

# **Missiological Education for a Global Era**

## Missiological Education for a Global Era

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How should we train missionaries and church leaders for the twenty-first century. This is not a question for the future. The students we now have in our classes will be the world leaders in 2030 A.D. The eight-year olds in our Sunday Schools will be missionaries in 2050 A.D. We are like mission educators in 1945 trying to prepare missionaries for 1992: before the collapse of colonialism, the rise of the cold war, the emergence of the church around the world, and the collapse of communism.

It is easy to plan for the past. It is what we know best. Planning for the future is perilous at best, but we must do it if we want to join in what God is now doing around the world.

### Historical Trends

To understand Christian missions in the future, we need to understand our history to understand the forces at work in the world around us.

#### The Rise of Colonial Missions

The modern Protestant mission movement born with the arrival of Ziegenbalg and Plutschau at Tranquebar in 1706, and of William Carey in Serampore in 1793. The early missionaries identified closely with the people, learning their languages and translating their sacred literature into English. They often faced fierce opposition from the mercantile companies which were expanding their rule around the world.

The wedding of Christian missions with colonialism occurred largely after 1856 when the British Crown took over the rule of India. After that date, European countries rushed to divide up the world into colonies.

The colonial governments were much more hospitable to missionaries. Bosch notes,

As it became customary for British missionaries to labor in British colonies, French missionaries in French colonies, and German missionaries in German colonies, it was only natural for these missionaries to be regarded both vanguard and rearguard for the colonial powers. Whether they liked it or not, the missionaries became pioneers of Western imperialistic expansion (1991, 304).

John Philip, superintendent of the London Mission Society at the Cape of Good Hope, and a strong champion for oppressed peoples in the colonies, wrote,

While our missionaries are everywhere scattering the seeds of civilization, social order, and happiness, they are, by the most unexceptionable means, extending British interests, British influence, and the British empire. Wherever the missionary places his standard among the savage tribe, their prejudices against the colonial government give way (1982, ix).

Despite its colonialism, the modern mission movement was remarkably successful. By the middle of the twentieth century, small bands of missionaries had planted churches in most lands. In 1900 a.d. ninety-five percent of the church was in the west, and white. By 2000 a.d. an estimated sixty percent of the world's Christians will be in non-western countries, a testimony to God who worked despite the faults of his messengers and the flaws of their methods.

Among these flaws was tie of Christianity to western colonial powers and western culture. The church often turn to colonial rulers to enforce social reform, and mission converts often became cultural aliens in their own lands. Moreover, the idea of western superiority often produced in missionaries an arrogance not befitting the gospel.

### The Anti-colonial Era

Opposition to the colonial exploitation of the people was voiced from the beginning by a few missionaries. The modern Anti-colonial movement began, however, with the emergence of nationalist movements in the colonies, and with the growing opposition to missions among secular humanists in the west. In recent years it has been backed by Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist fundamentalists.

The anti-colonial critique is an important corrective to the colonial nature of modern missions. The collapse of western Christendom (the marriage of Christianity to western governments), and the emergence of young churches as minority communities in hostile cultures, has broken the image of Christianity wedded to political power. The church today, like the early church, must operate from a position of powerlessness and marginality.

The emergence of independent churches around the world expressing indigenous forms of Christianity is undermining the equation of Christianity with western cultures. New and vital expressions of Christianity are emerging on the world scene. The western church is only one among many. Lamin Sanneh notes,

Christianity triumphs by the relinquishing of Jerusalem or any fixed universal centre, be it geographical, linguistic or cultural, with the result that we have a proliferation of centres, languages and cultures within the Church. Christian oecumenism is a pluralism of the periphery with only God at the centre.

In the long run, however, the medicine of anti-colonialism is more dangerous than the disease of colonialism. In the first place, like the post-modernism of which it is part, anti-colonialism rejects any universal claims of truth, and affirms deconstructionism and epistemological cognitive relativism. Anthony Giddens points out (1990, ##),

The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the 'grand narrative' -- the overarching 'story line' by means of which are placed in history as beings have a definite past and a predictable future. The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge. . . (1990, ##).

