

MISSION FOR UNITY OR UNITY FOR MISSION? AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL / ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The New Awakening

Very recently, in a prestigious Indian newspaper, there appeared an extended book review by Ram Swarup, a Hindu columnist. The title given to the review article was “Christianity Mainly for Export”.¹ The book under review was *Mission Handbook: North American Ministries Overseas*, published by World Vision International, an American evangelical agency with an annual budget of 84 million dollars.² The article begins by quoting Mark 16:15-16: “Go into the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” The writer, who qualifies western missionary work as “soul-saving business”, “corporate enterprise”, “proselytizing”, etc., quotes extensively from the *Handbook* and picks up revealing statistics.

Kam Swarup quotes from the writings of the Texas-based “Gospel for Asia” group: “The Indian sub-continent, with one billion people, is a living example of what happens when Satan lilies the entire culture... India is one vast purgatory in which millions of people are literally living a cosmic lie. Could Satan have devised a more perfect system for causing misery?”³ He has other citations in the same vein. The reader is given a hellish picture of western multi-billion-dollar missionary activity. The inevitable conclusion of the reviewer is that Christianity is losing its hold in western countries, but they are keeping it for export to the third world. Referring to “the powerful missionary lobby” behind the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which states that every individual has the right to embrace the religion or belief of his/her choice, the Hindu writer asks: “But is there to be no similar charter that declares that countries, cultures and peoples of tolerant philosophies and religions who believe in the famous quote ‘live and let live’ also have a right to protection against aggressive, systematic proselytizing? Are its well-drilled legionaries to have a free field?”⁴

Some of our more enlightened mainline churches, which are engaged in more sophisticated missionary activity, may dispose of it as sectarian fundamentalist rubbish. But to the vast non-Christian populations in many parts of the world it makes no difference. Missionary work is missionary work, i.e. the aggressively patronizing, culturally oppressive domination of

two thirds of the world by the powerful western minority wielding the world's wealth and military might, and using the gospel of Christ as a pretext for furthering their political and economic vested interests.

I use this article not simply to show how the multi-million evangelical empires, equipped with the latest electronic media and communication channels, work in our world, but also to point out the new awareness that is being built up among the ancient religions of the world, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The primary components of this revivalist awareness are suspicion of every Christian activity and complete resistance to it. Even Mother Teresa's dedicated work for the poor is being discredited by some of these anti-missionary circles, primarily because some of western evangelical agencies quote Mother Teresa out of context, highlighting her missionary zeal, and use her work as propaganda material for their proselytizing evangelical business. When resistance to the western missionary initiative began, most of the missionary bodies switched to recruiting and fostering indigenous agencies in the hope that the pill would be swallowed with the indigenous coating. These agencies, however, are heavily or even totally funded by their mother bodies, and the "pagans" are intelligent enough to detect all covering and coating. What is at stake is the authenticity of the proclamation of the life-giving gospel. The fraud, vested interests and big money that accompany the word render it vain and counter-productive.

The awakening of awareness among ancient religions and older civilizations indicated here is different from the awakening of the nations of the East described by Lord Balfour, the first speaker at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. Balfour said, in the prevailing mood of optimism created by imperial expansion, "Nations in the East are awakening. They are looking for two things – they are looking for enlightenment and for liberty. Christianity alone of all religions meets these demands in the highest degree. There cannot be Christianity without liberty..."⁵ Balfour spoke of liberty while his church connived with the British Empire to hold millions of people in bondage. The new awakening among the nations of the East rejects the "enlightenment and liberty" offered by the religion of the colonial masters. The way in which Christianity was preached to these nations was a great disservice to the gospel of Christ.

Two Assumptions

It is a known fact that the major impetus for the church unity movement came from missionary motivations in the early part of this century. The great missionary motto, "The evangelization of the world in this generation," was launched by John R Mott in 1910. The urgency of bringing the gospel to the unsaved millions impelled the various Protestant denominations to come together and seek common ground and a common

strategy for missionary action. It was a very practical and empirical search. It was expected that unity would begin in the mission field, and that devising a common overseas missionary strategy would perhaps bring in “a greater measure of unity in ecclesiastical matters at home”, and “increased hope of international peace among the nations of the world” (Lord Balfour). There were two assumptions behind this search for unity:

(a) Although speakers at the Edinburgh Conference, such as Archbishop Davidson of Canterbury, expressed the idea that “the place of missions in the life of the Church must be the central place and none other”, it was generally assumed that unity of the churches would be instrumental in the effective carrying out of the all-important missionary task. The same idea of the instrumental character of church unity for world evangelization, and through that for world peace, was prominently held during many subsequent years. The Tambaram (Madras) Conference in 1938, the 50th anniversary of which was recently celebrated, affirmed that “world peace will never be achieved without world evangelization”, and thus urged the churches “to *unite* in the supreme work of world evangelization until the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord”. Thus, the predominant thrust of the period before the formation of the World Council of Churches was unity *for* mission. The emphasis was not on the Church, nor on the unity of the Church, but on evangelistic mission, civil gatherings for conversions, and number-increasing mission. There was no real search in missionary circles for ecclesiological grounds for unity as would appear later, for instance, in the Faith and Order Movement, which expressed the need “to penetrate behind our divisions to a deeper and richer understanding of the mystery of the God-given union of Christ with His church” (Lund: 1952). Theologically speaking, the “unity for mission” call assumed that mission was different from unity. It could not go beyond the notion of the practical coming together of various Protestant denominations for strengthening work in the mission field. Division was detrimental to mission and therefore had to be rectified. Unity was the means by which mission could be accomplished.

