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Missiology and Serampore Ethos

J.T.K. DANIEL*

Introduction

What is Missiology? How is it related to other disciplines of both theological and secular education is indeed important. The task of missiology, as observed by a Dutch missiologist Johannes Verkuyl says, "is to investigate scientifically and critically the presupposition, motives, structures, methods, patterns of cooperation, and the leadership which the churches bring to their mandate. In addition, missiology must examine every other type of human activity which combats the various evils to see if it fits the criteria and goals of God's kingdom which has both already come and is yet coming." [Verkuyl 1978:5]. Even as we stand on the threshold of the tercentenary of William Carey's heritage, it is good for us to look at the factors which contribute directly or indirectly towards a balanced missiology in the light of Serampore ethos. The holistic methodology adopted by the Serampore missionaries for their ministry is punctuated both by their indefatigable service to the poor and the needy and their sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ in the languages and the idioms of the local people. In other words, though Carey had many reverses of fortune, he plodded with perseverance in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ both by word and deed. He managed to achieve social transformation by bringing even legislative changes wherever possible. He did not deflect from his sense of direction. We are indeed privileged to have the noble and inspiring heritage of Carey's intellectual capacity and his catholicity of interests. The curriculum at Serampore those days included many branches of Science and Linguistics along with Religion and Ethics. The Serampore missionaries wanted the leaders trained and equipped for the future of the

**Rev. Dr. J.T.K. Daniel is the Principal of Serampore College. Inaugural address given at the North East India Mission Consultation.*

society and the church to be people of "sound learning, genuine piety and sterling character." Carey made an indelible mark by setting afoot the parturient process of development of ethos in our culture. This mission of shaping the people's thought with new values has made an impact on the national renaissance even as it is acknowledged by several scholars including the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. We cannot remain idle when the turbulent situations in contemporary India challenge us to think afresh even as we respond to the present and the future worthy of the past.

During the year 1993 when we celebrated the bicentennial epoch-making event of Carey's landing in Bengal, the academic enlargement plan presented by and for the Theology department was three-fold:

i) Mission studies. ii) Tribal Religion and Cultural Studies and iii) Linguistics and Translation. The Council of Serampore College has received this plan as mandatory to be developed, as these were not only important for the Serampore Trio who made Serampore "the Cradle of modern Mission", but are very relevant for contemporary church and society. In the Serampore University system we do have fairly good training programme of the pastors and teachers, but not evangelists which precedes in the biblical order of contemporary ministry [Ephesians 4.11]. We can agree with David Bosch that "One of the most dramatic shifts" taking place in the church today is "the movement away from ministry as the monopoly of the ordained men to ministry as the responsibility of the whole people of God, ordained as well as non-ordained." [1991:467.473]. I am glad that this Consultation on Mission for the churches in North East has been organised under the auspices of the Unit of Mission Studies in the College. We cannot forget the fact that Krishna Pal, the first fruit of the labour of Serampore missionaries, was sent to North East India underscoring the importance of indigenous leadership with indigenous resources. May be, as an expression of gratitude to the pioneering missionary task of the Serampore missionaries, in return, we have now two Professors in the Theology department who are appointed by the council to give leadership in missiology to the Post-graduate level, hail from North East India.

Missiology at Serampore promotes Holistic Education

Learning and piety have been the two goals of education at Serampore College from its inception. All creative ideas should also be wedded to indomitable industry as we can notice from the personal diary of William Carey that he worked almost every day from 5.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m., beginning and ending each day with prayer and devotion. In December 1811 Carey wrote to Dr. Ryland saying, "I am now printing a Dictionary of the Bengali which will be pretty large, for I have got to page 256 and am not near through the first letter ..." [Story 1961:94]. After establishing as many as 126 vernacular schools in and around Serampore for the several thousands of pupils, the College was founded at enormous cost and personal sacrifice in order to make Serampore a 'Christian Benares' or an 'Indian Halle'. It may be noted in this context, the Hindu community in Calcutta had founded their College two years earlier and the Trio perhaps did not want the Christians to lag behind in Higher Education. Holistic education to the learner implies his/her head, heart, and hand as it addresses to reflection, commitment and action. The first report of the Serampore College published in 1818 reads, "the object (of education) is not to give (the students) a light smattering of things, which may tend to give a gender conceit ... but to lay the foundation deep to strengthen the mind by inuring to real labour." In other words, according to the Serampore ethos, knowledge cannot be secured apart from hard work and self discipline. The emphases of the holistic educational schemes of the Serampore missionaries were both western science and eastern literature. They published journals such as *Dig darshan*, *samachar darpan*, *akrabare* and *friend of India*, the ancestors of the present day *statesman* from the Serampore press beginning from the same year of the establishment of the College as the educated youth should have sufficient materials for reading and enlightenment especially since they had whetted their appetite for reading and gaining more information after going through the education offered in the institutions by the missionaries. There is little wonder when Joshua Marshman, the last of the Trio, died, the Asiatic

