

agreement that a closer exchange of views between the government and Church leaders' was 'desirable.' In addition, those present agreed to the 'creation of an informal group, comprising conservative Members of both Houses and a number of Bishops, which might meet about three or four times a year for dinner at the House.' Bishops would also be 'encouraged to write direct to Ministers when they wished for authoritative guidance on government policy.' Once the 'informal' meetings were 'fully established,' Hill intended to 'inject the idea that the group invite Ministers to attend.'

Did this government-directed campaign against critics of nuclear weapons pass over from opinion manipulation into the nether world of surveillance, covert operations, and illegal activities? In subsequent years, after all, CND grew larger, more influential and, in the eyes of officialdom, more threatening. Unfortunately, it is impossible to answer this question with any certainty. Hill—who became Lord Hill of Luton before going on to chair the Independent TV Authority and the B.B.C.—is now deceased. Furthermore, British government records covering the period from 1961 to the present are still closed to researchers under the 30-year rule for release of government documents. Finally, the official document list for the period to 1959 shows that the folder which produced most of the information for this article (PREM 11/2778) is followed, sequentially, by four others marked 'Closed for the next 100 years.' Like the government's campaign to counter its critics, this is rather remarkable.

Cross-cultural Ministry in Crisis

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How fruitful is this Decade of Evangelization going to be? The analyses and proposals offered in this essay refer specifically to the missionary enterprise in Africa south of the Sahara. But the implications are much wider, touching even the *raison d'être* of each one of Christianity's multiple ecclesial manifestations.

Anthropological Roots of the Crisis

Because the world's irreducible cultural pluralism cannot be ignored with impunity, much less scorned and replaced with alien cultures, the declining esteem for what missionaries have done may be seen as an inevitable consequence of the European and American cultural monomania that produced a network of dependent Western spiritual colonies through sub-Saharan Africa.

Much lip-service was, of course, given in official ecclesiastical documents to the goal of establishing culturally integrated, self-sustaining, indigenous Christian churches with their own vibrant missionary outreach and original cultural contributions to the universal family of Christians. Far from ignoring the local cultures of the people being evangelized, much less destroying them with foreign ways of being human and religious, missionaries were supposed to accept and evangelize the cultures themselves. This has been the official position of the Catholic Church, in theory, ever since St Paul, on this very issue of cultural pluralism, 'withstood Cephas to his face ... in front of everyone' (cf. Gal.2; Acts 15). We know, however, and especially those of us who have tried even on a very modest scale, that missionaries were not generally permitted to 'borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything that could be used to praise the glory of the Creator' (*Ad gentes*, no. 22). The Church's obvious failure to grow in cultural catholicity is attributed by Bernard Lonergan to the 'classical mentality'. Anthropologists call this 'ethnocentrism'. It might also be named 'Western cultural arrogance'. This form of blindness is reinforced by an almost paralyzing fear rooted in ignorance and shielded by the buzz word 'syncretism'—as though all of Christianity's European cultural accretions were not also syncretistic and flawed.¹

During the 1977 Synod of Bishops in Rome the Jesuit Superior General, Pedro Arrupe, focussed sharply upon these 'fears that arise to block inculturation completely or to diminish it.' Against those who felt threatened by the 'strange' ways of non-Western peoples—because their ways of expressing and celebrating their faith 'might possibly contradict what we (Europeans) have formulated and put into practice up to now'—Arrupe argued that 'real pluralism is the most profound unity'. It follows that 'the present crisis of unity, in many cases, is due to insufficient pluralism which fails to provide the satisfaction of expressing and living one's faith in conformity with one's own culture'.²

After praising the Pauline missionary method of respecting the cultures of those being evangelized and building the Christian edifice on the existing foundations, the first encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II acknowledged in a notable understatement that 'there has not always been full correspondence with this high ideal' (*Redemptor hominis*, no. 12). A similar acknowledgement had already been made by Pope Paul VI in an address to six cardinals and forty bishops from Africa and Madagascar: 'Does the Church in Africa', the Pope asked rhetorically, 'retain a certain Christian religious reform that was brought in from the outside and which makes her, as it were, a stranger and a pilgrim among her own peoples?'³

Theological Roots of the Crisis

Add to this the perplexity of all the missionaries and pastors, including a number of bishops, who have not kept abreast of developments in theology. They are disconcerted by their own failure to comprehend the

practical ministerial implications of the new theological attitudes, confirmed and promoted by the Second Vatican Council, such as the wider ecumenism respecting the graced condition of non-Christians and the salutary significance of all authentic religions. These new attitudes were explicit in the encyclical letter of John Paul II cited above, where religions were seen as a 'marvellous heritage of the human spirit', deserving our esteem and respect, because 'what humankind has worked out in the depths of its spirit concerning the most profound and important problems ... has been brought about by the Spirit ...' (no. 12).

