

# ***RAMSDEN SERMON***

## **In Defence of Mission**

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*The Ramsden Sermon Preached Before the University of Cambridge on Sunday 4th June 2006 in Great St Mary's Church by Dr Brian Stanley, Director of the Henry Martyn Centre for the Study of Mission and World Christianity, and Fellow of St Edmund's College.*

'Belief in a Divine mission', wrote Bertrand Russell in 1946 with characteristic pungency, 'is one of the many forms of certainty that have afflicted the human race.' [1] To imagine oneself or, even worse, one's nation, to be an appointed instrument of the divine will for the world was, to Russell's mind, a fatal delusion, to be ranked among what he termed 'Ideas that have harmed mankind'. To be certain about the truth, and hence about one's bounden duty to propagate it to the world was, Russell was quite certain (!), inimical to the liberal values of intellectual freedom, scientific progress and tolerance which he cherished, and hence, of course, wished to propagate to the world. Admittedly, Russell had a point. Ideas of manifest national destiny have been powerful engines for good or ill, but mostly for ill, throughout history. Nations shaped by Protestant Christianity, with its tendency to appropriate the Old Testament narrative of a divinely chosen people for purposes of national identity, have been particularly prone to this disease. The United States is the most obvious example. 'Some sense of religious mission is part of being American', as John Updike once neatly put it. [2] But Britons who are inclined to blame George Bush's neo-conservatism for the woes of the world would do well to remember that the concept of a redeemer nation was exported to the New World from the Old: the Puritans who sought to establish a godly commonwealth in seventeenth-century New England were shaped by the

legacy of the English Protestant nationalism of John Foxe or William Shakespeare. Godly America was called to take up the work which once-godly England had failed to accomplish, just as, in more recent times, American Christians have enthusiastically taken up the mantle of leadership in Christian mission which sat on British Christian shoulders before 1914. When linked to nationalism, confident missionary certainty is indeed a dangerous weapon which largely merits Russell's censure. But the idea of mission itself deserves to be rescued from the liberal anathemas which are regularly heaped upon it. The University Ordinances prescribe that the Ramsden Sermon is to be devoted to the subject of 'Church Extension overseas, especially within the Commonwealth of Nations.' There may be faint whiffs of nationalism lurking in the dark corners of that Ordinance: the Church that is being extended is almost certainly the Church *of England*; the term 'overseas' can suggest a bipartite view of the world as divided between Britain and the Rest; and some kind of added spiritual value appears to be attached to Christian mission within, as opposed to beyond, the boundaries of the former British empire. Be that as it may: the Ramsden Sermon was established to expound and defend an activity that runs plain counter to the norms of our pluralist and post-modern age - to express it in crude commercial terms, the export of Christianity from what was then European Christendom to peoples that did not have it before.

Why does our culture, along with many others today, react with such hostility to the idea of Christian mission, and is such hostility justified? Many answers to that question are possible, and today I must restrict myself to only two. The first and perhaps the most substantial reason for contemporary hostility to the idea of global Christian mission is the conviction that such a project is inextricably tied to processes of domination, and usually domination by the West is in mind. Hasn't mission always been linked to empire? Has Christianity not functioned as the ideological justification for structures of imperial exploitation that we all now rise up and condemn with united voice? This is a sermon and not a history lecture, so I must restrain my instincts as an historian on this occasion. But suffice to say that imperialism was, and is, far too complex a phenomenon to fit simplistic conspiracy theories of the

relationship of religion and power. Missionaries, for all their many faults, were usually to be found on the side of indigenous peoples, defending their interests against slave-owners, land-hungry settlers, and traders. For that very reason they frequently appealed to the forces of imperial law and order to intervene on behalf of the oppressed. They were imperialists of a paternalistic kind precisely because they were humanitarians. But missionaries rarely enjoyed the dubious benefit of direct access to power. When operating within the structures of empire, they were often the social misfits of the colonial establishment. When working outside the boundaries of European rule, as many of them in the nineteenth century did, they were people of extraordinary vulnerability, culturally isolated and linguistically challenged. One of the most delightful Spoonerisms attributed to the Revd William Archibald Spooner of New College, Oxford, tells of Spooner walking with a friend in Oxford and meeting a woman dressed in black, to whom he lifted his hat. When she had passed, Spooner turned to his friend and said, 'Poor soul, very sad; her late husband, you know, a very sad death - eaten by missionaries - poor soul!' .[3]

We find that unfortunate conceptual transposition of missionaries and cannibals so amusing because it appeals to a quaint mythology that has lodged itself within the British national memory and links hapless missionaries, usually sporting pith helmets, with voracious cannibals. In fact cannibalism was extremely rare outside of certain locations in the Pacific and very few missionaries ended up in the cooking pot, but the fact that we still crack jokes and draw cartoons about missionaries and cannibals is of some significance. What has remained uppermost in the cultural memory of the West is not the power of missionaries but a graphic symbol of their helplessness, their complete dependence on the hospitality or rejection of those to whom they went.

