

## A Re-Look at the Mission Concept and Missiology

### Introduction

Church and mission have come to be seen as two sides of the same coin, and rightly so. However, while in the West, by and large, mission continues to be a highly esteemed engagement, in the East, more so in the Asian countries, for the followers of other religions, mission is the by-product of colonial conquest, a social and political instrument to displace their religions with Christianity. All service of the Christian community comes to be interpreted as 'conversion' work, along with the claims of possessing the exclusive way of salvation. All this makes mission one of the most contemptuous concepts in the religious world of Asia.

### Origin of 'Mission'

The mission theology that is developed and taught in contemporary times, for the most part, has its origin in western colonialism. The 'discovery' of the new lands made European Christians painfully aware of the existence of vast lands populated by the followers of other religions, both organized and tribal. The European Christian estimate of these people can best be understood from a letter that the then Franciscan Superior wrote while sending the Franciscans to the 'new world' in 1523. He spoke of the urgent need to save the souls of the poor heathens, the vintage "being gathered by the devil and the flesh," depriving Christ "of enjoying the possession of the souls which he purchased with his blood."<sup>1</sup> It was founded on the theology of St. Anselm, the father of the western theology. His work, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why God became a Man, completed

in 1098), advocated satisfaction/atonement as the justification for the Incarnation, contributing to a radical deviation of the Church's life and service.

The term mission, as understood today, originated from the "Vow of Mission" that St. Ignatius imposed on the Jesuits, with the meaning that the Jesuits would be prepared to carry out any assignment that the Pope would mandate them to do or to go anywhere in the world the Pope would send them, contemporaneous with the colonial forays. Similarly, Missiology as a theological discipline began only with Gustav Wameck and Josef Schmidlin, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the theological discipline to justify and promote the type of work that the Church adopted ensuing the colonial forays. Interestingly, the Christianity of the colonial days did not pay much attention to the fact that Europe became Christian by the will of the ruler, a practice that had its precedence in Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the state and his successor Theodosius making it the only religion allowed in the empire.

### Return to the Roots

The Lord of the Church had described the Church as a "little flock" (Lk 12:32), that must serve the world as its light, salt and leaven (Mt 5:13,14), the recipe for the messianic transformation of the world. The community at the earliest stage had this sense of impacting the world through its lifestyle, which it described as "what soul to the body, that we are to the world."<sup>2</sup> In fact, St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians reminds them to be "the fragrance of Christ" (2 Cor 2:15). All these images indicate the quality of life and the impact of the Church on the world, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of Franciscan General, Francisco de los Angeles in 1523, quoted in H. McKennie, *Goodpasture, Cross and Sword: An Eyewitness History of Christianity in Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 20.

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<sup>2</sup> *Letter to Diognetus*, 6, quoted in Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 38.

minority status of the Church, on the other.

When we come to the ministry of Jesus as presented by the evangelists, it was focused on the divine reign. “The Kingdom has come” (Mk 1:15). The Gospel is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a person. The inaugurated Kingdom that God is bodily present in Jesus of Nazareth. Mark, in particular, emphasizes the ministry, the deeds of Jesus, rather than the teaching of Jesus. He is the path to God (Jn 14:6) whom he manifested through his ministry (Jn 1:18; 14:9).

The message of the Kingdom was an invitation to the people to accept it through a corresponding change of lifestyle, based on love and compassion, linking it with the great biblical theme of the Jubilee Year, though now it is not just another Jubilee, but *the* Jubilee: “the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:19; cf. Lev 25:8ff). It was the ‘manifesto’ of Jesus. Jubilee was the good news primarily for the poor who had lost their land or who had become slaves. Jubilee retrieved the original equality and fraternity that the Israelites had when they came to the Promised Land. Through the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus spelt this out through his announcing the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty those who were oppressed, all those who were excluded from the mainstream society (Lk 4:18-19).

Similarly, when John the Baptist, languishing in the prison, sent his disciples to Jesus asking if he were truly the Messiah, or if they are to look for someone else, Jesus’ reply was: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Lk 7:22). In the same vein, responding to the Pharisees who warned Jesus of Herod’s plans to kill him, he said: “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course’” (Lk 13:32). No wonder, Peter’s summary of the entire ministry of Jesus in Cornelius’ house is: “He went about doing

good healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:39).

The biblical idea of salvation and the naming of God or Jesus as saviour are to be understood from this integral sense. No wonder, Cyrus, the Persian king who sent the Israelites back to their own land from the Babylonian captivity, is called a saviour (Isa 44:24-45:8). Continuing that tradition of salvation and redemption, Jesus begins his ministry with his baptism in Jordan, opposite to Jericho (Jn 1:29), the same place where Joshua led the people into the new land of freedom and equality (Josh 3:16), where each could live in safety, under his vine and under his fig tree (1 Kings 4:25).

