



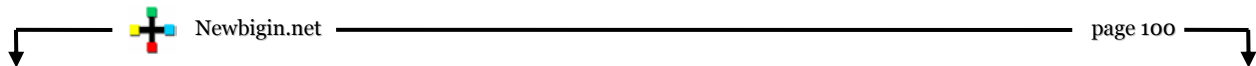
## Mission in the 1990s: Two Views

1989

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*The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, 3 (July): 100-102.

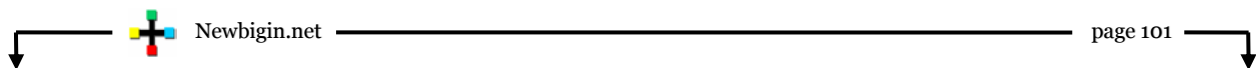
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I am no prophet and no futurologist. I am impressed by the fallibility of all human attempts to peer into the future. As Christians our horizon of expectation is not any vision of what we might expect in the next decade or the next century. The horizon is firmly marked in our creed: "He shall come again in glory." That is sure; the rest is very fallible guess-work. For what it may be worth, let me try some guessing about the coming decade.

### 1. The Context

For 400 years the major thrust of Christian missions-Catholic and Protestant-has been bound up with the expanding economic and political power of Europe and North America. We are already witnessing a shift in the balance of power. The nations of the Pacific rim are now the expanding economic powers. They are



investing on a massive scale in future growth. By contrast the affluent societies of Europe and North America are spending-probably beyond their real income-and investing little. As Jurgen Moltmann has said, they have hoisted a sign for all to see: "No future." And if one contemplates the life of these affluent societies, marked as it is by growing violence, drug addiction, and all the signs of the loss of meaning and hope, it is hard to see any future except collapse. Certainly anyone whose beliefs are shaped by the Bible can hardly fail to hear the word of God's dreadful judgment pronounced over that part of our world that calls itself "developed." Christians who come from the old "mission fields" to taste the life of the old "Christendom" are more and more deeply struck, and wounded, by the contrast between the message they received from the early missionaries and the reality they now meet.

But the categorization of nations as first, second, or third world, popular since the 1950s, is no longer meaningful. More and more rapidly the whole world, and especially the expanding

urban peoples of all the nations, are drawn into a single global network. The fantastic development of information technology in the past few years, development that continually accelerates, is locking more and more people into a single system-financial, economic, and ideological. The ideological battle between capitalist and Marxist systems becomes less and less significant. The power of Marxism seems to be waning, while capitalist societies show increasing signs of internal disintegration. Both are challenged by a resurgent Islam. Islam calls into radical question the assumptions that underlie both the capitalist and the Marxist ideologies.

The furor arising from the publication of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* has illustrated the internal weakness of the liberal democratic societies of the West. The question is posed whether or not the freedoms that these societies cherish as their most precious possession can be sustained in the absence of any ontological basis in the nature of God, and whether or not belief in God (or in any ultimate truth) can survive in a society that is incapable of understanding why blasphemy is a serious matter. My guess is that in the coming decade the prevailing relativism and subjectivism of our contemporary "Western" culture will be challenged more and more sharply by passionately held beliefs about fundamental realities, and that the sharpest of these challenges will come from Islam. That makes it imperative that we seek clarity about our message, about the content of the Christian mission.

## **2. The Content**

It is instructive to look at recent history in this respect. The early missionary conferences (London 1888, New York 1900) did not think it necessary to discuss the message. Everybody knew what its content was; those taking part were agreed about a broadly evangelical Protestant faith. Edinburgh (1910) had no commission on the message as such, but devoted splendid scholarly resources to the question of the right Christian approach to each of the great religions. Jerusalem (1928) found it necessary to write a "Message," but that was so skillfully drafted by William Temple that it concealed profound disagreements, which surfaced during the succeeding years. The "Laymen's Report" (1932), J. H. Oldham's work on church, community and state (1934-37), and Hendrik Kraemer's "The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World" (1938) represented important and very diverse ways of spelling out the message. The debates at Tambaram failed to resolve the issues and for the next twenty years the questions raised by Kraemer about the relation of the gospel to the world religions dominated discussion. The questions posed at Jerusalem and by Oldham, questions about the relation of the gospel to secular society, were not generally perceived as central to the missionary message. Oldham was, in this respect, a lonely pioneer.

In a second phase the discussion of the message centered on the relation of gospel to culture. Perhaps it was at Bangkok (1973) that this issue was most prominent. Discussion of it was stimulated by the terms of the "second mandate" of the Theological Education Fund, with its emphasis on "contextualization." The weakness here was that the cultures discussed were almost always non-Western cultures. The question of the relation of the gospel to Western culture was seldom posed.

In a third phase (and of course these phases always overlap) the stress was upon the articulation of the message in relation to oppression and injustice. At the center of the missionary message was the "option for the poor." Perhaps the Melbourne Conference (1980) was the point at which the World Council of Churches' thinking on this was most prominent, but of course it was very widely present in many Protestant and Roman Catholic circles.

