



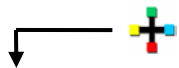
A Mission to Modern Western Culture

1990

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It is a great joy to be at this meeting to see that the integration of mission and church for which I was so deeply concerned thirty years ago now is a reality. As I look back on my own participation in this as the last general secretary of the old International Missionary Council and the first director of the WCC's Division on World Mission and Evangelism, I feel very much that I failed to fulfill all the hopes that we had when that integration took place. Therefore, it is a great joy to see how, under the leadership of those who have followed me as director, the vision has been more and more fully realized. We can today speak truly of a body that represents mission in six continents, for six continents, from six continents.

It is a very special joy that my old friend Christopher Duraisingh is to be the one who carries us forward into the next period. He and I have been friends for a very long time, which means that we have also had lots of theological arguments. It is that itself which is a token of our friendship and trust. I remember that Hendrik Kraemer of beloved memory often used to say that what we most need is someone with a theological head and a missionary heart. I think that Christopher Duraisingh is a man with a theological head and a missionary heart.

It was about thirty years ago that another very dear friend, John Coventry Smith, then director of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church, coined the phrase "mission in six continents". I remember him coming up to me during the New Delhi assembly and saying: "Isn't that a phrase that would describe what we are looking for: mission in six continents?" And now, I feel that this conference itself represents that reality in a way that certainly the missionary conferences of earlier years had not fully realized. I believe with all my heart that this is the way that God is calling us.

I was led to remember a little incident at the Bangkok conference, one of the predecessors to this conference which took place in 1971, something which does not appear in the conference reports but is the thing that

I remember most. It was during one of the early plenary sessions and we were having a discussion about the global situation of Christian world mission. The man sitting beside me was General Simatupang of Indonesia. He made an intervention in the debate. I don't remember what he said but I do remember that as he came back and sat down beside me I heard him say under his breath: "Of course, the number one question is: can the West be converted?"

That became for me an existential question... While I was struggling with that question I happened to be visiting a famous library and was going along the shelves, looking at the titles of the books. I chanced upon the title of a French book, *La crise de la conscience europeenne* by Paul Hazard, "the crisis of Europe's consciousness". I thought that might be helpful. I read it and began to reflect about that crucial point when Europe took a turn in a new direction. That point, which those who passed through it called "the Enlightenment", was roughly the middle decades of the eighteenth century.

That word enlightenment is a very significant word because it is a conversion word. It is the word used of the Buddha for his conversion. At that point as you look back you can see that at least the educated elite of Europe, the intellectuals of Europe took a decisive turn from one creed to another, from one way of understanding the world based upon a thousand years of biblical tradition and the authority of the Bible.

If one asks what were the essential elements in that conversion, at the risk of being very naive one could say that in the first instance it was the dawning of a belief that there could be available to us a kind of knowledge which is undoubtable, which is clear and distinct so that there are no fuzzy edges, no mysteries but clear, distinct unquestionable knowledge; that the human reason, unfettered by traditions or authority, by its own sheer rational power would be able to arrive at indubitable knowledge which does not require a personal commitment, which does not involve a personal risk but which is simply fact. Fact which no one can doubt, which is simply so. That anything in the nature of mystery, of imagination, of intuition, of vision that cannot be stated in these exact indubitable terms belongs to a second level of knowledge. It is the level at which you don't say "I know", but you say "I believe".

The classic picture which has operated as the background of the European mind for at least 200 or 300 years was the picture provided by Newton's astronomy and physics in which the world is understood not in terms of the purpose for which it exists, but in terms of the causes which make it work. That was the decisive turning point which created a

dichotomy within the whole of Western thinking, between a public world of facts which you know and a private world of beliefs and values which are the matter of your personal choice.

Can you realistically find in the Bible, in the Christian tradition, a stand-point from which you can radically call into question the whole set of assumptions which govern a culture?

The relation of the Christian gospel to the reigning world-view in the modern Western world is not to show that the gospel is plausible. It is to show that that plausibility structure itself is breaking down and that there is an alternative way of understanding the world which is radically different from the one that reigns here.

One of the Latin American liberation theologians has written words which I find very significant. He said: "The point is to understand the world through the text." The Bible ought to function not as the object of my study. The Bible should be the whole background of my thinking because, in all my thinking, all my acting, all my deciding, there is a background of assumptions which I do not question except when some special event occurs that causes me to question. It is in the light of all those assumptions about what the story is about and about who I am that I make my decisions from moment to moment. The Bible functions properly, not as the object of our

examinations but as the context within which we seek to understand the world. I find that an enormously important insight.

