



Mission in the 1980's

1980

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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The Editor has asked for an article on "Issues for Mission in the 1980s." I am no prophet. There is a vast area of discussion and I do not know what will appear to have been the crucial issue when we come to look back on the decade now beginning. Contemporary "trends" are – I think – unreliable guides. All I can attempt is to pick up one of the contemporary issues and suggest some of the new questions that I think need to be asked.

I take, then, the contemporary debate about "contextualization." No proof is needed for the statement that this is a live issue. The word itself, if I understand rightly, arose from the recognition that the older words such as "adaptation" and "indigenization" were misleading. The former implied that the message brought by the missionary is the unadapted gospel, the pure truth unadulterated by any cultural admixture. The latter tended to direct attention to the traditional elements in the receptor cultures and to seek to interpret the gospel through these, often at a time when the people concerned were in fact turning away from these traditions. The intention of the word "contextualization" – if I understand it rightly – was to point to the insertion of the gospel into the living situation of the people concerned so that it was related to the living questions that they were asking, not so much about the past as about the future.

Why has the debate about contextualization become so intense? I suppose that it is because of the recognition that the cultural dominance of the old "Christendom" can no longer be assumed. Among the peoples of Asia and Africa, recovering their confidence in their own cultures and shaking off the suffocating power that was exercised by the culture of the Western nations during and after the colonial period, Christians become aware of the extent to which the gospel has been presented in a purely Western form and seek to find their own ways of grasping it in the terms of their own cultures. Among the churches of the Western world there is a corresponding recognition of the fact that the gospel is not communicated at all unless the culture of the receptor people is taken far more seriously than it often was in the "Great Century" of missions.

All this is familiar, and in repeating it I am merely pointing to a vast jungle of complex problems – problems about hermeneutics, about communication theory, about the relation of the gospel to history, about law and gospel, and about many other things. I only want to draw

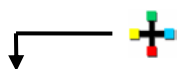
attention to two points at which I think the discussion needs to take a new direction. The first is a relatively minor point, which I mention without developing; the second is the one on which I want to focus.

The first point is this. The debate about contextualization among the churches of the Third World is understandably dominated by the struggle to break free from the embrace of Western ideas. It is carried on (necessarily) by those who have themselves thoroughly mastered the Western traditions in theology, having been trained in the leading universities and seminaries of the West. The Third World theology, which has become a desirable addition to the libraries of the West, is all written in European languages and addressed to those who live and move in the world of thought that that implies. But there is also another kind of Third World theology – namely, that which is being continuously produced in the languages of the churches of the Third World – in the form of preaching, catechesis, song, story, and drama. The volume of this material is very great, but it is rarely translated into the languages of Europe. Yet it represents the real fruit of the day-by-day struggle of the Christians of these lands to interpret the gospel to their contemporaries.

My point here is that there is often very little contact between these two kinds of Third World theology. Working in different languages, they seldom meet. Yet they imperatively need each other. The first without the second can become essentially a negative protest against the Western tradition rather than a real communication of the gospel to the peoples of the Third World. The second without the first can become static and irrelevant, encapsulated within the theological categories of a former era. I am happy to note that the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (Bangalore) has begun serious study of some of the Christian poets who have written in the Indian languages, and there may well be analogous moves in other areas of which I am unaware. It will always be extremely difficult to bring the insights of this "vernacular" Third World theology into the mainstream of the ecumenical debate, but without it that debate will be beating the air. The only way in which it can be done is by the kind of initiative that has been taken in Bangalore, and which I hope will be carried much further.

My second point is, however, the one that I wish to develop, and it is this. Western missiologists are debating with intense earnestness the questions that arise from the effort to "contextualize" the gospel in all the cultures of humankind from Peru to Papua. I do not find an effort of comparable intensity to wrestle with the question of contextualization in the contemporary culture of the West. Yet it is the West that ought to be giving missiologists their most worrying questions. It is in the West that the church appears to be continuously losing ground. It is typically the product of Western "enlightened" culture to whom the gospel appears irrelevant nonsense. Yet one does not find (at least in my limited reading) that missiologists are giving the same intense and sustained attention to the problem of finding the "dynamic equivalent" for the gospel in Western society as they are giving to that problem as it occurs in the meeting with peoples of the Third World.

Here let me confess that (inevitably) I am reflecting on my own experience. After a lifetime spent in India I now struggle with the problem of communicating the gospel in the comfortable suburb of an English city. And, from this angle, I am bound to reflect with some wry amusement on the anxiety shown by some of my missiological friends about the danger that the churches of the Third World should be led by their eagerness for contextuality into the morasses of syncretism. What is obvious



to a returned missionary is that English Christianity is a prime example of syncretism. Christianity as practiced in most of our churches does not call in question the basic assumptions of the normal Englishman. Christians are not distinguishable as people who obviously live by different

commitments from their neighbors. And I should doubt whether it is normal on the other side of the water to find that the churches are regarded as centers of "un-American activities"!