Journal (1838) records by way of paying tribute to these pioneering educationists of Bengal, stating:

“Their educational exertions were such as no preceding gentlemen had made nor have any hope that men equal in knowledge and benevolence will again be born and impart such benefits to us.”

Missiology at Serampore underscores Ecumenism

We are reminded of a dictum of Richard Niebuhr written about 80 years ago, “Denominationalism represents the moral failure of the Christian church.” [Newbigin 1986:144]. The College is not just bricks and mortar but primarily a place of community of people linked together in the common endeavour of learning and training. An important basis of our College is that it is undenominational. Though the beginning of our heritage was with a Particular Baptist tradition and that Carey lived in the days when there was little scope for any comity among the many denominations. Even the transliteration of the term baptism by Carey which had a Baptist bias became so polemic that it resulted in the discontinuance of grants to Serampore mission by the British and Foreign Bible Society and subsequent establishment of a Baptist Translation Society in England. [Brown 1859:128]. However, since a good understanding existed between the Bishop Reginald Heber and the Serampore Trio, the former expressed the need in his letter to Marshman to sort out the theological differences between the Baptists and the Anglicans so that a rich harvest could be reaped in the mission field and “the work of the Lord would advance among them (the natives) with celerity of which we have experience.” [Marshman 1859:292f.].

We affirm the Christian Unity by taking a stand for ecumenism which Carey dreamed of. It might be recalled that Carey was a century ahead in planning for an ecumenical conference to chalk out proper plans for world evangelization. He suggested to Andrew Fuller that the first meeting could be convened at Cape of Good Hope so that all Christian workers around the world could “understand one another better and more entirely enter into another’s views by two hours of

conversation than two or three years' epistolary correspondence." This wind of ecumenism stirred from Serampore could not, however, advance since Fuller was skeptic about the emergence of any partnership and dismissed these proposals as "pleasing dreams" of "an enlarged mind" of Brother Carey [Neill 1985:453]. Though the proposed international missionary conference could not be held until 1910 in Edinburgh, several decennial conferences were held in different parts of India which helped in the formation of one national structure for theological education in this country. In other words, evangelism, done with a spirit of ecumenism, becomes challengingly relevant for our context. At Serampore, we do not belong to any particular denomination of the Christian church. This helps us to develop missiology with the spirit of Christian unity even as our Lord offered in his High Priestly prayer that inextricable relationship between mission and unity among his disciples should be the hallmark of the Christian witness (John 17.21-26). This spirit of ecumenism is indeed essential especially in our country with millions of people whose faiths are different from that which we hold as a small minority. The famous *Tranquabar Manifesto of 1919* by Indian pastors of different denominations on Christian unity claims that the division among the Christians in this land was imposed on them from outside which were neither created by them nor did they desire to perpetuate those differences and had certainly hindered us from carrying out the Himalayan task of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ meaningfully to the millions of people in our land. [Paul 1952:97]. It is indeed amazing to note from the statutes and regulations of the College constituted way back in 1833, a year before the death of William Carey, that Christian unity and an inter-denominational community were dreamed and planned for by the Serampore missionaries who claim in section 13(a) "Students are admissible at the discretion of the council from any body of Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek or the Armenian Church ..."

