

WELCOMING LECTURE

Christian Mission and the Unity of Humanity

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I

I begin with a quotation from that remarkable figure in the history of modern missions and ecumenism, J. H. Oldham:

The Church must stand for something in the world's eyes, or it will be swept aside as meaningless. It is committed to the principle that in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free. On the Christian view the moral issues of sin, redemption, grace, service, brotherhood [we might add 'sisterhood'] are so tremendous that natural differences lose their significance. The body of Christ is one. All partake of the one bread. Take away this unity in Christ and the heart falls out of Christianity. [1]

The foundation of Christian mission is the affirmation that God so loved the world of humanity - in its diversity and its entirety - that he gave of his very own being in the person of his Son in order that this humanity - in its diversity and its entirety - might through participation in the gift of the Holy Spirit enter into that fullness of inextinguishable being which is God's creative purpose for women and men. All human beings without differentiation are the object of God's love, and all are called to respond to his gracious invitation to become part of that new humanity whose beginning and end is Jesus Christ.

Christianity is universal in scope or it is nothing, and it is egalitarian in nature or it is nothing. All humanity stands on an equal footing before God: all alike are created in his image; all alike have fallen short of that image and hence fall equally under the judgment of his righteousness; all alike are the objects of God's atoning work in Christ; and all alike are called to participate in that divine purpose of gathering up all things in Christ at the end of time.

Christianity thus affirms a unity of all human beings which is unambiguous and unqualified. But it also, of course, speaks of their need of redemption, as does the passage from Oldham, albeit only in passing. There is a deep fissure within humanity between those who have turned towards God's love in Christ and confessed Christ as Lord - and those who have not yet done so. The fissure is not a permanent fault line, for it is in constant motion as the good news of Christ is proclaimed and received, but it is a deep fissure nonetheless. Those Pauline epistles which proclaim in the loftiest and most universal language God's purpose of summing up all things in Christ also speak in unambiguous terms of Christians as those who by divine grace (even electing grace) have been rescued from a state of alienation, of spiritual death or non-being in sin, and made alive with Christ in a resurrection to salvation. Thus the same New Testament which affirms the oneness of all persons before God also contains stark antitheses between the children of light and the children of darkness, between the narrow gate and the wide gate, between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. Jesus himself spoke of his coming as a force that would bring division and not peace, setting sons against fathers and daughters against mothers. [2]

Christian theology in general and mission theology in particular must live with this inescapable tension between universality and polarity. The present age is one which finds the message of universality a lot more congenial than the message of polarity, but this has not been so of all generations of Christian history. For much of history, the church has been rather good at remembering polarity but much less comfortable with universality. It is not, however, simply a matter of holding grimly on to the two ends of an awkward paradox as if they had no relationship to one another. If the church dilutes one of these two emphases, it will inevitably find itself - even if unconsciously - distorting the other in the process. Thus many Christians in the past (both Catholic and Protestant) tended to relegate large sections of humanity to an inferior status of being, as 'pagans' or 'heathens', those living beyond the limits not simply of European civilization but also of the ordinary operations of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, they thought of themselves as having been born and baptised into a privileged sphere which was both territorial and sacral - the sphere of

'Christendom' - and hence as having in some sense first claim on God's grace. In so doing, of course, they evacuated the notion of grace of its essential content. Our current danger, as I shall argue in the final part of this lecture, lies in the opposite direction. If we fight shy of the hard sayings of both gospels and epistles about the need for all human beings to turn towards Christ as Lord, we may find, contrary to our most deeply held inclinations, that the basis for affirming the unity of humanity is no longer so secure as we imagined.

Christian mission has essentially to do with the crossing of frontiers in the name of Christ and his kingdom and in the power of the Spirit. That definition may be criticised as being unduly restrictive, but it can be defended if the frontiers are understood as not necessarily being geographical or cultural; they may equally be economic, or social, or political. Wherever Christians in the power of the Spirit seek to advance the claims of the kingdom of Christ and challenge all that resists his gracious rule, frontiers are being crossed, and there is mission. It remains the case, however, that the periods in which the questions about the relationship of universality and polarity in Christian anthropology have been posed most sharply for the church have been those periods in which the geographical and cultural frontiers of Christian experience have been shifting most rapidly. It may not surprise you that as a historian I intend to illustrate that generalisation first by a number of examples from the history of Christian mission, and then by reference to missiological debates in our own day.

