
CHRIST WITHIN CULTURES: DIALOGUE IN CONTEXT

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In theological discussions about the mission of the church, various themes feature prominently according to circumstances. In recent years attention has focused on such concerns as adaptation, building up the local church, indigenization, dialogue, and missionary presence. Today "contextualization" is a major concern. Such terms and emphases are not academic fads, but rather, they express aspects of a timely new consciousness. Taking the current interest in contextualization as point of departure, this article will offer, with the help of related themes, some comments on dialogue with people of other faiths.

1. Contextualization

In your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

For some time now the trend in missiological literature is to use the key word "contextualization" to describe all possible ways in which the Christian message and the non-Christian environment have an impact on each other. The International Colloquium on Contextual Theology, held in Manila from June 20 to 23, 1978, was not the first to point out that contextualization means "presenting fully the gospel of Jesus Christ here and now, incarnating it into every community, so as to make it the sign of God's kingdom-to-come" (1) Already at an earlier stage the ecumenical meetings of theologians from the Third World had given attention to this correlation. In the closing statement of their first meeting, at Dar-es-Salaam in August 1976, the Third World theologians affirmed: "The Christian churches, though taking their origin from Jesus Christ, the Word of God, and the Scriptures, are institutions comprised of human beings; hence they are subject to human weakness and conditioned by their sociocultural environment." (2) In an undeniably negative and ethnocentric manner missionary activity has therefore implied that "thus the Christian churches established on these (non-European) continents were more or less carbon copies of those of European Christianity." (3)

Third World theologians of the postcolonial era consider a theology, which geographically and socially has broken away from Europe, but which still considers Europe as normative beyond its own social and cultural context, misleading and absurd. To them theology that is neutral has little reason to exist. Rather, in a sense, all theology is committed; it is "conditioned notably by the sociocultural context in which it is developed." (4) The participants at this 1976 meeting in Tanzania were thus able to discern among themselves "a considerable measure of agreement concerning the need to do theology within the context described above." (5)

(1) Notes on session (p.5) of Dr. Kurt Piskaty to Missio/Aachen. For the general themes of contextualization, see the journal Gospel in Context, published since the beginning of 1978 under the editorship of Charles R. Taber. (2) No.15 of the "Statement of the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians" at Dar-es-Salaam, Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research 1, no.1 (January 1977): 19. See also the Willowbank Report "Gospel and Culture," Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Wheaton, Ill., 1978. (3) Statement of Dar-es-Salaam, No. 20. (4) Ibid., No. 35. (5) Ibid., No. 36.

The second meeting of Third World theologians, from December 17 to 23, 1977, at Accra, Ghana, elaborated upon these perspectives within the African context. (6) In their Communiqué they write: "We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present." (7)

In the beginning of 1979 the very same theme, but now within the Asian context, was taken up at the third intercontinental meeting of Third World theologians, this time at Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka. (8)

2. Inculturation

To the Jews I became a Jew,...to those under the law I became as one under the law....To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (1 Cor. 9:20-21).

Ever since the discussions at the Third Synod of Catholic Bishops in 1974 at Rome, (9) the wish to transpose the gospel message, theological formulations, and ecclesiastical lifestyles and to assimilate them with various cultures has also found its way into the vocabulary of the Catholic Church. The Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi (Dec. 8, 1975) on "Evangelization in the Modern World" very distinctly referred to this desire to translate the gospel message" without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth into the language that these particular people understand," and suggested that (no. 63,2) "The transposition has to be done with the discernment, seriousness, respect and competence which the matter calls for in the field of liturgical expression, and in the areas of catechesis, theological formulation, secondary ecclesial structures, and ministries." And very pointedly the text continues: "The word 'language' should be understood here less in the semantic or literary sense than in the sense which one may call anthropological and cultural."

3. Cultural Anthropology

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19).

(6) "Communiqué of the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians" held at Accra, Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research 2, no. 3 (July 1978): 92-94.

(7) Ibid., p. 94 (Perspectives for the Future).

(8) See "Statement of the Asian Theological Conference of Third World Theologians" (Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka), Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research 3, no. 3 (July 1979): 99-102 (Towards a Relevant Theology).

(9) See G. Caprile, ed., Il sinodo dei Vescovi. Terza Assemblea Generale (1974), Rome 1976, with references to "Dialogo con le culture," p. 1082. In the Message of the 5th World Synod of Bishops (1977) reference is made to "Inculturation" (No. 10).

An important shift in emphasis has taken place in theological methodology as a result of this new consciousness. It is no longer enough to point merely toward the human sciences as the disciplines which help to find theological answers; rather, it is necessary to take account of the complex process which structures a person's interior inculturation and makes him or her part of a particular human community. Indeed, the fact that people are subject to "language," in the sense we have described, fashions them in the way they think and live, both as individuals and as members of a particular society. (10) As a result, the human person is not just a "natural" being and a quality natura humana, which by itself is neutral in value, but rather is marked by and can only be understood in view of a lifestyle that was inherited, and a worldview, to which he or she is peremptorily subjected. Symbolic forms to express the sense of the transcendent and the content of revelation are just as much exposed to this "relativity," for the latter is functionally integrated into the structures of the total surroundings of life. The very essence of a culture colors to all intents and purposes the religious modes of speech and expression, for example, of the Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or Tribal environment.

4. Incarnation

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:5-7).

If it is necessary to integrate all cultural structures, then God's incarnation in Jesus Christ is no exception to this rule--the more so if we consider that in this fact man's value has been greatly enhanced. (11) In this light one wonders what to make of the objection, so often brought against theological contextualization, that Christ is neither African, Roman, French, American, or Jew, as he does not belong to any nation. Such a view fails to see a definite link between the mystery of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ with human life.