Following the Serampore ethos, the commitment of Christian ecumenism has also enlarged our horizon in terms of theological education for the whole country and neighbouring countries

such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the fountain head being the Theology department of our College. The students coming from different denominations of the Church have appreciated the fellowship offered at our College by the students and staff of several ecclesiastical backgrounds living and working together as one holy, catholic [universal] and apostolic church. Since the different denominations of the Church emphasize different aspects of our faith and doctrine, the missiology developed according to Serampore ethos has to be holistic and we ought to be willing to learn from traditions other than our own background including that of the Roman Church even as our founding fathers have expressed in the regulations of the College. We praise God that even before the organizational unity of the Church in different parts of our country took place, the vision of our founding fathers was implemented in the Serampore College Act of 1918, —100 years after the founding of the College—empowering the College to grant degrees based on the Danish Royal Charter of 1827 so that the theological education for the various branches of the Church in this country can be unitedly carried out. According to this Act, for the constitution of the Council “at least one-third of the members of the Council shall be members of the Baptist denomination”, whereas in the constitution of the Senate that restriction is removed so that the members of the Senate are expected to be “at least one and not more than three representatives of each of the following Christian denominations, viz., Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Syrian shall, *as far practicable* ...” In other words, Church being One Body of Christ, all branches or members need to be equally involved in theological education for the whole Church. The missiology offered as a separate branch in the M.Th programmes of Serampore University system, will have to emphasize the need for further growth in Christian maturity and unity. Taking the ministerial training today, denominational differences continue to deter us. As one of our theologians who has sufficient experience in the Serampore University system rightly observes, “Instead of pooling resources and faculty in order to insure sufficient depth and breadth, each group wants

to establish and control its own institution. As a result, faculties are spread too thin, libraries are inadequate ..." [Phillips and Coote 1993:61]. Emphasis on region or tribe or clan is not in line with the Serampore ethos.

Missiology at Serampore promotes inclusive Fellowship

The God of the Bible whom we worship is concerned for the whole world in all its colour and complexity, for the sacred as well as the secular. The familiar texts of the Bible reads, God so loved the *World* that he gave his only Son ... [John 3:16]; Go ye into all the *World*... [Matthew 28:19]. Let us recall the concern of our Lord, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold ..." [John 10:16]. All these indicate the Christian mission is always ex-centric and inclusive. We are called to take seriously the presence of our neighbours who do not belong to our faith. In these days of sectarianism which threaten the very foundational fabrics of the secular democracy of our country with all complications created by the politicians, some of whom are religious fundamentalists or communalists, it is a special privilege for us at Serampore to have the people of diverse faiths, philosophies/ideologies teaching/studying with us especially in the ASC department of the same College under the same administration of the College Faculty and the Council. It is not good for the theology community to have a ghetto attitude and to protect their parochial interests when there is a good opportunity (which is not available in many of our seminaries) to get to know the people of other traditions intimately. It may not always be palatable to our interests to really be concerned or be involved in the affairs of these immediate neighbours especially since many of us have the language and other barriers. There were occasions when we had sharp differences between the two departments. Nevertheless, we have existed as one College for a long time in the history of this Institution and have affirmed the possibility of being enriched by a wider fellowship. We may remind ourselves in this context what the Serampore missionaries had written in the Statutes and regulations of the College in article 13 "Students are admissible ... for the

purpose of study, from the Mussalman and Hindu youth, whose habits forbid their living in the College. No caste, colour or country shall bar any person from admission into Serampore College." Even the crisis we occasionally face in the College between the two departments in the College which are both delegated to be administered by the same College Faculty under the Council can be treated as opportunity which I would like to describe in terms of "creative tension". The understanding with and love for our neighbours can definitely enrich our whole missiology, even as the Serampore missionaries have inscribed in *The bond of the missionary brotherhood of Serampore* "It is very important ... to know their (the people of other faiths) modes of thinking, their habits, their propensities, their antipathies, the way in which they reason about God, sin, holiness, the way of salvation ... is of highest consequence, if we would gain their attention to our discourse, and would avoid to be barbarians to them." [Oussoren 1945:275]. We need to remember the commandment of our Lord that we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves—whatever the faiths they confess. No missiology will be possible these days if we have no time to care for our neighbours. It would be appropriate to quote Archbishop William Temple who claims, "The Church is the only co-operative society which exists for the benefit of non-members." [Stott 1984:24]. Honest dialogue with the people of other faiths and ideologies are essential ingredients of missiology in the multi-religious context of our country. Such dialogue has to be authentic, sympathetic and sensitive to others' needs. Dialogue is not for the sake of dialogue, but to lead the partners engaged in dialogue to mutual enrichment and understanding of their common humanity. The World Council of Churches statement on dialogue formulated at the Uppsala Assembly in 1967 goes as follows:

"A Christian dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble. In dialogue we share our common humanity, its dignity and fallenness, and express our common concern for that humanity" [WCC 1968:6].

