



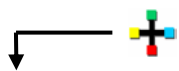
Recent Thinking on Christian Beliefs: viii. Mission and Missions.

1977

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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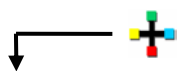


No major volume on mission or missiology dominated the period from 1950 to 1976 in the way that Hendrik Kraemer's *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* dominated the scene for the period 1940 to 1960. To discern the movements of thought one has to look at the conference reports and at the large number of smaller books written to interpret their findings.

A convenient starting-point is the conference convened by the World Student Christian Federation at Strasbourg in July 1960 on the Life and Mission of the Church. It was planned, mainly by D. T. Niles and Philippe Maury, as a "Teaching Conference". Those who planned it were the products of the era of "Biblical Theology". They believed that there was a clear and coherent missionary theology which could and must be communicated to the rising student generation.

The central themes of this missionary theology had been adumbrated at the World Missionary Conference at Willingen in 1952. Mission is the work of the triune God. It is the *Missio Dei*. George Vicedom's book of that title (published in German in 1959 and in English in 1965) is a landmark of this period. The mission is entrusted to the Church and the Church as such is the bearer of the mission – though, it must be added, serious questions about the adequacy of this church-centric missiology surfaced during the Willingen discussions. Johannes Blauw's biblical study of *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, written in 1961 admirably expounds the missiology developed in the 1950s, and D. T. Niles book *Upon the Earth* placed it in the context of the newly experienced reality of one global missionary fellowship.

But the Strasbourg meeting did not conform to the expectations of its planners. The rising generation was not willing to accept what had been prepared for them. There was a sharp rejection, mainly by those from Europe and North America, of the accepted forms of mission. The concept of the *Missio Dei* was not questioned: what was attacked was its imprisonment in the institutions of the Church. Strasbourg



sounded the most characteristic note of the coming decade by celebrating the secular as the field of God's saving work. Central to the thrust of the conference was the call to "move out of the

traditional Church structures in open, flexible and mobile groups", and to "begin radically to desacralize the Church" (*The Student World*, LIV (1-2) (1961), 81f.). Hans Hoekendijk, from whose address at Strasbourg these words are taken, was one of the powerful voices calling for a radically secular missiology during the ensuing decade. The *Missio Dei* concerned God's offer of *shalom* to the whole creation, and was by no means to be domesticated in the Church. Mission was not a function of the Church: rather the Church was a function of the mission. In this view the mission is the greater reality, the Church the lesser.

The theological problems which the 1952 Willingen conference had recognized but failed to solve were to dominate the scene during the 1960s, and it was the Strasbourg meeting which thrust them into the foreground of the debate. The central issue was that of the relation between "salvation history" and world history. The dominant theology of the 1950s had placed its emphasis on the former: in the centre of the picture was the Church as the bearer of salvation. In the 1960s the emphasis was upon the latter, upon the world as the place where "God is at work", and where the Church must go to find him and to co-operate with him. This was supremely the decade of the secular.

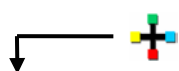
Of outstanding importance was Arendt van Leeuwen's book *Christianity in World History* (published in 1964 by the Dutch and British Missionary Conferences with a commendation from Hendrik Kraemer). This interpreted world history in terms of the impact of the biblical message upon the "ontocratic" societies in which men live before they meet the Lord of History, and it concluded with the claim that the contemporary movement of secularization is the present form of this impact. "The technological revolution is the evident and inescapable form in which the whole world is now confronted with the most recent phase of Christian history. In and through this form Christian history becomes world history." The movement of secularization is, however, ambiguous: in it both the Lord and Satan are at work. The Church's task is to "stand and interpret this invading history to those who are suffering it" (op. cit., 408f.).