Walter Anderson adds (1990, ##), "[We have] a growing suspicion that all belief systems -- all ideas about human reality -- are social constructs." Thomas Kuhn (1970) concludes that all such constructs or paradigms are incommensurable: that people in one cannot really understand or communicate with people in another. There is no way, therefore, to compare two paradigms to determine which is closer to the truth. Consequently, we cannot speak meaningfully of truth. We are left with pragmatism in which all we can say is that some paradigms are more useful than others.

One end of pragmatism is relativism and narcissism. Another is the rejection of any attempts to convert others to Christianity. In our fear of being colonial, we in the west are in danger of loosing our missionary nerve.

In the second place, anti-colonialism is in danger of absolutizing the historical and sociocultural contexts, and downplaying the possibility of divine revelation coming from outside our subjective human settings. David Bosch writes,

This approach ends up having a low view of the importance of the text as coming from outside the context. The very idea that texts can judge contexts is, in fact, methodologically doubted. the message of the gospel is not viewed as something that we bring to the contexts, but as something that we derive from contexts. "You cannot incarnate good news into a situation, good news arises out of the situation," writes Nolan (1991, 430).

Owen Thomas points out that it is this emergence of 'truth' from within the self that leads ultimately to "a naturalistic theism or affirmation of a cosmic soul as natural reality interacting with the world as part of the natural process" (1988, 212) - in other words to Hinduism and the New Age Movement.

Finally, anti-colonialism is essentially a reactionary movement. Its one agenda is to destroy the last vestiges of colonialism. It has no interest in and offers no solution to famines, oppression, poverty, crime and other evils on earth. Nor is it concerned with the eternal lostness of humans apart from Christ.

### The Global Era

We in the west must move beyond anti-colonialism to world thinking. We must see that the earth is being united through interlocking sociocultural systems. We must recognize that God is raising up a world church, and that we are no longer the center, but partners with churches in other lands.

## **Training Missionaries for a Global World**

What implications does this all have for the content of mission training? How do we train leaders for the next half century? I suggest the following implications:

### **1. We must move from discussing theology and the social sciences to a discussion of a biblical worldview.**

For the most part, missionaries during the colonial era focused their attention on theology. Mission conferences and writings are fully of discussions over theological issues such as the call of God, the lostness of humanity, and the nature of salvation.

In recent years, mission discussions have shifted to the contributions the social sciences have to offer. We now speak of people groups, multi-individual conversions, receptivity and contextualization.

How do we bring theology and the social sciences together in missiology? As I listen to young seminaries in the school cafe I am struck by the duality. Here is a circle of young theologians excited about some abstract theological concept. Mission and evangelism are far from the center of their interests. There is a group of mission candidates discussing strategies for evangelism and church planting, and trying to avoid taking theology courses. Theology students avoid mission conferences, and mission students stay away from theology courses. Sadly, the two groups rarely meet. The result is a theology divorced from human realities, and a missiology that lacks theological foundations.

Harvie Conn points out that one way to bridge the gap is to recognize that theology is the daughter of mission, not its mother. Most of the theology in the New Testament was worked out in response to mission problems. For instance, Acts 15 is the minutes of a mission conference. If we view theology in this light, missionaries need the help of theologians, and theologians would find their work relevant to everyday life.

But the division between theology and the social sciences runs deeper than asking different questions. They are embedded in different worldviews, and until these worldviews are brought together, no lasting integration is possible.<sup>1</sup> For us as Christians this must be a Christian worldview. Only as we reformulate our social science theories and our theologies in terms of a biblical worldview will they become complimentary maps or blueprints of reality.<sup>2</sup> We must, therefore, move behind the discussion of explicit beliefs to the largely implicit assumptions and categories we use to think about reality.

In missiological education, this means we must reexamine the presuppositions behind our theories to determine the extent to which they are based on biblical assumptions, or on secular scientific ones.<sup>3</sup>

It also means that we must recognize that conversion must take place not only on the level of explicit beliefs, but also on the level of worldview assumptions. If conversion involves only the former, in two or three generations the church will face Christo-



paganism, as implicit non-Christian assumptions and categories distort the explicit meanings of Christian teachings.

