



Witnesses to the World

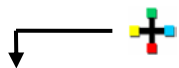
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Contemporary 'culture' has perhaps made the West the hardest mission field of all, as it pushes religion into a private world where truth is both personal and relative. Transformation will only come when Christians have the faith and courage to proclaim the Word by living it boldly.

Almost fifteen years ago I was at a WCC conference on the theme 'Salvation Today'. Sitting next to me was General Simatoupong of Indonesia. I heard him murmur under his breath, at one point, 'Of course, the number one question is "Can the West be converted?"'

And I knew that, of course, he was right. If you are looking at the total mission of the world-wide Church, this is the number one question, for at least three reasons.

First: among all the cultures of the world today, this which had its birth in western Europe is the most widely and powerfully spread. The process which is going on all over the Third World, the process variously called 'development' or 'modernisation', is the co-option of these various cultures into the culture which we call the modern world, of which western science and technology is the vital ingredient.

Second: this western culture of ours is, with the possible exception of the culture of the Islamic world, the one which is most resistant to the Gospel. In many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America the Gospel is eagerly received as good news and the Church grows - steadily or even spectacularly. In Europe, the Church is on the defensive or in retreat. Moreover, even in the countries of the Third World, when the second and third generation of Christians becomes fully enrolled through modern education into our western culture, there is a strong tendency for the old Christian commitment to weaken.

Third: among the churches of the western world, of the old Christendom, where the intellectual and spiritual resources ought to be found for meeting the challenge of what is called modernisation, there is a profound mood of uncertainty about the Gospel, about the truth, the sufficiency, the finality of what is given to us in the Christian message. What shall we say about this mood?

CAUSES

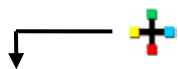
Let me make four points, and in making them I shall be thinking of our English scene. The situation in the United States is significantly different, and so also there are differences between the various European countries.

1. I think that the mood I have described is part of a wider failure of nerve about ourselves as a nation. Part of this is a proper sense of guilt about the wickedness of some chapters in our Imperial past - the slave trade, and the opium wars, for example. However one assesses these guilty feelings, they form an important part of a general loss of confidence about our role in the world.

2. During the decades following the Second World War, we discovered the idea of 'development'. Missions came to be commended to their doubting supporters because they were contributing to the development of backward societies. We were still confident of the beneficent character of our science and technology even if we were not so sure about the Gospel. Today 'development' is no longer a completely acceptable idea. In parts of the Third World it is totally rejected. The problem is not, as they see it, that the rich world has to lend a helping hand to the poor; it is that the rich world is using the existing international economic order to exploit the poor, and that what is needed is not for the rich to develop the poor, but simply to get off their backs.

3. Greater mobility for the peoples of the rich world enabling them to travel freely all over the world, the large movement of people of other faiths from Asia into Europe; and the growing self-confidence of the other great world religions have combined to bring about a profound change in the way that Christians in the western world perceive these religions. They are neighbours in the same street, notably more godly and devout than the general run of Christians. Is it not arrogance to try to convert them to our religion? Is this not, in fact, likely to produce hostility and alienation, making worse the already dangerous tensions in our inner cities, where large numbers of people of other faiths live and where they are often subject to discrimination?

4. These three points lead to a fourth which is, I think, fundamental. I want to suggest that underlying all these three movements of thought is the failure of the Church, our failure, to challenge more radically the underlying assumptions of our modern western society.



PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

We are frequently told that we are living in a secular, pluralist society in which Christianity, along with other faiths and ideologies, has the freedom to exist and express itself, but in which it cannot claim to be the faith of the nation. The two key words are 'secular' and 'pluralist'. Let us take the second first. In what sense are we a pluralist society? Only in respect of what are called 'beliefs' and 'values'. In respect of what are called 'facts' we are not. If we have a disagreement about beliefs and values, we may discuss it but in the end we accept the fact that beliefs and values differ; we live in a pluralist society. But if there is a disagreement about what are called 'facts' we proceed differently. We argue, carry out tests, go on arguing until we agree. We do not take it as an opportunity to celebrate the blessings of pluralism.

