MISSION IN A MULTI-CULTURAL AND MULTI-FAITH SOCIETY

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THE PLURALIST CULTURE OF OUR COUNTRY AND INDEED OF OUR WORLD PRESENTS US WITH A VERY STARK CHOICE. Either, as theologians like John Hick have argued, it is inconceivable that so many spiritual and sincere seekers after truth have missed the mark, and so therefore there must be many roads to salvation: or we must do business with those uncompromising words that Scripture says of Jesus Christ: "Salvation is found through him alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us" (Acts 4.12).

I believe that the only choice is the second one. In this article I want to look at the uniqueness of Christ from three perspectives.

First, the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin in a classic book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), reminds us that as we handle the dogma of the Christian faith we must not lose sight of the sovereignty of God. Only God, someone once wisely observed, holds the final definition of who is a true follower of Christ. We have been given sufficient and valid grounds for calling men and women to Christ, but it is not we who forgive sins and restore humankind to harmony with its Creator. So even as strong an evangelical as John Stott can say – as he has in several places – that he has a hope, which he considers a biblical hope, that the majority of humanity will be saved. Many Christians throughout history have come to that conclusion.

Second, Christianity is not a British invention or an American device; it was not shaped in the warmth of Southern Catholic Europe, the clarity of Reformation Switzerland or even the dour landscape of John Knox's Scotland. It was not even exclusive to the Holy Land, though much of the cultural incarnation of our faith derives from the culture of that region. Christianity is a universal faith, intended for the whole world.

Third, we need to remember in repentance that much of our Western Christianity is a poor advertisement for the gospel. Often materially-driven, frequently offensive to those less economically blessed than ourselves, and sometimes placing stumbling blocks in the way of seekers rather than reaching out to them; a significant part of what passes as biblical Christianity in the West today is far from the Bible's teaching in some vital respects.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN MISSION

There is a dangerous kind of imperialism into which it is all too easy to fall: one that argues that the only true religion is the one that looks like our own. In the immediate aftermath of the Eastern Europe revolutions of 1989–1990, many British Christians visited those countries with food, medicine and other aid, and also to take the gospel into areas where for forty years it had been under attack. Some of those who went came back with reports of churches that were thriving and of churches that were nominal and dying. Very often the definition of "thriving" turned out to be, "They sing hymns and choruses we recognise, their church services are similar to our own, the music is just what we are familiar with and their young people are very 'lively'. Obviously a keen evangelical church!" On the other hand, a church with the characteristically severe décor of some Eastern European denominations, where few men attended (a legacy of the recent Communist past), where the music was dour chants and unfamiliar melodic modes, and the general ambience of the service was sober rather than upbeat, might well be dubbed a dying church, or perhaps a nominal one.

Much recent writing on mission has been aimed at helping us to break just such preconceptions. The Indian theologian Valson Thampu, for example, who is emphatically not an inclusive pluralist (his definition of mission as a "harvest-in-waiting" would be anathema to many pluralist theologians, for example) seeks in his book *Rediscovering Mission* (1995) to urge a "non-Western" – though not "anti-Western" – "missiological paradigm", which questions many current interpretations of "mission" by measuring them against the "new paradigm" pointed to by the uniqueness of Christ. Essential in this bold experiment is the discarding of (Western) preconceptions.

Underlying ideas like Thampu's is an acceptance that God is actually in control of mission. It is God, not our programmes, methodology and definitions, who determines who needs to be told the gospel. Sometimes, if we scrutinise rigorously, we will find that people who seem very spiritual are in fact in the greatest need of the gospel; and that those whom we might be tempted to write off as "unsaved" in fact have much to teach us.

In talking and working alongside many Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and members of other faiths, I believe that my responsibility is to model Jesus to my neighbour and to share with him or her the biblical gospel as faithfully as I can. But that does not mean that I assume that my neighbour's spiritual experience is worthless or that God is not dealing with my neighbour in other ways as well as my relationship with him or her. By the same token, I have not discarded everything from my own culture. I enjoy celebrating Divali in a Christian context: who more than Christians should be celebrating a festival of light? And when my mother (who was a follower of Jesus) died, her funeral was a blend of clear biblical celebration of her life,

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and many traditions from our Hindu culture, because I believe that Hindu culture, like many other cultures are not valueless spiritually.

When mission engages with people of other cultures and other faiths, the kind of openness that finds some truth and some evidence of God's image is essential if we are to build sound bridges across cultural divides. Compelling other cultures to adopt Western "Christian" ways is not going to work.

CULTURAL BAGGAGE

As a South Asian, brought up in a religious context that included Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, and now a follower of Jesus Christ, these are issues that have shaped my own spiritual journey and are constantly part of my relationships with people of other faiths.