Our belief that the Christ-event implies universal redemption does not contradict the cultural limitation of the human nature of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, it presupposes this if it is not itself to be spiritually disincarnated. Seen in a cultural-anthropological context, God became not "merely man" in Christ, but a man conditioned by Hebrew-Aramaic-Semitic culture.

(10) Without getting involved in the discussion over the different definitions of "culture," it suffices here to state that by culture is understood "the totality of practices and customs, which are developed by a group of people and transferred from one generation to the next." This circumlocution stresses that culture is the outcome of human initiative and possesses a social prominence, which lives in its transmission. Consequently, we understand culture to be a totality, which develops, and which is corporative and plural. See Louis Luzbetak, The Church and Culture: An Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker (Techny Ill., 1963; 2nd edn. 1977); Lesslie Newbigin, "Christ and Cultures," Scottish Journal of Theology 31 (1978): 1-22; H. W. Gensichen, "Evangelium und Kultur. Neue Variationen über ein altes Thema," Zeitschrift für Mission (1978): 197-214.

(11) See R. Crollius, "Inculturation and Incarnation. On Speaking of the Christian Faith and the Cultures of Humanity," Bulletin Secretariatus pro non Christianis (Roma) 38 (1978); 134-40.

5. A Christological Basis for Dialogue

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew...barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:9-10).

If we can understand dialogue between religions as an intensive and common search for God, then understanding Jesus Christ correctly within his cultural-anthropological context becomes very important to the Christian partner in the discussion. (12) For, as we have pointed out, on the one hand the particular understanding of human nature is already implied in the universally significant event of the incarnation, and on the other hand no Christian can claim--as Christians too are conditioned by their culture--to have been so intensely and so completely stirred by Christ, that he or she represents Christ in the dialogue in the fullness of his incarnate Person. In their act of faith Christians have to continue the very same dialogue with Christ in which they are involved with people of other cultures and religions. (13)

The different forms of dialogue are thus aspects of the personal and ecclesial search for and conformity with Christ. Dialogue then becomes the guiding principle of the Christian lifestyle; that is, imitating Christ beyond his culturally limited and restricted human nature in Jesus of Nazareth. And this dialogue of the Christian with Christ in the world cultures will have to continue till the end of human history--till that very end, when all modalities of human nature will have been grasped and consequently all dimensions of God's incarnation will have been made fully manifest.

As long as all cultural diversity of human history and of human destiny have not yet been revealed, our understanding of Christ is still incomplete. Therefore, as Christians in dialogue with people from other religions, we cannot yet claim to know Christ fully. The Christ, with whom we want to acquaint them, appears incomplete and frequently distorted. To a degree this is because the incarnation took place in a Jewish context and its witnesses used Semitic and Indo-European speech patterns, but to some extent our personal human limitations and the divisions among Christians also account for it. However, in a dialogue we may come across human appearances of Christ, which appear unexpectedly and for which there exist so far no precedents. Contextualization then takes on the meaning of this ever-evolving complexity of Christ.

Accordingly, dialogue between religions must excite the interest of the Christian, not primarily while cultural-anthropology presents itself as a motivating force to transfer a cultural particularity into the totality of humanity and of salvation history, but more while dialogue adds a qualitative enrichment and a new Christlike intensity to this transfer. Dialogue between people of different religions and cultures becomes an attempt to shed new light upon this ever-unfolding revelation of the mystery of God in Christ.

(12) Richard Friedli, "Dialogue between the Religions--Its Cultural Anthropological Problems," in S. J. Samartha, ed., Faith in the Midst of Faiths. Reflections on Dialogue in Community (Geneva, 1977), pp. 28-35, esp. pp. 29-31 (Christological basis).

(13) Y. Raquin, "Dialogue: Differences and Common Grounds," Faith in the Midst of Faiths, p. 76 (The common search of God).

6. Acculturation

Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt. 25:40).

Inevitably contextualization, which may be described as the vital feature of missionary presence and missionary work, has received a new and intense perspective. It is no longer only a matter of pedagogical-pastoral adaptation of liturgy, homiletics, or catechetics, but more a step forward in Christology and a summons to systematic theology. It is no longer possible to think about the principle of adaptation as a question of missionary strategy. Rather, adaptation must be understood as an interpretation and an exploration--which are important and ever and again necessarily new--of the whole tradition regarding the Christ-event, as it exists now, in its contacts with nonbiblical cultures and patterns of humanity.

An acculturative process of this nature (14) affects not simply a few aspects of the cultural encounter between Christians and non-Christians, so that doctrine, ethical and symbolical expressions, liturgical usage, and socio-religious institutions change. Nor does a dialogue based on these elements aim at a cross-fertilization of different cultural and religious elements. Least of all does the reference to the cultural-anthropological relativity of all human reality serve as a mere observation of incidental change, in which two religious groups, one's own and an alien one, are involved through a dialogical process. Under discussion is what might be referred to as "qualitative catholicity," (15) that is, to abandon oneself in faith and trust to a yet unknown presence of God and Christ in alien persons and to accept such a communication in contemplation and thanksgiving. (16) In this way the individual as well as the entire church set out on pilgrimage toward the final advent of God's reign.

7. The Missionary

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20).

(14) See also, e.g., M. J. Herskovits, Man and His Works (New York, 1950), pp. 214-21 and 492-560; Ralph Linton, The Study of Man (New York, 1936), pp. 401-21.

(15) For the notion "qualitative Catholicity," See Y. Congar, "Die Katholizität der Kirche," Mysterium Salutis 4, no. 1 (Einsiedeln-Zurich-Cologne, 1972): 478-502, particularly 480-87 (qualitative Katholizität) and 494-501 (die Hereinnahme der Völker und Kulturen).

