New Directions in the Theology of Mission

by Eric J. Sharpe

Dr. Sharpe, who is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies in the University of Lancaster, read this paper to the Society for the Study of Theology in April 1971. *It has been modified slightly in that some of its colloquialisms have been removed; but many more (he says) remain. Many of our readers will appreciate the retention of the personal style in which the paper was originally delivered.*

ONE cannot but be aware in these days of the artificial barriers which for one reason or another have tended to be erected between different branches of theological and religious studies. Personally, I find many of these barriers absurd, and an inhibition to creative work. Not that I am an enemy of academic specialization: far from it. But I do wish to reserve the right to change hats, to cross boundaries, and generally to look at questions from more than one angle. I teach in a department of religious studies, and my professional field is what I am still prepared to call "comparative religion"—the (as far as possible) dispassionate historical and phenomenological study of the religions of the world as phenomena in their own right. Now comparative religionists are popularly supposed to be only comparatively religious (a verdict which some take few pains to dissipate, but which on the whole is no more conspicuously correct than in the case of some theologians); and this being so, it might perhaps be supposed that this paper will turn out to be no more than a lecture delivered to the landed gentry by the local poacher—by one who may know the terrain fairly well, but is totally lacking in respect for property.

Well, I do not want to enter into the psychological problems which arise on the borderline (or in the no-man's-land) between comparative religion and the Christian mission. But a word or two of explanation may be called for nevertheless.

I began my academic career as a research student in Manchester under Professor S. G. F. Brandon, working in the parallel fields of New Testament Studies and Hinduism, and trying (on the whole unsuccessfully) to outline whatever relationship there might be between the Christian and Hindu views of man and his destiny. I went to Uppsala, Sweden in 1958, and having been there for a year was laid hold on by Professor (later Bishop) Bengt Sundkler and persuaded to turn my attention to the encounter—the actual encounter, not the theoretical relationship—between Christianity

and Hinduism in India. Under his guidance, and in constant interplay with my good friend Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz (author of *Kraemer towards Tambaram* and *New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths*, and our foremost Kraemer specialist), for six years I was a full-time historian of mission. To say that I found the task completely fascinating would be an understatement, not least in contrast to the inadequate missionary stereotypes on which I had been brought up. To investigate the Christian-Hindu encounter, I found, involved me in comparative religion, church history, dogmatic theology, Indian politics (national and colonial) and many more things which are commonly held in unnatural isolation from one another. This was demanding, certainly; but it was greatly rewarding. However, all good things come to an end. In 1965 the results of all this were published as *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: the Contribution of J. N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before* 1914,[1] and I had to start to earn my living—in the event, by returning to my first field of comparative religion. Since then, missionary studies have been no more than an occasional diversion; what *might* have happened had the study of the interplay of Christian and non-Christian cultures been part of accepted theological syllabi in our universities, and had I been in a position to teach along these lines, it is hard to say. As it is, after six years I now speak only as an amateur.

I shall be dealing in this paper with some recent trends in the debate surrounding the question of the propagation of the Christian faith. Clearly in this context I can do no more than hint at a few of these trends, viewed mainly from the horizon of the Protestant (or in Continental parlance Evangelical) mission. I should like to have been able to devote equal time to trends in Roman Catholic missions, particularly since Vatican II. Regrettably, apart from a couple of side glances, space will not allow this. Another limitation is that I shall be considering mission largely against a background dominated by the situation of the Church in Asia and Africa. The newer idea of "mission in six continents" of course implies mission in Durham and Dagenham and Detroit, as well as in Durban, Dar-es-Salaam and Darjeeling. I know: but one has to draw the line somewhere.

One further (and final) preliminary point which I should like to make is that Christian theologians are dreadfully limited if they insist on working exclusively within a Western conceptual framework. I shall argue that one of the most pressing questions confronting Christian theology today concerns its confrontations with explicitly non-Christian religions and ideologies and *Weltanschauungen* outside the bounds of the West, or, if you like, the problem

[1] Reviewed in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY 39 (1967), pp. 189 f.

of hermeneutics on the basis of data provided by other cultures than our own. Regrettably, far too few Christian theologians seem even to be aware that this problem exists, far less to be able to contribute to its solution.

