Rethinking Gospel, Mission, and Church in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THIS chapter is to identify the principal opportunities and challenges for global Methodism in presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the very composition of this chapter, one certain but double-edged implication became clear: global Methodism presents Christians with a rare opportunity to think afresh about how we steward the gospel in light of complex global realities as well as how we conduct ourselves as members of a genuine global faith. One warning confronting all who consider this rethinking is the troubling consequence of not taking appropriate advantage of this opportunity. If we take seriously the theme of the 2018 Oxford Institute—"Thy Grace Restore, Thy Work Revive"—such rethinking of mission is unavoidable. To understand this concept, in the following pages, we focus on Sri Lanka as an example. Roman Catholic Christianity came to Sri Lanka in 1505 with the Portuguese. Today about two million people call themselves Christians because of Roman Catholic and Protestant missions.

The Christian faith stands on the command of Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19, RSV). Those who have heard and known the good tidings are to call others to share in it. From this simple and direct beginning in the words of Jesus, Christians have evolved a rich complex of religious ideas and institutions under the name of mission and evangelism. But the very mention of the word

evangelism nowadays inevitably stirs deep emotions. Whether people are passionately in favor of it or vaguely uneasy about it, evangelism is an issue important to the church.

The word suggests many images. An older generation in Sri Lanka may remember the tent meetings organized by the Tent Mission in villages, with its impassioned preaching and enthusiastic singing. Others may recall revival services held on open-air stages or in chapels or rural churches where the gospel was proclaimed to rescue people from immorality and eternal damnation.[1]

In the popular mind, however, evangelism, at least as it has been practiced in recent times, has caused considerable ambiguity. Criticism of evangelists has come from those not only outside the church but also within. While all churches are officially committed to fulfilling Christ's Great Commission, many have deep reservations about some of the techniques being used today. When Christian missionaries—the Portuguese, Dutch, and British—invaded the island of Sri Lanka in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries using aggressive mission campaigns, this generated a backlash that still, today, poisons Buddhist–Christian or Hindu–Christian relationships in Sri Lanka. Christians spreading the gospel, Buddhists and Hindus making attempts to revive their religions using the education received through the missionary schools, will throw light on this crucial encounter.

The hate campaign started against Christians by the Buddhists and Hindus might illuminate the methodologies adopted by the Christian missions. On Monday, December 29, 2003, dozens of Buddhist monks protested against "unethical conversions" by Christians and demanded anti-conversion laws be enacted immediately.[2] One hundred Buddhist monks of the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (National

1 Anna B. Taft, *The Tent Mission* (New York: Department of Church and Country Life, The Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., n.d.), https://ia600503.us.archive.org/26/items/tentmission03taft/tentmission03taft.pdf.

2 "Buddhist Monks Demand Anti-Conversion Bill in Sri Lanka," Zee News, December 29, 2003, https://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/buddhist-monks-demand-anticonversion-bill-in-sri-lanka_139032.html.

Sanga Council) commenced a hunger strike "unto death" opposite the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs (Buddha Sasana) building, urging the government and President Chandrika Kumaratunga to bring in laws to curb "unethical conversions."[3] Various events, demonstrations, and, at times, attacks led by Buddhist monks overpowering police, vandalizing church properties, and assaulting Christian workers also have taken place in different parts of Sri Lanka.[4] On December 26, 2013, an incident occurred against a Methodist church construction as a monument at Buttala to mark the bicentenary of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka. The construction began after obtaining the necessary approvals but was stopped by a group of more than two hundred people after a demonstration, in spite of the intervention of the divisional secretary and police.

Defining Mission

Twice in the last century, the Church of England has attempted to formulate the nature and scope of evangelism. A commission appointed by the archbishops of Canterbury and York offered the well-known definition of evangelism: "To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God

3 "The anxiety that Sri Lankan Buddhists feel about the question of conversion cannot be divorced from the political domination they experienced for five centuries under the colonial powers. The oppressions that the Buddhist monks, temples, and communities had to undergo as well as the aggressive evangelistic methods used to convert people during that period are well documented. Colonial governments that originally disdained the missionary movement later supported the missionaries, when they discovered that conversion to Christianity also shifted the political allegiances of many in favor of the colonial government, or that at least subdued the potential for political agitation." Shanta Premawardhana, ed., "Introduction," in *Religious Conversion: Religion Scholars Thinking Together* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Limited, 2015), 1.

