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# Missiology in Theological Education<sup>†</sup>

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**C**hristians will admit that the church has a message to communicate to the world, the source and inspiration on which it lives — God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This mission rightly understood, defines the relation of the Christians to the peoples in whose midst they dwell and to whom they are sent.

Mission is not an accidental attribute of the church, instead it pertains to the very essence of the church's being. Christian missionaries of the past and the present have understood its implication and have taken their task seriously. Thanks to their effort one third of the world's population today is Christian. As Bühlman reminds us ; out of the six continents of the world, five have become Christian : Europe, North America, South America, Australia and now Africa too which by the year 2000 is expected to have nearly half its population Christian<sup>1</sup>. only Asia remains, which of course is an enormous continent in terms of human population because it holds within its lap more than half the world's peoples.

Indian missionary activity takes place in this vast continent of ancient civilizations. In this task, undoubtedly our theological colleges have an important role to play. It is gratifying to note that many Indian theological colleges give due emphasis to the missionary dimension of the Christian faith, which is adequately reflected in their curriculum. But some, I am afraid are insensitive to the task of missionary orientation in their seminary training programme, showing sometimes a marked allergy to anything connected with evangelism. They seem to pay more attention to the social dimensions of the faith, than its biblical, theological and missiological aspects. Students in these institutions get more help and encouragement for organizing dharnas and jathas than for preaching the word of God or organizing a gathering to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Some B.D. curriculum reveals that a student may acquire a

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Bachelor in Divinity without attending a single course specifically related to missions, while the same cannot be obtained without taking several obligatory courses on other religions and social developments. These trends show a profound malaise afflicting some of our theological colleges and students passing out from these colleges feel uneasy, even ashamed to involve themselves in missionary activities. They do not have the knowledge nor the motive to spread the Word of God. People who are specifically called to preach the Word end up by being mere social activists.

The zeal for mission and the self-sacrificing dedication of our spiritual forebears are, in some circles, replaced by an almost complete paralysis and total withdrawal from any activity traditionally associated with mission in whatever form.

There is no denying the fact that there is a global crisis in mission activity as a whole. The optimism of the missionaries of the beginning of this century for a Christian world by the turn of the century has been proved wrong. There are no signs of "dying heathenism" as some had predicted. Instead old religions display a new vitality and vigour unprecedented in the past decades. Other factors, such as the rise of communism and the spread of secularism have all contributed to the slackening of the church's missionary activity throughout the world.

We cannot let the missionary aspect of the church to rest because the circumstances are not congenial. This dimension of our faith is not an optional matter. If we remove it we deprive the church of its very *raison d'être*. Especially in our theological colleges we need to train our future leaders of the church to look at the world from the perspective of commitment to the Christian faith. We need to structure both the curriculum and the general organization of the community life of the college to facilitate such a process. Missiology should not only be an integral part of the curriculum, but the mission spirit should permeate all other disciplines of the college.

### **Constitutive Elements For a Course In Missiology**

Since Christian mission is a holistic endeavour, missiology must draw its inspiration from many sources. As mission is directed to concrete individuals, situated in specific sociocultural environments everything that affects an individual in his situation affects also in some way the Christian mission. Hence missiology, by its nature is inter-disciplinary, drawing its support from many disciplines.

The core courses of missiology may form a trilogy, drawing their contents from biblical, theological and historical sources. These need to be supplemented by related courses from behavioural, anthropological and other sciences, such as sociology of religion, psychology of religion, anthropology of religion, Christian communication and ecology of religion. These courses, however, need to be properly integrated so that they do not distract the students from the main concern of missiology, but rather they critically corroborate it.

Let me first, start with the corroborative courses, after which I shall take up the core courses.

### **Sociology of Religion**

Since mission activity takes place in a particular social set-up, the relations between religion and society may first be noted. Societies are characterized by the values they embody, the ideals by which belief, attitude and behaviour are established. Hence religion can hardly be identified or defined except in relation to the society in which it is found. Religion offers prescriptions for social order, individual and collective action. A society is known by its collective aspirations to which religion attributes sanction

At the same time all religions sanction forms of withdrawal from the world or release from social demands, thus showing that religious ideals and day to day demands of common life are not fully congruent. Given the complex nature of their relationship to society, religious traditions often make a distinction between the sacred and the secular, offering tested formulas by which the boundaries of the sacred can be discerned from the boundaries of the secular.