We must help young churches test their worldviews against the Scriptures. One way to do so is to reorient the theological task. Instead of looking at theology only in terms of a comparison of Christian and nonChristian beliefs , we need to examine the assumptions that lie behind each of them. For example, in India, we found it important not only to teach that the God of the Bible is the only true God, but also to examine the implicit meaning of **devudu**, the Telugu word we used to translate the word "God," and to show how our use of it is different from the ways Hindus use the term. The same is true of other key theological concepts such as "incarnation" (translated **avatar**), "salvation" (translated **moksha**), and "time" (understood in India as **samsara** or cyclical time). When we examined worldviews, the results were dramatic. Students with little education grasped the importance of defining Christianity in their cultural context, noting both the similarities and the differences between it and the Indian worldview.

## **2. We must move from indigenization and contextualization to inculturation.**

The postmodern era has made it clear to us that all human knowledge is shaped by the sociocultural and historical contexts of the knower. It is important, therefore, that we contextualize the gospel in different cultural settings so that the people understand the message clearly. Too often we have equated the gospel with our own cultural ways, and so failed to contextualize it in new

cultures. Kenneth Scott Lautaurette notes that throughout church history, the established church has wedded the gospel to its own culture.<sup>4</sup>

We must remember, however, that the gospel is not a message to be understood, but a call to be obeyed. We must contextualize the message and the methods of evangelism for people to hear the gospel in ways they understand, but we must go beyond contextualization to an inculturation in which the prophetic call of the gospel leads to personal and corporate transformation. Contextualization without transformation leads to Christo-paganism. Transformation without contextualization lacks evangelistic outreach. In mission education we must reemphasize the absolute standards of the Kingdom of God in the middle of cultural relativities.

**3. We must move from a stress on the autonomy and independence of national churches to interdependence and partnership in mission.**

The colonial era saw the dependence of young churches on the older churches and their missionaries. The anti-colonial era rightly emphasized the need to recognize their independence.

Colonialism is not dead, and we must continue to guard against it. We must recognize the unity of the global Church, and move beyond the walls of nationalism, ethnicity, class and gender that divide us. As Samuel Escobar points out,

Internationalization of Christian mission means acknowledging that God has now raised up large and thriving churches in nations where sometimes the Bible was not even translated a hundred years ago. In these churches of the Southern Hemisphere, churches of the poor, churches of the Third World, God is raising up a new missionary force (1992, 7).

Such a shift calls for a radical change not only in our mission curricula, but also in the way we perceive mission training as a whole.

But we must move beyond our focus on our relationships to one another, and turn our attention again on the world and its needs. Injustice, famine, wars, oppression and poverty reign on earth, and millions die without knowing the way of salvation. For fear of offending one another, we are in danger of abandoning a lost and dying world. We need to work together under God's guidance in the mission he has given us.

#### **4. We must move from a stress on the Church and World, to God and His Kingdom.**

Most Western missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were largely children of the Enlightenment. They divided reality into a spiritual realm where Christianity ruled, and a natural realm where science ruled.

In this context, many evangelical missions saw their central task to be evangelism. By this they meant leading people to a personal, saving faith in Christ that would lead to eternal salvation. The Student Volunteer Movement, for example, had as its watchword, "the evangelization of the world in this generation."

Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, and later Roland Allen and Donald McGavran pointed out that evangelism by itself is incomplete. Converts must be incorporated into living churches. The strength of this view is that it ties evangelism to the

planting of churches. Evangelism without the church is incomplete, the church without evangelism is ingrown.

One weakness of this approach is its human-centeredness. Missions is what we plan and do for God. Another is its failure to address the structural evils of our world. We are in danger of separating individuals from their communities, spiritual needs from material needs, the future from the present, and the Gospel from its fruit.

