

Relevance of a Theology of Religions to an Understanding of Mission since 1910

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This paper raises the issue of a viable theology of religions and explores an understanding of Christian mission in relation to the mission of other religious faiths. During the 18th and 19th centuries the Christian missionary attitude to other religions and cultures was marked by a spirit of certainty about the superiority of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrines held by Christians. At the World Missionary Conference of 1910 at Edinburgh the missionaries who had come from lands of living faiths could not avoid the question of the Christian response to other faiths. They stated that on all lands the merely 'iconoclastic attitude' is condemned as radically unwise and unjust. The conference recognized the spirit of God working in the higher forms of other religions and affirmed that all religions disclose the elemental needs of the human soul, which Christianity alone could not satisfy.¹ Since then in the last one hundred years many discussions have been underway regarding a viable theology of religions and a theology of mission and their interrelation.

In our consideration of a theology of religions, we may note that Exclusivism is its own rejection as it makes the universality of the revelation of God in Jesus the opposite of it, namely a sectarian particularity and hence a viable theology of religions cannot have anything to do with it. What Inclusivism has is a disguised form of exclusivism because the Christ of Inclusivism is an irrelevant exclusively reformulated Christ. The age of considering different religions as isolated, self-contained compartments, which is implicit in the standpoint of Pluralism, again has to be considered as over. Different religions will contribute to each other in arriving at the content of the faith-experience of each. Different religions, which are the common property of humanity, will contribute to each other in arriving at the content of the faith-experience of each. Relational convergence of religions means the unique blending of two or more paths together for the emergence of the *creatively new* in each of the earlier paths. This is Pluralistic Inclusivism.

Pluralistic Inclusivism inspires each religious faith to be pluralistically inclusive. This means, on the one hand, each living faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to its conceptual content. On the other hand, Inclusivism is to transform its meaning to witness the fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths. Christian theology of mission here becomes truly pluralistic and obtains fulfillment by the theologies of mission of other faiths contributing to its conceptual content. If in the past a theology of mission has decided a theology of religions, in the 21st century a theology of religions such as Pluralistic Inclusivism may have to decide a viable theology of mission.²

¹ J. R. Chandran, "Christianity and World Religions - The Ecumenical Discussion", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 30, Nos. 3 & 4 (July-Dec. 1981), 186-7.

² K. P. Aleaz, "Religious Pluralism and Christian Witness - A Biblical-Theological Analysis", *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXI, No. 1 (Dec.-March 1990), 48-67; *Harmony of Religions. The Relevance of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993), 162-65; *Theology of Religions. Birmingham Papers and Other Essays* (Calcutta: Moumita, 1998), 168-99.

When we think of an understanding of Christian mission in the context of religious pluralism, we are all for a reconception of it. It is in the one mission of the one God that Christians share along with people of other faiths; Christian mission has to be seen only as a part, perhaps a minute part of the total mission of God. Christian mission has to be seen along with and in collaboration and combination with the mission of the people of other religious faiths, forming different aspects of the one total mission of God. There is a need to reconceive the one mission of God in terms of one's context and in that reconception identify the particular role of Christian mission. In our reconception of the mission of God, God-experiences of people of other faiths have to help us and similarly in the reconception of the mission of God by people of other faiths, God-experience of Christians can also be a guiding principle. In the light of such reconstructed understanding of the mission of God alone can Christians perceive their particular mission. Consequently Christian mission becomes not only imparting what Christians have to others, but also receiving from others what they have. This receiving aspect is proposed today as the thrust of a Christian theology of mission.³

Perhaps the Bible can help Christians to overcome ecclesiocentrism. What the Bible speaks about is God's reign and God's mission and not the church's or our reign and mission. The important point to be noted in this connection is: we should not equate Christian mission with God's mission.⁴ God's mission may have to be conceived as much wider in scope as compared to a possible understanding of Christian mission. God's mission in all its dimensions may be beyond human comprehension, especially by one particular grouping of humans. Perhaps the different religious communities may have to come together to ponder over the one mission of the one God (Reality). Christians are only a part of a larger mission of God and it is this conviction, which enables them to join hands and work with people of other faiths.

The struggle today is to understand what is that one mission of the one God, and once understood, to carry out that mission. We can understand what is the one mission of the one God along with people of other religious faiths only, and also once understood, we can carry out the one mission of the one God along with them only. Mission of God (Reality) as understood by a religion points to the mission of that religion which is nothing but the central focus of the religion, what that religion stands for. In order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the one mission of the one God, let us then analyze briefly the central focus of at least some of the religions.

