



*Reflections on the LMS/CWM Bicentennial: July 1995*

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Nine-page response to Konrad Raiser's keynote address on 12 July 1995 at the City Temple in London for the Bicentenary Celebrations of the London Missionary Society/Council for World Mission.

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Konrad Raiser in the City Temple gave the key-note address, giving us a vision of the world situation and the challenge which it presents to the Church. The address was magisterial in its scope and lucid in its presentation. Because it was a very important statement on a very significant occasion, I think it deserves a response. Dr Raiser set before us three major issues confronting the Church in its world mission.

1. The ecological crisis. The present development of our global economic system places us on a course which must lead to total disaster, and the time to reverse this and find a new direction is perilously short.

2. Claims to global hegemony clash with each other and threaten the survival of the human community. Among these claims are those of the religions, among them Christianity. Unless these claims to universal hegemony are abandoned, we are headed for disaster.

3. Hierarchical patterns of social order lead to the oppression and dehumanisation of the growing proportion of the world's people who are excluded from the benefits of the present global economic order. The proper model for human society is one of mutual relatedness expressed through a multitude of networks which hold society together in non-hierarchical and non-oppressive ways. As Christians we have the ultimate model of the Divine Trinity to guide us in working for such a society.

I am writing this from my listening to the address without having yet had the opportunity to read the text which will, no doubt, be available later. My brief summary does not justice to the depth and cogency of Raiser's analysis of these three challenges, but I hope it is enough to identify them correctly.

Reflecting on the address as a whole, I have one general comment and three specific ones directed to the three points of the lecture.

### *General*

We were celebrating the birth, 200 years ago, of a missionary society. We were reminded of the bold decision of a small group of Londoners to do what most of their contemporaries regarded as crazy, if not also impious. They also faced daunting challenges on the international scene. The established order of society as it had existed for centuries was being overturned by the French Revolution, and the convulsive events which followed. (I am writing this on Bastille Day). It seemed to many Englishmen of that time that the world as they knew it was coming to an end. But these events did not, apparently, occupy the centre of their thoughts. That centre was occupied by 'the glorious Gospel of the ever-blessed God'. They did not see themselves as a society dedicated to finding an answer to the conflicts which were tearing Europe in pieces. They had a gospel which concerned the whole inhabited world, and they were filled with the desire to share it.

Raiser's address contained no hint, not even a passing reminder, of this. The word 'gospel' was never, as far as I heard, spoken. We were given, as I have said, a magisterial presentation of the dangers which threaten our world and the human race with destruction. There was no hint of any good news. For me, at least, if I were not a committed missionary, this presentation would have been simply crushing. What possible human hope is there of reversing the ruin of the planet, reconciling the warring ambitions of human communities, or creating truly communitarian societies within the lifetime of even the child born today? Without the Gospel, there could be only the response of crushing despair in the face of such a scenario.

Was it not strange to celebrate this occasion without even a reference to the intentions of those whose action we were meeting to remember? Do we no longer have good news? Only a terrifying array of global problems for which no solution is in sight?

I would also like to make some observations on the three specific issues which Dr Raiser – rightly – identified.

#### *1. The Planet.*

It was absolutely right to put this first and to emphasise the extreme gravity and urgency of the environmental issue. But there are two reasons for questioning Dr Raiser's proposed answer – namely to replace an anthropocentric view of the world by a life-centred one.

(a) No-one except human beings can take responsibility for the environment. Animals and plants cannot do it. As human beings we have a unique place in the cosmos and cannot evade this responsibility. The point (and perhaps this is the sense in which an anthropocentric view is to be condemned) is that the stewardship with which we are entrusted is not to exploit the earth for our sole benefit, but to bring the whole earth to that perfection for which God created it in order that it might truly be, as Calvin said, a theatre of God's glory.

(b) If we accept this understanding of the wrong kind of anthropocentrism then we must say that a life-centred view would also be wrong. God, I believe, did not create the world simply for the multiclaccation of biological life. An untamed jungle is not, surely, what God intends the world to be. And, as David Ford pointed out in his response, the final word in the biological world belongs to death. Surely what is needed is not replacement of human responsibility by an appeal to the principle of biological life, but the repentance of humans who were entrusted with husbandry and have acted as rapists.