II

In the spring of 1514, in the early days of the Spanish conquest of central America, a young Dominican priest in what is now Cuba was preparing a sermon. His name was Bartolomé de Las Casas. The text he was studying was Ecclesiasticus 34: 21-2: 'The bread of the needy is their life; he that defraudeth him thereof is a man of blood. He that taketh away his neighbour's living slayeth him, and he that defraudeth the labourer of his hire is a bloodshedder.' [3] The text convicted Las Casas deeply. Although a missionary priest, he was also in effect a slave-holding landowner, having

been rewarded by the Spanish crown with the grant of a large landholding or *encomienda*, being entrusted with a population of 'Indians' from whom he was able to extract labour for the most nominal of wages. Persuaded that he had indeed been defrauding the labourer of his hire, Las Casas not simply renounced his own *encomienda*, but returned to Spain and began a fearless campaign against the whole system whereby the conquistadors were exploiting Indian labour and waging wars against the Indians in the name of Christ. He did not, we should note, cease to believe that the Indians were the proper objects of Christian evangelism. Indeed, he concluded his forthright tract, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542), with the assertion that he had written the work 'in order to help ensure that the teeming millions in the New World, for whose sins Christ gave His life, do not continue to die in ignorance, but rather are brought to knowledge of God and thereby saved.' [4] Neither did he condemn the fact of Spanish rule of the New World. For the rest of his long life he continued to believe as a good Catholic that the right of sovereignty in the Americas had been legitimately bestowed by the papacy on the Spanish Crown. What he did now dispute was that the right of legal and ecclesiastical sovereignty bestowed the right to treat Indians as mere goods or chattels. There was no people on earth, no matter how barbarous their apparent condition, who could be denied the dignity of human status and an eternal destiny within the family of God.

In the famous theological 'debate' with Juan de Sepúlveda, at Valladolid in 1550, Las Casas set out to demolish the contention of Sepúlveda - who, it should be noted, is remembered as a Christian humanist - that the Indians were an example of those whom Aristotle had branded as 'natural slaves', not fit to be accorded the full dignity of human beings. He did so by citing one greater even than Aristotle: 'Let us send Aristotle packing, for we have in our favour the command of Christ: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".' [5] By treating Indians as less than human, Spaniards had unconsciously made themselves less than human. They had fulfilled in their own behaviour the awful description of the reprobate given by the apostle Paul in Romans 1: they had 'become so anaesthetized to human suffering by their own greed and ambition that they had ceased to be men in any meaningful sense of the term

and had become, by dint of their own wicked deeds, so totally degenerate and given over to a reprobate mind. [6] By their failure to treat the Indians as human beings, the conquistadors had dehumanized and de-Christianized themselves, becoming like barbarians or savages. Thus Christians had behaved as 'devils in human form', and a conquista which had originated as an extension of the crusading reconquista to liberate southern Spain from the grip of Islam, had become a fearful obstacle to the cause of Christian mission. [7]

We might wish to conclude that any missionary venture that was so thoroughly imbued with the assumptions of conquest was deeply flawed from the outset, but what I wish to emphasise is the indissoluble connection that Las Casas came to perceive between the imperatives of evangelization and justice. Because they were fully human, Indians needed to be treated with justice. Equally, because they were fully human, they needed to hear the gospel of salvation. By its denial of the universality of humanity, so-called Christendom was preventing those beyond its frontiers from hearing the good news of Christ. Though Las Casas still believed that Indians who remained unbaptised went to hell, his language had in effect inverted the biblical polarity between believers and unbelievers: it was the former who were acting like 'ravens' and the latter as gentle lambs. [8] Denial of universality had destroyed the gospel of grace.

III

Over two centuries after Las Casas's debate with Sepúlveda, in 1788, an anonymous pamphlet was published in this city. Its title was *Am I not a Man? And a Brother? With all Humility Addressed to the British Legislature*. Its author, almost certainly, was Peter Peckard, Master of Magdalene College since 1781, rationalist clergyman, a pluralist benefice-holder several times over, and yet justly celebrated as one of the pioneers of the campaign against the slave trade on the basis of an unswerving belief in human rights. [9] The question 'Am I not a man and a brother?' was to become the catch-phrase of the Christian campaign against the slave trade. Peckard's tract was a polemic against the 'opinion now industriously propagated ... that the native

inhabitants of Africa are not of the Human Species' without any notions of civil government, moral distinctions, or religion. The advocates of the slave trade claimed that 'neither Religion, Morality, nor Humanity is concerned in transactions with Beings that are not of the Human race.' [10] Peckard set out, on the basis of the slender knowledge of West Africa then available to Britons, to establish that African societies did indeed possess capacities for civil government, moral thinking, and religion, and hence to conclude that, 'as Men', Africans possessed an 'absolute Right to Life, to Limb, to Property, and to Liberty'. [11] In support of his case, Peckard cited Las Casas. [12] Peckard himself was no evangelical, but many of his fellows and undergraduates were. Even before his arrival at Magdalene, the college had developed a reputation for vital and intensely sober religion, to the extent that the Cam below Magdalene Bridge was said to be unnavigable because of the accumulation of discarded tea leaves. [13] Under his Mastership, the college became something of a vicar factory, and one which rivalled St John's or Queens' in the extent of its production of evangelical Anglicans for the export market. His students included: David Brown and Thomas Thomason, who went to Bengal as East India Company chaplains, and became two of the most active supporters of early evangelical missions there; and Samuel Marsden, chaplain to the New South Wales colony, adviser to the early London Missionary Society mission to Tahiti, architect of the Church Missionary Society's New Zealand mission, and, incidentally, the man who pioneered sheep-farming in Australia. [14]