(16) This theme is further developed in Richard Friedli, Fremdheit als Heimat. Auf der Suche nach einem Kriterium für den Dialog zwischen den Religionen (Ökumenische Beihefte 8), Freiburg, Switzerland, 1974.

"...as Christians in dialogue with people from other religions, we cannot yet claim to know Christ fully. The Christ, with whom we want to acquaint them, appears incomplete and frequently distorted."

The principle of the human sciences to which we appeal here, and the Christological consequences for the motivation of dialogue, may well appear rather sketchy within the framework of this article. They may prove to be obscure points of reference both for adherents of the theology of fulfillment and for evangelical communities, because these believe firmly and exclusively that the Christ-event took place once for all and that it is central in understanding the mission of the church (a fact which is obviously not questioned here). In addition, for them, the concise but controversial formula of the "anonymous Christian," (17) proposed by Karl Rahner, with all the "imperialistic" interpretive distortions (18) is bound to rear its head. In a similar way those actively engaged in missionary contacts may also be left with a feeling of apprehension due to this sketchy Christological and ecclesiological comment on the mission of the church.

But, having analyzed my own personal experiences in Central Africa and Southeast Asia, which were corroborated by various missionaries at renewal courses, we are more than ever convinced that it is necessary to identify with the help of cultural anthropology the forces through which missionaries partake in their own culture, the phenomena which enable them to become open to new cultural expressions and values, the processes of communicative dialogue through which their transculturation takes place, and the consequences which result from this new inculturation in a Christ-event which they had not foreseen. Biblical exegesis and cultural anthropology do become then the main disciplines on which the missionary activity of the church must depend in order to be effective in this realm.

8. Perspectives

To share in God's works of salvation and to proclaim them with admiration are essential requisites if one wants to search in dialogue for the human nature of God and the human nature of persons. But this, in its turn, implies that one maintains a spirituality, which is at the same time open and in its very essence interreligious, and in which meditation and discussion, prayer and the practice of peace are supplementary. Such a spirituality creates the sphere in which dialogue between religions finds its beginnings and reaches its highest peak in silence for the mystery of Christ within human cultures.

Reference: OCCASIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH, Vol. 4. No. 1, January 1980.

(17) Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," Theological Investigations, vol. 5, p. 131; and "Bemerkungen zum Problem des 'anonymen Christen,'" Schriften zur Theologie X (Einsiedeln-Zurich-Cologne, 1972), pp.531-46.

(18) See the reference to "anonymous Christian," no. 22 in the report of the Chiang Mai consultation on "Dialogue in Community" (April 1977), Faith in the Midst of Faiths, p. 146.

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BASIC COMMUNITIES OF BRAZILIAN CHURCH IN ACTION

(There is a strong and ever-growing number within the Brazilian Church who take Christ at face value when he said:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
therefore he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring glad tidings
to the poor
To proclaim liberty to captives,
recovery of sight to the blind
and release to prisoners,
To announce a year of favor from the
Lord."

Luke 4:18-19

Here are some simple examples of the basic communities shared by James Pitt from his experiences of the Church of Brazil.)

A FIRST COMMUNION CLASS IN SAO MATEUS

I went to a First Communion class on the periphery of São Paulo where I experienced a practical lesson in Liberation theology.

It was a small group of mothers, eight in all, meeting in one of their houses. The catechist, an American Sister, was taking them through a catechetics program that had been developed by basic church communities in the sector to help prepare children for First Communion. The program covered 30 themes, and every two weeks the mothers would study one theme as a group, teach their own children individually and then evaluate it as a group.

I went to the meeting, hoping it would be interesting, but little prepared for an experience that would teach me more about liberation theology than anything I had heard or read to date.

The theme of that fortnight was "that Jesus was born poor and humble and shares our life," and the question was "Why?" The women present were all poor. None had much formal education. Most were migrants from rural areas. All knew real hardship. They could easily identify with a poor family on the move whose baby had been born in a stable. Indeed a one-minute reading of Luke's account of the nativity provoked a one-hour discussion of the injustices, humiliations and hardships that the mothers themselves experienced.

They discussed the terrible health services available in the area and how a local woman's baby had been born while she was waiting in a queue to see the doctor. (The baby died.) They swapped accounts of having to wait in shops while better dressed people were served first and how as domestic servants they were treated without respect by their mistresses. They talked of the high price of food in the local shops.

After an hour the catechist put the question, "Why did Jesus choose to be born poor and humble?" "Maybe," said one woman, a mother of ten of whom three had died and only two were working, "maybe it was to show these rich people that we are important too."

A ripple of excitement went through the room. Was God really making such a clear statement about their humanity? About their rights as people? The discussion progressed, but with an electric charge in the air. Half an hour later, a young woman said, "I think we still haven't got the right answer to the first question!" A complete hush. "I think," she went on, "that God chose his son to be born like us so that we can realize that we are important.

And suddenly I saw what it means to say that the Gospel has the power to set people free, that the Good News to the poor is a message of liberation. For these women, fired by a sudden consciousness of their own worth, of their identification with Jesus Christ, by an awareness of God's love for them... these women went on to discuss what they should be doing about the high food-prices, about how a particular chain of shops had cornered the market and was overcharging, and how they themselves would link up with other catechetics groups and basic church communities across the sector to organize a boycott.

Liberation theology is knowledge of God the Liberator.

MASS WITH A BASIC CHURCH COMMUNITY IN SAO JOAO DE MERITI, RIO DE JANEIRO

The community consists of about 20 families (between 120-160 people.) They have their chapel which is more of a community center and meeting place than a church, where they meet each Sunday morning to celebrate the Word, that is, they read the Gospel, reflect on it, sing hymns and pray.