Today is, of course, Whitsunday, when Christians celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at the Feast of Pentecost. In Luke's account, this extraordinary event marks the beginning of the world mission of the Church. All those gathered in Jerusalem on that occasion were Jews either by birth or by adoption as proselytes. The list of locations from which they came is a catalogue of the geography of the dispersion of the Jewish nation from Persia

and Iraq in the east to Rome in the west. For Luke, this geographical miscellany of the first hearers of the Christian message anticipates the imminent second dispersion of the expanded people of God. The integrating theme of the Acts of the Apostles is the role of the Holy Spirit in initiating a new dispersal of God's chosen people, as believers in Jesus radiate outwards from Palestine, first southwards into Africa through the so-called 'Ethiopian' eunuch (who probably hailed from the Sudan), then northwards into the western fringes of Asia, and finally westwards to the heart of the Roman Empire. But even the list of dispersed Jews which we find in Acts 2 encompasses great linguistic and cultural diversity. The significance of the gift of tongues at Pentecost is that each of these cultural and ethnic groups who heard the apostles' message about God's mighty deeds in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus heard that message simultaneously in their own language. From the very beginning, therefore, Christian mission has been about the simultaneous translation of the one word about Jesus Christ into the plural accents, cadences, and intellectual categories of indigenous cultures. Even if we believe that the Gospels are an authentic record of the words of Jesus, they are, of course, a translation into Greek from the Aramaic which he spoke. In Christianity, in contrast to Islam, there is no holy language: the eternal word of God can take flesh in every language, and hence in principle in every culture, in every world-view.

That is why the charge of the inseparability of Christian mission and domination ultimately fails. It is not accidental that historians of the encounters between indigenous peoples and Christian missionaries have in recent years become fascinated with the cultural implications of the vernacularization of the Christian message. As Old and New Testaments were translated into the indigenous languages of the non-European world, those languages acquired new cultural and even political significance. Frequently missionaries were the first to render them in written form, and to compile grammars and dictionaries. Local indigenous terms and religious concepts had to be employed to convey universal Christian truth. Hearers and readers of the biblical narratives began to interpret their own communal stories in the light of the biblical stories, particularly the Old Testament story of God's election of a small and despised

people and their redemption by his grace from captivity in Egypt or Babylon. The Bible has far more often been a vehicle of liberation than one of domination.

The second answer to the question of why the notion of Christian mission arouses such opposition and derision in contemporary culture is, as Bertrand Russell recognized, epistemological: it derives from the bare-faced Christian claim to be in receipt of revealed truth about God. Whereas I have argued that the alleged nexus between Christianity and domination is largely spurious, I believe that Christians should be proud to plead guilty to this second charge. The four gospel writers in their different ways all record some form of commission by the risen Christ, instructing his followers on his authority to teach and make baptised disciples of all nations, that is from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. This is the mother of all meta-narratives, universal in its geographical and historical scope, astonishingly bold in its pretensions. Christians in our post-modern intellectual climate should not be ashamed of it or try to disguise this grand meta-narrative as something other than it is. We have been too easily persuaded by the cultural relativism of our age that truth is both unknowable and inescapably hegemonic in character. Christian history began on the Day of Pentecost with a staggering claim by the apostle Peter that the man from Nazareth, Jesus, had been raised from the dead and exalted to a position of unique authority at the right hand of Yahweh, the one and only God at the heart of Jewish belief. The apostolic preaching in the book of Acts returns again and again to the historical reality of the resurrection as the ground of the appeal to all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, to turn in repentance to the God of Israel.

The Christian claim that Jesus Christ embodies the fullness of divine truth and hence the only hope for humanity is not to be enforced or proven: it can only be commended to others in 'bold humility'. [4]The lordship of Jesus that forms the centre of Christian faith was not a lordship of domination, but one of profound self-abnegation and absolute renunciation of all terrestrial power, culminating in the total human weakness of the Cross, where Jesus himself entered the cooking pot, as it were, for us. Christian truth claims derive from a condition of divine powerlessness, and therefore do not carry any logical

implication of intolerance towards those of other faiths, though the Church has too often claimed the power on which the exercise of intolerance depends. Religious toleration is reduced to a cheap and ultimately meaningless commodity if we hold that all religious and philosophical claims are equally valid. Christians, who maintain that on the contrary questions of truth and faith really do matter, have the most secure basis for insisting that no claim to religious knowledge should be suppressed or ridiculed.

Walter Mead, an historian of American foreign policy, has said this about the role of Christian missions in shaping the ideas of internationalism that became influential after the First World War: 'The very concept of a global civil society comes to us out of the missionary movement; apart from a handful of isolated intellectuals, no one before the missionaries ever thought that the world's cultures and societies had or could have enough in common to make a common global society feasible or desirable. Certainly before the missionaries no large group of people set out to build such a world.' [5]

The Christian internationalism that was rooted in the missionary enterprise and came to full flower in the ecumenical movement was not exempt from starry-eyed unrealism. But at its best it was fuelled by a conviction that the Church is called to be a sign of God's redemptive purpose for a divided humanity. Today's world exhibits the ugly paradox of growing interconnectedness through processes of economic and technological globalization, yet at the same time dangerously sharpening polarizations between rich and poor, liberal and fundamentalist. Christians believe that the hope of a humanity at peace with itself does not lie simply in the endless repetition of calls for greater tolerance and mutual respect, important though these attitudes are. The multicultural assembly that responded to the preaching of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost is seen by the New Testament as the first fruits of a new and richly variegated humanity united in common submission to the gracious lordship of Christ. It is a microcosm of what God created all humankind to be, and a foreshadowing of the perfect justice and harmony that will characterize the new cosmic order which he will inaugurate at the end of time. The task of bearing humble witness to this ultimate of all realities is entrusted to all who have received the Spirit given at

Pentecost. It is a commission, not to dominate the world, but to serve it, not to divide the world, but to unite it, not to extinguish human freedom but to invite all women and men to find in Christ that fullness of life for which they were created. Amen.

**Notes:**

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i[1] Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays (1950)*, new edn. edited by Kirk Willis (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 176.

i[2] Interview in *New York Review of Books*, 29 Feb. 1996.

i[3] William Hayter, *Spooner: A Biography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1977), p. 140.

i[4] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 489.

i[5] Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 146.