During my years in Birmingham I have been impressed by the vitality of the black-led churches. They are among the few churches that show real signs of vitality in our kind of urban culture. The vitality of these churches arises from the fact the Bible is not so much something that they study as it is their own story. We crossed the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army was drowned. We were fed with manna in the wilderness. That's who we are. We were led by the fiery cloudy pillar through the desert. That's who we are. We were there when they crucified the Lord. We were there when God raised him from the tomb. That's who we are. That's our story. And it is in the light of that story, living in that story, that we cope with the world.

Now if that is true, it raises in my mind two issues which are very relevant to the questions that we are discussing in this conference. The first is this: on what bases are we conducting the interfaith dialogue about which we are rightly concerned in this conference? There cannot be any mission to the world without dialogue, without listening as well as speaking. If the dialogue is based upon the contemporary world-view

which I have been seeking to describe (because nearly all of this dialogue is conducted in European languages which are shaped by this modern culture) then, of course, we are in this world of values and not in the world of facts.

We are sharing experiences and value judgments which are in any case a matter of personal choice and, therefore, pluralism naturally operates. We are not in the world of facts where pluralism is something that we are seeking to overcome because we want to know what is actually the truth, the real human story, the story that makes sense of human life. Is it the story which is told in the Bible, the story in which there is only one hero, namely the awesome merciful mighty Lord whose crucial action in history is there in the ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus?

Or is that simply part of a private world called religion, whereas the real world is governed by a different vision of the story? If we accept that basis then I do not believe the dialogue really leads us into the truth.

The real dialogue, and I think the most important dialogue for us now, is the dialogue between the biblical understanding of the human story and that understanding of the human story which is dominating Western culture and increasingly the culture of the world. And so, I am seeing it as the crucial missionary task that we challenge and claim the high intellectual ground of our Western culture. I know when I say this I am accused of being elitist. Of course elite just means elect and you cannot remove the doctrinal election from the Bible. (And when I get to the age of 90 I am going to start a society for the protection of elites.) But you cannot avoid the question of challenging the intellectual high ground, claiming the ground that rules our public life.

At the same time you have got to work at every other level, including the level of the simplest local congregation. Every one of these is vital and you cannot say yes to this and no to that. We need both.

But the second reason why this issue is relevant to the work of our conference here is that the question raised by Simatupang is one that will not go away. Simatupang was looking at Western culture from the standpoint of a more ancient culture, the standpoint that could look from the outside and see the witnesses of Western culture in a way that I did not and could not. Because, as I said earlier, this Western culture is something which is penetrating into every part of the world, particularly the urbanized sections of the world. Missionaries themselves have been among the great agents of secularization. As I look back on my own life as a missionary in India, I realize now in a way that I never did at that

time that I was not only carrying the gospel but that I was also a carrier of this so-called modern world-view which I now see to be breaking down because it is false. As I look back on my own judgments I realize that over and over again I was judging situations, thinking that I was making a Christian judgment. But that judgment I was making was shaped more by my training as an Englishman, a product of an English school and university education, than the judgment that arises from living in the world of the Bible.

I know how slowly it was that I came to see that. I believe that it must be part of our agenda as a Commission for World Mission that we address ourselves to that issue. If we are really serious when we speak about mission in six continents, then one of our toughest tasks, I think, is precisely the one that I try to outline: to challenge the high intellectual ground of our culture. I said earlier on that if I look at the life of the church in my own country I think that, as compared with previous centuries, the ministers and the people are more devoted, more committed to the gospel than was normally the case a hundred years ago. They are much more involved in the political and social implications of the gospel than they were a hundred years ago. I think that one cannot fault them at that point.

One asks: why is it then that the church tends to be so defensive, and even so timid in the faith, of the claims of what we call modern culture? The answer is that we have allowed ourselves, we have allowed the gospel to be co-opted into a subordinate position in this world of values where it cannot challenge what is called the world of facts. We must recover the courage to recognize that it is this world of so-called facts that we have to challenge, that we have to claim the high ground. We have to do as St Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, "to bring every thought in captivity to Christ". That must be one of the central tasks of a commission that takes all six continents for its agenda.

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