The day I was there one of the couples was celebrating 25 years of marriage. On a special occasion like this they have a Eucharist. The whole celebration was joyful, informal, and very spiritual. Lasting about two hours, it included a good hour's discussion about marriage. People shared experiences both good and bad, and began to analyze the causes of marriage problems: the struggle for decent housing, the impossible costs of doctors and medicines. The priest, who had not given any sort of sermon, very gently deepened the discussion. Why is it necessary to work long hours for low pay? The discussion could have gone on for three hours, but there will be plenty more opportunities. (I asked the priest about sermons. "Me?" he said, "tell them? about marriage? You must be joking! I haven't preached a sermon since I left the seminary.")

I cannot describe the joy, seriousness and spirituality of that Eucharist. It gave real meaning to the words, "For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them." It taught me more about the Eucharist than any book, discussion or Mass I had previously attended. The members of this basic community are a dynamic force in the neighborhood. They really are the leaven. Through discussion of neighborhood problems and the Gospel together, the people experience a clear call to action.

PARAIBA, NORTHEAST BRAZIL. A "CANTEIRO" IN JACARU AND A "MUTIRAO" IN GUARABIRA

Jacaru is a small town of 25 to 30,000 inhabitants in rural Paraiba, NE Brazil. It is the site of one of about 35 "canteiros" or free schools which have been brought into existence through the activities of a team of Sisters and lay people who work with Dom Marcelo Carvalheiro, an auxiliary bishop of Paraiba. The main activities in the Canteiro are woodwork and market gardening (the children aged eight to twelve sell what they produce) and basic reading and writing which is developed through a method that is "a combination of Freire, Illych and Montessori!" The canteiros are primarily concerned with conscientization and preparing the children with practical skills.

The workers in the canteiros are called "animadores" rather than teachers. There are over 60 of them, mainly in their late teens. They are employed part-time by "The Project" which also employs a few full-time coordinators and technicians. All the paid workers are peasant or working class except for one architect who works on the "mutiraos", two self-built cooperatives supported by the project.

I spent a morning on a mutirao, building a house with about 50 other people from 17 families. They were building 17 houses. Each Sunday they all worked on one of them, so that all will be ready at the same time. There was a very good atmosphere on the site and the people were visibly happy, articulate and purposeful. Yet those people are among the most marginalized in the whole continent, the really poor of Northeast Brazil.

Both the mutiraos and the canteiros were set up by local people. A Franciscan Sister who had done some of the groundwork explained that she and two others moved from town to town setting up evangelization groups, that is, small groups of people who study the Gospel and reflect on their lives.

The Sisters spend about five years in a town, living simply, getting to know people, getting them together in groups, animating the groups, training the leaders who emerge and then beginning to make contacts in the next town before moving on. It is these local leaders who take the initiatives to start a new canteiro. While she was explaining this to me, two of the technicians employed by the project were examining sites which an evangelization group had acquired for a possible canteiro. They found the land good for cultivation so Valeria (one of the Project coordinators) arranged then and there for two local girls, aged 15 and 16, who are part of an evangelization group, to start training the following week as animadores. Within two weeks a new canteiro was started.

One might ask what is the impact of 35 to 40 canteiros of about 20 children each in an area of 400,000. Perhaps the main significance of this work will prove to be the emergence of a conscientized leadership, the animadores.

STREET THEATER IN BRASILIA TEIMOSA, RECIFE

One lesson I learned in Brazil is that the young are a great resource to a community. So often humorous, uncomplicated by family responsibilities, they are able to contribute so much to the transformation of society. Yet so often they are ignored or marginalized by adults.

This was not the case in Brasilia Teimosa, a poor bairro that is right next to Boa Viagem, one of the smartest seaside areas in the whole of Brazil. Boa Viagem has been developed as a playboy's paradise, with luxury flats, expensive hotels, nightclubs and restaurants all the way along a beautiful white palm-shaped sandy beach. All the way to Brasilia Teimosa, where the coast road sweeps suddenly inland, the gleaming tower blocks give way to poor, single story dwellings and huts on stilts over the water. Occupied by some 25,000 people who have no written title to their land, Brasilia Teimosa is a site that every property speculator must dream about.

Needless to say, the squeeze is on the local residents to get out. "We used to ask ourselves," said an Irish nun who lived there for years and who works with the residents' association, "I wonder what compensation we will get when we go? Now we ask ourselves, 'Why should we go? In whose interests should it be?' There has been real 'conscientization' going on here!"

Young people have been active in this process. The residents' association "employs" them to put on street theater. The evening I was there they performed a devastatingly funny sketch about life in the bairro. Lack of sewers, water, street lighting--all things which the audience knew and experienced. Then were raised harder questions about the ownership of the land, what the local authority was up to. The sketches were followed immediately by discussion of the problems, with leaders of the community association probing and explaining.

When I told the young people in the play that in England we built youth clubs to keep people off the streets, they laughed! "They are the greatest opportunity," said Sister. "To treat them as a problem is madness."

Reference: LADOC, Vol. X, No. 5, May/June 1980.

Recently received:

Classics of Christian Missions. Ed. Francis H. Du Bose (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1979) 462 pages. A broadly ecumenical selection of mission classics mainly from a Protestant viewpoint, particularly in its selections from recent centuries. Sedos Documentation No. 758. C.1.

Mission Trends No. 4: Liberation Theologies. Eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), 289 pages. The fourth in the excellent series dealing with modern mission trends. Sedos Documentation No. 6/710. C.3.

Church and China: Towards Reconciliation? Joseph J. Spae, C.I.C.M. (Chicago: Leuven: Institute of Theology and Culture, 1980), 167 pages; Pro Manuscripto - for limited distribution. Available: Joseph J. Spae, C.I.C.M., Dennelaan 8, B-3031 OUD-HEVERLEE, BELGIUM. \$10.00 prepaid. Sedos Documentation No. 6/754 C.3.