In the Serampore tradition, the dialogue led to concrete action-oriented missiology. William Carey was certainly an illustrious missionary, but he cannot be really separated from his colleagues who were both Christians and people of other faiths. The pundits, munshis, teachers and type cutters—about sixty of them altogether—were involved in the tremendous task of translating and printing the scripture in several Asian languages. Their corporate enterprise was action-oriented and it was directed for the benefit of the larger community. In other words, the Serampore ethos challenge the contemporary Christians to be open, leaving little room for any form of exclusiveness, and be really caring and loving neighbours.

Missiology at Serampore takes seriously people's Culture

Culture is part of every human being. It has something or other to do with our beliefs, values, customs and institutions. In other words, we all have a cultural heritage. Christians sometimes think that their missiology should be a discontinuity with their culture. But, we know that there are many things in our language, customs and traditions which can be useful idioms for the promotion of Christian mission. The Lausanne Covenant summarizes this tension as follows: "Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it demonic." [Meeking and Stott 1986:74] According to our heritage in Serampore, this balanced view is important. Carey cared for the languages of the people and worked hard not only to publish the Bible but also dictionaries, grammar and polyglots in the many languages of the people. He was one of the few Western missionaries who mastered Indian languages and served as a Professor of Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi at the Government Fort William College, Calcutta. In recognition of the contribution to Asian languages, both Carey and Marshman were awarded a doctorate degree by the Brown University. He opened a new field of journalism in both Bengali and English from Serampore. For higher education, the Serampore missionaries thought both western science and eastern literature were important and the medium

of instruction ought to be in the vernacular. Alexander Duff miscalculated by making English the medium of instruction the Hindu culture can be blown off. Mayhew rightly observes that the Anglicism missed the "rare opportunity of a constructive combination" of eastern and western cultures. [Daniel and Hedlund 1993:351].

In order "to understand the Hindu spirit at its very roots" Carey translated *Ramayana* into English though Andrew Fuller called it "that piece of lumber." [Oussoren 1945:86]. According to the missiological principles mentioned in *The bond of the Missionary Brotherhood of Serampore*, "As God has qualified us to learn these languages which are necessary, we consider it our bounden duty to apply ourselves with unwearied assiduity in acquiring them." [Oussoren 1945:282]. It is important that their supreme desire is to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" [2 Corinthians 10.5]. In this context Carey's view of conversion was different from the many of his predecessors and successors. He believed in conversion, as a result of genuine repentance with necessary change in one's character with free will and not in mass conversion or proselytism by any cheap methodology. This may be supported by his conversation with Lord Minto who once asked: "Don't you think it wrong Dr. Carey to try to make Indians Christians." Carey replied, "Do you not misapprehend us, your Lordship. We have no faith in makings. We can make hypocrites by pressure and not Christians. We only solicit the right to present the truth to each man's intelligence and conscience as our Master enjoined." [Carey, S.P., 1923:280 pp].

Missiology at Serampore has Ecological Concern

We studied when we were young that Cherrapunjee was the wettest spot on Earth with a reportedly 450 inches (or 1,150 cms.) rainfall a year and once covered with lush tropical forests is today a barren wet desert and faces chronic shortage of drinking water. The lack of vegetation causes rain water to run off the surface into the plains of Bangladesh, causing the rivers there to swell and flood. Deforestation is perhaps the most serious form of environmental degradation. It accounts

for a third of the carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere, making it the single largest contributor to the global warming phenomenon. It is stated in official reports that our country is losing more than 1.5 million hectares of good forest land every year either to domestic needs or development projects. The environmental hazards of the so called global village with pollution of air, water, overpopulation, depletion of the Ozone Layer brought the heads of about 150 nations of the world to the historic Earth Summit which met in Rio de Janeiro in June, 1992. Unfortunately this awareness has not resulted in urgency and commitment to act, as Environment has suddenly become a major foreign policy issue between the North and the South blaming each other for the present ecological mess that the earth finds itself in. Missiology can never ignore this serious global as well as local problem which affects the very existence of human beings.