Whenever massive disturbances take place in the social landscape — for example, when an agricultural and monarchical society becomes an industrial and democratic one — a fragmentation of old loyalties takes place which radically affect not only the nation and the community as a whole, but also its religion. One important area where this becomes discernable is the shift of authority from traditional sources to other centres of power. There is a wide conviction that in modern history, the forces of bureaucratic power are winning out against traditional types of social and religious authority. The major trends in modern societies — impersonalization of personal relationships, bureaucratization of authority, fragmentation of traditional classes and increasing secularization of the society — have replaced sacred values by other values based upon utility, pragmatism and hedonism.

Students of missiology would greatly profit by the insights gained by modern sociology to understand and subsequently to influence the society in which they intent to work. The special branch of sociology that directly interests missiology is the sociology of religion.

### **Psychology of Religion**

Just as theology can be thought of as the rational reflection on religious expressions from within the institutional context of a religious community, psychology of religion is a reflection of the religious phenomena from its own point of inquiry.

Psychological assessment of religion has been both positive and negative. Freud approached all religious beliefs and rituals as covert projections of intrafamilial conflicts into a transcendent realm where they can be resolved. For him religion was a system of illusions aimed at repressing and containing antisocial desires<sup>2</sup>. Other eminent psychologists like Karl Jung, William James, Gordon Allport and others were prepared to argue the conclusion that a man's religion is the deepest and the wisest thing in his life.

The contrast between Freud and Jung, for example, shows how widely differing points of view of religion can emerge from the same basic idea. For Freud, the universality of religion was to be traced back to the universality of the unconscious and repressed incestuous desires that led the primitive peoples towards the illusory projection of divinely established taboos. For Jung, the projections of religion can be traced back to the natural disposition of the psyche for wholeness.

In general psychology has followed anthropology and sociology in curing itself of the simplistic biases of the projectionist approach. Religion in psychological studies has evolved from a pejorative "illusion" in Freud to the positive "potential space" in Winnicott through Jung's denial of the illusory character in religion.

For the students of missiology, the psychology of religion can help in understanding the religious nature of the growth process of an individual from childhood to adulthood, as well as the processes involved in religious conversions. Psychology can also help in pastoral care, prayer, worship and community integration. Psychological studies of Eastern spiritual traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Yoga have shown how such practices as rhythmic breathing, centred meditation and the like have anticipated many of the most common psychotherapeutic techniques. Just as Judeo-Christian ideas have inspired Western

psychotherapies, attempts are made in the East to draw on native religiosity. Mission aims at transforming the human heart and reorienting personal attitudes to life in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Often the process involves much psychological stress, especially since many conversions, at least initially encounter hostility and opposition from family members and others. Psychology can help missiology in understanding and in guiding people in such situations. It could also help in sorting out spurious motives from genuine ones when seeking admittance in the community of faith.

### **Ecology of Religion**

Concern for the earth has never been a dominant preoccupation of Christian mission. Instead withdrawal from the evil world has been there from the beginning of Christianity. J. H. Ropes commending on the life of the Apostolic church remarks :

"Not to influence the world by pervading and transforming its social order, but to form a group apart where the values of individuals should be cultivated in the soil of religion, and which should attract one and another from the evil world, was the aim which they set themselves"<sup>3</sup>

One controlling influence for such an attitude was their expectation of a speedy end to the present order of things to be brought about by the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ. It is plain that with so short a vista of world's future it was not worthwhile to lay foundations for a distant posterity. Hence only those concerns that related directly to eternal life was seen real. All else was subordinate or even seemed to be deterrent from the interest of the soul.

Today, however there is a movement among religious groups who are concerned about the defilement of nature in modern civilization, calling humans to take responsibility for preserving the ecological balance. This is in fact in accordance with the biblical perspective. Bernhard Anderson in his study on ecology from the perspective of the Old Testament points out the fact that in the overall pattern of the Genesis account, it is apparent that the emphasis falls not so much on anthropology, that is, the supremacy of humanity, as on ecology, that is, the earthly habitation which human beings share with other living beings<sup>4</sup>. Allied with other social concerns, Christian mission cannot shirk its responsibility for the preservation of God's creation.