It is hard to ascertain whether Peckard influenced his students or they influenced him (doubtless both are true), but what is striking about this decidedly heterodox churchman is the intensity of his commitment to the right of non-western people, not simply to liberty, but also to hear the gospel of Christ. In a sermon, *The Neglect of a known Duty is Sin*, preached before the University of Cambridge on 31 January 1790, Peckard insisted that the gospel was addressed to 'the Whole Race of Mankind'. God appointed Christ to be 'the Saviour of the Whole World ... He was anointed to publish glad tidings, to heal the broken hearted, to give liberty to the captives, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burthens, to let the oppressed go free, to

break every yoke, and thus proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'. [15] Two years previously, in *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, Peckard had had the nerve to attack the venerable Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for its failure to make any serious effort to convert Africans to Christianity. That failure was again due, he suggested, to a supposition that Africans were not really of the human race and hence incapable of religious ideas - a sentiment which Peckard claimed to have heard from the lips of more than one representative of the Society. [16] The SPG should not be damned on such hearsay evidence, but it is indeed the case both that the Society proved generally resistant to the gathering swell of Christian opinion in the late eighteenth century against slavery, and that it did not view the evangelisation of West Africa as in any way a pressing concern. The Society's (and hence the Church of England's) first missionary to Africa, Thomas Thompson, had published a book after his return from the Gold Coast to England in 1756, entitled *The African Slave Trade for Negro Slaves Shewn to be Consistent with Principles of Humanity and of Revealed Religion*. [17]

It was thus still possible in the mid-eighteenth century for someone, such as Thompson, to be both committed to Christian missions and a supporter, not simply of slavery, but even of the slave trade. There are some parallels in the early evangelical movement. George Whitefield regarded slaves as essential to the operation of his Bethesda orphanage in Georgia, and left the Countess of Huntingdon some fifty of the slaves in his will. I am sorry to have to confess in this particular building that 'the Elect Lady' then proceeded to purchase still more for Bethesda, and, when challenged in 1774 by the Philadelphia Quaker, Anthony Benezet, replied that it is 'God alone, by his Almighty power, who can and will in his own time bring outward, as well as spiritual deliverance'. [18] Thomas Haweis, chaplain to the Countess and a founding father of the London Missionary Society, acquired very substantial slave interests in the Caribbean through his second marriage in 1788 to Janetta Orton, and retained these for many years. [19]

Conversely, but less strange in our eyes, it was possible for Christians in late eighteenth-century England to be passionately committed to anti-slavery and yet lukewarm about missions. John Wesley is the classic example. Contrary

to popular conception, fuelled by a misunderstanding of his slogan 'The world is my parish', Wesley in fact proved singularly unenthusiastic about the idea of diverting Methodist preachers and Methodist funds to the West or East Indies, and consistently opposed the attempts of his lieutenant, Thomas Coke, to establish a Methodist Society for Missions to the Heathen. Yet Wesley preached sermons, such as that on 'The General Spread of the Gospel' (1783), which rejoiced in the prospect of the fulfilment of the biblical promises of the whole earth being filled with the knowledge of the Lord. The apparent contradiction finds resolution in the fact that, for Wesley, the spread of the kingdom of God was a strictly sequential process, beginning with the restoration of primitive Christianity in the heart of western Christendom, namely Oxford. 'From Oxford, where it first appeared, the little leaven' of 'pure and undefiled religion', could be observed spreading outwards, to northern England, Ireland, Holland, and North America. The next step, supposed Wesley, would be for it to spread to Roman Catholics in countries of Protestant or mixed faith; from there it would pass to countries 'merely popish'. 'And may it not be gradually diffused from thence to all that name the name of Christ in the various provinces of Turkey, in Abyssinia, yea, and in the remotest parts, not only of Europe, but of Asia, Africa, and America?' Then, and only then, would the 'Mahometans' and 'heathen' be convicted by the power of a revived primitive Christianity and be drawn to Christ. [20] Overseas missions must not be allowed to pre-empt the divine schedule for the renewal of the Church.

Wesley was swimming against a gathering tide. The story of evangelicalism from the 1790s is in fact one of parallel expansion in home and foreign missions: the diffusion of true godliness within Christendom was to proceed hand in hand with the propagation of the gospel beyond its boundaries. Equally strong was the connection between missionary enthusiasm and a defence of the interests of indigenous people against exploitation by slave-traders, merchants or white settlers. Protestant missions were born in the age of the Enlightenment, which combined an insistence on the essential unity of all human beings with an enhanced awareness of the radical otherness of

non-western societies from European ideals of civilisation. Thus one of the sermons which gave rise to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, preached by John Sutcliff to the Northamptonshire Baptist Association in 1791, insisted that the Christian duty of benevolence to one's neighbour could not be confined to the person next door, but must extend to any representative of the human race:

Let him be an ignorant Negro, dwelling in the unexplored regions of Africa; or an untutored Savage, wandering in the inhospitable forests of America; he is your fellow creature; he is your neighbour; he is your brother. He has a Soul, - a Soul that will exist for ever. [21]

Our ears are so finely attuned to the dangers of racism that we are likely to take immediate offence at the phrases 'ignorant Negro' and 'untutored Savage', not to mention the assumption of male gender, and hence fail to appreciate how radical and politically subversive was the strengthening evangelical insistence on the common humanity that bridged the gulf between Christendom and the societies that were being opened up to its gaze. It was this insistence that was the theoretical foundation of all Christian challenges to the operation of imperialism from Sutcliff's day down to J. H. Oldham in the 1920s with his campaign against forced labour in East Africa. It was equally the foundation of the missionary protest in India against the inequalities of the caste system, and is the reason why Christianity in India has proved so attractive to many of the oppressed Dalit population.

Yet, of course, this is only one side of the story. Very few participants in the western missionary movement were able to shed the legacy of European Christian history to the extent that they abandoned the notion of Christendom. For almost all of them, Christian mission in its global context was about the dispatching of missions across a geographical frontier from Christendom to heathendom. It was thus all too easy, fatally easy, to permit the geographical and cultural division between so-called Christian and non-Christian societies to approximate to the New Testament division between the redeemed and the unregenerate. That approximation was a matter, not of conscious theological affirmation, but rather of unacknowledged assumption, revealed, for example, in the frequent use of the language of Romans chapter 1, verses 18 to 32, to

describe the religious and moral condition of non-western societies. [22] It is also the case that the approximation was much closer in the period from about 1860 to 1918 than it was either earlier or later. In the early nineteenth century, evangelical Christians in Britain, Europe, and North America were too acutely aware of the missionary task that still confronted them at home to accept a purely spatial definition of heathendom, and, in the wake of the First World War, similar concerns began to re-emerge, but now phrased in terms of the menace of secularism. In the intervening years, however, missionaries and Christians as a whole succumbed more regularly and completely to the allure of various forms of racist and colonial discourse. Why and how they did so we cannot explore on this occasion. What is important for our purposes is to note how profound, enduring, and deleterious has been the impact of this confusion on Christian thinking on the subject of mission. I turn now to an illustration of the effect of such confusion during the heyday of its influence: to the rightly famous World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910.

IV

What we remember as the World Missionary Conference of 1910 was originally planned as, and entitled 'The Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference'. It followed two even larger but now virtually forgotten conferences in London in 1888 and New York in 1900. The Edinburgh conference, like its predecessors in London and New York, was to be designated as 'Ecumenical' in the original sense of the word that it would include the whole human race in its scope. It was to be concerned, according to the first major planning paper drafted in December 1907, with 'the missionary future of the world'. [23] Unlike its two predecessors, the 1910 conference was to be, not an inspirational jamboree for mission enthusiasts, but a serious consultative gathering of experts, proceeding on the basis of detailed reports prepared in advance by appointed study commissions. The first of those commissions was originally given the title 'Carrying the Gospel to all the World'. [24] In September 1908 it was decided that the title of the conference be changed to 'The World Missionary Conference' in order to avoid any misunderstanding arising from the fact that 'the word "Ecumenical"

has acquired a technical meaning' - in other words, its modern meaning, associated, ironically, with the very movement for church unity to which Edinburgh gave birth. [25]

Formally, therefore, Edinburgh 1910 might appear to have been originally concerned to discuss how the good news of Jesus Christ could be more effectively proclaimed to the whole world, to humanity in its entirety. If such had been substantially the case, it could hardly be faulted on theological grounds. In reality, however, the scope of the conference was implicitly limited from the outset by a decision that representation at the conference was to be on a financial basis and confined to 'Societies and Boards administering funds and sending out missionaries for the propagation of the Gospel among non-Christian peoples'. In the case of societies which worked in part in 'professedly Christian countries', only that portion of their income 'expended on work among non-Christians' could be counted. [26] The first (American) meeting of Commission I, supposedly entrusted with the topic 'Carrying the Gospel to all the World', accordingly took a decision to exclude from its statistical analysis 'missionary work carried on on the Continent of Europe, with the exception of the Turkish Empire and southeastern Europe'. The meeting considered the possibility of excluding all missions in Catholic and Orthodox countries, but rejected the idea, ostensibly on the grounds of 'practical difficulty', though one suspects more substantial reasons for the American decision. [27] It is important to note that even before the question of the geographical scope of the conference became a bone of contention between Anglo-Catholics and evangelical Protestants, the principle had been conceded by all, including the Americans, that most of Europe (and also, implicitly, North America itself) should be excluded from its purview as being 'Christian' lands. In practice, therefore, it had been decided that the conference was not in fact about world mission but rather about mission from 'Christendom' to 'heathendom'. There was no dispute that the two could be differentiated on a territorial basis: the only issue was where to draw the boundaries.