We need to move beyond evangelism and church planting to a focus on the Kingdom of God. This reminds us that mission is first and foremost the work of God (missio dei). As Jurgen Moltmann notes, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church (1977, 64)."

There is a danger, however. If we speak of missions as missio dei, but do not define dei, we are free to equate the kingdom with our own utopias - with Marxism, capitalism and socialism. The Kingdom of God to which we bear witness is the Kingdom defined by Christ its King.

Within the Kingdom, the church has a central place. It is the place on earth where the Kingdom is already manifest as a sign of what is yet to come. Within the church evangelism is central. As Bosch points out,

Evangelism is announcing that God, Creator and Lord of the universe, has personally intervened in human history and has done so supremely through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who is the Lord of history, Savior and Liberator. In this Jesus, incarnate, crucified and risen, the reign of God has been inaugurated (1991, 412).

There is no divorce here between earthly and heavenly, between material and spiritual needs, or between salvation, righteousness and justice.

**5. We must move from positivism and instrumentalism to a critical realist epistemology.**

Modernity and its offspring, colonialism, are built on a positivist epistemology. This affirms that scientific knowledge is an accurate photograph of the world, having a one-to-one correspondence with reality.

As we have seen, postmodernity and its offspring, anti-colonialism, are based on an instrumentalist epistemology which holds that all human knowledge is captive to the subjectivity of cultural and historical contexts. Postmodernity celebrates cultural and religious diversity, and deny universals. Donald Shriver writes,

By what right does anybody speak of the human - especially in a time when we are discovering the alienations and the destructive potentials of universal principles, including the principle of humanity (1980, 346)?

The result is subjectivism and pragmatism. Frederic Burnham comments (1989, x), "The fundamental characteristic of the new postmodern era is epistemological relativism." This relativism destroys both missions and the gospel.

We dare not stay in relativism. Nor do we want to return to the cultural arrogance of the age of positivism. Our answer must lie in a critical realist epistemology (Barbour 1974) which holds that human knowledge is a map or blueprint that links subjective images of the world with objective realities. Such a shift will change how we view theology and mission (Hiebert 1985a, 1985b).<sup>5</sup>

The implications of these shifts for what, how and where we teach missions are far-reaching. In the end, however, missions is not so much what we teach, but what we model.

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1. For a discussion of this view of epistemology see Larry Laudin. 1977. Progress and Its Problems. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. Laudin counters the instrumentalism posited by Thomas Kuhn in The Nature of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn

concludes that all knowledge is subjective, and that we cannot know if any of it is true. Consequently, we can no longer speak of truth. We can only say that certain knowledge is 'useful' in certain settings. Laudin proposes a schema of human knowledge in which Truth has a central place.

2. In recent years an extensive literature on the theory of complementarity has emerged. This sees different belief systems as different maps of the same reality, each of which gives true information on some specific aspect of that reality. Complementarity does not lead to relativism, for contradictions between belief systems must be resolved by changing one or the other, or both of them, or by changing the worldview in which they are embedded.
3. It should not surprise us that most of the people involved in the Gospel in Our Culture movement have served in missions. Because of their cross-cultural experience, they are most aware of how much of our modern Christianity is built uncritically on the assumptions of modernity, and how great is the need to return to a biblical worldview.
4. An example of this over-contextualization of the gospel is the church in North America which is no longer a prophetic counter-cultural community seeking to change the society around it. In recent years a number of North American Christians, most of whom have served in ministries abroad, have organized the "Gospel in Our Culture" which is challenging to church in the U.S. to break from its captivity to western cultures.
5. The shift will entail a move from Saussurian semiotics which is built on a diadic view of symbols (form and meaning), to Peircian semiotics which has a triadic view of symbols (form, mental image, and reality). The former leaves meaning only in the heads of people, with no real means to check the correspondence between what the speaker says and the hearer hears. The latter views symbols as the mediators between objective reality and the subjective perception of reality. In other words, meaning does not lie in human minds alone, but in the correspondence between what is in the mind with reality. We can, therefore speak of truth, while recognizing that truth is always a subjective and limited perception of a much greater objective reality.

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