Nowadays also, in the interest of interreligious dialogue, prominent Christian theologians have new reservations about the common ways of literalistically interpreting the meaning of such traditional Christian beliefs as the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Are these central symbols not something more than metaphors? Is the name of Jesus not somehow above every name? Is our Christian self-understanding sufficiently 'inclusive'? Must we be more reticent about our traditional faith-claims with their 'exclusivistic' and 'culture specific' terminology? Should we not mention to 'the others' our belief that, somehow on account of Jesus Christ, they are already 'saved' unless they themselves, freely and with a bad conscience, reject the unity in pluriformity offered by the Holy Spirit who is, like the wind, graciously present to all of mankind? And what, anyway, do we mean by the word 'saved'? How do we recognise authentic holiness?

A missionary who takes time out to think about such matters, in the light of what he or she has been doing for years, eventually begins to wonder about the meaning of this life commitment. Such a person on returning home is even there a stranger with a religious consciousness unavoidably transformed in a thousand subtle ways by a prolonged experience of life in an alien cultural world. Like the weary Jonah sitting under a withered tree, his mission to Nineveh completed, we sometimes wonder why we were sent out to a strange people in the first place—knowing, as we do now, how tender, compassionate, patient, gracious and relenting Yahweh has always been with the people of Nineveh who, like ourselves before the Holy Mystery, 'cannot tell their right hand from their left' (Jonah 4:11).

It is not surprising that the mainline Christian churches should be experiencing a notable waning in missionary zeal. So the question addressed here is whether, in view of the problematic noted above, these sending communities (churches, congregations, orders, societies) should continue to acquiesce in the senescence of the missionary ministry that once seemed essential to their own vitality, and at times described the Church's very reason for existing?

My answer is that the evangelization of the nations, mandated by the risen Lord, is still incumbent upon each Christian community, according to its ability. But this ministry is in urgent need of a radical reconceptualization, starting from a new willingness to learn from past mistakes and from new developments in theology, while applying

courageously the primordial principles of Christian missionary activity. These principles, *dialogue* and *incarnation*, derive directly from the way God's good news was communicated to humankind in and through Jesus of Nazareth. In the course of the history of the expansion of Christianity, however, these two principles have been, more often than not, either obtusely ignored or blatantly violated by heralds of the gospel sent out from the Christian communities of Europe and North America.

The evangelical principles of dialogue and incarnation, as well as critical theological reflection, have been the missing elements in Christianity's missionary outreach at least since Pope Benedict XIV, after a lengthy debate in the middle of the 18th century, officially terminated the incarnational missionary method initiated by Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto DeNobili in India. Since then, European experiences, customs, practices, concepts, precepts, philosophies, theologies, attitudes, postures, myths, symbols, rituals, styles, names, clothes, foods and art forms have been regarded as normative for almost all Christians living in the much larger world outside of Europe and North America.

The Principle of Dialogue

The Christian belief that God's word spoken to humankind in Jesus of Nazareth is normative and definitive does not mean that it is exclusive and exhaustive. The spirit of Jesus is one with the divine breath known as the Holy Spirit who is always and everywhere present as saving grace blowing like the wind that embraces everyone that comes into this world, bestowing grace upon grace. Unlike ourselves, God is not circumscribed by the particularity of time, place, history, ethnicity or culture. Nor are there any logical or legal limits to God's love for his gloriously pluriform creation which he makes and recreates with equal ease.

Like languages, religions are cultural inventions, symbolic systems of communication, and they are found among peoples as concomitants of normal human existence. As universal components of culture, religious systems of communications are as valid and necessary as languages, although always less perfect. If, as the Bible demonstrates, God speaks to us through languages, then why not also through religions? Like languages, religions are ephemeral symbol systems of communication, socially and culturally constructed in the course of a people's history. God's dialogue with the people of Israel, in the culture-specific and historically conditioned terms of their religion, is a paradigm of his communication with humankind.

God's word comes to a people where they are historically and culturally: not where they are not. Nor does it come to a people through a process of substituting for their traditional ways of being human and religious the ways of some other ethnic group with an entirely alien culture and history. If God speaks to people in their own situations, and in their terms, then also he allows them to respond through the relevant communication systems available to them. We know also from biblical

revelation that God listens to people even when they speak only with their tears and pray only by shaking pebbles in a gourd.

Our supposition must be that the gift of God's word comes to all people through the historical experiences and cultural systems of communication which are available to them; presumably, therefore, through the non-Christian religions that have always served most of humanity, and continue to serve an ever-increasing majority. Their religious constructions are their halting ways of conversing with God. Our belief in the normative character of Christian revelation does not mean that God has nothing to say to us through the religious experience of all the others who are also made in the divine image and also loved by God for what they are in their respective historical situations and cultural matrices. Openness to a word from the eternal means therefore openness to the experience, both religious and secular, of all peoples.

Through honest dialogue, mutual listening, we learn not only who the others are and what they really believe, but also who we are and what we really believe. As the Spirit of God is present to humankind—freely and magnanimously communicating divine light and love as a gift, as grace—in a manner analogous to the air moving around and inside every person, we may believe with increasing numbers of theologians today that God can and does converse with all peoples through their respective religious symbol systems, historically conditioned, socially structured and culturally coloured as they are.