One of the last things I did before leaving for Scandinavia in 1958 was to attend the international conference of the World Student Christian Federation in Edinburgh. In time I was to learn to what extent the study of the theology of mission this century had been bound up with the pronouncements of just such conferences as this. In fact, about the easiest (though not necessarily the best) way of writing the history of Christian missions since the turn of the century has been to do it with the help of volumes of conference reports. The picture that emerges is not altogether false; but nor can it altogether escape having a certain stereotyped quality.[2] The stereotypes say that at Edinburgh in 1910 Liberal Protestantism was on the march and the quest for unity was first seriously pursued; eighteen years later, at Jerusalem in 1928, the religions of the world were being urged—somewhat tentatively—to join forces against the common enemy of secularism; at Tambaram (Madras) in 1938 Hendrik Kraemer came forward as a great dialectical ogre to shatter the remaining illusions of the liberals, and to return the missionary debate more or less to where it had been before the turn of the century. In fact the debate was far more complex than that. It had many facets: and closer study showed that it was not so much a matter of the swing of a theological pendulum from transcendental to immanentist extremes and back again as the overlaying of one attitude by another, to produce a number of strata, evangelical, liberal, neo-evangelical and ultimately neo-liberal. Closer study also showed that attitudes differed considerably between adherents of different confessional traditions, and even between adherents of ostensibly the same tradition. Always, however, the key to the situation seemed to be contained in the question of Christian attitudes to non-Christian religions, and it was here that the great variety of possible (and occasionally impossible) theologies of mission was most clearly seen. I am not confident that this aspect of the recent history of Christian thought is as well known as it deserves to be; but I cannot go further into it on this occasion. Suffice it to say that it had not exhibited any real development (at least not an organic development), but that it had tended to oscillate from one extreme to another, carrying some with it, but leaving many more behind.

After Tambaram, and the publication of Kraemer's book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, there was considerable

2 Regrettably, the definitive history of missionary theology which might put and end to these stereotypes has not yet been written.

puzzlement among missionary leaders and working missionaries as to the direction which the theology of mission was going to take. Kraemer had delivered a number of body-blows to the liberal ideal of religion as an aspect of culture, to the thought of essential continuity between religions, non-Christian and Christian, and to the practice of missionary apologetics. He had called for "Biblical realism", but there was little in his theology to fit missionary thought for life in a world in which traditional priorities were being reversed, in which the Eastern religions were developing a new dynamic and a new confidence, and in which the West was rapidly sinking into a slough of religious despond—and in the 1960's into paroxysms of post-dated colonialist guilt.

An analysis of the developments of the immediate post-war years would itself be a fascinating exercise; but my brief is to deal with *new* directions, and so I shall say simply that after the interruption of the second world war we saw first a new emphasis on church-centred mission, and then, almost simultaneously, on mission-centred church. One of the first post-war conferences of the International Missionary Council was held in Canada (Whitby) in 1947, and it is interesting to see how its "Statements" are beginning to reflect what have since become terminological commonplaces: for instance, "Christian Witness in a Revolutionary World" and "The Supranationality of Missions". But its underlying theology is unmistakably post-Barthian. Take this, for example: "The Christian and still more the missionary—by his special position as ambassador of Christ—will always view his nation in the light of the Word of God. This is not a ready-made test and its implications are not always easy to determine. Moreover, we have to confess that in claiming to be ruled by the Word of God we may be only trying to give a religious sanction to our own self-assertiveness. We can only guard against this danger by a continual readiness to submit ourselves to the judgment of the Word and in the light of it to amend our ways."[3]

My impression is that for the next decade or more, the dominant theology of the Christian mission (or at least that part of it which was involved in the work of the International Missionary Council) was orthodox, Word-centred, very much reflecting the renaissance of biblical theology which was the heritage of the dialectical theologians. But there was a growing feeling of uneasiness just below the surface.

At the 1952 conference of the I.M.C. at Willingen a new concept came to the surface: *Missio Dei*,[4] concentrating on one God, one

[3] C. W. Ranson (ed.), *Renewal and Advance* (London, 1948), p. 220f.

[4] See Georg F. Vicedom, *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (München, 1960).

Church and above all one mission. This implied, among other things, a devaluation of the idea of "missions", that is, of narrowly specialist agencies and groups acting to propagate the faith on behalf of the totality of God's people. Instead the totality must learn to regard itself as the propagating agency.[5]

At the Edinburgh W.S.C.F. conference of 1958, the theme was the entirely proper one of "Life for the World". When the report was published in the *Student World*, the Editor drew attention to the ambiguity of the word "mission", and deliberately dissociated it from "missions" and "missionary societies". The Editorial went on:

> . . . the biblical renewal of our time has clearly demonstrated that the total task of the Church—its "mission"—also includes two other elements described by the Greek terms "diakonia" and "koinonia". As someone has rightly pointed out, the suspicion of so-called "missionary" organizations which is evidenced in some quarters is often due to the fact that they give the impression of claiming to carry out the whole Christian mission, while in reality they accomplish only one aspect of it . . . "Life and Mission" implies fundamentally the total living task of the Church.[6]

Strictly speaking, there was absolutely nothing new in this; but the words were new, and the correction of the impression that mission could safely be left to the specialist in his missionary society was welcome.