#### *2. The Lust*

The lust to enlarge one's own space is as old as human history. The roots of it have been endlessly examined by Christians from Augustine to Reinhold Niebuhr. I suppose it is combination of lust and fear – lust for the enjoyment of wealth, and fear of other aggressors and predators. The global expansion of western Christendom which began, symbolically, in 1492, was certainly not the first or the last in the series. It was a long delayed response to the military expansion of the Arab people which had wiped out the ancient Christian civilisation of the old eastern empire and had been halted only in France and in the Balkans. Like other counter-attacks

(and like the response of the Muscovites in repelling the Tartars and then expanding into Siberia, it went beyond restoring the original boundary in search for future security. The acute guilt feelings about this in contemporary Europe (contrasted with the total absence of such feelings in the world of Islam) are worth a study for which this is not the place. The creation of the Islamic empire stretching from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Pacific coasts of Asia effectively imprisoned Christianity (apart from the small scattered East Asian enclaves) within Western Europe. In terms of the ordinary patterns of human history, it was inevitable that eventually the attempt should be made to break out of this stranglehold. The reasons for which so many liberal Protestant European Christians see this as a uniquely wicked chapter in human history deserve study.

Dr Raiser's plea is that we must all, especially Christians, abandon dreams of world hegemony and accept plurality as a permanent and proper feature of human life together on this planet. I think the following points need to be made.

(a) I do not think that the New Testament requires or entitles us to expect that there will be a time within history when 'Christianity' will be the only religion in the world. But the New Testament does affirm that those whom Jesus has called to be his disciples are entrusted with a gospel, news of facts (Latin *factum*, things which have been done) which are of concern to every human being both for the carrying on of human life within history and for what lies beyond history.

(b) Christians have a long record of seeking to suppress plurality. This has to be confessed with shame, not least because it is a contradiction of the heart of the Gospel: see below.

(c) When this led to the religious wars of the 17th century, the attempt to enforce religious conformity collapsed. The liberal vision (Locke, Mill etc) was that plurality could be safeguarded by removing religious beliefs to the private sector, leaving the public arena. The 20th century has seen the collapse of this secular ideal and the rise (as Raiser noted) of powerful forms of religious fundamentalism invading the public arena. The reason seems to be a logical self-contradiction within the liberal idea. Its fundamental dogma was that, for the purposes of public discourse, the created world and the sum of all human beings constitutes all that exists. But this negates the liberal doctrine of the rights of the individual human being. The liberal dogma can only mean that the collective has the ultimate power over the individual. (See Ian Markham: *Plurality and Christian Ethics*). The liberal vision has survived so long, it would seem, only because western society was still deeply permeated by residual Christian beliefs about God and still shaped at a scarcely conscious level by the teaching of the Bible. When these become weakened to a certain point, there is nothing to prevent liberalism from sliding into 'elected dictatorship' and finally into totalitarianism. Plurality is extinguished in the name of the collective will.

(d) While all the world's major religions have at some times shown zeal for proselytising, only Islam and Christianity are fundamentally and essentially missionary religions, but seek the submission of the whole world to the rule of God. Both recognise that the world generally rejects the will of God as communicated by his prophets/messengers. Both believe that, nevertheless, God vindicates his messengers. But this vindication is seen in different ways. In Islam, the world's rejection is expressed in the flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina (the Hajira) and God's vindication in the victory of Medina over the Meccans in the Battle of Badr. Thereafter Islam is launched into the world as a movement of military conquest. In the New Testament the world's repudiation is expressed in the crucifixion of Jesus, and God's vindication in the resurrection. But whilst the crucifixion is an event in public history immediately manifest to all, the resurrection is an event made known only to those who had been chosen and prepared beforehand as witnesses. The victory of God is a reality, but it is now a hidden reality known only in faith by those who have known also the crucifixion. The Church is therefore launched into the world not as a victorious army but as a community of the cross.

(e) How did it come about that the cross was used as a symbol of military victory ('in hoc signo vincis')? That is the question Christians have to face. How did it come about that Christendom as a political and military power became less tolerant of plurality than Islam?

Christians became the bearers of power in an imperial system which was already centuries old; Islam created its own new empire. Does that provide any clue? Whatever the case, as Christians we have to repent of, and divest ourselves of, imperial claims of this kind. These claims led to the bloody impasse of the religious wars in Europe, and Europe's repudiation of Christianity as public truth. Locke and those who followed him believed that the liberal creed would safeguard freedom for plurality in the public arena.