Most primal cultures try to establish a harmonious relationship with nature. Some ecological movements, such as

for example, the ones started by the North American Indians are rooted in the conception of nature as manifestation of the supernatural or the divine. This is in sharp contrast to modern industrial mentality where nature is nothing but a natural resource to be exploited for human needs, real or fancied.

Ecology of religion tries to investigate the relationship between religion and nature and tries to assess the impact of the environment on religious life and vice versa. Even though humankind's religion may spring from autonomous psychic factors, there is much in its religious expressions that are shaped by ecological factors. And ecology of religion tries to assess the creative role of environmental adaptations, often overlooked in religious studies. In particular it tries to explain some of the basic forms of religions found in primal cultures. Often religious injunctions against the killing of certain animals in some religions are related to ecological considerations. An understanding of the complexities of religious customs anchored in particular ecological settings is of great help to mission studies.

### **Anthropology of Religion**

Anthropology's traditional concentration on non-literate societies has helped the understanding of religious practices and beliefs of the so called primitive peoples, tribal groups and marginalized people discredited by the dominant society. As Christian mission often takes place among such groups, anthropology would greatly help the understanding of their peculiar mentality and way of life.

Anthropologists employ various approaches in the interpretation of religious life, sacred symbols, ritual speech, mythic order, sacrifice etc. They explore sacred values across domains of illness and cure, sexuality, ethics and warfare. They throw light on such phenomena as totemism, animism, shamanism and the like which are all important to know from a missiological perspective. It is acknowledged that the phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretations of sacred symbols and the semiotic analysis of communication codes employed by anthropologists can assist missionaries who intend to work among people whose cultures are different from their own.

### **Communication**

Christian communication is about the self communication

of God in varied forms, but most specifically through the event of the incarnation by which the Word was made flesh. The church as we know is commissioned to spread this salvific Word through the entire globe till the consumation of time.

The main task of Christian communication is to keep the channels of communication open between the human and the divine spheres and especially among the humans themselves, so as to bring about a true fraternity based on the realization that each human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by the same precious blood of Jesus Christ.

McLuhan has spoken of modern communication systems with electric speed bringing about a sudden implosion of all social and political functions which is expected to produce a heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree that the world would shrink into a global village<sup>5</sup>. This is expected to bring into sharp relief the inter-connectedness of human life with all other living beings and with the total environment. Consequently there is an emergent new faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being. This is an added opportunity for Christian communicators and missiologists should not be blithely unaware of the tremendous potentialities of modern communication for the spread of the gospel.

In fact, exploration into the theory and practice of all forms of human communication for the sake of the gospel is an integral aspect of missiology. This would invariably involve both ancient and modern means of communication.

Among all the means, the role of the preacher in missionary communication is of paramount importance. The preacher is the teller of the sacred story, who speaks about the unspeakable, who charts the course in a sea of change. He gives language to rituals, connecting the history of humanity with an overarching story of salvation. He is the story teller, teacher and guide of the community. Hence his training in the art of his profession is of utmost relevance.

In the hey day of modern communications, the role of the humble preacher is often overlooked. But we must remember that none of the modern technologies has superseded or supplanted the human word. On the contrary, they have only empowered the word, making its diffusion ever faster and more pervasive.

Besides the verbal form of communication, we must tap all other forms that are ways of access or points of entry into the supernatural world. In this, art is one of the most natural and richest means for religious communication. Art is a reconciler of paradoxes. "It obliterates the boundaries between I and it, between inner and outer, between mind and concrete, even

between life and death"<sup>6</sup>. The deepest dimension of religion like the highest forms of art are non-cognitive, thus making art one of the best means for the communication of spiritual realities.

In spite of a few forays into the artistic media, the main thrust of the church's communication remains verbal. The visual art as a major channel of communication is not fully appreciated. In fact the emphasis on the verbal and conceptual with a deepening insensitivity to art often characterizes Christian communication, which is unfortunate<sup>7</sup>. Just as a doctrine, in a limited form reflects the divine truth through a formula, art through a sensible form can evoke a transcendental experience. In fact, art can be a silent, non-threatening evangelizer. In missiology this aspect needs fuller elaboration, while dealing with communication.