Telema: Revue de Reflexion et Creativité Chrétiennes en Afrique. (Trimestielle) The issue 1/80 contains some articles of interest to those studying the implications of Asian, African, Latin American membership of International Congregations: eg. "Etre Africaine et Religieuse", which is an account of the Colloquium of African Religious Sisters held at Kinwenda, Zaire, 15 to 21 August 1979, by Sisters Kitewo Ndunsi and Nzenzili Mboma. Also: "Formation Religieuse en Afrique" by Victor Mertens, sj.

Mutual Assistance of Churches in a Missionary Perspective. A report on a Missiological Research Project. E. Jansen Schoonhoven. (Leiden Inter-university Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, 1979), 41 pages. Prof. Schoonhoven has co-ordinated a long term (1970-1977) study project on the new relationships between older and younger churches after the declaration of autonomy of the latter. How can missionary assistance make place for mutuality in mission? Is there a two-way missionary traffic between Churches? In what sense may the Western congregations become missionary? The author tells the story of the research project in this abridged English version and proposes twelve missiological conclusions. (Sedos Documentation No. 4/3750.

MISSIONARY PRIORITIES

In its progress towards the 1981 Mission Research Seminar, Sedos has gradually arrived at the significance of the Local Church as the focal point of its Research. The following article sheds some light on the Local Church as seen from one European perspective.

In its preparation for the CWME Melbourne Conference, the Netherlands Missionary Council asked a Study Commission, composed of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians and sociologists, to offer a contribution in which western, and even more specifically, Dutch society is tested by the theme "Thy Kingdom come."

Together with friends from the Roman Catholic Missionary Council, the Netherlands Missionary Council dealt extensively in a special meeting with this contribution. The report extends to 46 pages. We reproduce here the final two Chapters which summarize the findings of the Study Commission without necessarily finalising them.

1. NO RECIPE, BUT SCOPE

Indicating missionary priorities does not mean that we wish to offer models. Concrete missionary initiatives seldom come from study commissions. Rather do they come from people who, in their own place, see something happen, believe that, in God's Name, it should be different, and then set off for renewal. The six stories or "parables" for which we have given space in this report exemplify this in six different fields. They are not meant to be copied or declared canonical. They serve as encouragement, and also as a stimulus for the imagination of others, who from their own situation want to set off. (1)

Indicating missionary priorities does not mean the offering of rules, methods or congregational structures that would then be of great promise as regards their missionary effects. The way back to the missionary congregation is not, in our opinion, that of bringing about an ideal form of organization of the congregation - as seen from a missionary angle - plus the acceptance of a well-tested communication strategy.

(1) The six "parables" referred to here are the following ecumenical models described in Chapter 4 of the report:

1. The Stillness Centre in Utrecht.
2. The Calama Group in Rotterdam.
3. The Ecumenical Workshop in Zaandam.
4. The Work Group "The Woman in Church and Society" of the Council of Churches of the Netherlands.
5. The I.K.V. Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons.
6. The Co-operating Churches in the Merenwijk in Leiden.

Each general recipe quickly ignores the concreteness of the people concerned inside and outside the congregation. It ignores, too, the specific context and the relationships that have grown historically. It ignores in this way also the exact causes of stagnation that prevent the congregation from really setting off. The provision of recipes, therefore, easily leads first to a cramped evangelism, succeeded by absence of evangelism and by paralysing guilt feelings. This is the reason why we wish only to indicate the conditions which, in our opinion, clear the way for a process of renewal that can lead to the missionary congregation. We see a new attitude as condition for this process of clearing the way. We see a new practice in contemporary accountability of faith as condition for keeping this way open.

2. A NEW ATTITUDE

Because in the Netherlands, in many cases, some illusions make it difficult or even impossible for congregations to come to a proper understanding of themselves, of the world around them and of the relevant form of the message of the Gospel, the following conditions for the recovery of the missionary congregation may be mentioned:

2.1 The willingness to keep our distance from the illusion that we are living in a so-called Christian Western world.

The models for explaining our society, as chosen in chapter two of this report, sufficiently illustrate that it is society and culture that push back - even dispute - faith in the coming Kingdom. They also illustrate that embarrassing questions can arise: "What kind of power, what kind of king would be able to withstand this? Is resurrection from this death possible? Is a "revolution" - a radical transformation conceivable?"

Therefore, in our opinion, among the conditions for a missionary attitude, the following belong:

- the willingness to see to these questions;
- the acknowledgement of the "minority" character of the Christian community in the Netherlands;
- the refusal to enter into all those alliances that restore the former feeling of belonging to the majority and thus having safety on our side, but that actually mean alliances with other kingdoms - which force upon us other aims and rules of the game - rather than those of Christ's Kingdom.

2.2. The willingness to keep our distance from the illusion that we, as churches and Christians in the Netherlands, stand together.

In chapter two of this report it has already been indicated that the front lines dividing us no longer run, exclusively or mainly, between the churches, but also, and sometimes specifically, right through the churches. With this, we do not deny that denominational difference and dissension, however out of date, still play a part. But:

"There is also the difference within each denomination and very often differences within a congregation or parish of whatever denomination. It is fairly euphoric to speak of it as if it were a sort of symphony: "Different words with different music, different tone colour and different stress." In fact, people from one church, yes, even from one congregation or parish often do not understand each other. Not only do they speak and act differently, but even conflictually. They choose opposite positions in political questions. They cannot accept each other's expressions of faith. They do not really recognize and accept each other. They sing, as it were, very different songs, in completely different keys.