Serampore ethos formulated by its leader William Carey went far beyond his time as many scholars in life sciences express today. He not only taught Botany and Geology in the College, but established an agri-horticultural society with a farm and field trial design at Serampore for hybridization and introduction of better varieties of cereals, vegetables and fruits. A Danish Government surgeon, Dr. Voigt paid his tribute to Carey by publishing a good volume on all the plants introduced in Carey's Serampore Garden for four decades 1800-1840. In April 1820, a prospectus on the project of establishing Agri-Horticultural Society in Calcutta was published by Carey in which he records: "... in one of the finest countries in the world, the state of Agriculture and Horticulture is so abject and degraded and the people's food so poor and their comforts so meagre, India seems to have almost everything to learn about clearing of jungles, tillage of waste, the draining of marshes, the banking of river courses, the irrigation of large areas, the mixing of compost and manure, rotation of crops, betterment of tools and transport, breeding of stocks, culture of new vegetables and herbs, planting of orchards, budding, grafting, pruning of fruit trees, forestation of timbers ..." [Daniel and Hedlund 1993:244]. No wonder, the foreign institutions such as Linnean Society and Horticultural Society,

London elected Carey as one of their members. The challenge before us is great in learning and working towards a holistic missiology which involves human being—nature—God together, and not apart from one another.

Missiology at Serampore enhances social transformation

Praxis, derived from the Greek word, *πραξις* means doing. Our missiology ought to have several practical applications and we are called to be doers of the word. For, as we know, faith not accompanied by action is dead. In the letters of Paul one can notice the striking sequence of faith, love and service. To give an illustration, the letter to the Galatians reads, “the only thing that counts is that faith expresses itself through love ... serve one another in love” [Galatians 5.6 & 13]. Ours can be holistic missiology only when we take our Lord’s principle of ministry—“not to be served but to serve”—seriously.

The Serampore ethos shaped by our forefathers underscores social transformation. There is no dichotomy between evangelism and social action. In the agenda of their social reformation they fought against evil practices such as sati, human sacrifice and infanticide, highlighting the actual incidents by publishing the details in their journals *The Samachar Darpan and Friend of India* and worked ceaselessly until they brought about the necessary changes by legislation even with the help of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Wellesley and Lord Bentinck. On Sunday, the 6th December 1829, Carey spent the time in translating the Government declaration of abolition of sati into Bengali, giving his preaching assignment to another person, with the hope that he would save some lives without wasting any time. As champions of social justice, they started the banking system at Serampore, liberating the poor and the helpless from the clutches of the money lenders. Even their educational enterprises and their commitment to develop agriculture and horticulture were geared to meet the objective of transforming the lot of the poor and the oppressed. As a small measure, in the present system, we are glad that the theology students have to do minimum practical work for three weeks to one month every year of their study. Many

new avenues of witnessing for Christ in our needy world by our service to the people should continue to be part of our missiology. Let us not forget the two great commandments of our Lord which demand us that we love him with all our being and our neighbour as ourselves.

Missiology at Serampore is rooted in Prayer

“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,” says Lord Tennyson. The Serampore missionaries had stressed the need of maintaining disciplined personal and corporate prayer life. In *The bond of the Missionary brotherhood of Serampore* they have inscribed the importance of cultivation of daily devotion. Citing the experience of David Brainerd, the bond reads, “Prayer secret, fervent, believing prayer, lies at the root of all personal godliness.” [Oussoren 1945:283]. The discipline of waiting on God helps us to be really committed to the task the Lord has given each one of us. Any form of debilitating pessimism dishonours God and it is incompatible with Christian faith. Our strength depends on the fact that the Lord does not expect us to do everything with our limited and inadequate resources. The mission arises out of the very nature of the Triune God. It is proclamation of the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son and bearing witness to the Holy Spirit. The Risen Christ who commanded the disciples to be engaged in his mission did not simply expect them to carry out all the tasks for Christ but with Christ their eternal Contemporary and in whom all things will be consummated. Following the deathless sermon of William Carey, let us continue to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God and His glory!

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