



*Gospel and Culture – But Which Culture?*

1989

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*Missionalia* 17, 3 (November): 213-15.

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Discussion of the relation of the gospel to human cultures has been a favoured occupation among missionaries and their scholarly colleagues. Reflection on these discussions suggests two questions. Firstly, why does the question arise in this form? "Culture" is simply human behaviour in its corporate, public aspect. Why is this the subject of a separate discussion as though it were different from human behaviour in its private and personal aspect? Is the very existence of this discussion among Western missiologists one more symptom of the fundamental flaw in Western culture itself, namely the splitting apart of these two aspects of human behaviour and the relegation of religion to the private sphere? Granted that the gospel calls for a radical conversion in respect of personal behaviour, why should it be otherwise in respect of culture? Does the question arise because missionaries have themselves been the great conveyors of Western culture to the rest of the world, reproducing through their schools and hospitals and programmes of "development" the conditions within which this same split, the characteristic mark of "modernity", occurs?

And that leads immediately to the second question. It is obvious that the rapid growth of Christianity is taking place today in the countries of the Third World while in the old Christendom it is on the defensive or in retreat. But "modernity" spreads even more rapidly than the gospel, even when missionaries are not themselves the bearers of modernity. The "Third World", culturally speaking, is a rapidly shrinking entity. In all the great and growing urban centres of the world, "modernisation" is in progress and is spreading its influence even into the remotest villages. Everywhere it has the effect of marginalising religion – including the Christian religion. It is, without possibility of doubt, the most powerful and pervasive of human cultures. Wherever it goes it becomes the controlling doctrine for public life and drives religion into a smaller and smaller private enclave. And, next to Islam, it is of all human cultures the most resistant to the gospel. My second question, therefore, is this: Why have missiologists, so committed to the investigation of the relation of the gospel to human cultures,

given so little attention to this, the most powerful, the most pervasive of contemporary human cultures and among the most resistant to the gospel?

Perhaps the short answer is that "modernity" is itself a product of Western Christendom, and the parent and the child have lived in the same house for so long, that the parent has grown accustomed to living in one room while the grown-up child effectively runs the household. The parent cannot disown the child, does not want to throw him or her out, but does not know how to make the child see that there is a wisdom entrusted to the parent which the child has forgotten or rejected. "Modernity" could only have come into existence in a world shaped by the Bible. Historians of science have shown impressively how the biblical view of the world provided the context in which modern science could be born and even the "Enlightenment" man and woman with their total confidence in the sovereignty of human reason, is a product of the unique biblical vision of the human person as a responsible actor in a meaningful history. Alain Finkelkraut in *The Undoing of Thought* has sketched the story of the magnificent vision of the Enlightenment with its promise of the universal reign of Reason over all peoples and cultures and its promise of a new unity for all humankind; and the story of the reaction against this in the name of the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a people, that which is unique to each human community and uniquely precious; and the story of the "multiculturalism" which abandons all value judgement on cultures and supposes that every form of human culture is uniquely valuable and therefore to be safeguarded against the erosion that "modernity" threatens. But while autonomous "reason" has an unstoppable dynamism, it offers no vision of a goal and therefore no meaning of history. And so we find Western culture with the twin marks (to quote the Chinese writer Carver Yu) of "technological optimism and literary despair". And it is this unstable alliance which presses inexorably into every corner of human society.

Incomparably the most urgent missionary task for the next few decades is the mission to "modernity". It can only be undertaken by Christians (in all parts of the world) who are also "modern". It calls for the use of sharp intellectual tools, to probe behind the unquestioned assumptions of modernity and uncover the hidden credo which supports them. It calls for the consecrated labours of men and women who are in full command of the methods and skills of the various disciplines. At the most basic level there is need for critical examination from a Christian standpoint of the reigning assumptions in epistemology (How do we know what we claim to know?) and in history (How do we understand the story of which we are parts?). At a second level it means probing the hidden assumptions behind our practice in economics, in education, in medicine, and in communication (the media). All of this has to be seen and done as part of missionary obedience. It calls for the service of the best Christian scholarship. Of course, this exercise will be condemned by some as "elitist". There is no need to be frightened by the charge. We are called "to bring every thought into captivity to Christ",

and if that means long struggles to master difficult intellectual issues, we have no right to evade the duty. The men and women of the Enlightenment were writing for a very small elite, but their ideas were to become the unquestioned assumptions of millions. The "trickle down" model does not work with economics but it does work with ideas.

The British Council of Churches has sponsored a programme which is trying, with modest resources, to mobilise Christian thinkers for this enterprise. It is meeting with a remarkably encouraging response.

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