Does such a situation provide new chances for the missionary congregation, or is it an enormous impediment? Can pluralism be made fruitful? If so, how? Oh, it is nice to have interesting, non-committal discussions with each other at ecumenical conferences somewhere far away. But in what way can you jointly make one policy, one strategy in a certain local or national situation, when this diversity and these contradictions are there? How can you, together, be a missionary congregation? Or do we, perhaps, have to forget about it, go our ways separately, and wait until the last central questions - such as an ecological crisis or a nuclear war - throw us into one heap and relativize our differences? But what are we to do, when we, especially with regard to these central questions speak, act and behave in a conflicting manner?"

Freek Nijssen

In the meantime it is not only political-economic questions that divide us. In our report we already have referred to the effect of the differentiated or over-developed society on religion and church. Beside this, the scientific world-view, that has more and more increased the distance in culture between the world-view of the biblical testimonies and the world as experienced by people today, must be mentioned. The answers given by church people to these challenges are varied.

It is indeed, both in political-economic questions and in questions of the arrangement of society and the world-view of our culture, that our unity is broken, our theology challenged and our belief disputed.

2.3. The willingness to stand back from the illusion of evangelism being only a problem of the methodology of communication of what we (who are "reached") have, and what they (the others) have not.

In the introduction to this report it is said: "While we try to explain the Kingdom of God, we are forced to explain ourselves and to analyse our situation; while we are occupied with ourselves and the great questions of our times, the prospect of the Kingdom of God repeatedly looms up. It is a double movement which, while following this way, moves us."

If this is so, no true evangelism outwards can exist without evangelism inwards. Only through joint involvement with our fellow men and women outside the church in trying to renew life in this world, will we also learn to understand and to live out the Gospel in such a way that it again becomes missionary for both us and for our fellow men and women; that is to say, that it liberates again and, because of "God with us", makes us set out on the way.

Real evangelism, therefore, bears the traces of the painful struggle for the renewal of life. It also bears the traces of the struggle, evaded by confessionism, conservatism and fundamentalism, to understand what the message really is in this place and in this time of the pluriform collection of testimonies that we call the Bible.

The practical significance of this is that we should stand back from and examine:

Evangelism that keeps us Christians out of the picture and that thus thinks and works from "us" over against "them", or from the "reached" over against the "unreached". This, as if our own conversion is not at stake, and as if sections of our participation in modern society are not often "unreached".

"Judgement begins with the household of God" (I Peter 4:17).

Evangelism that gives no serious attention to the context both in understanding the message and in communicating the message; and that in doing so makes true evangelism impossible.

Evangelism that tries to organize, yes, even tries to pre-programme the conversion of others - as regards contents and also, if possible, as regards moment. This, as if conversion is not God's possibility, but would be the result of our missionary activities.

"For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

"Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (John 6:45).

Evangelism that neglects the very supposition of real missionary presence, namely, a congregation that celebrates Word and Sacrament, and that consists of members who live in dialogue and in shared responsibility with others.

2.4. Summary

To summarize, it can be stated that a first condition for renewal towards a missionary congregation lies in learning to accept together an attitude which, despite the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that accompany it, will take as a starting point for a new beginning:

the acceptance of the "minority" character of the Christian community in the Netherlands,

the acknowledgement of the increasing social, political and cultural counter-pressure exercised against "going the way",

the expectation that, when struggling for renewal, the signs of hope will mostly be small and vulnerable,

the expectation that those signs of hope, in many cases, will be found on or over the edge of the institutionalized churches. This because, after all, with the forms of discord, and with the danger of privatization and of ideological use of religion, as mentioned above, one cannot take it for granted that the institutionalized churches are now the most important places where salvation will be found,

the abandonment of activist, non-integrated, uncontextualised forms of evangelism, which alienate people from the gospel, which do possibly redeem our missionary guilt feelings, but which spare us the real missionary engagement.

3. A NEW PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTABILITY OF FAITH

3.1. A close interplay

In many cases, members and leadership of the congregation relate to the claims of modern society and culture in a rather intimidated and defenseless way. We therefore give as a second condition the search for a congregational life that, in the experience of a large number of the members, comes to a close interplay of:

public worship or celebration;

practice in an hermeneutically answerable and contextual use of the Bible;

practice in becoming conscious about society and one's own place in it;

exchange between the various forms of missionary presence;

search for assistance from outside one's own congregation.

3.2. Existing or new structures?

The question can be asked whether these five focus-points can be dealt with simultaneously and in an integrated way within the existing structures and meetings of the congregation, or whether some specialization and some structural renewal would be necessary if joint practice in contemporary accountability of faith is not to reach, once again, a far too small part of the congregation. This question should not be given a general answer by an ecumenical commission, because of the greatly varying structures of the denominations. Also, because of the greatly varying situations of the large and the small, the urban and the rural congregations.

We think it to be, in the first place, the responsibility of the central policy-making boards of the churches or congregations to see to the realization and co-ordination of what is mentioned above. Beside this, it remains the task freely chosen of the various groups and movements to contribute to this realization and co-ordination on their own initiative, and from their own point of view and experience.

This chapter, therefore, is dealing no further with structures. It is rather a plea for combining integrally the classical and justified attention to the divine service - with Word, prayer and Sacraments - with what is just as necessary, if we as congregations want to escape from confusion again and set off on the way. What we envisage with the brief indications about "what is just as necessary" is now clarified point by point.

3.3. Practice in a hermeneutically answerable and contextual use of the Bible

In many congregations in the Netherlands as regards the use of the Bible three phenomena are present:

- either a clinging to a biblicistic use of the Bible;
- or, because of feelings of distance and estrangement, a gradual loss of the traditional forms of using the Bible, without substituting something in its place;
- or a beginning of a new, hermeneutically more answerable, way of dealing with the biblical testimonies; this mostly in very small Bible circles, and often still without much relationship to what happens further in the congregation.