4 "Monks Attack Church in Sri Lanka," *Christian Today*, December 12, 2012, http://www.christiantoday.com/article/monks.attack.church.in.sri.lanka/31232.htm.

through him, to accept him as their Saviour, and serve him as their king in the fellowship of his Church."[5] This definition contains the classical New Testament elements of evangelism. The focus is on calling all people to faith in Jesus Christ. The call is given in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are able to offer up our best efforts in preaching, teaching, counseling, visiting, praying, and organizing for evangelism, but it is still the work of the Holy Spirit that finally convinces people and brings them to faith. Faith in Christ involves a new personal relationship of trust in God, which brings eternal life. From this relationship to God flows service to Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus is to serve God in every part of the created order because Christ rules over all. This faith and service link us in fellowship with other believers in the life of the church, where faith is strengthened and moral commitment guided.

The commission's definition of evangelism states the task in classical Christian terms. Its use of the language of the New Testament, however, raises the question of whether it can be translated into modern terms. Any theology of evangelism deals with two matters. On the one hand, there is the question of faithfulness to God's saving work in Christ. On the other hand, there is the question, no less important, of the world to which this saving word is addressed. The message must be expressed in a language people can understand. As we seek to witness to our neighbor, we are aware that the neighbor speaks the language of his or her culture and religion, not Christian religious language. Effective evangelism requires careful thinking about how the Christian faith may be interpreted for our contemporaries.

The task of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is no longer simply the renewing and encouraging of a faith already present. What is needed is a new way of expressing the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best way to get at this

5 Bishop of Rochester (Christopher Chavasse) et al., *Towards the Conversion of England: A Plan Dedicated to the Memory of Bishop William Temple, Being the Report of a Commission on Evangelism Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York* (London: Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1945), 156.

reformulation is to start with a basic question: What are people really asked to accept when they are urged to have faith in Jesus Christ?

The Great Commission

Many Christians in Sri Lanka possess, in addition to the Bible and prayer book or devotional text, a book on the adventures of missionaries. These books tell of those heroes and heroines of the faith who, in obedience to Christ's Great Commission to make disciples of all people (Matt. 28:19), had gone to distant and dangerous places with the message of salvation. The stories of David Livingstone, adventuring in a trackless wilderness to oppose slave traders, made fascinating fare for faith and imagination. Missionaries were pictured, being confronted by lions, or praying unaware to stealthy intruders of murderous intent. The life of a missionary seemed to be one adventure after another, with little mention of dreary months of trekking, learning languages, or overcoming the ravages of disease. Missionaries always seemed to be delivered by direct divine intervention or, failing this, they died peacefully, with blessings on their lips.

The vigor of missionary outreach that promises salvation to those lost in pagan religions and autocratic societies has continued among mainline Methodists, Anglicans, and other Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics. Faithful missionaries still serve in distant and difficult places, but the media of the mission organizations no longer supply us with pious adventure stories. Mission organizations have even changed their names to suit modern thinking.[6] Now we may purchase books on interreligious dialogue and anthropological study. Christians of the United Kingdom who send missionaries to "heathens" no longer find tales of grateful natives receiving the gospel interesting. Instead,

6 For example, what was formerly called the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG) now goes by the new name United Society, to be known as "Us." "Anglican Mission Agency USPG Announces Plans to Change Its Name," Anglican Communion News Service, June 26, 2012, https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2012/06/anglican-mission-agency-uspg-announces-plans-to-change-its-name.aspx.

Christian missions are faced with sharp questions about the injustices caused by multinational corporations. We see the need to draw from the creative insights of traditional religions. What has happened to the Christian mission? Have we lost our commitment so that we no longer share Christ enthusiastically with others? Or has the Christian mission entered a new phase in response to God's leading? To answer these questions we need to look at what Christian missions have accomplished already. We also need to find what it means to express faith in Christ in a culture different from our own. What does faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord mean for those whose lives are guided by ethnic memories and spiritual visions so different from our own Christian culture? What form does Christian discipleship take in modern Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East? To deal with these questions, we need to develop a theology of mission. The first step in learning to do a mission theology is to go back and look at what impelled the modern missionary movement as it traveled from Europe and North America into the rest of the world.