The Principle of Incarnation

This principle, nowadays called 'inculturation', is derived directly from the central Christian belief in the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus of Nazareth.⁴ In Jesus God's Word entered human history from, as it were, the inside, through the physical and cultural flesh of one particular people at a moment of their history. The divine Word thus embraced everything belonging to the human condition, except sin, in that limited cultural world through which God's good news became manifest. Analogously, the Church is supposed to enter the historico-cultural world of each people. What was done once and for all among the Jewish people is paradigmatic for what the Church is supposed to do in sacramental symbolism among all peoples.

According to the authentic tradition, retrieved and reaffirmed by Vatican II, the Church is not supposed to be 'tied exclusively or indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life ancient or modern'. It is expected, instead, to engage all peoples in 'a wonderful exchange' exactly in accord with 'the economy of the incarnation' (cf. *Ad gentes*, no. 22). It is precisely by 'entering into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves' (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 58) that the Church is enabled to grow in catholicity while accomplishing its mission, indeed through its mission, to every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Far from being historically static and culturally monolithic, the Church is thus called to become a universally intelligible, hence culturally pluriform, sign of humankind's unity and salvation. So the Church must come to life in the historical and cultural terms of all 'the large and distinct groups united by enduring ties, ancient religious traditions and strong social relationships'. This is to be done 'in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the people among whom he lived' (*Ad gentes*, 10). In other words, the Church must make herself at home among each people in the same truly human way that Jesus was at home in Nazareth.

Evangelization As Incarnational Dialogue

In an effort to align the ecclesiastical establishment with the new directions mandated by the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI in 1964 established the Secretariat for non-Christians, significantly on Pentecost Sunday.

Some of the Church's servants felt (and continue to feel) that the Council's new and positive attitudes toward the other religions would undermine the Church's missionary outreach to the followers of these religions. But Pope Paul, because of his anthropological understanding of culture as a kind of indispensable language, and his profound appreciation of the role of non-Christian religions in the lives of most human beings, viewed the situation differently (cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, nos. 2, 53). It was clear to him that the separation between the gospel and the particular culture of each people is 'without doubt the drama of our time' because real evangelization requires a profound encounter with a people's culture understood and appreciated for what it is in itself and for its own people.

It is not surprising therefore to hear the secretary of the Secretariat for non-Christians echoing the explicit teaching of Vatican II 'that the gift of "grace and truth" does reach or may reach the hearts of men and women through the visible, experiential signs of the various religions'.⁵

Authentic dialogue, according to the Secretariat, always allows people, indeed encourages them, to be themselves: 'It leaves room for the other person's identity, modes of expression and values'. This, moreover, is 'the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission' to the extent that 'any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the gospel'.⁶ For reasons already outlined, we may also say that any sense of mission not guided by the principle of incarnation is against the demands of true humanity and against the gospel.

It is not, however, necessary, in the interest of dialogue, to be reticent about what we believe, although our beliefs should not be flaunted as though we were promoting a political party. Experience suggests 'that when reference to Jesus is postponed or downplayed, conversations between Christians and people of other faiths tend to become arid'.⁷ At the same time, instead of trying to win people over to our camp, a climate of

mutual freedom from moral coercion must be honestly fostered, allowing for the possibility of Christians, as well as others, being led by the Spirit, and in good conscience, from one faith community to another. This should be no problem for anyone who trusts the grace and truth of God.

An incarnational and dialogical approach to the Christian world mission is apt to yield unexpected results and events not yet imagined—perhaps even more crucifixions along the way to the new Jerusalem. At the present stage, anyway, such an approach calls for a radical overhaul of our usual systems of preparing the cross-cultural agents of Christianity's good news, the new missionaries of the future, whether these agents will be sent out from the churches of Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia or the Islands far away. The model of missionary activity developed under the influence of Western imperialism and colonialism has not served well either the gospel or the nations.

Will the Christian missionaries and the pastors in the non-Western world, still contradicting the essential nature of their mission, continue to function like the agents of 'an export firm, exporting to the whole world a European religion along with other elements of this supposedly superior culture and civilization, without really attempting to change the commodity...'?⁸ Or, has the time come for a new Pentecostal boldness aimed at the real catholicization of Christianity in the spirit of Paul, Ricci and DeNobili?

- 1 See Eugene Hillman, *Many Paths: A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 59—60.
- 2 Pedro Arrupe, 'Catechesis and Inculturation', *Teaching All Nations*, 15:1 (1978) 21.
- 3 Paul VI, 'Evangelization in Africa Today' (26 Sept. 1975), *Christ to the World*, 21:5 (1976) 294.
- 4 See Eugene Hillman, 'Inculturation', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak et al (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987) 510—513. For more on this, see Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); also Anthony J. Gittins, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).
- 5 Pietro Rossano, 'Christ's Lordship in Roman Catholic Perspective', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, edited by Gerald A. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983) 103.
- 6 Secretariat for Non-Christians, 'Attitudes of the Church Toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections on Dialogue and Mission' (1984), reprint in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9:4 (1985) 187—191.
- 7 Harvey Cox, *A Christians Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon press, 1980), 6.
- 8 Karl Rahner, 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council', *Theological Investigations* 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 78.