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England As A Foreign Mission Field

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Let me begin with a story. About 15 years ago I was taking part in the WCC's conference on 'Salvation Today' in Bangkok. We were in a plenary session, looking at the global situation of the Christian world mission. Sitting next to me was General Simatoupong of Indonesia. He was the general who commanded the Indonesian forces in the war against the Dutch. When there were no more Dutchmen left to fight, by a very natural transition he turned to theology, and he is now one of the outstanding spokesman of Indonesian Christianity. He had just intervened in the debate. I do not remember what he said. What I do remember is that, as he came and sat down beside me, I heard him say under his breath, 'Of course the one question is, Can the West be converted?'

I knew of course, that he was right. Among all the cultures, which have power in the contemporary world, the culture, which originated in Western Europe, is the most powerful and pervasive. It dominates the cities of most of the world. What is called 'modernisation' in Asia and Africa is usually cooption into this way of thinking and behaving. And it is precisely this powerful culture, which is most resistant to the Gospel. Christianity is a growing movement in large parts of the Third World, rapidly growing in some places. In the West it is on the defensive if not actually shrinking. Plainly if one is looking at the global situation of the Christian world mission, the crucial question is: 'Can the West be converted?'

Simatoupong was looking at the West from outside, from the vantage point of a more ancient civilization. His was, if you like, the viewpoint of a foreign missionary. And the foreign missionary does have certain advantages over the native. He sees things, which they do not see because they take them for granted. They are just 'how things have always been'. I remember that when I went as an English missionary to India 50 years ago, and tried to understand Indian life and thought, I slowly came to realise how important it was that the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* have hardly been challenged in all the great revolutions from the Buddha to Gandhi. They describe how things are and have always been. Human life, like all of nature, is a cyclical affair, a matter of endlessly repeated birth, life, decay, death and re-birth. In a world so

understood there is no way in which a particular happening in history can decisively change the human situation. It can only illustrate and exemplify what is always the case.

And that, in general, is how Indian thought understands Jesus. As a young missionary I used to spend an evening each week in the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission, studying with the monks the Upanishads and the Gospels. The great hall of the monastery was lined with pictures of the great religious figures of history, among them Jesus. Each year, on Christmas Day, worship was offered before the picture of Jesus. It was obvious to me as an English Christian that this was an example of syncretism. Jesus had simply been co-opted into the Hindu world-view; that view was in no way challenged.

It was only slowly that I began to see that my own Christianity had this syncretistic character, that I too had – in a measure – co-opted Jesus into the worldview of my culture. I remember an incident, which made me realise this. I was taking a group of village teachers through St Mark's Gospel

My Tamil wasn't very good, but I was fairly confident about my theology, fresh as I was from theological college. All went well till we reached the first exorcism. Now Westminster College had not taught me as much about how to cast out demons. My exposition was not very impressive. These village teachers looked at me with growing perplexity, and then one of them said: 'Why are you making such heavy weather of a perfectly simple matter?' and then proceeded to rattle off half a dozen cases of exorcism in his own congregation during the past few months. Of course I could have said: 'My dear brother, if you will kindly let me arrange for you to come to Cambridge and take a proper training in modern science and then a post-graduate qualification in psychology, you will be able to understand that Freud and Jung and Co have explained everything'. In other words, 'If you will permit me to induct you into my culture, you will see things as they really are'. But this was a bible study, and Mark's Gospel was sitting there, saying what it does. Inwardly I had to admit that he was much nearer to Mark than I was. Outwardly I kept quiet and went on to the next passage.

I am not saying that there is an easy answer to my problem. One could put it this way: Do you try to understand the Gospel through the spectacles provided by your culture? Or do you try to understand your culture through the spectacles provided by the Gospel? There is no easy answer, but it is a real question.

During the 12 years since I came back to England, and especially since I had a pastoral charge in Winston Green, I have come more and more to feel that England is a foreign mission field as much as India was for me in 1936. I have come to feel that there is an English parallel to the picture in the Ramakrishna Mission Hall. I mean, of course, that it has increasingly seemed to me that instead of allowing the Gospel to challenge the unexamined assumptions of our culture, we have co-opted Jesus into our culture by giving him a minor role in what we call the private sector. The matter is very clear when we look at the lay-out of a news magazine like TIME or NEWSWEEK. We know that if we want to find any reference to Jesus we shall not find it in the section 'World Affairs'. It will be tucked away in the little slot between 'Drama' and 'Sport', among the optional activities for the private life. It does not challenge the assumptions, which govern our understanding of public affairs.