The recognition that mission was henceforth to be seen as an expression of the total function of the church was expressed in a number of ways, for instance in Brunner's epigram that "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning"[7]. But a more concrete recognition came in 1961, when the International Missionary Council was integrated with the World Council of Churches. The integration was appropriately accomplished in India, at New Delhi, and as the report said, it was ". . . a fitting symbol of the fact

5 Among the many books in which the Biblical basis of this view has been expounded, we may mention J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (London, 1962), esp. pp. 119ff. It is interesting to see how this same concern came to be actualized in Roman Catholic missionary thought after Vatican II. The Council, wrote one commentator, "rediscovered the mission not as something peripheral to the Church, but as its very heart and nature; not as a task for a few well-intentioned people in missionary institutions but as a life-task for the whole community of the Church". A. de Groot, "The Missions after Vatican II," in *Concilium*, VI/4 (June 1968), p. 82. For the older view, see C. Couturier, *The Mission of the Church* (E. T. London, 1960), p. 10f.

6 *Student World* (1958 No. 3), p. 226.

7 This attractive slogan must not be misused, however. For Brunner, there was a great deal of difference between the Church as an institution and the *Ecclesia* which is the creation of the Holy Spirit. Here we have the old distinction between the church visible and the church invisible—a distinction which many of the participants in the debate would not have allowed. See Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (E. T. London, 1952), *passim*.

that missionary responsibility cannot be separated from any other aspect of the Church's life and teaching"[8]. Simultaneously it was affirmed (though not quite for the first time) that "We are concerned not with three continents but with six",[9] and "mission in six continents" became a new motto.

Perhaps it would be as well to say at this point that to claim that mission is in essence the task of the church may be theologically justified; but it remains practically viable only for as long as the notion of the church remains viable. Also, it invites the criticism that to say that mission is the task of the church does not necessarily mean that everything the church does it equally "mission". However, the problems which lay in wait for the church (perhaps in some contexts a dangerous abstraction?) were not altogether theological in nature. Its gradual loss of credibility, and its final espousal of some very odd causes in the impression that its mission was being thereby fulfilled, lie outside my scope to discuss. However, another New Delhi statement was to lead to some *genuine* theological problems (and I must record my conviction that where everything is theological nothing is theological, just as—to borrow Bishop Stephen Neill's *dictum*—where everything is mission, nothing is mission).

The New Delhi conference stated—and the echoes of Barth and Kraemer are still to be heard—that the future aim of the Christian mission is

> To further the proclamation to the whole world of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to the end that all men may believe in him and be saved.[10]

Surely an unexceptionable sentiment! But in a very few years it was to be widely challenged.

It was in this same spirit, and in this same year, 1961, that the American scholar G. H. Anderson published his symposium *The Theology of the Christian Mission.* In a preface he called for a theology of mission from the angle of "radical Christian theocentrism" to supersede the "culture-centred, man-centred, revelation-centred, eschatology-centred, kingdom-centred, Bible-centred and Christ-centred points of view"[11]—an appeal which I quote merely to show the things one can do with words! More seriously, his symposium began with six essays on the Biblical basis of mission, went on to three essays on aspects of the history of mission, and continued with eight essays on Christianity and other faiths and another eight on "Theory of the Mission". Anderson called his symposium an ecumenical reappraisal (and it was technically

8 *The New Delhi Report* (London, 1962), p. 249.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
11 Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

ecumenical enough), but it did not seem on the whole to have a great deal in common with the New Delhi statements. For one thing, it showed just how diverse the possible approaches to these problems were. Although a group of scholars were saying optimistic things about the revival of biblical theology and the like, it was clear from this volume that there was no real ecumenical consensus on any of these problems just as soon as one left the area of vague generalities and made an attempt to get to grips with the realities of a specific missionary situation (in any of the six continents).

The essays which interested me most were those on Christianity and other faiths—which incidentally provided some interesting juxtapositions, for instance in consecutive pieces by Hendrik Kraemer and A. C. Bouquet.[12] I have already said (and I trust that this is not mere departmental chauvinism) that in my view, the encounter between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and the Christian evaluation of other religions, acts as it were as an epitome of mission theology. Other matters concerning missionary practice, the relationship between mission and the world, mission and politics, mission and social action, are all important; but it is the theology of encounter that can be best interpreted in theological categories. So many theological points are involved—views of revelation, authority, inspiration, the possibility of *theologia naturalis*, the doctrine of man, eschatology, and many more—that it is at this level that the theological nerve of the Christian mission can most easily be tested.