In February 1909 J. H. Oldham as secretary of the conference found himself on the receiving end of an episcopal onslaught from Charles Gore of

Birmingham, Edward Talbot of Southwark, and H. H. Montgomery of the SPG in protest against the American intention to include in the conference statistics of Protestant missions working in Catholic or Orthodox territory. Unless such an intention were revoked, it was clear that all Anglo-Catholic participation in the conference would be forfeited, and Oldham's hopes that this conference, unlike its forbears in 1888 and 1900, could claim the full endorsement of the Church of England, would be dashed. [28] The nub of the issue was whether the (mainly North American) Protestant missions in Latin America were to be included or not. Oldham warned John Mott that, 'if the leading men in the Church of England were to withdraw, the whole attitude of the Press and of the general public in this country toward the Conference would be altered. The blow would be a very serious one indeed'. [29] Ultimately, however, there was little doubt that the Anglo-Catholic case would prevail, because, if Europe and North America were deemed to be within Christendom and hence beyond the scope of mission, how could the same status logically be denied to Latin America? As Oldham commented to Mott, 'If you admit work among the Roman Catholics in South America why should we exclude such work in papal Europe?' [30]

Under pressure from Oldham, who made a special journey to New York for the purpose, the Americans caved in and the crucial support of the leaders of Anglo-Catholicism was retained. On the suggestion of the Americans, the title of Commission I was changed to 'Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World'. A sub-title was added to the conference as a whole: 'to consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World'. [31] Latin America was excluded from the scope of the conference, with the exception of missions among the aboriginal tribes and 'non-Christian immigrants'. In the cases of the Turkish empire, Persia, and Egypt, the British section of Commission I reached a compromise that defies logic. All statistics of Protestant church membership were omitted, on the grounds that these Christians were primarily proselytes from the ancient Oriental or Orthodox churches. However, 'in view of the direct bearing of the work in these countries upon the Mohammedan population', statistics of the missionaries who were working towards making such converts from the ancient churches

were included, 'as indicating the agencies and forces which are influencing, and in a measure are directed to effect the ultimate conversion of the non-Christian populations'. [32] One wonders whether such illogic was not a sop to the Americans, who, having had one of their areas of missionary predominance swept from the agenda by the British, might well have jibbed at seeing another such region - the Near East - disappear altogether as well. From the standpoint of present-day ecumenical orthodoxy, the outcome was highly desirable. Protestant proselytism of Roman Catholics, and, rather less clearly of Orthodox, had been implicitly declared to be no valid part of Christian mission. In fact all had accepted from the beginning that only mission funds expended on work among non-Christians should be counted in the determination of representation. The real division was between those who defined Christian identity primarily in terms of an act of personal commitment to Christ and those who thought in terms of belonging by territorial and baptismal affiliation to the church catholic. Yet many of the former, as befitted the offspring of pietism and the eighteenth-century evangelical revivals, were themselves ambivalent about the acceptability of the notion of Christendom: in practice, they willingly accepted the notion in relation to the supposedly godly commonwealths of Protestant Europe or North America; tacitly accepted it even in relation to Catholic Europe; and then found as a result that they had no option but to extend the boundaries of Christendom to Latin America. The principle of the unity of Christendom had been preserved, but at the price of a crudely geographical division of humanity into two. The gulf in western Christian thinking between territorial Christendom and the so-called 'non-Christian world' was now wider than ever. It is no wonder that at least one of the seventeen Christians from that 'non-Christian world' who assembled at Edinburgh in June 1910 in the company of some 1200 western delegates found it a not entirely happy experience. The address by the young Indian priest, V. S. Azariah, on 'The Problem of Co-operation between Foreign and Native Workers' has become justly celebrated. Azariah complained of 'a certain aloofness, a lack of mutual understanding and openness, a great lack of frank intercourse and friendliness' between European missionaries and national Christians, citing examples of experienced Indian missionaries who

had never once been invited to share a meal with any of their European brethren. He insisted that 'friendship is more than condescending love' and argued that no substantial change would be possible unless the dependent financial relationship which bound Indian workers to missionaries as servants to their masters were severed. He concluded with a searching application of the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:

Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS! [33]

Azariah's address made many of his audience 'very angry'. Some pressed for 'something in the nature of a public protest' or, at least an explanation that would reassure the faithful that reality on the mission field was not as this unknown Indian had suggested. [34] Azariah had discovered, like many others, that Christian professions of the unity of redeemed humanity were too often belied by the realities of Christian behaviour. Himself a missionary in India of uncommon gifts and effectiveness, he was denied that status at Edinburgh because he stood on the wrong side of a division between the Christian and the non-Christian world that had come to be defined in territorial and hence racial terms. If the acid test of Christian fellowship is the capacity to receive in humility an uncomfortable truth spoken in love by a fellow Christian, then Edinburgh 1910 must be judged to have failed that test of ecumenicity.