This ideal situation was shattered by human selfishness, leading to exile (Jer 16:1 Off.), and at the time of Jesus, making the Jews a nation of empty legalism and ritual purity, with little concern for the poor, the excluded ones and those suffering from injustices. It is in this context that Jesus enters the scene with the message of the arrival of the Kingdom.

Jesus’ ministry was centred on accepting the neighbour with his/her dignity and rights, and it is inbuilt into Christian discipleship. This was unfolded all through the ministry of Jesus Christ. Nowhere in the gospels do we come across Jesus saying that he has come to give his life as a ransom<sup>3</sup> for the humans to have the heaven opened up for them as presumed by many writers. On the contrary, in the face of the rigour of the religious leaders of the time, Jesus was a sympathizer and champion of freedom over regulations, human well-being over religious rigour and the scrupulous observance of rituals (Mk 2:23—3:5; 7:1-23; 9:33-37; 10:2-12, etc.).

When Zacchaeus, the tax collector, following Jesus’ teachings, had donated half of his property to the poor and restored fourfold any ill-gotten wealth, the Lord comments that salvation has come to him on that day (Lk 19:9). Jesus was still alive and the

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<sup>3</sup> Mk 10:45 is to be situated in the context of service to the neighbour rather than lording over others. The whole ministry of Jesus was focused on service and that led him to the cross (Mk 3:6; 11:18; 12:13, etc.)

salvation that he referred had to do with life on earth as well.

Jesus did create a new community to be sent out to continue his own work (Mk 3:14-15; Jn 20:21; Acts 1:7-8). The members of the community earned this out faithfully, by sharing their Kingdom experience with others (1 Jn 1:1-4). The mighty deeds and proclamation of Jesus were continued through the community of the disciples as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. That kingdom- ministry has to be continued through the Church at all times and everywhere. As the Syrophenician woman insisted (Mk 7:24- 30), the benefits of the divine reign must be made available to all, more so to the discarded ones of the modern human society. The Church has to be present in all cultures (Mt 28:19ff.).



**The community of the Divine Word  
Missionaries**

It is not a question of agonizing over the destiny of the non- Christians or bringing all into one's own Church to rocket them to an otherworldly salvation. It is a service whereby all humans, more so the excluded ones of the society can experience the benefits of the arrival of the divine reign - when all can feel accepted and respected, without the least denial of one's human rights, as children of God, the Abba of all. This is summarized in the only prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the Our Father.<sup>4</sup> The sending of the community of the disciples is to be situated in the context of Jesus' own ministry.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (London: Harpercollins, 2011).

All this call for a retrieval of the early Church's life and service. It was in no way a threat to the existing religions. In fact, the community of the disciples of Jesus became a separate religion only sometime after the Jewish Council of Jamnia, around 90 CE. What is to be emphasized is the quality of Christian life, a life of love and compassion, which can make others exclaim with wonder see how the Christians love one another and what makes them to do so! Christian lifestyle becomes a question mark leaving an impact on others. A Roman theologian of the time and a Church Father, Tertullian, refers to the Roman perception of the Christian community: "Look," they say, "how they love one another!"<sup>5</sup>

The Christian community has to return to the original mindset, leaving out the discourse of "mission" and its justification. Rather than missiologists and mission scholars, we need scripture scholars who study the Scripture, not primarily for teaching and writing about the Scripture, but to live it integrally today, attracting many more to that lifestyle. Christians will have to become 'letters of Jesus Christ' for all to read!

### **In Practice**

The Christian narrative, stories that we come across in the New Testament, must come alive and active through the service of the followers of Jesus Christ, without being troubled over the destiny of the followers of other religions. Instead, there can be collaboration with them to realize the divine reign in the contemporary times. Interreligious dialogue has to be a defining element of contemporary Christian service. Today, every Christian, more so the evangelist, must become the 'implied author' of the Gospel narrative for the contemporary society, by living it and proclaiming it relevantly so that he/she will serve as the salt, light and leaven to the society (Mt 5:13-15), and as members of a minority community (Lk 12:32), as was the case before the Constantinian era.

The contemporary Christian asks: what role

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *Apologia*, 39.7.

did the cultural, economic or religious context play for the earliest communities? This can serve as an example and an inspiration for the Christian community today for its life and service, rather than discussing how to justify inculturation, dialogue or liberation. This enables the community to be a dynamic presence from within every context, with a sense of identification and contestation. This would be very much similar to the existence of the St. Thomas Christian community in Kerala, before the arrival of the Portuguese, a presence from within, without being swallowed up by other religions as it happened to the early Christian communities of North Africa or swallowing up other religions as did the Christian communities in Europe!<sup>6</sup>

The Christian presence, while permeated with the spirit of dialogue and collaboration, does not abandon its service of prophetic critique of the society, especially when the rights of human persons are trampled upon. The gospels tell the world how Jesus was never compromising with regard to the dignity of the human person. Truly, a major portion of his ministry was the defence and promotion of the dignity of the humans, especially of the little ones, for Jesus was ever aware how “in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:10).