In the early 1960's there was a distinct feeling abroad, not least in the young churches of Asia, that it was time for the theology of encounter to escape from the massive shadow of Kraemer. The trouble was that no one seemed to know exactly how this was to be done. For one thing, Kraemer was still writing. In 1956 he had pronounced a series of comprehensive anathemas in *Religion and the Christian Faith*; in 1962 he was writing on *Why Christianity of All Religions?* But in his insistence on the ultimate discontinuity of the Christian revelation and other religious traditions, he was embarrassing not only liberals, but also Christians in the younger churches. The problem was particularly acute in post-independence India, where P. D. Devanandan (a contributor to Anderson's symposium) was making cautious attempts to get beyond Kraemer, in the interests of lessening the gulf which had always seemed to

12 Kraemer, who had been requested to write an article on "Syncretism as a Theological Problem for Missions", contributed a four-page letter on which he thought it would be a waste of time to write such an article—largely because he felt that the time for theorizing was at an end. Bouquet's article was entitled "Revelation and the Divine Logos", and took a line of which Kraemer could scarcely have approved.

exist between Christians and India's cultural heritage.[13] Possibly, some were saying, it is time to go back to the idea of "fulfilment" as expounded by the liberal Protestants at the turn of the century[14]. In the event, Vatican II came close to doing just that.[15]

One has to recognize that this was not only a theological problem: it was a problem of culture, of national integration, of translation and communication. Behind this innocent question of relationship there lay hidden an entire theology of mission. Along with the problem of secularization, it is still *the* theological problem of mission.

At all events, in the early 1960's a new term became current in the missionary world: "Christian Presence". I say a new term advisedly; I do not in fact think that it was a new theology, rather it was a fraction of an old theology. But it made an impression nevertheless. The term appears to have been made current by Roman Catholic priests in France, where the discovery had been made that the church was "absent" from post-war society, and where the French Bishops had said in 1960 that "It is evident that all around us, and already for a great number of souls, even those who have been baptized, the church is as if absent"[16]. The conclusion was drawn that what was absent could be made present; and then the concept was transferred bodily to the entire non-Christian world. But already by 1964 a subtle change of atmosphere had come over the debate—at least as compared with the 1961 statements. It was not only that the leaven of Bonhoeffer was spreading, that Biblical theology had caused Jesus to disappear in the smoke from the fire he started, that new terms like "religionless Christianity" were in the air, that Bishop Robinson had been honest—though all these were symptoms. At ground, a fundamental re-evaluation of the roles of East and West, rich and poor, have and have-not,

13 On Devanandan's contribution, see C. F. Hallencreutz, *New Approaches to Men of other Faiths* (Geneva, 1970), pp. 56ff.

14 This was why I was persuaded to examine Farquhar's work, with a view to finding out what he had *really* said, as opposed to what people *supposed* that he had said. In *Not to Destroy* I did not attempt to evaluate Farquhar in the light of the current debate, but in an article entitled "Christ the Fulfiller", in *Bangalore Theological Forum* III/1 (1969), I gave my reasons for regarding his work as too dated to be of much value in the present situation.

15 The idea of "fulfilment" is implicit in the Decree *Ad Gentes*. See W. M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, 1967), pp. 581, 586 etc. Cf. J. Neuner (ed.), *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (London, 1967), p. 16: "The other religious systems are not essentially rival systems . . . They are all ordained towards Christ and have to find fulfilment in him." It should not be thought, however, that the post-Vatican II argument and that of Farquhar and his colleagues are based on the same theological premises. They are not.

16 *Student World* (1965 No. 3), p. 227.

"us" and "them", was taking place, and the post-war theological confidence in the Word was rapidly evaporating.

The students, as usual, were at the front of things, and in 1964 the General Committee of the W.S.C.F. made an explicit statement to the effect that words like "evangelization", "witness" and "mission" *all* suggest

> . . . a Christian behaviour of speaking before listening, of calling people away from their natural communities into a Christian grouping, and of a preoccupation with the soul at the expense of the whole of life . . . [also] a certainty of faith and purpose, and an ability to conceptualize faith in terms which create difficulty for many people . . .[17]

In reality, these words implied nothing of the sort; but to a new generation they *suggested* these things, and that was enough. "Presence", by contrast,

> . . . tries to describe the adventure of being there in the name of Christ, often anonymously, listening before we speak, hoping that men will recognize Jesus for what he is and stay where they are, involved in the fierce fight against all that dehumanizes, ready to act against demonic powers, to identify with the outcast, merciless in ridiculing modern idols and new myths.[18]

This pretentious programme—which was put forward seriously as a new mode of mission—deserved hard words. Regrettably, it received few, although one American Lutheran noted sadly that although the W.S.C.F. did not intend "presence" to become "the new password for the in-Christians", it was likely to become that. It did. He also asked what could be done to prevent it from having a short life. It seems that very little could be done.[19]