Ninety-one years on from the Edinburgh conference, the church views these issues very differently. Missions conducted by Christians from the non-western world now dwarf the missionary endeavours of the western churches in both scale and significance. Christian profession in Europe and much of North America has receded, at the same time as it has exploded in Africa, Oceania, and parts of Asia. Over 60 percent of all the world's Christians now live in the so-called Third World. The old territorial division between the Christian and non-Christian worlds no longer corresponds with statistical reality, nor, in the aftermath of the end of the western colonial empires, does it

possess moral acceptability. The polarities between (white) Christian and (non-white) non-Christian populations so engrained in western Christian discourse in 1910 have been consigned to the dustbin of history. No Christian theology of mission deserves a hearing today unless it is explicitly committed to the unity of humanity and to the multi-directionality of mission.

Yet it is appropriate to issue certain caveats here. It is important, first, to stress how deep and enduring were attitudes which fatally compromised the witness of the church by their implicit or explicit acceptance of a racial division between the agents of mission sent from within Christendom to the recipients of mission located without it. Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) under white settler rule can serve as an example. In 1962 the basic wage of an African priest in the Anglican diocese of Mashonaland was £150: that of a European missionary priest was £330. The problem was not peculiar to the Anglican Church, even though it was distinctively the church of the white settler population. As late as 1976 Methodist ministers in Zimbabwe earned less than one-fifth of their white missionary counterparts. In the short term, such disparities could be overcome only by reducing white stipends to African levels, a prospect too drastic to be contemplated; African congregations simply could not afford to support their clergy at the levels paid to whites. [35] There is plentiful evidence to suggest that much popular understanding of mission in the western churches even now remains imprisoned within a mental framework constructed around the opposition between a white Christian West and the 'heathen' mission fields overseas.

Even more fundamental, it is necessary to reflect, in the second place, on the theological implications of what has happened to the mainstream Christian understanding of mission in recent decades. In response to the distortion of the Christian understanding of humanity represented by what might be termed the 'racialization' of redemption, mainstream theological thinking in both Protestant and Catholic traditions has in the last forty years come to place more and more emphasis on the unity of humanity as the central theological principle that should animate Christian mission. The radical shift that took place during the 1960s from a church-centred to a world-centred approach to

mission, which drew particularly on J. C. Hoekendijk's missiology of the kingdom in confrontation with the world, can be understood as a reaction against the racial and colonial implications of the fatal merger between church and Christendom. Hoekendijk's *The Church Inside Out* (1964) was in part a protest, grounded firmly in biblical theology, against the current tendency to divide the one apostolic task of mission to the world into two spheres - that of 'evangelism', conducted within the political-linguistic frontiers of Christendom, and 'missions', conducted beyond those frontiers. [36] After a century in which the increasingly sophisticated human structures of western missionary organization had dominated the scene, the *Missio Dei* now resumed centre stage. This was long overdue, but in the markedly secular climate of the 1960s and 1970s, humanization became the central objective and motif of mission, and the sending of missionaries across the territorial boundary separating the old Christendom from the old heathendom now appeared at best a marginal activity and at worst a perpetuation of colonialism.

In order to repudiate the ideology of western Christendom it now seemed to many theologians necessary to go one step further and question the legitimacy of the call to conversion to Christianity itself. Thus the leading Indian Protestant theologian Stanley Samartha affirmed in 1981: 'If it is recognized that real conversion is not from one religion to another but from unbelief to God, and that "mission" is not the church's work but God's, then the implications of this in the context of religious pluralism must be more openly acknowledged.' [37] More recently, Samartha has made the point still more explicitly: 'In a religiously plural world the mission of the church is not to make other people Christian but to invite people to enter the Kingdom of God'. [38] In fairness to Samartha, it should be noted that he goes on to explain that the kingdom is present wherever people are being transformed by Jesus Christ, showing 'the marks of love and self-sacrifice in their commitment of human liberation', even if for many in countries such as India, such transformation does not lead to baptised membership of the institutional church. [39] According to Samartha, Christ's call to conversion as a turning towards God stands; what it need not imply is conversion to Christianity. [40]

The problem about the position advocated by Samartha and many others today is four-fold. First, it implies that there is something new about the contemporary context of religious pluralism, or, more accurately, plurality. In fact, religious plurality is as old as humanity itself, and the church has always had to define its mission in relation to a plural religious context. What is new - distinctively post-colonial and indeed post-modern - is the way in which much Christian theology has responded to its intensified awareness of the plurality of religions with an ideology of religious pluralism. It is in fact powerful testimony to the persistent hold of Christendom perspectives that it can be so widely accepted today that there is something new about the multiplicity of religious perspectives: it appears novel only because too much of the church for too long chose to ignore the world that lay beyond the frontiers of Christian society. To cite the fact of religious plurality as a reason for abandoning the call to conversion to Christianity is a nonsense. If the early Christians had accepted such a position, there would, of course, have been no Christian history. If eighteenth-century Christians had responded in this way to the burgeoning knowledge of the Hindu tradition opening up before them, there would be no Protestant theological community in India today, and Stanley Samartha would not have written a word of Christian theology.