The first two mentioned phenomena are seen very often. This partly results from a lack of experience with a communal practice in a use of the Bible that is supported by the results of advanced bible studies, and that respects the specific character of all those biblical testimonies which came into existence in another time and culture, and with another consciousness of life.

The first two phenomena offer but little perspective for the missionary congregation. This is true even for the increasing biblicism, because it is dealing with the Bible in a timeless manner. A distance is created between the Bible and one's own situation. And no account is taken of the plurality within the biblical testimonies. This leads to all kinds of theology, church, mission and evangelism which cannot, or even refuse to, establish the relationship with the context of modern West European society.

The result is that this biblicism causes an increasing defencelessness against the claims of society, against privatization of faith and against the strengthening of the ideological function of faith on behalf of the status quo. The result of some missionary activities based on such biblicism is, moreover, that many people who understand the irrelevance of such an evangelism become estranged from the movement of Jesus Christ. Making room for communal practice in a hermeneutically answerable and contemporary use of the Bible is, therefore, a condition for the desired process of renewal.

3.4. Practice in becoming conscious about society and one's own place in it

The manner in which we have sketched going the way in this report - in that double movement of the explanation of the Kingdom and of ourselves in our situation - demands a congregation that surmounts the privatization of faith. A congregation in which, together with the above-mentioned Bible study, the practice in consciousness about society also takes place. As focus-points for this can be mentioned:

making the illusions mentioned under 2. discussable and helping to cope with the feelings of uncertainty that result from the laying aside of these illusions;

giving extra attention to the results of the (one-sided?) social composition of the congregation;

making the question discussable, whether the structure of our church life or the structure of some Christian organizations shuts us off from the social-cultural context in which a great number of our fellow men and women live, so that we share the lives of other people too little to be able to arrive at a true missionary encounter;

giving special attention to the contribution to reflection and conscientisation by persons who are trained in human sciences and by persons, who on account of their field of activity or by their position in certain movements or action groups, have a deeper insight into what the social reality means for a large number of people in our society;

working - or participating with others outside the congregation, in working for changes that promote justice and peace. This, based on the encouragement and call of the Gospel. And this to be done by developing the strategy of the small steps that relate to the specific possibilities and talents of the congregation or of groups who partly recruit their members from the congregation.

3.5. Exchange among the various forms of missionary presence

The necessity for exchange stems both from the many forms of missionary presence in a plural society (see the pluriformity of the "parables" in chapter 4 and from the differences between and within the congregations. In order to prevent estrangement, isolation and unnecessary vulnerability to what opposes the movement of the Kingdom, it is necessary to pay purposeful attention to co-ordination or at least to dialogue and consultation between representatives of all kinds of activity within and without the congregation itself, or from the activities of Christian action groups, movements and grassroots communities.

3.6. The search for assistance from outside one's own congregation

To face the missionary tasks in present-day society and culture, the congregations cannot, without great loss, neglect the encouragement, the supplement to one's insight and contribution, or the correction that can be offered by all those who stand for the same mission elsewhere. It therefore seems desirable that attention be given by the councils of the congregations to:

concrete signs of liberation and renewal elsewhere - eventually by means of exchange or "mirror" visits - in order that these signs of liberation and renewal can serve as parables and encouragements for the search for one's own contribution;

the contributions to recovering the missionary congregation already offered, but which have still not penetrated sufficiently in the congregations; the impulses for renewal, which come from international co-operation in the fields of mission, interchurch-aid and development can be thought about, as can the impulses offered to us through international ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches;

the help which can be requested from foreign Christians who can be found near at hand or who can be invited for a temporary stay.

FINALLY

(Chapter 6 of the Report)

Here ends our report. We have gone a certain way and have wanted this to be seen in this report. From the last chapter - Missionary priorities - it may have become clear that it is not our intention that the way ends here. On the contrary. We hope to see people, groups, churches in and outside the Netherlands setting out on this way, encouraged, even perhaps a little inspired to set off anew up on this way. For this way has not been invented or discovered by us.

It is not a way we, as Christians, tread alone. We realize that the prayer "Thy Kingdom come" has been and is prayed by the people of Israel who have been called, just as much as we, to be a witness on the way of the coming Kingdom of God.

"The power and the cross", the title given to this report, will point to him whom we call our King, the Son of Man, who is also a Son of Israel, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given, just because he has chosen the way of emptying himself.

Because our report has been written from within the European situation, the consciousness of the unmeasurable suffering put upon the people of Israel on its way may never be pushed out of our memories. That consciousness, also, belongs to proceeding along the way that was taken by the King as a Servant.

It is this way that is behind the movement that we indicate by church, mission or even Kingdom. What we have done is nothing else than to sketch in our own way, and in our own situation, something of the movement which is given with the theme of the conference in Melbourne: "Thy Kingdom come".

Reference: CWME 1980 YOUR KINGDOM COME.

MIGRANT WOMAN ON A MELBOURNE TRAM

Impossibly black
 Amid the impudence of summer thighs
 And long brown arms and painted toenails
 and the voices impossibly obscure
 She hunches sweltering.
 Twists in sweating hands
 A scrap of paper--address, destination,
 Clue to the labyrinth
 Where voices not understood
 Echo
 Confusing directions.
 (There was a time they sent them
 Out of Greece in black-sailed ships
 To feed the minotaur.
 Who's in the blind beast now
 Laired in Collingwood.
 Abbotsford, Richmond
 Hungry for man power?)