But before "presence" was eclipsed by other pseudo-theological passwords, some useful things had happened. Canon Max Warren had, for instance, edited a series—"The Christian Presence Series" —in which approximately this kind of ideal was applied to the encounter between Christianity and the great religions.[20]

In his general introduction to the series, Max Warren drew attention to certain new factors, new challenges in the missionary situation. Christianity, he pointed out, had long been identified with Western colonialism, on the whole, to its detriment. The fact of this misidentification poses a challenge. Can Christianity, he asked, make peoples of different cultural backgrounds feel at

17 *Ibid.*, p. 233.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 234.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
20 The first book in the series, Kenneth Cragg's *Sandals at the Mosque*, had appeared in 1959 (five years before the W.S.C.F. statement). Six more followed, the last appearing in 1966. A rather pedestrian commentary on the series as a whole has been given by Gerhard Rosenkranz, "Christian Presence across the Frontiers," in Beyerhaus and Hallencreutz (eds.), *The Church Crossing Frontiers* (Lund, 1969), pp. 139ff.

home in the new world? This, too, is a challenge—though one which some might feel to be wrongly conceived. And the third challenge to mission was the fact of religious plurality. How is the Christian to coexist with other religions? The Christian response, he held, was first to accept gladly the freedom which the end of the colonial era had brought about, and secondly to accept humbly the "fact"—which should of course be called a theological attitude —that God has never left himself without a witness in the world. And in some much-quoted words, he said:

> Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We have, then, to ask what is the authentic religious content in the experience of the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, or whoever he may be. We may, if we have asked humbly and respectfully, still reach the conclusion that our brothers have started from a false premise and reached a faulty conclusion. But we must not arrive at our judgment from outside their religious situation. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and griefs and joys of their history and see how those pains and griefs and joys have determined the premises of their argument. We have, in a word, to be "present" with them.[21]

Now I think you will agree that there is considerable theological vagueness here, not to mention the degree of psychological difficulty attached to the attempt to "sit where they sit". In addition from the non-Christians' own point of view, this kind of attempt at Christian presence was, and is, open to the charge of condescension. But in this programme, the one concrete theological statement is that "God was here before our arrival", which we are to "remember", not to "consider". The doctrine for which the liberal Protestants fought and argued fifty years earlier had now reached axiomatic status.

But as a basis for a theology of mission it had certain weaknesses, weaknesses which were to be intensified as time went on, and "presence" came to be associated with "dialogue" as the twin foci of the new missionary theology. If God were present in the non-Christian religious situation, if that situation were a point of holiness—*in what sense* is he present, and in what sense is he *more* present in the Christian community? Had the missionary scholars *en masse* turned back to the recently-celebrated biblical theology they would have found there a great deal of material which suggested that although natural revelation was a possibility, it was a possibility seldom or never realized owing to certain fundamental flaws in the human character. But the "Christian presence school" was hardly a school of biblical theologians; it was indeed much more a school of natural theologians, standing

21 Quoted from Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*, p. 9f.

in an ancient tradition. And natural theologians have never been at their best on the subject of the nature of the Christian message and Christian proclamation.

Let us recall that up to this time—the early-to-mid-1960's—the ecumenical consensus (or rather that part of it bearing the imprimatur of Geneva—the new Geneva, not the old) had been largely dominated by the dialectical version of biblical theology. We see it in ecumenical statements up to New Delhi 1961. We see it for instance in Bishop Sundkler's book *The Word of Mission*, which I translated into English in 1965. We see it in the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the first head of the W.C.C. Department of World Mission after 1961. We see it in the work of Bishop Stephen Neill, who is still happy to call himself a post-Barthian liberal.

We do not see it, though, in Paul Tillich's *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (his 1961 Bampton Lectures). What we do see there is a new emphasis on dialogue, not least for the purposes of Christian self-criticism. Christianity, in Tillich's view, had once been characterized by "an openness in all directions, and for centuries this openness and receptivity was its glory"[22]. In time, however, the hierarchical and polemical factors destroyed this openness: Christianity became a religion "instead of remaining a center of crystallization for all positive religious elements"[23]—whatever those may be. If Christianity can somehow cease to be a religion—a goal which may be realized through dialogue with other believers—then there is the opportunity for the Spirit to break through its false particularity. Needless to say, the ideal of conversion is here regarded as out of date, and slightly absurd.[24]

After about 1965, the most publicized type of Protestant missionary theory came more and more to approximate to Tillich's view. I say "most widely publicized" because I find it hard to believe that this view was actually held by more than a minute fraction of those involved in the work and thought of Christian missions. At all events, it was made to seem as though the Christian mission itself was an archaism, at least as long as it involved the proclamation of a message. Dialogue, on the other hand, was respectable, and soon eclipsed "presence" as the "in" word to use. But as with the case of "presence", what had started as a watchword became a motto and finally a cliché, but with this difference, that there are at least four *separate* senses in which the word dialogue can be used.