The Missionary Movement

The missionary movement grew out of the evangelical renewal of the churches that swept through Europe and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Lutherans of Germany and Scandinavia, the puritans, nonconformists, and Methodists in England and later in the United States, the Moravians, Baptists, and a host of spiritualistic groups were being renewed by a fresh vision of the converting power of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The vitality of their newfound faith at home was not to be limited to their own communities. This was also the age of exploration, colonization, and imperialism. Europe and the United States were expanding their influence and culture into the rest of the world. Trade brought not only exotic goods, spices and silk, china dishes and tea, gold and gunpowder, but tales of exotic peoples. Western Christians were becoming aware in a dramatic way of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Non-Western countries were people who had no

notion of Christ, church, or the message of salvation. The inhabitants of these distant lands were now perceived as ripe for conversion and ready to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reports of merchant traders and military adventurers told of people in slavery who were bound by superstitious religions and barbarous cults. The missionary movement started to bring to these people the freeing power of Jesus Christ. These missionaries believed that the gospel not only delivered people from eternal damnation, but transformed their lives and opened the way to modern education, medicine, agriculture, and commerce.

William Harvard, a pioneer Methodist missionary to Sri Lanka, wrote a book called *A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of Mission to Ceylon and India* (1823). The title itself expresses his main idea. Harvard argued that people had the freedom to accept Christ. But to make good on this offer of salvation, carefully planned means of witness were to be used so that the message could be heard by those who were ignorant of it. The learning of native languages, the translation of the Bible, the study of the cultural background of non-Christian peoples, and the teaching of natives to be pastors were the means by which Harvard and the missionaries brought about the conversion of non-Christian populations. They were inventive in their approach to preaching and not only saw to it that the gospel was heard but also lived in the places where they settled. Harvard did not believe the missionary worked alone. The Holy Spirit also worked in and through those who had made their commitment to Christ. Their own commitment was vital. Another Methodist missionary, Thomas Squance, preached his first Methodist sermon at the Dutch Church in Galle on Sunday, July 3, 1814, based on 2 Corinthians 10:14 (KJV): "We are come as far as to you also in preaching the gospel of Christ." The non-Christians would be converted and the kingdom of Christ spread across the world. Here was a dynamic, democratic theology, launched with the vigorous confidence of the Western world.

What missionaries saw in Sri Lanka as technological backwardness, injustice, superstition, fear, and chaos were proof to them of the folly of the religions of the natives. The missionaries of Europe and North America were convinced that they brought not only a superior religion, but the

superior culture that grew out of it. Christianity and Western civilization were closely linked. Mission was a matter not simply of preaching, but of sharing the full resources of an advanced civilization. When modern farming had replaced inefficient traditional ways, modern medicine had brought the healing that native medicine could not, and vigorous trading societies had made slavery unprofitable, the full impact of Christianity would be felt. Jesus Christ eventually would be Lord of all. The missionaries came with not only Bible in hand, but also plows, printing presses, medicine chests, and schoolbooks. The vision was one of great vigor and confidence. It reflected a vital religious faith and an expansive culture confident of its own rightness. There was for these missionaries only one way to God. There was also only one way for humankind to move into the future—the way of modern Western civilization.

Colonization

Deep and pervasive changes have come into mission theology in the twentieth century. Church leaders no longer look to the mission theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a norm to which they must adhere. Rather, they see it as the beginning of Christian missions in the age of colonialism. With the emergence of new nations of the developing world, new theologies are needed to deal with the challenges and opportunities of today. Mission theology has been challenged at two points. It has been challenged in those situations in which its vision of triumph has not been fulfilled, and paradoxically, it also has been most deeply challenged at those places in which the church has been established and experienced its greatest growth.

If you look at the Sri Lankan context, Christianity is still a small fraction of the Sri Lankan population (8 percent). All Christian actions take place in a non-Christian world and are intimately interwoven with the actions and collaboration of peoples of other faiths and ideologies. Christians have to interact with non-Christians in all places of work and study to survive. The Christians cannot filter, as it were, only what they find morally good by the standards of a hypothetical Christian ethics, religiously true by the standards of Christian dogma. They cannot

ignore the rest, and they must offer their most cordial indiscriminate collaboration to whatever is good, true, and beautiful in the cultures where the community of the Christian faithful have to live. The transition from missionary compound to immersion in the world is not easy and is often painful, but it is an irreversible process. Christians cannot refuse collaboration with others in nation-building on the grounds that the optimal conditions for collaboration are not visible there or that the peoples of other faiths are unable or unwilling to agree with them.[7]

