

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Missiology I: Incarnate Christianity

THE NINETEENTH century saw the foundation of a number of catholic missionary congregations accompany the modern drive into Africa. The 1860 constitutions of one of these congregations, St Joseph's Society for Foreign Missions, the Mill Hill Fathers, stated that it was a 'Society of secular priests and lay brothers established to propagate the gospel among the unevangelized races beyond Europe. It is a clerical society'. This statement of aim was typical of the time. Mission was undertaken by priests. Primarily the gospel had to be preached by those who had been trained in theology, and who had been ordained. Laybrothers and sisters could engage in a supporting role. Schools, hospitals, technical colleges, agricultural projects were secondary to the essential task of evangelizing which was achieved through word and sacrament. Education was to be the means of putting individual Catholics into positions of political power, thus ensuring the future freedom of priests to continue the work in favourable circumstances, and eventually ensuring that the society would be christian.

This priestly task aimed at the conversion of individuals from the errors of paganism to the truths of Catholicism. It aimed at the 'winning of souls' through baptism into the Catholic Church. Gradually an elite would be built up, trained in the necessary background philosophy to enable them to understand catholic theology. When a sufficient number of natives had been adequately trained in philosophy so that they correctly understood the meaning of 'person', 'nature', 'substance', 'accident' and so on, and had consequently understood the manuals of theology using this terminology, and when a sufficient number had been found able to embrace celibacy, a native clergy could be ordained and, finally, a native hierarchy established. The local Church would then have been planted and the mission ended. For catholic missiologists, the aim of mission was *plantatio ecclesiae*, the setting up of the Church in the new locality.

Rome, through the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, gave the *ius commissionis* to a particular society for a particular area outside of Europe, and Rome appointed the european cleric to be in charge of the area which was to grow into a native Church once it had its own hierarchy modelled on the european (roman) pattern. Thus, the mission aimed at the establishment of a uniform Church throughout the world.

In 1969, Raymond Panikkar wrote an article in *Concilium*¹ in which he queried the assumption that theology needed a (philosophical) foundation

outside it, a basis knowable by some universal rational process. He queried the dualistic conception of reality implicit in this approach and in particular he queried the assumption that there are human, universal, foundations of thinking valid for all human beings, such as the concepts of 'nature', 'substance', 'individual', 'private property' and so on, all concepts that had been considered essential pre-conditions to the appropriate preaching of catholic theology. Since these tend to appear somewhat abstract they have not produced as much dust as the other concept to which Panikkar referred, 'monogamy'. As Eugene Hillman pointed out, christian missionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have preached to pagan Africans the necessity for salvation of belief in the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and monogamy.² This particular debate continues but with little hope of ecclesiastical authorities giving way. So far, they have not shown the least willingness to entertain the possibility of altering even the canonical requirements for valid marriage, requirements that the most reactionary roman monsignor would recognize to be no more than church law, and that originally arose out of the european situation. Some missiologists, among them Hillman and Hastings³, would maintain that monogamy cannot be proved to be essential to a christian understanding of marriage.

This questioning of the assumption that there could be a uniform underlying philosophy for a world-wide Christianity found its counterpart in the roman synod of 1974 which was devoted to evangelization to-day. The synod saw the largest percentage yet of bishops from the third world. The first half of the synod was devoted to the exchange of experiences. Reports emanating from the synod at the time were extremely enthusiastic about the great openness and sharing manifested at the sessions. Clearly apparent was the wide diversity of situations the local Churches found themselves in. At that stage in the synod, the delegates were made aware that the preaching of the gospel must be different for secularized Europe, for deeply spiritual Asia, for the emerging nations of Africa and for Latin America with its social concern. The third world bishops repeatedly drew attention to the ecclesiastical colonialism inherent in much of mission practice in recent years. The african bishops issued a statement from the synod calling for an end to 'the so-called theology of adaptation' as being 'completely out-of-date'. In its stead they adopted 'the theology of incarnation'. They called for de-centralisation, recognizing the aspiration of Africans to take their own destiny into their own hands from now on. Summarizing this first session of shared experience, Cardinal Wojtyla (as he then was), drew attention to three areas of primary concern peculiar to three geographical areas. In Latin America, the primary concern was for the liberating aspect of the gospel in the face of social injustice and oppression. In Asia, the primary concern was the dialogue between the gospel and the other great world religions. In Africa, the primary concern

was with the inculturation of the gospel, the bringing about of a genuinely african Christianity. Here especially the gospel was encountering new cultures for the first time. In this article I concentrate on this third world problem. It is my belief that the problem of the relationship between the gospel and culture underlies all three concerns.