Francis Schaeffer wrote that at the end of the day, the artisan convert and the convert who is a university professor must both accept Christ in exactly the same way: by bowing before him as their Lord and Saviour. But, he said, their paths to that moment may well have been very different. This is a helpful point. In my own case, I tried for a very long time to deal with the burden of my *karma*, the accumulated weight of sins committed in this and previous lives. I had come to the realisation that I was never going to be able to pay off the huge debt. Then I heard about Jesus, and what he did on the cross. I accepted the same gift and the same Giver as any white Christian convert does – but in my case I was receiving my true *Sanatana Sat Guru*, the eternal true and living Master (John 14.6), who would never die. He had done what was necessary to pay off my *karma* once and for all – no longer was it necessary for me to be reincarnated in order to start the whole process towards redemption all over again.

Every year I would join in the family prayer which pleaded to God "from the unknown, lead me to the known; from the unreal, lead me to the real; from darkness lead me to light." It was the satisfying of that universal longing, specifically expressed for me in my Hindu prayer, which drew me to Christ.

Different people need to be told the gospel in different ways, different questions need to be answered and different needs have to be met – all by the same one unchanging Christ.

Western mission has often taken a long time to learn this. Go to various parts of Africa today and you will hear Christian hymns that still contain traces of the African musical tradition – the tradition that missionaries often required converts to abandon, because Moody and Sankey or John Wesley were in some sense "correct" Christian hymnody. For myself, in London, I was perplexed on my first visit to church to find sombre organ music playing (I wondered who had died), astonished to be allowed to keep my shoes on (unthinkable in the temples I was familiar with) and surprised not to be expected to sit on the floor. Indeed, I was amazed to find myself even allowed inside, for I had assumed that churches were special buildings that only special people could enter.

Cultural baggage stands in the way of many people encountering biblical Christianity. In today's multi-cultural, multi-faith Britain, we are still prone to forget that.

CLEARING THE WAY

The task of mission in any context is to present authentic biblical truth in a way that will challenge hearers to respond. How is this best achieved in a multi-faith, multi-cultural society?

First, I believe, we must not make the mistake that theologian Ken Gnanakan has identified in his book *Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralist Context* (2000). In Old Testament times, he says, God's people handled pluralism with great zeal by distancing themselves from people of other religions. But that meant ignoring God's wish that they should interact with people of other faiths. Gnanakan cites the stubborn refusal of Jonah to preach to Nineveh: he contrasts this with Jesus' willingness to relate positively to people of other faiths, while presenting them with the challenge of the true God.

We must reject, therefore, the temptation to see ourselves as an elite people. Pharisaism is a modern sin as well as an old one. Mission means putting our stall out in the marketplace, not refusing a trading licence to all other stallholders. The gospel has power enough of its own to defeat competing truth-claims. Also, as we have already mentioned, we do not have a blameless record to justify an elite status. Like the Children of Israel, we have made many mistakes.

Second, *we must not be afraid to be realistic about the errors of other faiths.* Since the tragic events of 11 September 2001, there has been a surge of pro-Islamic feeling that argues that Islam is a religion of peace. I sympathise with much of that. I have many Muslim friends and colleagues who are horrified by what happened in America and see it as a gross abuse of the Qur'an. I know Muslim families who live peaceably with their non-Muslim neighbours and have built enduring friendships in which both sides have been free to talk about their faith. But this does not mean that ▶

► there is no militant Islam, no students in the UK whose primary cause is to encompass the conversion of Britain to Islam. Generalisations, however well meaning, only cause problems, rather than solving them.

But third, *we must seek dialogue.* Mission means communication, and communication is a two-way process. Bishop Newbigin tells of a series of Christian–Muslim dialogues in the Midlands in which, for the first meeting, there were only two rules: the Christians were allowed to say anything they liked, provided it was an explanation of biblical teaching, the Muslims were allowed to respond in any way, provided they only asked questions and did not attack the statements made. Muslims who felt victimised were much relieved to find that the rules for the second meeting were the same, except that this time Muslims and Christians changed places. The alternating pattern continued for the rest of the series. The meetings achieved real mutual understanding and sharing of faith, and the kingdom of God advanced.

My colleague Vishal Mangalwadi, in *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Postmodern Hindu* (1997), writes, "We stand at an extraordinary time in history. Admittedly the Church is weak and has lost the position of leadership it once enjoyed in the Western world. But this is not to say that the Christian faith itself is weak."

In India, Turkey and many other countries, mission and missionaries are regarded with the gravest suspicion. My colleague Robin Thomson has written a book, *Changing India* (2002, forthcoming), in which he discusses current misgivings about Christian missionaries and conversions in India. He seeks to strip away misunderstanding, to explain what conversion really entails, and to show that Christian faith has a part to play in changing India for the better just as it had in the days of William Carey.

In modern multi-cultural Britain, many people consider the Church to be similarly suspect. The task of mission, I believe, is to remove the obstacles and misunderstandings between faith communities, so that the power of the gospel faithfully preached can be released to make its own way in its own strength. ■