A similar optimism about the role of secularization in God's purpose for world history was expressed in Harvey Cox's best-seller *The Secular City* (1965). And in fact the city was the context of a great deal of missiological thinking in this period. The Church-centred missiology of the 1950s had inevitably raised the question of the forms of the Church's life. To be convinced on biblical and theological grounds that the Church not only has a missionary task but is itself the form of God's mission ("As the Father sent me so send I you") was to be driven to acknowledge that congregations as we know them are not structured for mission. They reflect the assumptions of the Christendom era that the whole of society is already baptized and therefore within the Church. They invite people to come out of the world into the Church: they do not themselves go into the world as those who are sent by God. The question of the missionary structure of the congregation", formulated at the end of the 1950s, was probed in a series of studies pursued by the World Council of Churches in the years 1962 to 1965. The resulting report, *The Church for Others* (Geneva (1967)), shows that the original Church-centric missiology which prompted the study had given way to a missiology whose focus of attention was "God at work in the secular world". "Thinking about the Church should always begin by defining it as part of the world" (17). It is the world, not the Church, which writes the agenda" (20-23), and the Church is not to be concerned about increasing its own membership (19). "Participation in God's mission is entering into partnership with God in history, because our knowledge of God in Christ compels us to affirm that God is working out his purpose in the midst of the world and its historical processes" (14). So "What else can the Churches do than recognize and proclaim what God is doing in the world" in the emancipation of coloured races, the humanization of industrial relations, and so on?

The North American section of the Missionary Structure Study carried these insights further. "If mission is understood as God's working out his purpose in creation, the Church does not have a separate mission of its own" (75). Consequently mission was seen as participation in secular programmes for urban renewal, for civil rights, for community organization, etc. In this perspective "the Church is a happening on the road from one event to the next" (71) and the

events are events in secular programmes for human liberation. From these convictions it was a natural move to the massive programmes carried out in many parts of the world under the name of "Urban Industrial Mission", and so into the liberation theologies characteristic of the following decade (see below). From the point of view of this programme the Church as an institution is only of peripheral interest. A line of thought which had begun with the conviction that "the Church is the Mission", had led into a missiology from which the Church was practically eliminated.

The church-centred missiology of the 1950s had other developments. The final integration of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961, and the similar movements by which the national missionary



councils in Europe were related to or integrated with church bodies, were organizational expressions of the belief that mission is the task of the whole Church. This involved a change in perspective easy to describe but difficult to achieve. Mission had to be seen as having its home-base everywhere (because the Church is now a world-wide family) and its destination everywhere (because there is now no more "Christendom"). "Mission in Six Continents" was a good slogan, but what did it mean in practice? Roman Catholic missiology continued to insist on a distinction between "mission lands" and others. In face of the famous phrase "La France pays de Mission", the Professor of Missiology at the Propaganda Fidei University insisted that this is a confusion between "the real mission countries" and "the lands with a dechristianized milieu where the Church is still geographically implanted" (Andrew V. Seumious O.M.I. in *The Theology of the Christian World Mission*, ed. G. H. Anderson (1961)). In line with this official position, the Second Vatican Council promulgated two separate texts, both of which referred to the mission of the Church to all the nations. The famous Decree on the Church proclaims in its opening words (*Lumen Gentium*) the missionary orientation which controls the whole. Here the Church itself is described in missionary terms. But another Decree (*Ad Gentes*) defines missions as "those particular undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel are sent out by the Church and go forth into the whole world to carry out the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ. These undertakings are brought to completion by missionary activity and are commonly exercised in certain territories recognized by the Holy See" (*Ad Gentes*, 1.6). To use (rather crudely) the language contemporaneously current in the World Council of Churches, mission is an affair of six continents, but missions are directed to only three.

The World Missionary Conference at Mexico City (1963) tried to give precision to the idea of mission in six continents. In terms of *structure* this was still a period of church-centred thinking at the global level: it was hard to distinguish missions from inter-church aid. Many mission boards renamed their missionaries as "fraternal workers", and "departments of mission and ecumenical relations" replaced the old foreign mission boards. Only near the end of the decade was the "s" removed from the *International Review of Missions*, but this was a belated expression of the dominant concept, that of the one global *Missio Dei*.

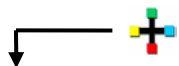
In terms of content, however, the whole enterprise reflected the prevailing conviction that mission is concerned with the doing of God's will in the secular world. This was, let it be remembered, the first "Development Decade" of the United Nations, and for many the Church's involvement in world mission was justified only by its contribution to "development". "Development" was still understood from the perspective of the rich world. Nations were "developing" in so far as they were moving in the direction set by Western Europe and North America. This line of thought reached definitive expression at the Uppsala Assembly of 1968 which described mission as "for God's people everywhere" (including those already members of the churches) and gave as the criteria for evaluating missionary priorities the following: "Do they place the Church alongside the defenceless, the abused, the forgotten, the bored? Do they allow Christians to enter the concerns of others to accept their issues and their structures as vehicles of

involvement? Are they the best situations for discerning with other men the signs of the times, and for moving with history towards the coming of the new humanity?" (*Uppsala Report*, 32).