### **Bible and Missiology**

It is necessary that missiology must delve into sacred scriptures in search of an understanding of mission. Though in Old Testament we see God's universal plan of salvation as evidenced in the creation narrative, the covenant with Noah and Abraham etc, the traditional understanding of mission as sending preachers across geographical, religious and social frontiers in order to win others to faith, is difficult to see. Jesus' reference to the zeal of certain missionaries in winning converts shows that such practices were there during his life time. But the Old Testament does not furnish us with such materials. On the other hand, the New Testament is essentially a book about mission<sup>8</sup>. Yet we need to stress that the Old Testament is fundamental to the understanding mission in the new. The Old Testament primarily deals with God's acts in history, and from Israel's point of view what is significant is God's election of Israel as his chosen people. But the purpose of election is service, and when that is not done, election ceases its meaning. In the Old Testament we note an ambivalent attitude towards the other nations. On the one hand they are Israel's enemies, on the other, there is a conviction that God's compassion embraces all peoples. Hence the history of Israel, in a way, unveils also God's continued involvement with the nations. The book of Jonah, Isaiah's Suffering Servant etc show clearly Yahweh's compassion reaching out beyond Israel.

At the time of Christ, Israel had passed through a long period of involution, as a result of which Israel-centreness comes to the fore and the Law becomes an absolute entity.

Against this backdrop we notice in the New Testament the

all-inclusiveness of Jesus' mission breaking down walls of hostility and crossing boundaries. Even though Jesus' own ministry was restricted to the limited horizon of Palestine, he consistently challenged the attitudes and structures that excluded others from the Jewish community.

Though Jesus sent disciples to preach during his life time, it was only after the Easter experience that the Christian community fully discovered its self identity and its mission in the world. Intimately related to the resurrection is the gift of the Spirit which is integrally related to mission. As Bosch says : "If it was the experience of resurrection that gave the early Christians certainty, it was Pentecost that gave them boldness . . . ."<sup>9</sup>. Although Jesus' parting injunction in Matthew 28 : 19 to make disciples of all nations was accepted, its practical implications were only gradually realized, as is evidenced by the book of Acts. . . .

For a proper understanding of Christian mission the authoritative source is the Bible and this must take the pride of place in any course on missiology.

### **History and Missiology**

The study of the church history needs to be viewed from a missiological perspective. The church has a history only because God has given it the privilege of participating in his mission. Often the history of mission has been reduced to denominational history, where each denomination simply writes its own chronicle. Looked at from the perspective of mission, however, the history of the church asks fundamentally different questions: why the church ? why mission ?

History endeavors to demonstrate the relentless change from past to present to future and how that change leads human beings to search for elements of continuity so as to reconcile their memories of the past with their expectations of the future. Whenever history tries to reconcile change and continuity by constructing a unity of past, present and future, it invariably links religion with history. From a Christian point of view, time is the space in which God works out his purpose and the end would come when the time is fulfilled. For Christians, history began with the creation of the world and will culminate with the return of Christ. The intermediary period is the history of mission. It is important to understand that the early Christians formed their views of history as an integral expression of their worship, liturgy, preaching and art<sup>10</sup>. What emerges is an interpretation of universal history that depicts a sequence of

creation, fall, redemption and a future culmination at the return of Christ. For this culmination the church plays a vital role by her life and mission. Seen in this way, history is a journey or a pilgrimage. In this pilgrimage of humanity the central event is the incarnation of Christ. Hence the on going sequence of years is marked with reference to the birth of Christ — A.D., *anno Domini*. The years before this are counted backward from the incarnation, calling it B.C., before Christ. By using these powerful symbols, the whole course of history is centred on Jesus Christ.