What assumptions am I referring to? While I was preparing this address I received a budget of papers from the French Villemetrie Group. It included a paper by the German political scientist Fritz Erich Anhelm. In it he wrote:

"We are the children of an Enlightenment, which first of all brought into being the idea of emancipation as the replacement of the reign of God by that of men. The reign of man requires an instrumental reason, capable of controlling, calculating and thus manipulating objects.The system came to replace rule by the grace of God, and it ensures continuity despite the absence of an order of succession. Yet this usurpation of creating has been only partially successful, despite its ever-increasing pretensions to universal validity. It has shifted the order of things in the interest of the rulers and of *their* presumed security. Only by creating a new relation to the world can we hope to reconquer that which was lost

in the emancipation of bourgeois rule; the vital sense, which tells us that everything we touch, has been borrowed. This is expressed by biblical tradition in the sentence ‘For ye are strangers and sojourners with me’ (Lev.25: 23).

Like a growing number of people, Anhelm sees the 18th century Enlightenment as the coming to birth of our modern world, and also – like many others – he sees that it was essentially a corporate conversion of Europe's intellectuals to the belief that the world is to be understood and managed without the hypothesis of God. I say ‘a growing number’, but it is still a small minority. The majority of our intellectuals still accept the Enlightenment at its own valuation, as the dawning of the light in which things are seen as they truly are, free from the distorting lenses of dogma and prejudice. I well remember my first meeting of the Society for the Study of Theology when we had a paper on ‘The Present State of Research into the Historical Jesus’. The speaker, in the course of his paper, said that the scientific study of the history of Jesus could only begin at the end of the 18th century when the old dogmatic pre-suppositions were set aside. When the discussion of his paper opened, I ventured to ask whether it would not have been more accurate to say that this study could only begin at the end of the 18th century when the old dogmatic pre-suppositions were replaced by a new set of dogmatic pre-suppositions. In the ensuing debate only about half of those present were willing to accept my amendment. For the rest, the presuppositions, which had governed biblical study for the 1000 years before the Enlightenment, were ‘dogmatic presuppositions’ whereas subsequent study was simply the making manifest of what is the case.

But, of course, this is illusion. No knowledge of anything is possible without presuppositions. We do not begin to understand anything without the aid of concepts, embodied in the language we use, which enable us to grasp and make sense of our experience. All knowing of anything is the exercise of a skill in which we have to be trained by those already skilled in the exercise. This means that we have to depend upon the ways of understanding, which they have developed. We cannot begin to know anything except by an initial act of faith that the language we have learned, the concepts, which it uses, and the accepted teachers of knowledge can be relied upon. Later, as we become ourselves skilled in the art of knowing, we shall be able to criticise and perhaps amend the tradition upon which we have to rely as beginners. But not knowing at all is possible without this initial faith. The idea that we can advance in knowledge by doubting everything that can be doubted is nonsense.

The way to learn to understand the world will depend upon the questions we put to it, questions which will be shaped by prior commitments. The decisive shift, which made possible the rise of modern science was the shift from asking the question ‘To what end?’ to asking the question ‘By what means?’ from asking about purpose to asking about cause. At the risk of vast over-simplification it is fair to say that this shift was the crucial factor in releasing the explosive power of the natural sciences from the 17th century onward.

The mightiest among the early achievements of science were the physics and astronomy of Isaac Newton. His picture of the universe provided the mental framework within which the Enlightenment occurred. To the thinkers in Europe in the 18th century, it seemed plain that Newton had shown how things really are, in contrast to how they appear to our unaided senses, and that the clue was therefore available to lead us in all areas of life from appearance to reality. It seemed that the ancient prayer of the Upanishads was being answered: ‘From the unreal lead to me to the real; from darkness lead me to the light’.

The real world, so understood, is a world of facts. These facts are, as we say, ‘value-free’. They cannot be called good or bad. They just are. The point becomes clear if we consider a machine, for example a watch. A watch is a collection of pieces of metal, which can be analysed exhaustively into their chemical, molecular and atomic elements. The cause-and-effect relations, which connect the movements of electrons and atoms all the way up the chain to the movement of the hand on the watch face, could in principle be explained. But this would give no basis at all for answering the question: ‘Is this a good watch?’ To answer that question one would need to know whether the purpose for which this collection of bits of metal was put together in this way was to

decorate the sitting room to throw at the cat, or to record the passage of time. Only if I know the purpose for which it exists can I call it good or bad.