Street names in the glare,
 Leap ungraspably from sight.
 Formless collisions of letters
 Impossibly dark
 She is forlorn
 In foreign words and voices.
 Remembering a village
 Where poverty was white as bone
 And the great silences of air and
 sea
 Parted at dusk for voices coming
 home
 Calling familiar names
 Impossibly departed.

Jennifer Strauss

Reference: WALK IN MY SHOES,
A social justice resource book,
Asian Bureau, Australia.

AFRICAN VALUES THAT ENRICH FAMILY LIFE

Peter Sarpong
Bishop of Kumasi

There are different types of family life. What has been described as the nuclear family comprises the father, the mother and their children. This is an Euro-American model which has, more or less, been adopted by the Church.

There are however, other models. For instance, we have the fratriachate. In this type of system, the oldest brother is the head of the family and his authority is handed on with the property from brother to brother. It has been claimed that there are traces of this system in the Old Testament. For example, in the institution of the Levirate, in the action of Jacob's sons in avenging the rape of their sister, Dinah (Gen. 34), and in the part Leban played in the arrangement of the marriage of his sister, Rebecca (Gen. 24). These examples are not conclusive, but the existence of fratriachate in early times among the Assyrians and the Hurites is now admitted, at least, as a hypothesis.

As a type of family, matriarchate is much more common in simple societies. Ten per cent of Africa is said to be matrilineal. The child's lineage is traced through the mother. The child belongs to the mother's family and social group, and is not considered as related to his father's community. Rites of inheritance are fixed by maternal descent. This type of family is associated with small scale cultivators, while pastoral people are generally patriarchal.

There are scholars who claim that the patriarchal regime is the original form of family among the Semites. They justify this thesis by indicating the presence of this regime among Israelites; for example, in Genesis 20:12 Abraham is excused for passing off Sarah as a sister because she was, in fact, his half sister whom she had married.

However, the arguments do not prove the point at issue. What appears to be evident from the time of our oldest document is that the Israelite family is patriarchal or patrilineal. The Hebrew word to describe it means the house of one's father. Genealogies always come under the father's line and women are hardly mentioned. In this type of Israelite marriage, the husband is the master. The father has absolute authority over his children, even over his married sons if they live with him and over their wives. In early times, this authority included even the power over life and death, thus Judah condemned to death his daughter in law, Tamar, when she was accused of misconduct (Gen. 38: 24).

The family consists of those who are united by common blood and have a dwelling place. The family is a house. To build the family is to build a house (Neh. 7:4). Noah's family includes his wife and sons and their children (Gen. 7:1 & 7). Jacob's family comprises three generations (Gen. 46:8-26). The family included the servants, the resident aliens and the stateless persons, widows and orphans. However, the term "house" is very flexible and may even include an entire nation like "the house of Joseph". It may include kingship in the wide sense. In this wide sense, the family was the same group as the clan. On the religious level too, the family played this part as a unit of society. The Passover was a family festival kept in every home (Ex. 12:3-4 & 46).

This type of biblically extended family is more or less what obtains in Africa whether one is dealing with a matrilineal society or a patrilineal society. It gives security to the members because members of the family in this

wider sense have the obligation to help and protect one another. They share common goods and property and they bear responsibility collectively.

The education of the child is not left in the hands of one man who may prove inadequate when he is irresponsible or unhealthy. In the traditional African setting, there is always somebody to fall back on. This was the case in Israel where mutual protection within the family was institutionalized. The communal life of the African made one the keeper of one's brother. In the family, there was little selfishness. The leader of the family was the focal point of unity. Even when the family extended, he could rally them together when the need arose. In a society where there was very little specialisation of work, landed property was of the utmost importance and everybody, through the family, had some work to do. The family, therefore, was the focal point of both young and old. The family was self-sufficient and provided secure protection for its members.

This African value of communalism, of man-in-community, of friendship, of mutual support and assistance, if revived and well-developed, would go a long way to enrich Christian family life. As a matter of fact, it reminds us of the early stages of Christian life beautifully described for us by the Acts of the Apostles. The brethren did not own property individually, but considered their possessions as belonging to all.

The African, too, has a sense of friendship. In some parts of the continent, friendship can be developed to the stage of blood-brotherhood, where this sociological relationship becomes even much more important than blood relationship. A person would rather die than betray a blood brother. Is not this what Christian family life should be about, being ideally a source of mutual support for members? Should not members of a family forget their personal interests, and take the interests of their relatives into consideration in whatever they do?

Probably the most predominant value of the African is religion. Traditionally, the African trusts in the Creator, in the divinities and in the ancestors. There are family or clan or lineage divinities and cults. There are days of worship when the family comes together to implore the assistance of the spiritual overlords on the members of the family. Members of the family normally have the same taboos and observances to keep. Religion makes for harmony and peace in the family. At a time in our history when good family life must be promoted in order to counteract the baneful effect of social change, it appears imperative that we should revive this African value, so that the family may become the focal point of prayerful life among its members, thereby generating peace, harmony and concord among family members.

The traditional African has great respect for the sacred, old age and authority. Old age and authority are respected because in some way, they are connected with the sacred. With the sense of authority breaking down everywhere and thus affecting family life, a revival of the sense of respect for authority would go a long way to help family life. Another value of Africa is its integral approach to life. Africa takes life as one whole, and does not dichotomize between politics, religion, morality, culture and recreation. Life is one and must be lived as one. The artificial barrier raised between the sacred and the profane is simply alien to the African mind. Here, Africa has a lot to tell the world. We cannot go on truncating human beings as if we were at one time political, at another social, at another, something else. This integral approach to life must start from the family. If a family is divided, it is hard to see how its members can develop a sense of community with others. This should be carried forward.

In Africa there is a strong sense of unity between the living and the dead. As a matter of fact, the world of the dead is much the same as the world of the living. Family life is not broken by the death of one of its members. Our dead