Running through the interpretations of history is the understanding that God acts in history even though his realm is the timeless present. Equally pervasive is the conviction that humans are also responsible for the course of history. Hence the importance of the church's mission in history. The history of missions will be an interpretation of the world events in the light of God's salvific plan. Mission history will necessarily be a critical history that would look at the church not only in respect of what it has achieved but also from the perspective of its failures, such as the early church's failure to accommodate the Jews, the attitude of the church towards heretics after Constantine, the disappearance of the church from North Africa, Arabia and the Near East which were once highly Christianized, the complicity of the church in the colonial subjugation and exploitation of other races and so forth. Mission history, like the book of Acts must be written from the perspective of the history of salvation.

### **Theology and Missiology**

A theology of mission must help the believer to develop and express the missionary aspect of his faith. The starting point is God's revelation of the divine plan for human salvation, as found in the Bible, tradition and the present life of the church. It must explain and communicate the church's mission to the world as commissioned by Christ. A theology of mission must also bridge the gap between ancient testimonies that reflect histories and cultures no longer ours, and the needs and desires of our time. In fact, the act of theologizing must be an act of interpreting the meaning of the mission for contemporary believers. This does not mean, however, that we substitute our own ideas and questions for those of Jesus Christ. In this the dogma and the living traditions must define the hermeneutical field that will safeguard against erroneous or arbitrary interpretations. At the same time it is theology's task to reread

the inherited data and reformulate its message in terms that are intelligible to present believers.

For this the theology of mission employs specific methods for taking possession of the accumulated data pertaining to the mission and organizing the complex content in a coherent, intellectual manner. It must also use critical methods in assessing the religious data furnished by other rational disciplines, such as exegesis, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and so forth.

In interpreting missiological data, a theologian must maintain a twofold fidelity : fidelity to Christian faith as well as fidelity to scientific methodology. However one ceases to be a theologian if he or she betrays the originality of the faith while employing the methods of other disciplines.

It needs to be stressed that theology today has become so comprehensive and complex that it requires a variety of knowledge. It is also acknowledged today that no school of theology can provide an all embracing body of knowledge. A pluralism is required in a world that has grown complex and secularised. In the theology of mission this aspect has become all the more obvious as mission is interpreted in a plurality of ways. We hear of mission as evangelism, ecumenism, liberation, inculturation, common witness, dialogue, quest for justice and the like, all of which need careful study from the missiological point of view. Though these ways of seeing mission may confuse us as to what exactly is Christian mission, one thing that is undisputed today — after the International Missionary Conference at Tambaram, the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council is the fact that mission is no longer considered merely as an activity of the church, but an expression of the very being of the church. Hence we can no longer go back to the earlier position when mission was peripheral to the life of the church. As David Bosch points out : "It is for the sake of its mission that the church has been elected, for the sake of its calling that it has been made 'God's own people' "<sup>11</sup>.

It is obvious that mission concerns the world beyond the boundaries of the church. It is for the sake of the world God so loved that the Christian community is called to be the salt and light. As Bosch points out again, for theologizing this has far reaching consequence : "Just as the church ceases to be the church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character"<sup>12</sup>. Hence what is needed in our theological colleges is not a theology of mission but a missionary theology, for theology rightly understood has no reason to exist other than critically accompany the *missio Dei*<sup>13</sup>.

Hence in a theological curriculum we could very well dispense with a separate subject called missiology if the entire curriculum is permeated with the missionary spirit. However for practical reasons, it is advisable to have a separate discipline called missiology, for without it other disciplines may lack constant reminders of their missionary nature.

## Conclusion

Missiology within the context of theological disciplines performs a critical function by continually challenging theology to be a theology of the pilgrim church, to accompany the gospel on its journey through the nations. Missiology must resist every ecclesiastical impulse to self-preservation, provincialism and parochialism. Furthermore, missiology's task is to critically accompany the missionary enterprise, to scrutinize its aims and methods. Missiology, however, is not in itself a proclamation of the message, but a reflection on that message and on its proclamation. This it should do not as an onlooker from a safe distance, but in a spirit of coresponsibility in the service of the church. Ultimately we are all called to continue the mission of Jesus, "seen as part of the great arch of saving history reaching from the creation of 'the heavens and the earth' in the 'beginning' (Gen.1 : 1) to the inauguration of the 'new heavens and the new earth' in which all reality finds its fulfilment at the end of time (Rev. 21 : 1—4)"<sup>14</sup>.

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