1968, the year of the Uppsala Assembly and of the Paris student revolution, is a good point at which to begin looking at the new currents of thought which were to dominate the 1970s. The "counter culture" was to challenge the domination of concepts of development based on the science, technology and industry of the west. The secularity fashionable among theologians in the 1960s was to be challenged by a growing interest – especially among young people – in the world of religious and mystical experience. Pentecostalism – largely ignored in the early stages of the ecumenical movement – was to emerge as the real growing edge of Christendom. Latin America was to become the source of a new missionary theology which rejected development in favour of revolution. And the conservative evangelical missionary forces, hitherto remaining aloof from the ecumenical movement were to organize a powerful challenge to its thinking and practice.

We may take the last movement first. At Wheaton, Illinois in 1966 there took place a Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission organized jointly by the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association and the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association – bodies linking the work of more than 11,000 foreign missionaries. The Declaration of the Wheaton Congress, while affirming a conservative evangelical understanding of missions, was also a call to take seriously and penitently into consideration issues such as unity and social responsibility which were being stressed in ecumenical circles. Further world congresses in Berlin (1966) and Lausanne (1974) gave shape and force to these developments. The central missiological thrust of the movement is well expressed in John Stott: *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (1975). Three distinct stands can be recognized within the movement.

(a) Led by Peter Beyerhaus of Tübingen there is a



vehement polemic against the missiology of Uppsala, claiming that it replaces the preaching of the everlasting Gospel by a programme of humanization. This is represented in the "Frankfurt Declaration on the Fundamental Crisis of Missions" (1970) and in Beyerhaus's book of the same year *Humanisierung: einzige Hoffnung der Welt?*

(b) Led by Donald McGavran of the Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, the Institute of Church Growth has inspired a stream of books illustrating, applying and developing the thesis that enormous multiplication of churches is possible and therefore imperative provided that missions will abandon their misplaced emphasis on "perfecting" and pursue single-mindedly the goal of "discipling the peoples" as distinct ethnic and cultural entities. Among the forty or more volumes coming from this source in the present decade one may select the volume called *God, Man and Church Growth* (1973), a *Festschrift* representative of the school as a whole.

(c) From Latin America new and powerful voices are being raised within the conservative evangelical circles calling for a missiology which gives a central place to the struggle for social justice, without muting the call for personal conversion. Typical of this is Orlando Costas: *The Church and its Mission* (1974).

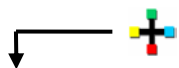
The challenge from the conservative evangelical side has met with a serious response from the side of the World Council of Churches. The World Conference on "Salvation Today" (Bangkok, 1972) was primarily concerned to celebrate God's gift of salvation as a presently experienced reality in the personal life, in culture, and in the political order. Here already we find salvation being understood as a deeply religious experience as well as a political one. And at the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi a statement was accepted on *Confessing Christ Today* which brought together in a genuine wholeness the different emphases of "evangelicals" on personal conversion, of "ecumenicals" on cultural and political liberation, and of Orthodox on the witness of the eucharistic community.

It was from a Latin American bishop that the Assembly heard the call to a holistic evangelism which did much to shape the final report. It is primarily from within the Latin

American churches that the powerful movement known as "Liberation Theology" has come, though it has important links with the *Black Theology of North America* (See James Cone; *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969)). The Theology of Liberation accepts most of the Marxist analysis of the economic and political reality of today, and accepts also the Marxist (and biblical) insight that theory divorced from praxis can only be illusion. The work of Juan Luis Segundo (*A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 5 volumes (1968-72, Eng. tr. 1973-74)), and of Gustavo Gutierrez (*A Theology of Liberation* (1971, Eng. tr. 1974)) have given powerful and lucid expression to a Catholic theology of liberation. The most impressive work on the Protestant side is Jose Miguez Bonino (*Revolutionary Theology comes of Age* (1975)). From the same milieu the educational work of Paulo Freire (see *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972)) exercises a growing influence all over the world. His fundamental axiom that all education is either education for oppression or education for liberation has the power to haunt not only those concerned with formal education but all (and this certainly includes missionaries) who are concerned with altering the attitudes of others.