What is often not noticed about all these discussions is that they have been carried on in European languages and within the parameters of the worldview that has controlled these languages since the Enlightenment. To discuss "religions" as though they were a separable entity from the entire life of human communities is possible only in a society that has accepted the privatization of religion typical of modern Western culture. It is wholly inappropriate to the great world faiths. Equally, to discuss "culture" as a matter separable from human behavior as a whole presupposes that division of human life into the private and the public. There has not been a similar discussion of the question "The Gospel and Personal Behavior." And finally it must be

said that much of the discussion of the message in its relation to economic and social injustice has presupposed a Marxist analysis of the human situation rather than a biblical one. In the Marxist analysis human beings are divided into oppressors and oppressed. In the biblical understanding all human beings are both sinned against and sinners. That starting point leads to different conclusions.

What I think has been lacking, and what I hope the next decade will provide, is a serious and sustained effort to articulate the Christian message vis-à-vis this globally dominant Western culture, which has become the shared culture of at least the urbanized part of humankind. For this I think two things will be needed. One is the resolute effort to overcome the tragic split between "fundamentalists" and "liberals," so that there can be a coherent and credible appeal to biblical authority. Without this there is no *locus standi* from which the critical questions can be addressed to our culture. This split is itself a particular manifestation of the fundamental split in Western culture between a false objectivity and a false subjectivity, between a world of "facts" supposed to be available apart from the commitments of the knowing subject, and a world of "values" supposed to be purely a matter for the personal choice of the subject. When our minds are locked into this dichotomy, then we are compelled



to choose between reading the Bible as a collection of "facts" and reading it as the record of subjective "religious experiences." In this situation, neither side can hear the other. We therefore need, second, the help of those whose minds have been shaped by non-Western cultures and who come to the Bible unencumbered by this dichotomy. At present this is difficult because the ablest theologians of the non-Western societies have been trained in colleges and universities whose curricula were wholly in the Western model. I hope that the next decade may witness a fresh and resolute attempt to clarify the content of the Christian mission from a perspective that is not wholly controlled by the assumptions of Western thought.

And I hope that this re-thinking will lead to the correction of a defect that seems to me to be present in the whole debate about the missionary message during the past century. It has all

been terribly Pelagian. Whether the emphasis was upon the saving of individual souls from perdition, or on the shaping of more truly humane cultures, or on the righting of social wrongs, the overwhelming emphasis has been upon missions as our program. From the New Testament I get a different impression. There, it seems to me, mission is an overflow of gratitude and joy. The center of the picture is not the human need of salvation (from sin, from oppression, from alienation) but God and God's immeasurable grace. So the central concern is not "How shall the world be saved?" but "How shall this glorious and gracious God be glorified?" The goal is the glory of God. The present decade has seen two world missionary conferences with the themes drawn from the Lord's Prayer: "Your Kingdom Come" (Melbourne 1980) and "Your Will Be Done" (San Antonio 1989). I would like to think that the next decade might see a world conference with the theme: "Your Name Be Hallowed."

### 3. The Community

Who will be the bearers of the mission in the 1990s? Who will be the missionaries? Modern missions began as the enterprise of groups of enthusiasts often with little backing from the churches. That has changed. The Tambaram meeting of 1938 posed the issue that could not be ignored. A church is no true church if it is not missionary, and missions are no true missions if they are not part of the life of the church. Faithfulness to that logic has led to measures – more or less effective – to integrate church and mission at national and international levels. What has not generally happened is integration at the level of the local congregation-and that is where it matters most. A congregation is not missionary just because it supports the work of a board or society; the question always is whether or not it is itself missionary, whether it exists as a witness to the

people around it. I think that in the coming decade this question will be increasingly important. In the period when the major bearers of the Christian mission were churches in the rich and powerful nations, the main thrust was in the form of people and funds mobilized and sent by supracongregational agencies. Yet even today the great numerical increases are taking place mainly through the quiet witness of members of congregations to their neighbors. I think this happens chiefly where church structures are flexible and the spontaneous generation of fresh centers of Christian congregational life is made easy. In this respect I think that we have still not properly learned the lessons of Roland Allen.

I am sure that international and intercultural missionary sending will continue and will be important, but I think that the main point of growth will be at the point where ordinary congregations are in contact with their neighbors. We are living in a time marked by skepticism about large organizations, even though (or perhaps because) the power of these organizations is increasing. Much of the liveliest Christian commitment is going into small groups, "base communities," "house-groups," and the like. This seems likely to continue into the coming decade. And the strongest growing points are in the cultures that have not been shaped by "modern" Western culture. My guess, for what it is worth, is that it will be in the unspectacular and unheralded growth of small congregations, especially in the nonWestern world, that the gospel will be communicated in the coming decade. But, at the same time, "modern" Western culture will continue to strengthen its grip on the life of human communities everywhere and – therefore – Christian churches that have so long accepted a syncretistic co-existence with the "modern" worldview will continue to bear the prime responsibility for articulating a Christian message for this particular culture. That remains a task which calls for the best intellectual and spiritual energies that we can bring to it.

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