The mission of Hinduism is to lead people to their own innermost reality – the Paramatman who represents immortality and is simultaneously the Parabrahman. Everything we do is for the satisfaction of the Atman. “Our love for other objects is secondary, it is there only to the extent they contribute to the satisfaction of the Atman and our love for the Atman alone is primary.... Therefore the Atman should be made the object of realization”.⁵ We should realize the Atman through hearing, reflection and meditation.⁶ The gospel of

³ K. P. Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion: Study, Experience and Interaction* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995), 247-79.

⁴ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC, 1985), 69-71.

⁵ Sankara, *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad Bhasya*, 2.4.5.

⁶ *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 2.4.5.

Hinduism is that the Brahman/Atman pervades, illumines and unifies all the levels and layers of human person and the whole creation. Brahman/Atman is the total Cause of matter and body, both their reality-providing Cause as well as efficient Cause and hence they do exist either as manifest or unmanifest name and form. What we can do is to discard them as independent reals and affirm their existence as totally dependent on Brahman/Atman and their essence as Brahman/Atman.⁷ The mission of Hinduism is to communicate this gospel and lead people from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality.⁸

The mission of Islam lies in helping people to live a life in accordance with human nature. The proof of the truth of Islam is its conformity to nature. A return to Prophet Muhammad and the Holy Quran is possible for the present day people because their genuine and chief principles are in perfect harmony with nature and reason.⁹ The mission of Islam is adequately summed up in its name. The Arabic word connotes 'submission', 'surrender' and 'obedience'. Islam emphasizes the idea of submission to God. Everything in the universe is Muslim for it obeys God by submission to God's laws.¹⁰ The mission of Islam is to enable the Kafir to become a Muslim. *Kufr* literally means 'to cover' or 'to conceal'. A person who denies God is called a Kafir (concealer) because he/she conceals by his/her disbelief what is inherent in his/her nature. *Kufr* is a form of ignorance, to be ignorant of God, the Creator, and the Lord of the Universe; to fail to find a clue to Reality. Islam helps a Kafir to become a Muslim.¹¹ The word 'Islam' also has another meaning, namely 'peace'. This signifies that one can achieve real peace of body, mind and soul only through submission and obedience to Allah. The mission of Islam is to enable such a life of obedience to establish peace in human heart and in the society at large.¹²

The mission of Primal Religions can be identified in the manifestation of a tribal consciousness of an egalitarian society in which there is community ownership of means of production, distribution according to needs, democratic form of government and consensus in decision-making process.¹³ Further, the mission of Primal Religions lies in proclaiming the sanctity of life and oneness with Nature and the Divine as their basic affirmation. To consider creation, humans and divinity as separate is an idea foreign to the tribal. These are inseparably interrelated; they form one community.¹⁴ The mission of Jainism is to proclaim liberation through a three-fold way of right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. These are the three gems, which have to shine in human life.¹⁵ Non-violence occupies an important place in Jaina understanding of right conduct. It is based on the principle of equality of souls as well as on the principle of reciprocity. Life is

⁷ Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *The Relevance of Relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1996).

⁸ *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 1.3.28.

⁹ L. Bevan Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988), 206-7.

¹⁰ Abul Ala Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam* (Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami, 1979), 2-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Nirmal Minz, "Dalit-Tribal: A Search for Common Ideology" in *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul, 1990), 105-6.

¹⁴ A Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Tradition in North East India* (Jorhat: ETC, 1991), 21-22.

¹⁵ Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1968), 103-9.

precious. One should even not think or speak of taking life or encourage others to take life.¹⁶ It is also the mission of Jainism to uphold the standpoint of Pluralism in theology of religions through the theory of Syadvada (Relative Predications), a theory well developed at least by 6th c. CE.¹⁷

The accommodating spirit and missionary zeal of Mahayana Buddhism is well known. This school upholds the concern which Buddha himself had for the salvation of all beings. The ideal of *Bodhisattva*, which is the goal of the followers of this school, stands for the attainment of perfect wisdom with a view to being able to lead all beings out of misery. Love and wisdom constitute the essence of Bodhisattva's existence. The Bodhisattva ideal is based on the philosophy of the unity of all beings and in terms of it, nirvana or liberation is conceived as within the world and not away from it.¹⁸ The mission of Sikhism is to help in the realization of Truth and the attainment of the beatific vision. This goal is attainable through a sustained process of spiritual discipline and experience. The discipline lies in the annihilation of ego through an unqualified acceptance of the Divine Will and imploring of the grace of the Lord in loving devotion.¹⁹