I think we can now see that it was able to do so for as long as the European mind was still, to some extent, permeated by beliefs derived from Christianity. We have seen in this century that this vestigial Christianity is not enough to save liberalism from sliding into its logical end: the dominance of the collective. And if liberalism cannot safeguard plurality, neither can Islam. If we return to the heart of the Gospel itself, to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, we have the unique ground on which plurality can be safeguarded, since it is the ground for assurance that the total submission of all human wills to the will of God (Islam) is the true goal of human history, but lies beyond history. If there is no assurance that God's will finally prevails, there is no bulwark against total corruption – the slide into moral anarchy which we now witness in our society. But if God's final victory is within history, then those who claim to speak for God can allow no space for plurality. In other words, we safeguard plurality not by abandoning the universal claim of the Gospel but by affirming it as good news for all without exception.

(f) However important may be the safeguarding of plurality, plurality cannot be the first and last word about society. Unless there is something which holds a society together plurality becomes fragmentation, shattering and destruction. For most of human society for most of history what holds society together is the extension of what holds a family together, namely the ties of blood and race. Without these there is no society at all. Most human religion in actual practice is intimately bound up with these ties of kinship. When these natural bondings are disrupted – by war, migration or the pressures of an economic system which requires a high degree of specialisation and therefore of mobility, these ethnic and religious bondings can themselves become sources of conflict, as we know from bitter experience. What is the force strong enough to create that degree of mutual trust and forbearance between these groups to make plurality tolerable? Since we now talk, as we must, on a global scale, where is the centripetal force strong enough to hold together the communities drawn by the centrifugal power of their separate ethnic and religious identities? I am committed to the ecumenical missionary cause because I believe that the Gospel is itself the good news that in the atoning work of Jesus Christ there is provided for us all that place, that 'mercy seat' (Greek *Hilasterion*) where we can be reconciled to one another because we have been reconciled to God. When those who are entrusted with that gospel use it as a means for the coercion or subjugation of others, they subvert it. But to cease offering it to all peoples as God's invitation to a reconciliation which gives room for particularity, would be a betrayal of trust.

### *3. A Non-hierarchical society.*

The nations of Western Europe, North America and Japan, who now dominate the global economic order, demand as the condition of help that developing nations conform to the principle and practice of democracy. Yet this global order is seen by those who are not its beneficiaries as imperialistic and oppressive. In the classical world of antiquity democracy 'the rule of the mob' was seen as the last stage on the road to tyranny. We have seen the truth of this exemplified in 20th century Europe. Democracy which is not controlled by any convictions about what is right and wrong (as distinct from what a majority wants) inevitably follows this road. The story of the early development of democratic institutions in England is part of the history of the Puritan version of Christianity. It rested on the belief that devout Christians, seeking together with the guidance of the Scripture to find the will of God for their situation, would be led into the right course. It was not hierarchical, but it was not merely majoritarian. In a society which is committed to the secular ideology, in which there is no publicly acknowledged and venerated vision of

righteousness, it is hard to see how democracy can avoid developing into the tyranny of the majority.

I am sure that it is right and urgently necessary to work for a society which is participatory, a network of networks in which we recognise that our human-ness is properly fulfilled in a life of mutual relationship and responsibility. (The Amsterdam Assembly took as its response to both capitalism and communism the slogan of 'The Responsible Society', but I do not think they adumbrated this idea in the form in which we now try to realise it. Why do we find that the forces working against such a vision for society are so strong? Is it not because such a society depends on a vision – ultimately a religious vision – of the human situation? As the remaining traces of Christian belief continue to evaporate, and we become more and more certainly a pagan society in which there is no God and no Torah which sets an absolute limit to the freedom of the individual to pursue self-interest, there is nothing to prevent democracy from descending into tyranny. As the commissioned witnesses of the Gospel we cannot be content with simply advocating the desirability of a participatory society, much as we ought to do so. We are entrusted with a Gospel which can set people free from the tyranny of self-interest and can give to our tired society the confidence that a different kind of life is possible.

Why do I write all this? Because at the end of Konrad's address I felt only a crushing sense of the utter impossibility that the Church, feeble, timid and divided as it is, could possibly meet and master the overwhelming disasters which (as Konrad rightly said) are impending; because I love the World Council of Churches and long that it should be a sign of hope and not of despair for our world; and because I think the bicentennial of the LMS/CWM should have been an occasion for rejoicing in the amazing power of the Gospel even when it is proclaimed by an insignificant group of London merchants meeting in the midst of the most violent events that had convulsed Europe for a thousand years. I wish it could have been a celebration of 'the glorious Gospel of the ever-blessed God'.

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