Verkuy⁴ points out that Vatican II, in the document on the missions, *Ad gentes*, still put *plantatio ecclesiae* as the aim of mission. 'The special end of this missionary activity is the evangelization and the implanting of the Church among peoples or groups in which it has not yet taken root'. (*Ad gentes*, 6). But, Verkuy⁴ adds, this must be seen in the light of the new understanding of Church that had arisen out of Vatican II. This ecclesiocentric view of the aim of mission is still to be found in *Evangelii nuntiandi*. The 1974 synod ended without being able to agree on a statement. The bishops left Rome having asked Paul VI to write an encyclical on mission in the light of their discussions. The resulting encyclical, issued on 8 December 1975, is not a full reflection of the debate. It too states that 'in its totality, evangelization consists in the implantation of the Church' (para. 28).

Any missiology must be dependent upon one's ecclesiology, christology and soteriology. If one adopts an institutional model of the Church, then *plantatio ecclesiae* will be so coloured. An institutional model will stress that the Church is a visible, hierarchical structure. As a *societas perfecta*, the Church is considered to have its own goal, and to possess within itself all the means necessary to attain that goal. Thus it is seen as being quite independent of the state, although it will look to the state for the freedom to pursue its own aim. Such a Church, independent of human experience, is seen as having been founded by Christ from the beginning with its own hierarchy and sacramental forms. The aim will be to preserve its uniformity as proof that it has existed from apostolic times precisely as it now is. The function of theologians will be to justify magisterial statements. The beneficiaries of the Church will be its members who find within it the means of grace. Such a Church will be seen as coming to an end with the eschaton. In the kingdom of heaven there will be no need of such a Church.

This picture of the Church is that adopted by institutionalism. This needs to be remembered, because if we prefer to adopt a different model, this does not imply that we deny the Church is an institution. It is. The Church is undoubtedly a visible gathering of people committed to Christ and, as such, is an institution. But institutionalism stresses the image of the Church as I have presented it here and this model has consequences for mission. The dictum 'outside the Church there is no salvation' will then tend to be taken literally (though no catholic missiologist would hold that non-christians simply cannot be saved at all). Thus the aim of mission will be conscious faith in Christ and explicit membership of the

Church. Since the aim will be to set up this institutional Church in the new locality, missionaries, who will be primarily clerical, will seek to ordain a native clergy exactly like the clergy existing in Europe. Since the Church is seen as a *societas perfecta*, independent of the secular, the mission will be a spiritual matter and the clergy will not engage in politics. Such a mission ends with the setting up of a local Church that is self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. The foreign missionary can then move on. Such a model of mission fits in with the geographical concept. There is then no mission to Europe which already has its own Church. There is no 'mission to six continents'. Such an image of mission is characterized by exteriority (the gospel is presented as an out-there existing entity) and uniformity.

But if the model of Church that we adopt is a servant model then our image of mission will differ correspondingly. If the Church is seen as the community of people committed to Christ whose role is to discern the signs of the times and to promote the whole human enterprise, if its activity is directed towards the transforming of society, and if it is seen rather as a catalyst seeking to embrace all for the sake of the kingdom, then mission will have a different aim. The Church will seek to introduce all human values, looking for their perfection in the eschaton. Then the aim of mission is to be a leaven opening up human consciousness to fuller life. Such a model of mission is called by missiologists the 'fulfilment model'. Now mission is seen as the sharing by the community of believers in God's salvific activity throughout the world, realized in a definitive way in Jesus. Such an image of mission recognizes that human experience is a constitutive element in christian theology. It runs counter to the exteriority of the institutional model, to its inherent dichotomy, and expects pluriformity in cross-cultural manifestations of Christianity. What this implies is a concern of missiologists.

Valadier⁵ complained that *Evangelii nuntiandi* sets out an an-historic treatise on evangelization. It says nothing about the different situations in which the different Churches find themselves. Whereas the synod observers had been struck by the extraordinary diversity of local situations and by the consequent complexity of the means being used to evangelize in these various situations, the encyclical presents evangelization as one and the same for all. But announcing the gospel cannot be the same thing for the Churches of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, for the Churches of the industrialized advanced countries, for the young african countries, for the traditionally christian countries of Latin America faced with economic and social problems and for the Churches of Asia. The encyclical presents the gospel as independent of its concretization. *Evangelii nuntiandi* is characterized by an all-embracing exteriority. Jesus is seen as one who brings a message external to himself. The Church in her turn brings this external message. She is not presented as herself a