Only from such an understanding of the mission of God can we come down to an understanding of the mission of God as revealed in Jesus. The good news of God in Jesus may have many aspects of meaning, which the Christians may not yet have come across. Other religions can help them to arrive at such meanings. Only such a reformulated gospel can be a universal gospel, which transcends meaningless sectarian assertions. So a new role of Christian mission is in the very struggle of conceiving the meaning of the gospel of God in Jesus, before the communication of that gospel to others.²⁰

The process of hermeneutics or understanding and interpretation is very important. Hermeneutical context decides the content of the gospel and what Christian mission is. It is the hermeneutical context or the contextual socio-politico-religio-cultural realities which decide the content of our knowledge and experience of the gospel as well as what our mission should be. Knowledge is formulated in the very knowing process and understanding the gospel of God in Jesus and Christian mission is a continuous integrated non-dual divine-human process. Nothing is pre-given or pre-formulated. We cannot accept some timeless interpretation from somewhere and make it applicable to our context. Understanding and interpretation belongs exclusively to us, to our context, and there is the possibility for the emergence of new meanings of the gospel in this process.²¹

In other words, in the exposition of the relation between gospel and cultures as well as mission and cultures, we have to go beyond the standpoint of Inculturation, Indigenization or Contextualization can imply the following misconceptions: the gospel is external and alien to us; revising the language of the unchanging Gospel is what is needed; there is a

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ K. P. Aleaz, *The Harmony of Religions*, 182-86.

¹⁸ Satischandra Chatterjee and Dharendra Mohan Datta, 153-60.

¹⁹ Cf. G. S. Randhawa, *Guru Nanak's Japuji [Text, Translation and Study]* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1990); Sher Singh, *Philosophy of Sikhism* (Amritsar, 1986).

²⁰ K.P. Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion*, 292-93.

²¹ K.P. Aleaz, *Religions in Christian Theology* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2001), 295.

dichotomy between message and context; we can judge our religious traditions from inside and those of others from outside; we can artificially make indigenous that which is not indigenous; Christian gospel which is foreign has to be translated in each country; and God the Creator is a foreigner in one's own country and culture. Such a perspective of Inculturation has its basis in Inclusivism in theology of religions. There is a need to go beyond the approach of Inclusivism to that of Pluralistic Inclusivism.²²

How can we understand the gospel of God in Jesus and Christian mission in relation to the gospel and mission of other religious faiths? Jesus through his person and function affirms the centrality of the Creator God Brahman/ Atman, to whom he was submitting his will, life, totally. He stood for the annihilation of ego through an unqualified acceptance of the Divine Will and imploring of the grace of God in loving devotion. The total love and total self-sacrifice of Jesus was the affirmation of the One Supreme Reality, the Creator God. Jesus through his life showed us the path of total submission, self-surrender to God and thus affirmed the reality of the Supreme Brahman who is simultaneously our Innermost Reality, Atman. He re-presents to us the Atman's pervasion, illumination and the unification of all the levels and layers of our personality as well as the whole creation.²³ Also, through his life and ministry he affirmed the integral relation that exists between humans, creation and the Divine.²⁴ Again, he upheld the principles of non-violence as well as love and wisdom to lead all beings out of misery. He affirmed Pluralism and the unity of all beings through his life and ministry. Christian mission involves in sharing such a person and function of Jesus with others through our experience and life.

In conclusion we wish to point out that in such a reconceived understanding of the gospel and Christian mission we uphold all the liberative resources of other religious faiths. The religious resources of all living faiths are the common property of humanity. They are for the mutual enrichment and growth of all. If in the name of mission, Christian imperialists have attempted to destroy local religions and cultures, and some of the Christian missionaries and thinkers have misinterpreted the teachings and practices of other religions, the first step in Christian mission therefore has to be to seek forgiveness for the damage done. Then comes the receiving of the liberative resources of other religious faiths in the very understanding and experience of the gospel and Christian mission.

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²² *Ibid.*, 295-96.

²³ Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1997).

²⁴ K.P. Aleaz, *Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2004), 127-46.

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