But what, in our culture, are facts, and what are values? That every human life is governed by the programme encoded in the DNA molecule is, in our culture, a fact; it will be part of the school curriculum. That every human life exists for the glory and enjoyment of God and will in the end be judged by that test to have achieved or failed to achieve its true end is, in our culture,

not a fact. Yet, if a statement about God is true, it is at least as important for a child to know as the statement about a DNA molecule.

Facts, most people would say, are what you can know for certain; they form our public world where we can all agree. Values, on the other hand, are things you believe in but cannot know for certain. They belong to the private world where we will always differ. Here are two related pairs of terms: knowing and believing; public and private. They correspond to the pair: fact and value. What lies behind this dichotomy is the complex story of European thought since Descartes; in particular two elements of this story: the desire for a kind of knowledge which should be free from all possible doubt and the search for explanation in terms of cause rather than in terms of purpose.

SCIENCE

Here is the origin of the modern concept of 'facts'. If things are understood only in terms of their causes and not in terms of their ultimate purpose, then they are just facts to which no value can be assigned. If I use all the sciences from physics and chemistry to biology and psychology to understand what makes human beings behave as they do, that would give no basis for saying what kinds of human behaviour are good and what are bad. That could only be decided if we know what human beings are made for.

How could we find out what human beings exist for? Not by examining human behaviour.

If, like most of the human race, you had never seen a washing machine and had never had any experience of the habit of eating off china dishes and using them again and again, and had no previous experience of electricity and electric machinery, and you were presented with a dishwasher for the first time, you could take it to pieces and examine every part but that would not tell you what it was for.

Either its maker, or someone accustomed to using it, would have to tell you. And you would have to believe, and then try it out.

How can we know what human life is for? If we could wait until the end of the world the purpose of it all might be clear. Short of that time, we do not have the data for a decision. The maker will have to tell us, and we will have to take it on trust, believe and try it out. The idea of a kind of knowledge which is certain and involves no possibility of doubt, in other words, of a knowledge which is in no way dependent on faith, is an illusion.

Science itself is an immense enterprise of faith from beginning to end: faith that the universe is rational and that its secrets are capable of being rationally understood; faith that the problem being studied is a worthwhile problem; faith that these pieces of evidence will prove to be significant in relation to the problem; faith that the methods developed so far by science are capable of leading to new discovery. To doubt all one's beliefs at the same time would be to become an imbecile. Faith and critical doubt both have an essential place in the enterprise of knowing, but faith is always primary.

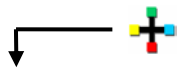
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This brief excursion into the subject of how we know brings me back to the question of the division in our culture between a public world of facts where we claim to know, and a private world of values where we only claim to believe. My contention is that we in the western churches have allowed ourselves to be largely co-opted into this way of looking at things. We have allowed ourselves to be deceived into thinking of the Gospel as expressing a set of values which belong to the private world and which must somehow be accommodated within the public world of what are called facts.

When we are in Church, we read and expound the Scriptures as the true story of God's dealing with his creation and as the guide to our eternal destiny. But if we go out of Church into the university lecture theatre or the school classroom or the arena of politics, we use a different language. In our society, the fact that people have religious beliefs and religious practices is

acknowledged as a fact. But the things which religious people believe in are not facts as our culture understands them. They belong to the private world of values.

And that leads me to look at the second of the two key words used to



describe our society. It is described as pluralist and secular. I have tried to show that pluralism applies only to the private world of values. There is a public world where pluralism does not operate, a world which is often called 'secular'.

'THE GOOD LIFE'

A secular society is uncommitted to any particular view of the universe and our place in it. It is therefore pluralist and tolerant. It solves its problems by eliminating emotion and ascertaining the facts. It has no official image of the good life for human beings, but provides a framework in which different ideals can co-exist.

What is at once obvious is that this is a particular view of the universe and our place in it. It is a view that the real world is a world of value-free facts and that values are matters for the personal choice. And from the point of view of the Bible, we will have to say that it is a false view, that the universe is not a world of value-free facts, but that it is only to be understood as the sphere of the gracious working of an all-wise and all-loving purpose revealed in Jesus Christ.

We will have to say that it is not true that every human being has the right to pursue happiness as he or she may care to define it, because human beings are made for a kind of happiness which is centred in the love of their creator and will not find it otherwise. We will have to say that it is nonsense to say that our society has no accepted image of the good life, when we know that a very specific image of the good life is being endlessly piped into every living room in the country in the advertisements and the soap-operas which fill the television screens night after night.

