

Christian Mission in Asia Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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Edinburgh 1910 has marked a paradigm shift in the modern ecumenical movement in its understanding of mission. There is now a certain theological consensus that mission is always God's mission (*missio Dei*). Yet this theological consensus could not prevail in the church in its practice of mission. Historical instances are not at all scarce to highlight the fact that over the centuries the churches and their missionary societies have misused and abused the practice of mission in and through their complicity with capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and even with terrorism. This indisputable fact of Christian mission could aptly be described as *mission-in contradiction* and *missionizing* rather than as *missio Dei*.

The reality of religious pluralism in all its multifarious dimensions and complexity plays a crucial role in Christian missional engagement and the theological task in Asia. This is inevitable. For instance, in his interpretation of the *Critical Asian Principle*, Emerito Nacpil identifies Asia as "the home of some of the world's living and renascent religions" which "have shaped both the culture and consciousness of the vast majority of Asians." Roy Pape reiterates religion as one of the formative factors or sources of Christian theology.

Lessons from the Past

We shall look into the Raja Ram Mohan Roy – Joshua Marshman Controversy (India) and the Panadura Debate (Sri Lanka) of the nineteenth century.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy – Joshua Marshman Controversy (1820s)

Mohan Roy's contributions to religion, theology and societal transformation are far-reaching. No wonder, he is recognized as "the first Indian to have written seriously and extensively on Christian theological themes." He is the founder of the Brahma Samaj. He is honored as "the pioneering Hindu social reformer," "the morning star of the Indian renaissance," "the prophet of Indian nationalism," "the Father of modern India," "the Father of Indian journalism," etc. He was thoroughly acquainted with the teachings and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Unitarianism and Christianity. He had the benefit of western education. He was influenced by rationalism. He had to be an unwilling witness of the *sati* of his brother's wife in 1811. This incident was the turning point in his life and a paradigm shift in his thinking, compelling him to commit himself to the cause of abolishing this and similar abuses and evils perpetuated in the name of Hinduism.

Mohan Roy made a critical analysis of Hindu teachings and practices and concluded that it was popular Hinduism which caused and perpetuated social evils such as the *sati*. According to him, whereas popular Hinduism is untenable, Upanishadic Hinduism continues to be orthodox, authentic, credible and tenable. He pleaded for outright rejection of polytheism and idolatry advocated by popular Hinduism and for the recognition of a monotheistic faith with its emphasis on the unity of God based on the Upanishadic teachings. Of course, the influence of Islam in the development of his thought process was remarkable.

Mohan Roy was committed to the cause of reforming the Hindu society contaminated by the “dream of error” of popular Hinduism. He found the moral teachings of Jesus, as found in the Gospel accounts of the Sermon on the Mount, capable of reforming Hindu society of its evils. He published a booklet entitled *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, containing extracts of Jesus’ sermons and parables from the Gospels. By publishing the booklet, he was seeking the support and solidarity of the Hindu intellectuals in effecting the reform process. For him, Jesus was undoubtedly the moral teacher par excellence.

Joshua Marshman, one of the Baptist missionary trio of Serampore, reacted sharply to the publication of the booklet and its goal. In his review of the booklet, he remarked that the publication of a part of the Gospel “may greatly injure the cause of truth.” In his analysis, Roy Pape comments that Marshman was very harsh in his critique of the booklet because Mohan Roy omitted two aspects of the then missionary theology. They are:

- i Jesus is the full and final revelation of God by virtue of his incarnation; and
- ii Jesus is the only saviour from sin by virtue of his vicarious sacrifice on the cross in Calvary.

Mohan Roy discerned no problem for him personally to believe in Jesus’ virgin birth, miracles, etc. but in the context of popular Hinduism, such a presentation would make Jesus just another magician and miracle man, and thereby India would miss the teachings it needed for its moral reform. Unfortunately, Marshman missed the point and therefore the controversy continued. Both Marshman and Mohan Roy continued to bring out a few publications one after another in support of their respective positions.