living sign of the kingdom. Rather she is seen as one who, fully constituted, offers a message. The means of evangelization are primarily sacramental. The Christian's responsibility in social, political and economic affairs and the witness to the faith within the secular are not seen as evangelization. The *comunidades de base* are seen less from the point of view of their relationship to the world. They are considered from the point of view of their links with the Church. They are listed among the receivers of the gospel, not as those who witness to the gospel in their lives. The Church is seen as needing the means that the world offers her to deliver her message, but there is no indication that the Church needs the world, its language, culture, in order to understand herself, in order to appreciate the newness of the gospel. Culture is presented as an extrinsic instrument for the communication of the gospel rather than as the very locus in which man comes to faith and in which this faith has to be expressed. How can the Church hear the world if it takes no time to listen to it and to hear the call of the Spirit in man's questions? Human culture is presented as an extrinsic means and not as in itself a constitutive element of the message. The document does not make clear the dialectic Church-world in which the Church comes to know herself in a living tension that bears fruit for humanity.

Missiology is engaged in fundamental theology, in a hermeneutic task. Christianity claims to have universal validity. The christian theology we have inherited has been developed within a judaeo-hellenic context, a european technico-scientific background. But fundamental theology has to show that christian beliefs have meaning, are reasonable, for all peoples, therefore that they have meaning outside of the culture where that theology has up till now developed. The need is to show that the christian message may become meaningful in any authentic human attitude.

David Tracy⁶ maintains that the two principal sources for theology are the christian texts and human experience and language. We can apply this thesis to our missiological problem. A Nuer (say) village is faced with the christian fact (Tracy's term to cover christian texts, ritual, liturgy, symbols, patristic and conciliar writings and so on). The village experiences this christian fact as made concrete for it in a group of christian missionaries. Now, the only way in which a genuinely Nuer Christianity can come about is for the Nuer themselves to understand, within their own cultural process, how this christian fact can bring about richer meaning within their lives, can fulfil their own experience. But this means that the Nuer cultural process must itself be a constitutive element of this Nuer christian meaning that is brought about in the mutual encounter. The Church needs the way-of-being-in-the-world of the Nuer if it is to understand itself among the Nuer. And the new meaning that is brought about in the encounter must be adequate to the

Nuer way-of-being-in-the-world and appropriate to the christian tradition. Otherwise it is either not Nuer or not christian. Schillebeeckx is engaged in a diachronic hermeneutic: what do the Christian texts mean for contemporary men and women? Missiologists are engaged in a synchronic cross-cultural hermeneutic. What does the christian fact mean for different peoples across the world?

This is different from the attempt to adapt the gospel message. In a theology of adaptation we attempt to take a 'truth' that we possess and to translate it into somebody else's language. There is here a dichotomy between the out-there existing 'truth' and its expression in words. This approach leads to a 'drums and dress' liturgical adaptation. In the West we play the organ to support our singing in church; in Africa we can use drums. In the West we wear black for mourning, in China we use natural, undyed cloth. In the West we kneel to pray, in India we sit in the lotus position. All of this is superficial and ultimately ethnocentric. The assumption is that the Indian in the lotus position is really, if the truth be told, doing exactly the same thing as we are doing when kneeling. To take another example, anthropologists studying kinship (a favourite topic since it is assumed to be objective and scientific) assume that there will be an institution to be found in the other culture corresponding to our institution of marriage.

Much of the missiological writing on this topic remains superficial. Monographs are written on the meaning of *Mbori* (a word used by the Nuer of Sudan). The writer will set out to establish that, for the Nuer, the word has both transcendent and immanent implications and that it is therefore the Nuer word for God, meaning that it corresponds to his, the writer's, theological concept of God. This is ethnocentric. Further, it works at the surface level of language, it does not investigate the cultural process.

Some writers denounce anything that goes beyond mere translation or even, it seems, anything that goes beyond transliteration. Hacker approved of the fact that the early missionaries in India (by which he means the Portuguese) retained '*Espirito Santo*' for 'Holy Spirit' instead of attempting any translation into Hindi. The european missionary leaves the words in his own european language and sets out to instruct the native as to what the European understands by these words. We are back then at the assumption that all people will accept our thought process once it is made clear to them, rather as we expect all people to accept any theorem of Euclid.