(b) Churches and missionary bodies in the pre-WCC period, which coincided with the colonial-imperial period, apparently assumed that concern for unity and mission was an exclusively Christian concern. Perhaps they did not openly acknowledge that the mission they conceived was modelled on another complex and universal political mission of the imperial rulers. The gigantic movement of colonial expansion, which spanned several centuries, attempted to accomplish a certain unity by bringing various peoples, cultures and continents under the authority of western imperial powers. It was an invading, conquering and colonizing mission. In spite of its openly lustful search for wealth and power, the prophets of that mission identified it with a divine calling. It was “the white man’s burden”, as the poet Rudyard Kipling, one of the staunchest advocates of imperialism, conceived of it. He was convinced that “the

responsibility for governing India had been placed by the *inscrutable decree of providence* upon the shoulders of the British race”.

Mission in Humankind’s Way

Vasco de Gama, the Portuguese explorer, landed in Kerala, India, in 1498 where a Christian church had already taken root from the apostolic era. It is reported that in answer to a question posed by an Indian, “What were the Portuguese looking for in Asia?” he said, “Christians and spices.” And his landing on the Malabar coast marked the beginning of a conquering and proselytizing mission by Portuguese Roman Catholics, and later, by British missionaries, inflicting deep wounds on the already existing Christian community in India. The Portuguese *conquistadores* defined their motive for embarking on this mission as “to serve God and His Majesty, to give light to those who are in the darkness and to grow rich as all men desire to do”.⁶

Therefore, what the west European churches conceived of as their unique mission of saving the pagans and gathering them for the patriarchal embrace of western Christendom was mainly an extension of the great commercial and political mission already universally launched by the colonial-imperial powers. “Mission”, whether in the political, commercial or religious sense, was essentially a state enterprise. “Religion supplied the pretext and gold the motive. The technological progress accomplished by Atlantic Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provided the means.”⁷ Rarely did any European engaged in this mission distinguish the mission of Christ from that in His Majesty’s service. The tragedy of mission in the post-colonial imperial period is that the basic attitudes and methods of the imperial mission still lingered. The division of the world into those who are saved and those unsaved, or yet to be saved, remains in Christian missionary attitudes and in politico-economic categories like the new three-tier universe of first, second and third worlds.

These two assumptions of the past western missionary enterprise are mentioned in order to suggest that we have to go far beyond them in order to enter into a new understanding of the nature of unity and the mission of the Church. On the one hand, we need to transcend the alternatives – unity for mission or mission for unity. The understanding of the Church as the body of Christ, manifesting the Kingdom in unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, is central to us. Unity and mission are integral to this. On the other hand, our mission is not on behalf of the powers of this world, but on behalf of the one whose “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). God’s mission has to be weaned from its past political, imperialistic matrix. This is the dialect of Christ’s mission today – the historical visible, tangible dimension of the life of the Church expressing itself in concrete situations and moments on the one hand, and on the other, the transcendent, ineffable,

eschatological experience of the body of Christ, the Lord whose Kingdom permeates the whole creation, both visible and invisible.

Manifesting the Kingdom

Manifesting God's rule or Kingdom is the mission par excellence of the Church. We know that the fulness of the Kingdom cannot be identified with anything within the created realm. It is a kingdom ever-present and ever-coming. God's rule is inexhaustible and is identified only with the incomprehensible nature of the Triune God. However, created reality is thoroughly permeated with the power of the Kingdom.

Everything that is, visible or invisible, is under God's rule. The Church, as the community of the Holy Spirit, is called to make his power manifest in our world, to witness where it is discernibly present, whether in cultures, religions or secular ideologies; to discern it where it is confused with the powers of this world; to proclaim it, especially to the poor and the victims of injustice, as "the Lord's year of grace" for liberation.

The presence of the Church as the icon of the Kingdom is mission in the deepest sense. Just as Christ was fulfilling his mission by his incarnate presence in the world, the Church's iconic presence in itself constitutes the mission. In the physical presence of the Lord, the reality of God and the destiny of creation were together manifested. We understand the presence of the Church as a continuous *parousia*, enabling us to participate in the mission of Christ. This understanding of the Church, of course, does not conform to the notion of the Church as an instrument – an instrument for mission, for social transformation, for uniting the nations of the world. The instrumentalist language tends to treat Christ, Church, unity, mission and world as unrelated realities that somehow must be linked with each other. But in the biblical and patristic understanding of the Church as the body of Christ and the icon of the Kingdom, manifesting the glory of God and illuminating the future of creation, the integral unity of Christ, Church and the creation is presupposed as fundamental. Mission in our times must rediscover this unity from within and not impose unity from a detached alien and superior perspective, as was done in colonial, imperial times and as it is being done in our neo-colonial times.