Liberation Theology is primarily a Latin American product, but developments in European theology were pointing in a similar direction. Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1965, Eng. tr. 1967) had the world mission of the Church as its point of orientation and its dynamic expression. "The real point of reference for the exposition and appropriation of the historic Bible witness, and the one that is their motive and driving force, lies in the mission of present Christianity, and in the universal future of God for the world for all men, towards which this mission takes place" (*op. cit.*, Eng. tr., 283). In a further development of this future oriented Christology, Moltmann's *Crucified God* (1973, Eng. tr. 1974) culminates in two chapters on the psychological and political liberation of man. A debate is in progress between Moltmann and Miguez Bonino which, while it exposes their differing estimates of Marxism, expresses also their close agreement.

Latin America is also the scene of the greatest expansion of Pentecostalism. This too is a movement of liberation among oppressed people, though its offer of liberation is in the first place inward and spiritual rather than outward and political. Pentecostal leaders, however, often make clear their solidarity with the struggle for political liberation. But Latin American Pentecostalism is only one segment of a global movement which embraces not only the rapidly growing Pentecostal churches and the burgeoning charismatic movement in the Catholic and Protestant communions, but also the vast explosion of independent churches in Africa and – to a lesser extent – in Asia. Here is, without possibility of question, the contemporary growing edge of the Church. To a large extent it is a matter of spontaneous expansion and not of organized missions on the nineteenth-century model. W. J. Hollenweger's standard work on *The Pentecostals* (1969, Eng. tr. 1972) is itself a condensation of his unpublished work in ten volumes available in eleven libraries of Europe and North America. David Barrett's *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (1968) touches more than 6,000 African Independent



Church movements, and analyses the dynamics of their growth. There are numerous monographs describing the growth of individual movements. If Mission is concerned with the numerical growth of churches, then this is the area of greatest significance in the present decade.

The swing away from the secular missiologies of the 1960s has brought a greatly increased interest in religious experience and correspondingly an increased eagerness for contact and dialogue with people of other faiths. The effect (certainly not the intention) of Kraemer's emphasis on the absolute uniqueness of the Gospel had been – in many cases – to put a stop to the kind of inter-faith dialogue that had been common in the first four decades of the century. It was only slowly and with hesitation that the dialogue was resumed. Hallencreutz (*New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths* (1970)) chronicles the story. Numerous publications of the World Council of Churches (e.g., *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement* (1975)) and of the various study

centres around the world during the past twenty years, carry the story further. At the same time a growing number of theologians in the West have called for a re-examination of traditional attitudes to the world religions. The questions raised for those responsible for Religious Education in the multi-faith cities of England have powerfully reinforced the assumption (generally unexamined) that Christianity is one variety of the inclusive species "religion". Under pressure of the demand for trained teachers of religion, the study of theology as a normative discipline tends to be replaced by the study of world religions as varied manifestations of man's innate religiousness. In this context any assertion of uniqueness and finality for the Christian variety is out of order. And if – as with Karl Rahner – it is assumed that religion is the sphere of God's universal purpose of salvation for mankind, it follows that the non-Christian religions are the "normal" means of salvation for the peoples of the Third World. Of the growing flood of books about world religions One may note Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1964), John Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) and – on the Roman Catholic side – Karl Rahner's essay on *Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions* (Theological Investigations, Vol. V, 115-134). With a quite different and deeply Christo-centric approach M. M. Thomas in *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (1976) examines what is happening to the world religions under the impact of modernity from the point of view of the concrete reality of Jesus Christ as God and Man.

To draw these observations to a tidy conclusion is impossible. A multiple debate goes on and will continue. I am tempted to end this survey with one personal observation. It is a common and not unjust comment on the missionary thinking of an earlier day that it unconsciously identified the Gospel with Western culture, and that it therefore transmitted too much of the latter along with the former. Today it is common to find writers who assume that Christianity is just the religious aspect of Western culture and therefore assert that it should not be exported. Professor John Macquarrie – for example – regards the notion of converting all nations to Christianity as "a thing of the past", and looks forward to religious pluralism rather than the universal acceptance of the Gospel as the "good and healthy state of affairs". (*Christian Unity and Christian Diversity*, 109). What is perhaps most needed now is a discovery among Western theologians of the extent to which they are the victims of syncretism. It will be the work of theologians of the Third World to re-state the uniqueness and finality of Christ in terms which liberate Christian theology from its long imprisonment in the thought-forms of the Western world.

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