C.F. Andrews described the controversy as “ungracious and short-sighted”. Sophia Dobson Collet was of the view that Marshman sustained his dogmatism because of his understanding of the doctrine of Atonement in its harshest form, regarding “that alone as ‘the Gospel.’” Russell Chandran commented: “The controversy ... became unpleasant mainly because of the attitude taken by Marshman and the other missionaries that those who interpreted Christ differently from their interpretation were enemies of the Gospel. In some ways that controversy drove Ram Mohan Roy further away from Christianity than he would have been otherwise.”

The Ram Mohan Roy – Joshua Marshman Controversy raises a few issues.

First, how far is Marshman’s insistence that all should begin from the Christ event as traditionally interpreted by Christianity, in terms of the birth, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, tenable and valid? While this insistence has traditionally been recognized as the orthodox position, we have instances in India of people beginning their discipleship of Christ from other starting points. For instance, Narayan Vaman Tilak and Nehemiah Goreh started their pilgrimage from the Sermon on the Mount. Yet they, in the process, embraced Jesus as Saviour. Although Pandita Rama Bai and Mathura Nath Bose began their pilgrimage from the Brahma Samaj, the teachings of the Teacher led them to the Teacher himself. It is worth recalling Manilal C. Parekh’s experience of Christ given the fact that his pilgrimage also started from the Brahma Samaj.

Second, the package deal of Marshman deserves reconsideration. His package deal amounts to saying either you take the whole Scripture or leave it out completely. What is the authority of the Bible? What role does it play in the midst of other scriptures?

Third, Mohan Roy had his own understanding of the uniqueness of Christ, namely Jesus as the ethical teacher par excellence. He regarded *the* precepts of Jesus as *the* guide to peace and happiness. Although it was different from the traditional Christian affirmation, Roy took his discipleship of Christ seriously. Yet he did not belong to the church nor was the church prepared to receive him into its membership. Although his position was not recognized as orthodox by the church, he was engaged in orthopraxis, actualizing moral reform in Hindu society. This calls for a reconsideration of the traditional notions of the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy and membership in the church.

Fourth, in his survey of “what the Indian Church has thought and said in dialogic response to the leaders of Neo-Hinduism... [on their] understanding of Christ and Christianity”, M.M. Thomas aptly comments: “The acknowledgement of Christ in India, whether by Hindu leaders or by Christian men, is no doubt partial and very inadequate.”

Last, although Mohan Roy identified Jesus’ ethical teachings as the only guide for reforming the Hindu society, he did not envisage the abolition of Hinduism. In fact, he wanted to actualize a synthesis or a compromise between his understanding of the Upanishadic view of the oneness and the unity of God and the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. His leading role in founding the Brahma Samaj has to be seen in this direction.

The Panadura Debate 1873

The debate between Migettuwatta Gunananda, a Buddhist priest, and David de Silva, a Methodist minister, is popularly known as the Panadura Debate 1873. The topic of the debate was no soul (*anatta*) or soul. Both of them argued and counter-argued from their respective faith perspectives without being sensitive to the faith perspective of the other. Whereas Gunananda maintained the Buddhist position that there is no soul, de Silva insisted the Christian position that the soul is eternal. At the end of the debate, it was concluded that the Christian side miserably failed.

What still comes to mind is the polemical attitude and the exclusivist position of the missionary theology. A brief reference to the contribution of Lynn de Silva will further clarify the issues of the Panadura Debate. He was one of the most creative pioneers in Buddhist-Christian dialogue relations. His theological contribution in the Buddhist context has helped to move toward healing the wounds of the Panadura Debate and to press forward. He links *anatta* (no-soul) with *pneuma* (spirit), and says that to be filled with the spirit is to be emptied, that is, to be of no soul. He points out that the immortality of the soul is a Platonic concept and not a Christian one. He constructs a theological anthropology, emphasizing resurrection. He writes:

We advance towards this goal [of direct and indubitable awareness of God] by overcoming self-centeredness - the egocentric notion of “I,” “me,” “mine” Progressive sanctification is, for the Christian, an alternative to the theology of rebirth. If *anatta* is real there cannot be natural survival. To affirm the continuity

of one's own karmic force or memory contradicts the truth of *anatta*. If *anicca* [impermanence] and *anatta* are real, there can be nothing in us that can survive death. Survival is possible only if God creates a new being. This is what resurrection means. Resurrection is most meaningful in the context of *Tilakkhana* [the Three Signata] There is nothing in one, however noble, which does not bear the marks of *anicca*, *dukkha* [suffering], and *anatta* in the strictest sense of the words. Thus the doctrine of resurrection is wholly in keeping with the doctrine of *anatta*.

Lynn de Silva's theological contribution is indeed a breakthrough in Buddhist-Christian dialogue relations. His articulation of theological concepts provides a radically new and imaginative direction for Sri Lankan theology in the context of Theravada Buddhism.

Compulsions of the Present

The issue of conversion - forcible conversion - unethical conversion is raised time and time again in Sri Lanka. A critical analysis will illustrate the fact that what is at stake is not a religious issue but a political issue. The real issue is not conversion but communalism. It needs to be reiterated that the language of Sinhala and the nation of Sri Lanka have become and continue to be integrally linked with the religion of Buddhism. They have become an integral design. Fundamentalism and communalism strengthen and support each other. As a result, politicization of religion, communalization of politics and criminalization of public or civil life have become the order of the day.

Although the need for interfaith dialogue in and for community and the concern of religious communities for mutual witness have been widely recognized in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan theology cannot help being sensitive to the reactions coming from certain Buddhist quarters. Some Buddhists point out that having failed in their missionary activities, Christians now use "dialogue as a tool to break down the mental resistance of the Buddhists and lure the unwary among them into the Christian fold." Their assertion is self-explanatory: "Dialogue is a subtle invitation to the 'heathen' fly to walk into the parlour of the 'Christian spider'." The other side of the Buddhist reactionary attitude has also serious implications. Characterizing the significance of the independence of Sri Lanka from the British colonial power in 1948 as the pivotal point, they state that Christians are "now trying to curry favour with the Buddhists" because Christians have lost the privileges and the prestige of the colonial era since independence. The Buddhist assertion is unambiguous: "Christians are now trying to kiss the hand they failed to cut off."

It is worth recalling the mission of Arumuga Navalar as well. Just as the Buddhist tradition of linking Buddhism, Sinhala and Sri Lanka together and parallel to it, his thinking linked together Saivism, Tamil and Jaffna. His sustained efforts to revamp Saivite Hinduism demonstrated that Hinduism was not prepared to lag behind Christianity in polemics.

Mention may be made of the Indian discussion on secularism, pseudo-secularism, etc. Misuse and abuse of religion have become quite normal.

Directions for Christian Mission Today and Tomorrow

What is the nature and goal of Christian mission? What are the directions with which we press on in Christian mission?

Recognising Christian mission as part of the whole - making mission of God is pertinent. Christians do not have the monopoly of God's mission. This humbles us to understand ourselves as People of God in the midst of the Peoples of God, and our scripture in the midst of scriptures. Ours is a mission in the midst of missions. Recognition of such a pluralism is called for. What may be more helpful is the formation of a confederation of religions to fight against the misuse and abuse of religions and for the eradication of the Third-Worldness of Asia.

God's mission has to deal with the brokenness of this world. Wounds have to be healed. Sri Lanka is often identified as a broken palmyrah. The notion of broken palmyrah is a symbol of hopelessness, lifelessness and death. Can the Christian mission be a sign and symbol of hope against hope? Inspiring, challenging and leading people to live out a life of symbiosis is Christian mission today. Christian mission cannot but negate the broken palmyrah and affirm symbiosis. Symbiotic life needs to be the goal of mission in Asia today and tomorrow.

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