Missiology courses nowadays include studies in anthropology, and missiologists engaged in the study of this problem of incarnational Christianity are attempting to use the tools of anthropology to understand the cultural process. Here we are faced with the perennial struggle between a science, which aims to be experimental and objective, and

religious experience. Some anthropologists denounce any attempt to fit their science to a theology. Much anthropology is essentially behaviouristic, even appearing to be deterministic, and the tradition of the british functionalist school has left us with a science that resolutely refuses to go beyond the observable. The most fruitful research therefore is being done using the tools of semantic anthropology which holds that it is misleading to trade off the semantic value of categories for their social effects. The cultural process brings about meaning for the culture bearers. It is misleading to separate fact from value here.

Missiologists are again engaged in studying myth, ritual, and especially symbol. Most theologians would do well to go to the semantic anthropologists for an appreciation of symbol. Nobody should ever again be heard referring to something as 'merely symbolic'. It is in this area that research is going on for a common base for the comparative study of religious dimensions in christian religions and in religions specific to particular cultures. It is clear that what we in the West would refer to as 'a religion' has no counterpart in a traditional african society where there is certainly no systematic theology and there is considerable overlap in ritual. The aim of the research is to understand what is involved in the bringing about of a Nuer (say) christian meaning, to understand what meaning is brought about for the Nuer when confronted by a community of Christians from another continent. We cannot say beforehand under what form such a christian meaning would manifest itself. Immediately, the aim is to show that the christian message may become meaningful in any authentic human attitude.

Karl Rahner dealt with this same topic from the point of view of systematic theology in a frequently quoted article that was originally an address given in 1979.⁷ He maintained that Vatican II was the first official event in which the Church actualized itself precisely as a world Church. This will involve 'de-europeanising' of the Church, although the examples he then offered (marital morality, use of wine at the Eucharist) remain at the surface level of adaptation. He pointed out that, after the council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts, there were two different ways in which one could be a Christian, one could be either a jewish Christian, worshipping in the temple and keeping the dietary laws and practising circumcision, or one could be a hellenic, gentile Christian, and both ways were valid forms of Christianity. This, said Rahner, was a quantum jump, and Vatican II was a new quantum jump. We do not yet know what valid ways there are of being christian. Missiologists, concerned as they are with the Church concretized across cultures, are aware of the need to investigate these possibilities. Christianity as a western export has failed with the high cultures of the East and in the world of Islam, precisely because it was western. Either the Church must see and recognise the differences between cultures and draw the

consequences, or she will remain merely western. We must expect pluriformity.

There has been some debate as to whether or not there should be a moratorium on mission. This debate hardly caught on in catholic circles apart from Illich. The grounds for a moratorium were found in the accusation of ecclesiastical colonialism. The young Churches in the third world would never develop into native Churches as long as they were dependent on the european patterns. It can be seen that if the research into the possibilities of a genuinely incarnate Christianity are allowed to bear fruit, then the objection falls and there is no call for a moratorium, rather there is no end to mission which is sharing in God's saving activity. Such a mission is not ecclesiocentric.

Mission is seen then as the activity of the whole christian community, not as primarily a priestly task. It is not a spiritual task in contradistinction to a secular or material task. The saving activity of God is to be found in and through society, in and through the secular. Christians are called to animate society by the witness of their works. So that the mission will involve the setting up of the Church as a means, not as an end, though we cannot say in advance what that Church will look like in a particular culture. The aim of mission will not be primarily to proselytize, but to communicate to all peoples the promise of God, to receive his glory. The enduring meaning of mission is the showing forth of the glory of God among all people. We seek to co-operate with God in the bringing about of his kingdom which is already and not yet, already present and not yet fulfilled. The christian community hopes to witness as the historical, socially constituted and explicit expression of what it believes to be a hidden reality outside of the visible Church. This witness is our mission.

John Ball M.H.M.

NOTES

¹ Panikkar, R.: 'Metatheology or diacritical theology as fundamental theology', in *Concilium*, 6 (1969) 5; 21-27.

² Hillman, E.: *Polygamy reconsidered*, (New York, Orbis, 1975).

³ Hastings, A.: *Christian marriage in Africa*, (London, SPCK, 1973).

⁴ Verkuyl, J.: *Contemporary missiology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978). This is a good summary of missiological thinking up to 1975.

⁵ Valadier, P.: 'L'évangélisation dans le monde moderne', in *Etudes*, 344 (1976) 4; 605-610.

⁶ Tracy, D.: *Blessed rage for order* (New York, Seabury, 1975).

⁷ Rahner, K.: 'Towards a fundamental theological interpretation of Vatican II', in *Theological Studies*, 40 (1979) 4; 716-727.