The historical fact is that Christianity has not won a large-scale acceptance in Asia with the exception of the Philippines.[8] With this fact in view, Aloysius Pieris argues that when Christianity came to Asia, it created a Christ-against-religions theology.[9] Mission in the Sri Lankan context, then, emerges from a different perspective and angle. It adds fresh and refreshing reflections to the traditional Christian theologies and at the same time initiates new praxis to work among the human communities of Sri Lanka, saturated as they are with religiosity. This is again an important factor to do mission among people of Sri Lanka and by Sri Lankans. The Christian theology of incarnation also must become incarnate in the Asian cultural and economic flesh of the Asian masses. This theology will be done in the context of non-Christian experience and will gravitate between the two poles of the social reality today and the normative message received from the past.

Some Observations

The Limits of Mission

The vision of a Christian triumph over all the religions of the world has not been fulfilled. Neither the twentieth nor the twenty-first century

7 Raimundo Panikkar, "Common Grounds for Christian–Non-Christian Collaboration," in *Religion and Society*, ed. R. W. Taylor (Bangalore: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1982), 27–28.

8 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 59.

9 Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 60.

have become "The Christian Century" as was earnestly expected. Christians make up about 30 percent of the world, according to the most optimistic estimates. As Christianity grows rapidly in Africa, it is shrinking in its old centers of strength, North America, Europe, and Russia. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam have not vanished from the earth; instead, they have experienced renewal and growth. The ancient religions of China have diminished, not to be replaced by Christianity, but by Marxism. The nations of Africa and Asia have returned to their ancient spiritual resources for guidance. Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi teachers now journey to the West to offer new religious resources to dispirited secularists.

The world at the beginning of the twenty-first century is religiously plural and shows every sign of remaining that way. If the claim for the universal lordship of Christ is to be more than an assertion, it must be reinterpreted in relation to the continuing existence and vitality of non-Christian religions. Is it possible to believe that God, the creator and sustainer of the whole world, is graciously disposed toward less than a third of his children because they were born into a culture affording them a chance of responding to the word?

From Mission to Church

The hopes of the missionary pioneers of the nineteenth century for the spread of the church have largely been fulfilled. Christianity is found throughout the world. In some places, its existence is marginal; in others, it has vigor and expansive power. In the year 2000, there were more Christians in Africa than on any other continent. Christianity has claimed the minds and hearts of millions of Koreans and Indonesians. Christian leaders, notably the late Bishop Desmond Tutu, shaped the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The churches of Latin America struggle for liberation in response to the freeing power of Jesus. Intellectual leaders, writers, and artists in Japan and India ponder the meaning of Jesus for them and their culture.

This transition from foreign mission to Indigenous church reflects more than administrative reorganization. It reflects deep theological change. The modern missionary movement has fulfilled its vision in

which Christianity has become expressed through the culture of the people to which it has gone. Here is where the transition from mission to church has taken place. It is the transition from Christianity as a foreign religion brought by outsiders to being a religion rooted in its own time and place and led by its own people. That Christianity is capable of such transition is what makes mission to non-Christians possible. The name given to the process of transition is *Indigenization* or *contextualization*. It is the process by which Christian faith becomes incarnate in another culture and shares its values, visions, and symbols yet does not lose its own identity. It is the process by which Christian faith is lived in a new and different context of life from that of the missionaries who brought it. To understand the theology of Indigenization, we need to go back and look at the way in which missionaries brought Christianity to the non-Western world.

Christianity and Culture

Christian missionaries took a faith that was closely tied to Western civilization beyond the bounds of Europe and the Americas. Students in mission schools built by missionaries were more likely to be reading Shakespeare or studying the history of Washington and Lincoln than learning the traditions and history of Sri Lankans. Sri Lankan societies in the colonial world were weakened by colonial economies that tied them to the mills and factories of the West. Home gardens and small farms were submerged into great tea, coffee, rubber, and cocoa plantations. English, the language of the mission school, became the language of the new elite. Tribal burial practices, naming ceremonies, marriage rites, and harvest festivals were rejected by missionaries as dangerous pagan customs. Hymns were sung in native languages, although the hymn tunes were from English or American hymnbooks. The Sri Lankan cultural music and musical instruments were kept outside the church because of their association with the religious rituals of the unconverted. Inside, organs wheezed out hymns and music of the Western world or the revival songs of Charles Wesley, according to the taste of the missionaries.