The truth is that the idea of a secular society has led us into the reality of a pagan society, not a society which has no publicly accepted religion, but a society which worships false gods.

The division between a world of facts which we know, and a world of values in which we only believe is a false one. Therefore the idea of a secular society which is devoid of shared beliefs and values is an illusion. But on the whole I fear that we have accepted it because it provided an enclave to our public life where religion, and particularly the Christian religion, could be cultivated as one of the optional value systems without challenging the public world of facts.

CHALLENGE

So, to conclude, let me make four points.

1. We are the heirs of the great missionary outreach of the western churches during the past 200 years. In long perspective of history, I believe that this will be seen to have been one of the very great chapters in the life of the universal church. It has, under God, been the means of bringing into existence a church which is present in almost every nation, even though in some places it is small and weak. It has been intimately bound up with the cultural, political and economic expansion of the western and European peoples. Above all, it has carried the Bible everywhere and seen its translation in whole or in part into more than 1500 tongues.

The peoples of the Third World now live among three different stories: there are their own stories, by which they have traditionally understood themselves; there is the story imported from Western Europe, world-history as modern Europeans understand it, in terms of what we call 'modern civilisation'; and there is the story of the Bible. The leadership of these nations, whether Christian or not, and the leadership of the churches, has been trained largely in the western European vision, which in effect marginalises them, and they struggle to recover their own stories so that they may be themselves in the Third World. But there are millions of Christian believers

who have been only slightly touched by the European story, and for whom the Bible is their story. For them, it is the stories of Abraham and Moses and Jesus and Paul that define who they are and what life is about.

2. It seems to me that this places upon us in the western churches an enormous responsibility. If we are to be responsible partners with the growing churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific, we have first of all to face up to the missionary task in our own society.

I come back to the remark of General Simatoupong: 'Can the West be converted?' Can we recover our nerve? Can we accept God's forgiveness for the arrogance and greed and cruelty of which we have

been guilty as people of this nation, and can we recover confidence in the Gospel which will enable us to come out of the private sector and proclaim the Gospel as truth for all?

Can we recover the faith that our true story is the one we share with all human beings and that it is the story which the Bible tells? Can we find the courage to live in a genuinely missionary situation when we do not accept the story that our society tells about itself, but steadily tell, re-tell and live by another story, a story which defines in a radically different way what it is to be a human being.

If we can do that, then we have also a unique contribution to make to the life and witness of our partners in the churches of the Third World, who have received from us the Gospel so encapsulated in western culture that they are caught in the conflict about what is the real story.

3. For the story is the story of a community and cannot be understood otherwise. The Bible story has been repeatedly re-told to bring out its meaning for a new situation, as the new situation is understood and grasped in the power of the story. This is our story, the story of the human family, and we continue in our day telling the story in the light of our situation, and seeking to cope with new situations in the light of this story. For now the community is world-wide. In this enterprise we are all learners. In particular, I am sure that we in this country cannot rise to the demand of our particular missionary situation without the help of churches overseas.

I am thinking of the profound effect which I have seen made in the lives of young people going from this country to share for a time in the ordinary life of a congregation in Asia or Africa. Over and over again I have seen them challenged and renewed by the forthright simplicity with which many Christians in the Third World are able to confess and communicate the Gospel.

The more we are able to open the life of our churches to the witness of those overseas, the more we shall discover both that we are not the leaders in the whole enterprise, that we have to learn a very great deal from those whom we used to teach, and we shall also find help in discharging the specific task which I think God lays upon us in the western churches at this juncture of the Church's mission.

4. What I am pleading for is simple, but not, I hope, simplistic. It is simply for a recovery of confidence in the gospel, the truth, sufficiency, finality and universality of that which God has done for the whole human race in Jesus Christ. We cannot accept for him a place merely as one of the world's religious teachers. We are but learners and have to listen not only to our fellow Christians of other cultures, but also to our neighbours of other faiths, who may teach us much that we have not understood.

But the crucial question is: Which is the real story? To that question our whole life is our answer. There is no neutrality. The answer has to be given not only in the words of the Church, but in a life which follows the way Christ went, and so - in Paul's words - bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, manifests to the world his risen life, the life which is life indeed.

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