I cannot discover the purpose simply by examining the watch. If I had no prior knowledge of watches and what they are used for, I would have to ask the maker. Just so, the most exhaustive scientific analysis of all the phenomena of the physical world could never enable us to affirm that it had a purpose. If we could wait until the cosmos has reached the terminus of its existence we would perhaps be in a position to say what – if any – its purpose was. Short of that event, we do not have the data. It simply is, and we examine it as it is. It is a world of value-free facts.

But that is not the whole story. We cannot, by examining all the facts about the universe, discover whether it has any purpose. If it has a purpose, the maker will have to tell us. But we who examine it, we do have purposes. Quite obviously modern science is a purposeful activity. But, if Newton's world is the 'real' world, these human purposes of ours can only be matters of personal choice. They do not belong to the observable world of 'facts', which can be weighed and measured; they belong to the invisible, inward world of 'values'. Here the scientific method is not applicable. There is no way in which it can be 'scientifically' determined that my values are good and yours are bad. These are matters of personal choice. Pluralism reigns. No one has the right to say to another: 'Your values are wrong'. Values are matters for the free personal choice of every individual.

Here we come to the most distinctive feature of our 'modern' world-view- the division of life into two spheres, public and private. This division does not occur in pre-modern societies. It is the distinctive feature of ours. In our culture there is a private world of values where pluralism reigns, and there is a public world of facts where pluralism does not reign... When alleged facts are in contradiction, we do not take it as an opportunity for congratulating ourselves on living in a pluralist society. On the contrary, we argue, we carry out experiments, we argue again, and we go on until we have solved the contradiction. But in the world of values, we proceed otherwise. To say to another, 'Your facts are wrong', is perfectly acceptable. But to say to another, 'Your values are wrong' is arrogance. And since the methods of science can be extended all the way from physics to sociology and psychology, we have developed so-called behavioural sciences, which claim to be value-free. In these sciences the behaviour of human beings is not judged in terms of any accepted view of the purpose for which human life exists: that would involve making value judgments. It is explained on the analogy of physics and chemistry. It simply describes how human beings in fact behave, and – if possible – what causes them to behave this way. From a scientific point of view, this would be 'explaining' the behaviour in question.

The scientist thus undertakes to 'explain' the behaviour of human beings in terms of the factors, which cause them to behave, and not in terms of what these human beings think are their purposes and values. But the scientist would not begin his study unless he had purposes of his own, purposes, which are exempt from this kind of treatment. These purposes may range all the way from improving his own academic prospects to improving the condition of the human race. If, to give him the benefit of the doubt, we assume that he intends to improve the condition of the human race, it will still be the case that his vision of what is better for the human race will derive from his own personally chosen values and will not be subject to any kind of 'scientific' control. And since modern technology has given us many new and sophisticated ways of manipulating human behaviour, the way is opened up – as Anhelm says – for a further shift of power into the hands of the rulers.

Perhaps the place where this dichotomy between a public world of facts and a private world of values becomes most clear is in the field of public education. That the development of every human life is conditioned by the programme encoded in the DNA molecule is – in our culture – a 'fact', which everyone is expected to know and accept. It will therefore be part of the school curriculum. But that all human life exists that we may glorify God and enjoy him forever is, in our culture, not a fact. It is a way, perhaps a mythological way, of expressing certain values, which are held by some people. It will not be part of the curriculum. Yet it is surely plain that, if

both statements are true, the second is at least as important for the child setting out in life as the first.

To this it will be answered that the first statement (about the DNA molecule) is something we *know*, whereas the second (about God) is only something that some people *believe*. Here we come to another way of stating the division that runs through our culture. John Locke defined belief as that which we have to fall back on when certain knowledge is not available. That is still how the matter is generally understood in our culture. Belief is a second-class substitute to be relied on when knowledge cannot be had. The truth, however, as I have already suggested, that – so far from being a second-class substitute for knowledge, faith is the foundation on which all knowledge must rely. Studies in the history and philosophy of science have emphasised the fact that modern science rests upon faith-commitments which science itself is powerless to prove – for example that the universe is rational, but that its rationality is not necessary but contingent. When Descartes set out to establish a kind of knowledge, which cannot be doubted, he set Europe on a course for disaster. As Michael Polanyi has pithily put it: ‘Only statements which can be doubted make contact with reality’; or – to quote Einstein – ‘In so far as the statements of mathematics are certain, they make no contact with reality; in so far as they make contact with reality, they are not certain’. Faith is not a second-rate substitute for knowledge; it is the precondition of knowledge. Augustine’s slogan, *credo ut intelliga*, I believe in order that I may understand, holds true across the whole range of human knowing.