The second problem about the Christian pluralist case is its hidden individualism. It is legitimate to invite those of other faith to respond to Christ, but illegitimate, or perhaps simply unreasonable, to expect them to embody that response by visible identification with the corporate church. Now perspectives such as Samartha's arise from the genuine and acute dilemmas faced by the churches in the Hindu context, where the concept of changing one's religion for most people who do not belong to the Dalit or tribal communities is simply unthinkable, for how can one change one's birth or dharma? I do not wish for a moment to make light of these dilemmas. Yet the question must be posed: what is left of Christianity if it is reduced to an individual making his or her own response to Christ, out of relationship with tradition, sacraments, collective worship, and Christian community? Can there

be any allegiance to Christ which does not involve commitment to the body of Christ? Is this not Protestant individualism gone mad?

The third problem requires some subtlety in delineation. The pluralist redefinition of mission has not abandoned the concept of a missionary message. There is still a story to be told to the nations. The church, writes Samartha, remains 'committed to move people in the direction of the Kingdom'. [41] There are distinctive kingdom values - of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation - to be affirmed against all the principalities and powers that seek to oppress humanity and despoil the created order.

This, affirmed the Programme Policy Committee of the World Council of Churches at the Canberra Assembly in 1991, 'has emerged as the central vision of the WCC and its member churches' as they look to the future. [42] But on what grounds do we decide that such values are worthy of commendation to the world? If these values are to be given a stable content, and not to be mere slogans of infinite plasticity, then they derive that stable content from our knowledge of God in Christ and our hearing of his Word in Scripture. They are to be commended to all of humanity because as Christians we hold them to be intrinsic to God's character and his will being accomplished through his Spirit at work in the world. As such, therefore, these values can hardly be divorced from our witness to the truth that finds its summation in Christ.

There is, of course, an alternative answer to the question I have posed, and that is to say that these values have no distinctive Christian meaning at all: they are simply values on which all reasonable human beings can be expected to agree. That is an answer which may appeal to many liberal and reasonable minds, and, if all human beings were reasonable, it would have much to commend it. But I would submit that the history of the twentieth century, to say nothing of the last month, has disposed of the fallacy of universal human reasonableness. Whilst it may be entirely appropriate for Christians to argue for the values of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation on the basis that these are the only reasonable values to adopt, we

do not as Christians adopt them in the first place because they are reasonable. We adopt them because they are intrinsic to, and derivative from God as he is and reveals himself to be; they are reasonable because they are true, not true because they are reasonable.

If the message of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation is to be proclaimed by the church with urgency and conviction to the world, then that message has to be grounded in the knowledge of God's redemptive acts in Christ, for these alone provide the guarantee of the fulfilment of God's saving purpose in a new creation in which justice, peace, and harmony will reign. Thus I for one am encouraged that at the last WCC Assembly in Harare in 1998, the Council, in its fiftieth year, adopted a vision statement which had at its heart the words: 'We are challenged by the vision of a church that will reach out to everyone, sharing, caring, proclaiming the good news of God's redemption, a sign of the kingdom and a servant of the world.' The statement concluded with a further commitment to be open to 'a culture of dialogue and solidarity, sharing life with strangers and seeking encounter with other faiths'. But if the good news of God's redemption in Christ is indeed to be proclaimed to everyone, is it enough to affirm the importance in inter-faith relations simply of 'sharing life and seeking encounter', however laudable and important these objectives may be? [43]

The fourth and final problem is the most fundamental of all. The ultimate implication of the Christian pluralist position is to suggest that distinctively Christian faith and worship are of value for those who, through accident of birth or other people's evangelistic witness, belong to the Christian tradition, but are not of such pre-eminent value that they deserve to be commended to all human beings. In other words, Christianity is the tribal religion of those who are fortunate enough to have it already - Christendom still rules OK. For all the radicality of its reaction to the racial divisions of the colonial era, the pluralist theology of humanity has concealed within it a chasm between what is appropriate for Christendom and what is appropriate for what used to be called the heathen world. This chasm is disintegrative of the very heart of Christianity. As Jürgen Moltmann has said recently, 'If Christianity loses its

missionary character anywhere in a given civilization, or at any time in a given era, or in any society, it is forgetting its origin and surrendering its identity'.

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If we repudiate the call to bring the good news of Christ to those beyond the frontiers of the church, we shall end by destroying the Christian basis for the unity of humanity. It might conceivably be argued that such a repudiation can still leave intact the central Christian claim that only in Christ and his kingdom can the eschatological vision of a restored humanity and a renewed creation be realized. But what it undeniably does - with consequences for theology that have yet to be seen - is to sever the ties that bind the kingdom of Christ to the body of Christ. More serious still, it reinforces the dangerous notion that religious affiliation is inextricably linked to ethnicity and territoriality. At a time such as this, when the murderous potential of such a linkage is being repeatedly demonstrated, it is surely incumbent on Christians to re-affirm their belief that there is one humanity and ultimately one hope for its future - Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Notes:

i[1] J. H. Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: SCM, 1924), p. 263, cited in Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; and Geneva, WCC; 1999), p. 207.