22 Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York and London, 1963), p. 83.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 94f. On the question of conversion, see my article in *EQ* XLI/4 (1969), pp. 221 ff.

I have tried elsewhere to describe and account for these four senses—discursive, human, secular and interior dialogue—and I do not propose to pursue this theme further on this occasion.[25] Instead I must pass on to the next stage in the missionary debate, now of the late 1960's.

It is only to be expected that, the diversity of Christian opinion being what it is, every theological action will call forth its reaction. Sometimes reaction is fairly gentle. But as the theology of mission on one wing went further and farther to meet the non-Christian, as ideals of evangelism were successively laid aside, as immanentism became more and more comprehensive—and incidentally, as the Christian gospel more and more took on the appearance of an extended illustration of the parable of the Good Samaritan—it was only a matter of time before other voices were raised in protest. Perhaps one might want to argue that these other voices (those of the conservatives) do not belong to the "new" directions in missionary theology; but they are an important part of the total picture of Protestant thought today, and they cannot be ignored.

In April 1968 the First European Consultation on Mission Studies was held at Woodbrooke College in Birmingham, with the very appropriate theme of "Presence and Proclamation". Not surprisingly, for any one who had followed the debate thus far, there was a striking lack of consensus both in the papers and in the discussions, both about the nature of Christian presence and the nature of Christian proclamation.[26] In fact it was not hard to detect an incipient polarization of opinion. Max Warren's paper restated the theme of his series, with the addition that he held there to be an *implicit* proclamation in dialogue, an *explicit* proclamation in evangelism—a point of view which satisfied neither the left nor the right wing. On the left there was Professor H. J. Margull of Hamburg, who seemed to want to say that the time is not yet ripe for proclamation (other than perhaps in such vague terms as "Pray for Peace"), and who read a paper liberally sown with near-epigrams, of which I may quote three out of context: "God's Word does not depend . . . on a saintly presentation by Christians." "We may lose the Word for this and the next hour if we now as always want to win." "There are certainly situations particularly in our time in which the simple presence (but presence

25 The literature on dialogue is already extensive, and growing steadily. See Hallencreutz, *New Approaches*, pp. 15ff., and *International Review of Mission* LIX/236 (October 1970), entitled "Faithful Dialogue". I may perhaps be allowed the opinion that we are in desperate need of a comprehensive study of the concept of dialogue, its uses—and its limitations. A forthcoming volume, edited by Professor John Hick, will explore some of these facets.

26 The papers delivered at this consultation have not been published.

is not simple) was and is the proclamation." To anyone who believes that the Christian Gospel has a content, as well as a vague flavour, Professor Margull's paper was bound to seem either confusing or irrelevant.

At the other end of the theological spectrum there was Professor Donald McGavran of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, who at any rate knew what he meant, and said it very forcefully indeed. Presence, he noted correctly, is a very large umbrella, and can so easily become an end in itself. But the end of the gospel is nothing less than the salvation of the world, and to engage in well-meaning but uncritical dialogue, promoted perhaps more by guilt for a scarcely-understood past than by zeal for the kingdom, places a hopeless strain on the missionary, however enthusiastic he may be. "Does God speak out of both sides of His mouth?" he asked. "Is He the author of double talk—affirming to the Theravada Buddhist that there is no God and to the Christian that God *is* and is intensely personal?"

At this time, of course, the ecumenical world was working up to another world conference—this time at Uppsala. The evangelicals were desperately worried about the kind of things that Uppsala might foist upon the Christian mission, and in an article entitled "Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion?"[27] Donald McGavran voiced his disquiet with the strategy expressed in the Uppsala "Drafts for Sections" (Section II, Renewal in Mission). Firstly because of its omissions—nothing about the necessity for faith, nothing about the cross, "nothing about the two billion unbelievers [the term borrowed from Vatican II's *Ad Gentes*], the need to believe on Jesus Christ, or the mandate to disciple the nations. Not a sentence, not a line, not a word. Nothing!" Instead, although there was a great deal in the draft about mission, that word seemed always to be conceived in terms of dialogue, and McGavran commented that "To the authors of Section II dialogue seems to be not feeding those dying in the great famine of the word of God but [concerned with] cultural improvements of Christians". There is much more criticism—for instance of the idea of the church *as* mission, on which subject McGavran wrote that ". . . scarcely has mission appeared to be the business of the whole Church . . . than the Church has begun to subvert the mission . . . Mission to carry the Gospel to the two billion is becoming any good activity at home or abroad which anyone declares to be the will of God."