The response of the churches to the vast conversion experience of Enlightenment has been – by and large – to accept the dichotomy and to seek refuge in the private sector where one can say ‘I believe’, leaving the public sector to make the claim: ‘We know’. The grand theological underpinning for this was provided by Schleiermacher who redefined the task of theology as the study of religious experience, and denied that theology had anything to say directly about God (for this applies to metaphysics) or about the world (applies to the natural sciences). All Protestant theology since Schleiermacher has been done under his shadow. The Church struggled to retain a place in education, but even here it was to hold only the private sector, not to challenge the public faith. So in a modern university there may be ‘religious studies’, since it is a fact that some people do have religious experiences and that they have resulting religious beliefs. These facts can be scientifically studied. But though the beliefs are facts, the things believed in are not facts as our culture uses the term. So you can have ‘religious studies’, but not ‘dogmatics’ – not the exploration of another way of understanding the world, which would pose radical questions to the whole of the rest of the curriculum. There is no place for ‘dogma’ in the schools.

Here perhaps I may venture one more anecdote. At a recent meeting where my book ‘The Other Side of 1984’ was being discussed, I apologized for using the word ‘dogma’ because it had raised so many hackles. One of those present was the head of a large department in a comprehensive school. She interrupted me with the words: ‘Please don’t apologise. I know very well that in my school dogma reigns in every classroom, except – of course – in R.E., where it is treated as rubbish’. She was more aware of realities than the theological professor whom I quoted earlier.

Perhaps the point of my reference to the portrait of Jesus in the Ramakrishna Mission hall will now be obvious. We have allowed Christianity to be co-opted into our culture, allotting to it a place from which it cannot challenge the fundamental assumptions of our culture. We give it a place in the world of privately chosen values; we do not allow it to question the public world. We are always eager to try to express the gospel in terms of modern thought. We are less eager to evaluate modern thought in the light of the gospel.

But this will not do. We are entrusted with a commission. We have news, which we are appointed to communicate. It is that Almighty God, creator and sustainer of the universe, has acted at a certain time and place to reveal and effect his purpose of love for all human kind and for all creation. That revelation provides the criterion by which all things human will finally be judged, and the power by which human life can be restored according to the purpose of its creator. Of course, I have lived long enough to know what will be the response in our society to a

statement like the one I have just made. In India it will be: ‘Yes indeed, we reverence Jesus as one of the great souls who have shown us the truth, and we honour him with a place alongside others who have done the same’. In England it will be: ‘Yes indeed, we recognize your statement as expressing one of the many varieties of religious experience, and we will certainly include it in our syllabus for the comparative study of religions’. Whether in India or in England, the claim has been more effectively silenced by co-option than it could be by outright rejection.

What are we to do? Three things, I suggest.

1. We continue boldly yet humbly to bear witness to God’s revelation of himself in Christ. There is no credit in our doing this. We have no superiority over any other human being. We are just the messengers, the postmen, who happen to have been entrusted with the message. Like St Paul, we have no ground for boasting; we have a commission, and we must discharge it.

2. We identify and name the idolatries, the false gods that our society worships. I was reading again recently Dennis Munby’s book ‘The Idea of a Secular Society’. Munby in the 1960’s advised us that a secular society was what a Christian ought to work for, and that one of its marks was that ‘there is no publicly accepted image of the good life’. If that is so, ours is certainly not a secular society. How absurd it would be to make such a claim when (according to published statistics) something like 90% of the population spends at least three-quarters of its free time glued to the television screen, hooked inseparably to those pictures of the good life which are being ceaselessly pumped into every living room in the country, the advertisements and the soap operas which provide an image of the good life more powerful than anything Islam or mediaeval Christendom ever managed to fasten on an entire population. Ours is not a secular society, but a society which worships false gods.

3. We remember constant, and thankfully, that in spite of everything, and in spite of the bumbling incompetence, mediocrity and plain sinfulness of us Christians, The Holy Spirit continues to work in countless mysterious ways, drawing men and women to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and so to worship, love and serve the Father through him.

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