To use the distinction between theologies that look at the bright side or the shadow side of human nature, we might say the modern missionary movement tended to see the bright side of Western civilization and the shadow side of the civilizations of Sri Lanka. With such a vision, Christianity made little progress in becoming part of the new context of life to which it had been taken. Christianity lived in little islands of Western civilization created in other lands. It needed a radical contextualization. The church needed to be planted firmly on Sri Lankan soil and allowed to draw nourishment from its native ground. When Christianity is Indigenized, it is born afresh as part of that time and place without losing its own genius.

As daring as this seemed at the time and as sharply rebutted as it was by conservatives, Indigenization remained largely an intellectual matter stage-managed by Americans and Europeans. With the end of colonialism after World War II, Indigenization, or as it is more frequently called today, contextualization, has entered a new phase. The new theologies of contextualization see it as a process involving the whole church, not something Western intellectuals can do for others. Contextualizing the Christian faith must be done from within a culture by those who belong to it.

The churches of Asia, including the independent churches, are drawing freely on the music and ecstatic worship of Asian traditions in place of the staid liturgies of their missionary past. Can Christians use the burial rites, naming ceremonies, or wedding customs of their communities? Did Christian missionaries bring God to Asia? Or was God there already? The key affirmation of Asian theologians in contextualizing Christian faith is that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill what had come before him (Matt. 5:17). To be a Christian means building on the strengths of one's culture while transforming its weaknesses.

In Asia, C. S. Song has used Chinese and Polynesian folktales to interpret the gospel.[10] The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama[11] has

10 See C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

11 See Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

developed a critical theology by his meditation on Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: a critique of idols. And in Latin America, Christianity is being contextualized afresh from within the struggle for social, economic, and political liberation. A new generation of theologians has plunged more deeply into the religious culture of India to discover what Raimundo Panikkar called "the unknown Christ of Hinduism."[12] In Korea, Christians are fashioning a new theology based on the tense sociopolitical situation in which these people have lived so long. Kim Yong Bock works with a Minjung theology,[13] articulating the gospel in light of the Korean experience of unjustified suffering and the resolve to establish an ideal realm in redemption. It is a theology drawing on the deepest memories of folk culture and existential concerns for the present day.

No one of these theologies is complete, nor have the churches given considered judgment to them all. They are theologies in process. But the key is the shift in consciousness they represent. The churches of developing nations are not waiting to take over ready-made theology from the West. They are fashioning a theology out of the resources that their own cultures and experiences have given them.

It is not possible for Christians, the contextual theologians argue, to divide the world into realms of light and darkness. As they insist, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5, RSV). As the presence of God becomes real in any place, the elements of its culture that have the power of deepening and enlarging human life become evident. Wherever compassion is present, truth is known and love is at work. They are there as God's gift to be accepted and rejoiced in by Christians, even when they bear names given them by other religions and cultures.

The old images used to describe religious change do not fit the present realities. We have been used to thinking of mission in terms of crusades or campaigns that would end up with a conquest of lands

12 See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

13 Wikiwand, s.v., "Minjung Theology," accessed January 19, 2021, http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Minjung_theology.

and the replacement of one religion by another. What is happening can better be described as a process of transformation. The proclamation of the gospel in word and deed is a transforming power that encounters the spiritual vision, ethical values, and community life of the people to which it comes. The power of God's love appropriates from each culture the means of expressing the new being in Christ. In this process, the culture is transformed but not destroyed. The negative elements of the culture are rejected; the creative elements are given new life.

"The deeds of boldness" of the Methodist missionaries of the past live on. Today they take different forms. The process of contextualization is a difficult and demanding one. It requires spiritual, emotional, and intellectual courage to claim unfamiliar ideas and customs for the proclamation of the gospel. Yet if the risks of contextualization are not taken, Christianity increasingly will become a ghetto religion of the Western world. Making the biblical message meaningful in terms that the people can understand, facilitating critical reflection on the message of Scripture in the particular cultural context, and helping the people internalize the message will continue to make Methodism relevant to people within a particular culture. As Raimundo Panikkar observed, Jesus did not come to found the one holy catholic and apostolic sect.[14] The goal of contextualization is not comfort but clarity. The church of Jesus Christ is by its nature in and for the world. It is not a sectarian enclave but a light. What the theologians and peoples of the churches of developing nations are doing is finding how that light is entering their own time and place.

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