A vital expression of the Church’s contribution to the creation of an inclusive community is the changing faces of femininity in India, trying to establish its identity in the social, economic, cultural, political, and religious spheres. It is not a question of usurping power or place occupied by men, but women taking their right place as equals in the spirit of participation. The Church, following the spirit of Jesus who not only learned from a woman (Mk 7:24- 29), but was also anointed by a woman for his passion, death and resurrection (Jn 12:3-7), must take pro-active steps for an inclusive community of men and women in the life and

ministry of the Church.

Another area of the Church becoming an inclusive community and thereby serving the Indian community as the leaven is the Church’s attitude to caste discrimination, in the Church’s own identity and ministry. At every level of its existence this has to be positively reflected, especially in the choice of persons for leadership roles within the Church, anywhere in India. Such bold and generous steps will enhance the Church’s credibility to serve as the leaven of the Kingdom in the Indian society.

The prophetic character of the disciples of Jesus in India, will resist any expression of injustice in the Indian society, more so the denial of the basic human rights of any person. This is a fundamental expression of their service to their fellow men and women, more so the poor and the powerless, enabling them to regain their human rights and to live with dignity and in freedom.

In the same spirit, any dispute or matters of lifestyle and rite within the Church has to be seen and solved primarily from the perspective of the Church’s service to the Indian society, as the light of the Kingdom. When there is so much struggle and competition for power, possession and prestige in the society at large, the Church must make every effort, that every Christian, especially the priests, religious and bishops consciously avoid the temptation, following the example of the Lord in facing his messianic temptations of power, possession and prestige (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4: 1-13).

The suggestion to abolish the term ‘mission’ and the accompanying theology by no means implies the abandoning of the call to share with others the experience of the kingdom in Jesus, or to attract others to the community to continue that work. However, this is done mainly through a life of love, for “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). The very Incarnation, the central event of Christian experience, itself is the fruition of divine love: “because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

<sup>6</sup> There may not be a consensus regarding the extent of impact St. Thomas Christian community had on others.



His ministry was a manifestation of God's love for the world, for he came to manifest the Father as a human person (Jn 1:18; 12:45; 14:9).

Continuing that work of manifesting the Father and Father's love made present in Jesus Christ for the world is the service for which the community of his disciples are sent into the world. In Jesus Christ one experiences what God is like: God's love and compassion, God's forgiveness, God's acceptance of humans, more so of the marginalized ones. Jesus' upholding of the dignity of the human person, rather than the religious laws of purity and rituals, earned him the odium of the religious leaders of his time, who in collusion with the political power killed him, but God raised him and made him the Messiah, the Christ (cf. Mk 3:6; Act2:22-36).

It is a work of attraction, rather than an aggressive expansion. It leaves a deep impact on others. In contrast to the prejudiced assessment of the western mission theoreticians that Christian work in India has been a failure (due to the insignificant percentage of Christians in India), the Christian presence has indeed positively impacted Indian culture in different ways. Just to give an example, in the past, when a natural calamity like an earthquake, a plague, or flood occurred, it was the Christian community that came forward to help out the victims while the Indian society generally attributed it to 'karma' and did little about it. Today, on the contrary, in such instances, others are there to help the victims, even if it may be mixed with other motives, even before the Christians can reach.

Such an evangelical service is in keeping with the Asian value of harmony and complementarity. Christians can also learn many things from their neighbours of other faiths, even as Jesus was enriched by the words of the Syrophoenician woman (cf. Mk 7:24-29). Such an evangelical sharing and building bridges across religions can earn for us the good will of others, which is essential for ushering in the divine reign in today's world that no religion can accomplish all by

itself.

## Conclusion

We are living in an era of seismic changes affecting every aspect of life. This calls for radically reimagining Church's service to the world, always keeping with the Scripture and the practice of the early Church, even if it may imply leaving aside certain expressions and justifications developed in the course of history, and which are irrelevant for the contemporary times. This can enable the Church to be faithful to its call to be a transforming presence in every culture, calling for the involvement of every Christian for the realization of the divine reign as spelt out in the introductory sentence of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution of the Church, *Gadium et Spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (GS 1).

All this is beautifully capsuled in the very title of the latest encyclical of Pope Francis: *Fratelli Tutti*: All are brothers and sisters!

*The author <[jkavunkalsvd@gmail.com](mailto:jkavunkalsvd@gmail.com)> has published extensively on missiological topics and has taught Missiology at Jnana Deepa, Pune for over twenty years. He has been a visiting lecturer in the US, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. In this short article, the author argues for the retrieval of the early Church's understanding of its work as a service to the Kingdom of God, and describing it not as mission, but in terms of service, witnessing, being salt, light and leaven, etc., more so, in the Asian context of the perception of mission as an aggression on Asian religions.*

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