It was, though, McGavran's colleague Ralph Winter who put his finger on the sore spot when he pointed out (quite gently) that

27 *Church Growth Bulletin* IV/5 (May 1968).

W.C.C. thinking on the subject of mission had become incredibly parochial.

> The problem of this document is not merely Geneva's tiny staff, nor the WCC membership's internal indigestion. Despite the impressive number of churches on their roll, as far as missions are concerned the largest two blocks are still outside the council: the Roman Catholics and the Evangelicals outside of member churches—and there is hardly a trace of the thinking of these two groups in the document.
>
> It is ironic that council people would speak so sincerely about dialogue with other faiths and yet engage in so little dialoging with those who are much closer . . .[28]

And as a result, this particular ecumenical missionary document had the appearance of being strongly "preoccupied with the single passion of a single Christian sub-group". Which, of course, it was.

I have dealt with this debate at some length because both sides of it deserve to be known. The theology of mission is not and never has been the sole preserve of the liberals, and although the conservatives' response has expressed traditional concerns and been expressed in traditional language generally (and thus perhaps disqualifies itself as a "new direction") it corresponds more closely to the realities of the Christian mission than do most recent ecumenical pronouncements. There is, however, one more shot in the debate to report—again from the conservative side, though in this case from confessional Lutheran theologians in Germany rather than from American Calvinist Evangelicals.

In March 1970 an association of German theologians passed a draft of what has since become known as the Frankfurt Declaration. Responsible for it was Dr. Peter Beyerhaus—like myself a product of the Sundkler stable in Uppsala.[29] It took the form of seven declarations of principle and corresponding declarations of opposition. The declarations of principle might well have been written by Martin Luther himself (as was no doubt the intention); the declarations of opposition hit hard in a certain direction. Let me give an example; number one reads, after the quotation of the Great Commission,

> We recognize and declare:
>
> Christian mission discovers its foundation, goals, tasks, and the content of its proclamation solely in the commission of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ and his saving acts as they are reported by the witness of the apostles and early Christianity in the New Testament. Mission is grounded in the nature of the Gospel.

28 *Ibid.*

29 The complete text of the Declaration was printed in *Christianity Today*, June 19, 1970, with an introduction by Donald McGavran. An excellent summary of the debate called forth by the Declaration has been given—though regrettably so far only in Swedish—by Hallencreutz in *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 58/4 (1970), pp. 186ff.

> *We therefore oppose* the current tendency to determine the nature and task of mission by socio-political analyses of our time and from the demands of the nonchristian world. We deny that what the Gospel has to say to people today at the deepest level is not evident before its encounter with them. Rather, according to apostolic witness, the Gospel is normative and given once for all. The situation of encounter contributes only new aspects in the application of the gospel. The surrender of the Bible as our primary frame of reference leads to the shapelessness of mission and a confusion of the task of mission with a general idea of responsibility for the world.

Another general rejection which the Frankfurt Declaration contains is of "dialogue" as a substitute for "proclamation".

Were space not so limited I should certainly have gone far more deeply into Roman Catholic attitudes to other religions in the period after Vatican II, since it is here that the ideals of Christian presence and dialogue have been carried farthest—even to the extent of maintaining that the non-Christian, in so far as he is faithful to his own best insights, is as assured of salvation as is the Christian. He is in other words an "anonymous Christian", since the grace which saves him is the grace of the cosmic Christ[30]. Fr. Hillman's *The Wider Ecumenism* and Fr. Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* are perhaps the most accessible examples of this view.[31]

The observer might therefore perhaps be forgiven for thinking that the only really new direction which missionary thought has taken of late is less distinctively Christian in a theological and phenomenological sense than almost anything else which has been said or written by Christians since 1910. But again, this is a minority view, and against it we might equally well place the explicit statement of the Frankfurt Declaration:

> We refute the idea that "Christian presence" among the adherents to the world religions and a give-and-take dialogue with them are substitutes for a proclamation of the Gospel which aims at conversion. Such dialogues simply establish good points of contact for missionary communication.
>
> We also refute the claim that the borrowing of Christian ideas, hopes, and social procedures—even if they are separated from their exclusive relationship to the person of Jesus—can make the world religions and ideologies substitutes for the Church of Jesus Christ. In reality they give them a syncretistic and therefore antichristian direction.

I am, however, far from convinced that the plain and unadorned reiteration of accepted confessional formulae is what the Christian mission of today most needs, although the confessions undoubtedly contain material of which the Christian needs continually to be reminding himself.

30 See Anita Röper, *The Anonymous Christians* (New York, 1966).

31 As Hillman put it (*The Wider Ecumenism*, p. 38): ". . . if grace works for the most part anonymously, and if all grace is always and only the same grace of Christ, we may speak of an 'anonymous Christianity', an authentic life of grace (and not entirely hidden), among those whose historical situation makes it impossible for them to have more than an implicit faith in Christ."