That great interpreter of the gospel to Hindus, A. G. Hogg, died too soon to learn the blessed word "contextualization," but he spent his life doing what that word intends. He summed up the essentials of the matter in the phrase "challenging relevance." The gospel must be heard as relevant. It must speak of things that are real things in the lives of the hearers. It must therefore begin by accepting their issues, using their models, and speaking their language. But relevance alone is not enough. The gospel must at the same time challenge the whole world-view of its hearers. It must cause them to question things that they have never questioned. It must bring them to the place where they hear spoken to their whole world of understanding and experience that word of grace and judgment which marks the end of one world and the beginning of another, a death and a new birth.

How can the church become the bearer of that word of grace and judgment for the Western culture with which it has lived so long in an almost total identification? That, to my mind, is the most pressing missiological issue for the next decade. For centuries the churches in the West have seen themselves as the guardians and sustainers of the culture of which they have been a part. They have not-in general-seen themselves as the bearers of God's judgment upon this culture. If they had done so, they would have learned again that "challenging relevance" means, in the end, suffering, and that suffering is the fundamental form of Christian witness (marturia).

From a missiological point of view, it seems to me that one of the most significant facts of the contemporary world is the fact that the churches in the USSR (Orthodox, Baptist, and Pentecostal) are not only continuing to exist but are winning converts to Christ out of a society dedicated to a totally secular and atheist view of humankind. This seems to be the only part of the Western world in which the church is not losing ground but gaining it. And it is significant that the witness of Russian Christians has been and is conformed precisely to that which the New Testament indicates as the essential form of witness-that endurance of rejection and suffering which comes from bearing witness to the truth in the face of the lie.

The Stalinist form of Marxism represents an extreme development of that view of humankind and the world which, in the period that we call (significantly) the Enlightenment, replaced the Christian view as the dominant model by which Western people undertook to understand and manage their affairs. The Enlightenment took the autonomous reason of human beings to be the bearer of their history, and therefore saw the Christian tradition as a bondage from which people had to be delivered. Looking back over the three centuries that have passed, we can see that while the churches struggle to retain their traditional hold upon Western society, they lost the struggle and retreated into the private sector where they could exist without challenging the *cultus publicus*, which rules in the world of public affairs. The traditional machinery, which had sought to impose some sort of ethical rules upon economic life, were dismantled in the name of human freedom and the era of the "free market" began, in which everyone was free to pursue one's own interests with the maximum of enterprise and the "invisible hand" would ensure that all worked for the common good. Marxism represents the

revolt of the victims of this ideology while remaining within the general world-view of the Enlightenment. It has seen even a privatized religion as a threat to the perfection of humankind and has therefore forced the churches into the position where they have to choose between compromise and suffering. Insofar as they have chosen the latter, they have become places where the promised witness of the Holy Spirit is being given so powerfully as to "convict the world."

Churches under the capitalist system have not been forced to make this choice. They have been seduced into compromise. The capitalist system, placing self-interest at the center of the entire philosophy of society, is no less total a contradiction of the gospel than Marxism. But the churches of the West have accepted for so long the position of tolerated beneficiaries of the system that they have almost lost the power to question it. In the effort to be "relevant" to the "modern world," they have almost lost the power to challenge it. And the forms of Christian teaching and example that they have carried to the rest of the world have been deeply imbued

with values derived not from the gospel but from the post-Enlightenment ideology of the Western world.

Now, however, we are in a new situation. Western society is showing every sign of disintegration. Its claim to be the bearer of "enlightenment" to the rest of the world is rejected with growing violence. The church has become a genuinely worldwide society in which powerful voices can and do speak the Word of God to Western Christians from standpoints in other cultures. I think that the Western churches are now challenged to a fresh and urgent examination of the relation of the gospel to Western culture. It is here that the problem of contextualization is most urgent. An enormous amount of Western theology has been occupied with the question of restating the gospel in terms of "modern thought." But this can be done in two ways. It can be done by those who take "modern thought" as providing the fundamental models and axioms into which the gospel has to be fitted. Or it can be done in a truly missionary way: standing within the tradition of Christian faith, worship, and discipleship, taking the biblical axioms and models as fundamental, it can seek to bring the word of judgment and grace to bear upon the whole world that comes to expression in "modern thought." I am not advocating a biblicist fundamentalism; fundamentalism and liberalism are twin products of Enlightenment rationalism. I am speaking about something that is known in practical experience, a kind of discipleship that is open at the same time to Western culture and to the testimony of Christians in other cultures, and which is totally committed to obedience to Jesus as he leads us along the way of the cross. It is in that kind of discipleship that the promise of the Holy Spirit is given both to convict the world and to guide the church into the truth.

The church that practices this kind of contextualization will not be a strong and "successful" church. It will be a church that is spoken against. It will be seen as a threat to the powers that rule society. But it will be a witnessing church in the fundamental meaning of that word. I hope that the great work that has been done during the last decade in exploring the meaning of contextualization in relation to non-Western cultures may, in the decade now beginning, enable us to undertake with comparable energy and seriousness the exploration of the problem of contextualization in relation to the powerful paganism of our Western world.

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