i[2] Luke 12:51-3.

i[3] Anthony Pagden, 'Introduction' in Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. xxii.

i[4] Las Casas, *A Short Account*, p. 127.

i[5] Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (eds), *Bartolomé de Las Casas in History* (De Kalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 285.

i[6] Las Casas, *A Short Account*, p. 3.

i[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.

i[8] Ibid., pp. 96-7.

i[9] See John Walsh and Ronald Hyam, *Peter Peckard: Liberal Churchman and Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (Magdalene College Occasional Papers No 16; Cambridge, 1998).

i[10] [Peter Peckard], *Am I not a Man and a Brother? With all Humility Addressed to the British Legislature* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788), p. 2.

i[11] Ibid., pp. 59-67, 94.

i[12] Ibid., pp. 98-9.

i[13] Walsh and Hyam, *Peter Peckard*, p. 10.

i[14] A. T. Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden: The Great Survivor* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne UP, 1977), pp. 78, 132-3.

i[15] Peter Peckard, *The Neglect of a known Duty is Sin* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1790), pp. 21, 25-6, cited in Walsh and Hyam, *Peter Peckard*, p. 21.

i[16] [Peckard], *Am I not a Man? And a Brother?*, p. 20.

i[17] Thomas Thompson, *The African Slave Trade for Negro Slaves Shewn to be Consistent with Principles of Humanity and of Revealed Religion* (Canterbury: 1772); see Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 178. On the SPG's lack of enthusiasm for mission to the indigenous population of West Africa in the eighteenth century see Daniel O' Connor and others, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1701-2000* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 27, 410-11.

i[18] Boyd S. Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (Bishop Auckland: Durham Academic Press, 1997), p. 91.

i[19] Ibid., pp. 170-1.

i[20] John Wesley, 'The general spread of the gospel', in *The Works of John Wesley*, bicentennial edition, vol. II, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 490-6 [my italics].

i[21] Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts: and, the Pernicious Influence of Delay in Religious Concerns: Two Discourses Delivered at a Meeting of Ministers at Clipstone ... The Former by John Sutcliff of Olney (London: 1791), p. 7.

i[22] See Andrew F. Walls, 'Romans One and the modern missionary movement', in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 55-67.

i[23] Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference (June 1910), Memorandum Suggesting Constitution and Procedure of Conference, 12 Dec. 1907, p. 6, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva.

i[24] Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference (June 1910), Minutes of International Committee, 14-20 July 1908, p. 3, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva [my italics].

i[25] World Missionary Conference (1910), Minutes of General Committee, 23 Sept. 1908, p. 21, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva.

i[26] Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference (June 1910), Minutes of Executive Committee, 12 March 1908, pp. 14-15, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva.

i[27] World Missionary Conference Papers, Box VII, Folder IV, Minutes of Commission I, 9-10 Sept. 1908, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

i[28] See Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, pp. 81-5; T. Tatlow, *The Story of the Student Christian Movement of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: SCM Press, 1933), pp. 404-10. The correspondence between Gore, Talbot and Oldham is in the Oldham Papers, New College, Edinburgh.

i[29] Oldham to Mott, 2 March 1909, Box 1, Folder 2, Oldham Papers.

i[30] Oldham to Mott, 10 March 1909, Box 1, Folder 2, Oldham Papers.

i[31]World Missionary Conference (1910), Minutes of Executive Committee, 30 June 1909, p. 44, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva.

i[32]Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions (Edinburgh: World Missionary Conference, 1910), p. 61; World Missionary Conference papers, Box VII, Folder 11, Minutes of the British section of Commission I, 4 May 1909, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

i[33] World Missionary Conference 1910, vol. IX, The History and Records of the Conference (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, n.d.), pp. 306-15.

i[34]S. B. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; and Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), p. 148; J. Z. Hodge, *Bishop Azariah of Dornakal* (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1946), pp. 4-5.

i[35] A. C. Ward, 'A critical investigation of the history of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe from 1945 to the present day' (MA thesis, Lambeth, 2001), pp. 45-6.

i[36] J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, English transl. (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 13-17, 39; See T. Yates, *Christian Mission in The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 163-4, 196-7.

i[37]S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: ecumenical issues in inter-religious relationships* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), p. 32.

i[38]S. J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 153.

i[39] *ibid*, p. 153.

i[40]See E. Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the Work of Stanley J. Samartha* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1992), pp. 308-10.

i[41]Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions*, p. 153.

i[42] Michael Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit: World Council of Churches official report seventh assembly Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991* (Geneva: WCC and Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 187.

i[43]Diane Kessler (ed.), *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1999), pp. 114-15.

i[44] Jürgen Moltmann, 'The mission of the Spirit - the gospel of life', in Timothy Yates (ed.), *Mission: An Invitation to God's Future* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing, 2000), p. 19. See also Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: the Public Relevance of Theology* (London: SCM, 1999), pp. 226-44.