When the Second European Conference on Mission Studies took place in Oslo last year (1970) under the general heading of *Mission and Change*, two important papers were delivered on the subject of "Mission after Uppsala 1968" and "Mission after Vatican II". The Vatican paper we must regretfully bypass on this occasion; it was given by an Indian Jesuit, Fr. Samuel Rayan, and was thoughtful, moderate and above all theological[32]. The post-Uppsala paper was, I am afraid, none of these things. It was given by Professor Johannes Aagaard of the University of Aarhus, Denmark, whom I remembered as having been a Barthian, or something like one. At all events, here is the opening of his (so far unpublished) paper:

> The year 1968 is a decisive year in recent history. A radical change in the general attitude to political, social, cultural, philosophical and theological matters came into existence from 1968 onwards. First of all the collapse of the May Revolt in Paris and the breakdown of the renewal in Czechoslovakia, but also the development in Vietnam . . . contributed to this change in attitude.

And his last words—after having pleaded with passion and sincerity and a good deal of rhetoric for a political version of the Christian mission:

> The soft age has gone. We all live in the world of polarization and integration. We have to accept the fact of *conflict*, for we can neither do away with it, nor ignore it. Therefore our missions cannot be supportive, they have to be critical. Theology can no longer be kind and nice. It has to contribute to the organization of conflict, which means to reconcile conflict in such a way that man can live with it without being spoiled by it. In a world of conflict we have to look for the fruits of the Spirit—and we have to bear such fruits.

Now I do not see that one can take this line of thought much farther. Aagaard's paper sounded throughout so much like the angry young man—and yet the quality of Aagaard's scholarship is not in question. Perhaps to some extent he was trying to shock people—but in the end Samuel Rayan's paper made the deeper impression, "archaisms" and all, not only because it was more balanced, but because it came out of a seminary in Kerala, not out of a chromium-plated university in Northern Europe.

How far the extreme radical position (and I freely admit that there are moderate radicals as well)[33] has entered the thought-world of the missionary organizations, it is hard to say. Certainly it appears to have burrowed deep into the consciousness of the World Council of Churches, or at least of some of its staff members. But it is becoming increasingly common for some missionary organizations to express their aims in terms dictated by current

32 Part of this paper has been published in *International Review of Mission* LIX/236 (October 1970), pp. 414ff.

33 One might perhaps refer in this connection to the work of such secular theologians as J. C. Hoekendijk and A. van Leeuwen, whose contribution I have not ventured to discuss in this context. See however Hallencreutz, *New Approaches*, pp. 63ff.

social concern. For instance, in 1969 the Swedish Free Church Conference meeting in Örebro stated that the goal of mission should consist of two simple things: (1) to improve human and social conditions wherever these are unworthy; and (2) to take up the cause of those who are living in unworthy human conditions in poverty and oppression.[34] The actual (or apparent) needs of the "third world" have thus come to determine a section of missionary opinion, again to the exclusion of traditional theological categories. And there can be little doubt that the recent W.C.C. decision to finance "freedom groups" in Southern Africa was swayed by considerations like these. One might want to say there is no real theology in this—but one would have to face the rejoinder that if God is at work in the process of history, then theology has no limits; equally mission has no limits, since the latent presence of Christ has no limits.

Again to set the record straight, it would be necessary to point on the one hand to the remarkable successes of Pentecostal missions in certain parts of the world, notably South America, and on the other to the real influence exercised among Hindus in India by those missionaries whose life-style is contemplative, rather than political. It is in fact arguable that the missionary who at this moment exercises the greatest influence in India goes by the Hindu name of Swami Abhishiktananda, though he is a Christian contemplative.[35]

To attempt, finally, to sum up the trends of the last ten years in Christian missionary thought is virtually impossible, since, although clarity of vision is the quality all are striving after, it is a quality few possess. The practical difficulties confronting Christian missions in all six continents have never been greater; but it would be wrong to interpret the premature desires of some theological publicists to make history as meaning that the radical alternative is the only feasible alternative for the thinking Christian. For ten years we have been entering more and more deeply into an age of theological confusion, and this, coupled with the changing balance of power and influence among the nations of the world—to whom the Christian message is directed—has thrown the Christian mission temporarily off balance. Possibly what we need is a closer study of what has happened at similar times in the past; in this way we might perhaps gain a little of the theological balance and perspective which seems so signally lacking today among those who are still, despite everything, called by God to announce to the world that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

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34 *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 57/4 (1969), pp. 158ff.

35 See e.g. H. le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), *The Church in India: An Essay in Christian Self-Criticism* (Madras, 1969); *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point* (E. T. Bombay and Bangalore, 1969).