Prof. Nikos Nissiotis classifies all ecclesiological trends in contemporary systematic theology mainly in two categories – the pro-Catholicizing and the pro-Congregationalists.⁸ The first is conceived on the basis of incorporation of all in Christ and sharing the same experience in the sacramental body, and implies an inseparable single communion. The second ecclesiological category starts with the gathering of the people of God by God's word. The community "hears" and acknowledges the supremacy of the word of God and shares in the prophetic actualization of the Gospel messages in the world. Although these two trends are integral dimensions of an authentic ecclesiology, our loyalties are often in conflict,

and we attach ourselves to either one or the other in a mutually inclusive way.

Perhaps the different historical experiences of the Western and Eastern Churches encouraged the deepening of the separation between these two ecclesiological trends. The churches that live under hostile regimes would perhaps show an inclination to the first, and the churches that live in political and economic systems that emphasize geographical outreach as the essence of growth would be inclined towards the latter. In our understanding of the Church as the iconic manifestation of the Kingdom, these two ecclesiological dimensions are taken together as two sides of the same coin. I would like to indicate some of the major aspects, as they appear to me, of the Church's life as manifesting the Kingdom in relation to unity and mission.

In the sayings of the Desert Fathers, we often see young monks, who are tormented by disturbing thoughts and flights of fantasy, approach the elders for advice. The usual advice is "stay in your cell". The risen Lord told the disciples: "Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49) before they went out to announce the good news. The Church's staying in the city of Jerusalem in prayer and waiting for the Holy Spirit was an exercise in unity. The Eucharistic community that worships and gives thanks to the Lord in the "cell" of prayer on behalf of all creation, continues that act of gathering the whole order of creation to be offered to God. The Church joins the high-priestly prayer of our Lord "that they all may be one".

In the Orthodox tradition, the predominant image is that of the saint and not of the outgoing preacher-missionary. The saint prays and receives the creation of God with hospitality. The missionary preaches and offers, often aggressively, in order to live. I'm not drawing a mutually exclusive contrast between the saint and the missionary. There are missionaries who are saints and saints in the Orthodox tradition who were missionaries. The world, however, is healed and transfigured more by the praying saint than by the thundering preachers. It is the saint who, manifesting God's tender love and receiving his creatures in divine hospitality, is genuinely sensitive to the riches of other religions, to different cultures, to "all sentient beings". The crusading missionary is afire with the message he proclaims, but can be totally lacking in receptivity and sensitivity. Perhaps this is a stereotyped image of the past. Today we need to combine in our experience of our Church the true saint and the genuine missionary whose sole concern is manifesting the Kingdom and not annexing new territories.

Division and conflict in our world are mainly the work of the political powers allied with economic interests. The military-industrial complex of demonic dimensions will continue to strike at the root of harmony and unity among peoples of the world. Disunity is essential for the survival of those forces of evil. The churches in many parts of the world are unknowingly drawn to be instruments of these powers. At the same time,

there are strong movements in various churches that stand up prophetically against the powers that break God's word and sow enmity among the people. This should challenge the Orthodox churches to witness to the Kingdom in the true sense of *martyria*. How can we keep ourselves from identifying God's will for the world with the political will and economic designs of dominant powers? This is a major question which we must answer when concerning ourselves with the mission of the Church.

The mission of the Church is an act of *epiclesis*, calling the Holy Spirit to descend upon the whole creation. It constitutes an act of creative unification. The priestly gesture at the moment of *epiclesis* in the Syrian Orthodox liturgy is especially significant. In the fluttering and cyclic movements symbolizing the Spirit, the priest invokes the Spirit to hover over the elements and to dwell within the Holy Eucharist, thus infusing the whole created reality. If the Church's historical existence can become an act of *epiclesis*, calling upon the Spirit to descend and dwell within our world, to transfigure it, then the Church's mission is accomplished. The Spirit also liberates us from our barrenness of thought and attitude and makes us aware of the truth that mission in Christ's way has many faces and many ways, not only one. St. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, said, "For our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:5). This is the way in which the gospel must be proclaimed in our world too.

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1. Ram Swarup, "Christianity Mainly for Export", *Times of India*, March 14, 1988.
 2. Samuel Wilson and John Siewert (eds), *Mission Handbook: North American Ministries Overseas* (California: MARC, a Division of World Vision International, 1986).
 3. Swarup, "Christianity Mainly for Export".
 4. Swarup, "Christianity Mainly for Export".
 5. "History and Records of the Edinburgh Conference", 145, quoted in Philip Potter, "From Edinburgh to Melbourne", *Your Kingdom Come* (Geneva: WCC, 1980), 10.
 6. Carlo M Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion* (Penguin Books: 1970), 99.
 7. Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion*, 101.
 8. Nikos A Nissiotis, "The Church as a Sacramental Vision and the Challenge of Christian Witness", Gennadios Limouris (ed), *Church, Kingdom, World* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 100ff.