

## **APerspective of Holistic Mission from Sri Lanka**

Arulampalam Stephen<sup>1</sup>

---

Mark 1:14-15 says that Jesus was sent by God to proclaim the mission or reign of God. John 20:20 says that Jesus also sent his disciples to fulfill the mission of God. Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya says in his publication, "Church Mission and Kingdom", that the responsibility of the church is to proclaim the mission and vision of God. Indian theologian Dyanson Kiass makes the point that the mission of God is equal to the reign of God. Luke 4:18-21 explains the holistic mission of Jesus. On the one hand, we are called by God to fulfill this mission in our contexts. On the other hand, we face some obstacles in fulfilling this mission. Therefore I feel that a shift is necessary in our thinking and actions in order to fulfill holistic mission.

### **From Church-Centered Thinking to the Reign of God**

In Sri Lanka, for over 500 years, we were under the colonial masters. The Gospel was brought to our country by those in power and authority. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, missionary movements identified some continents where they could proclaim their power - e.g. Asia, Africa and Latin America. They also used certain instruments to fulfill their task - e.g. education, health and social service. Indian theologian K. M. Pannikar draws a parallel between Vasco de Gama, who captured territories, and the missionaries, who captured the minds of the people who inherited those territories. In the light of these statements, it can be understood that the missionaries did not so much carry out the mission of God but rather their own perception of the mission of God, which was colored by their identities.

This mentality did not permit them to fulfill the holistic mission of God. Also, the missionaries did not introduce the historical Jesus who lived in Nazareth 2000 years ago, but rather the Christ of the denominations that came out of their home countries. This divided Christ presented by the missionaries was a barrier to fulfill the values of the reign of God. Bishop Azariah cried out at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, "Missionaries, you have given your bodies to be buried in our lands, you have shown your love for us, but you have failed to show us the Jesus who lived in Nazareth." This statement shows us that the missionaries did not proclaim the reign of God, but rather the reign of the Church.

Another Indian theologian, Chakkarai, asked the missionaries, "Go back" to Rome, Geneva and Wittenberg with your denominations.

The time has come to move towards the unity of the church but this alone is not enough as the time has also come to proclaim the wider ecumenism of the reign of God.

Tissa Balasuriya states in his book, "Without help of the Church, the kingdom or reign of God can exist." In other words, with the participation of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims,

---

<sup>1</sup> Arulampalam Stephen is a priest of the Church of Ceylon, Diocese of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

the reign of God can exist. He further says that on the reign of God there is no sacred place, no unique time, no unique book. That is to say that not all members of the Church are part of the reign of God and consciously some outside the Church are evident members of the kingdom or reign of God. These statements indicate that the Church should now be ready to move away from church-centered thinking to reign of God thinking, so that we can fulfill the holistic mission of God.

### **From conversion to conversation**

Sri Lankan theologian Wesley Ariarajah, in his book, *Not without My Neighbor*, says, "To fulfill our holistic mission the Church should be ready to move from conversion to conversation with other living faiths."

Aloysius Peiris, the Sri Lankan Roman Catholic theologian, uses the image that while Buddhism and Hinduism took root in the soil of Sri Lanka, Christianity was like a helicopter that has landed on its soil.

Another theologian speaks of the necessity of identifying and understanding the "otherness" of others. Once again this highlights the importance of other faiths. In *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, Wesley Ariarajah points out that both Buddhism and Hinduism existed in Sri Lanka before the introduction of Christianity and that God would have spoken to people through these two religions and cultures.

Richard Niebuhr, in *Gospel and Culture*, emphasizes that for a Christian it is not to convert a Buddhist or a Hindu to Christianity but to convert them to become a better Buddhist or a better Hindu. D. T. Niles, the Sri Lankan theologian, in "Sir, we want to see Jesus", speaks of the need to identify the God who is already out there amongst the people of other faiths before we preach the Gospel.

All these reflections point to the importance of conversation as compared to conversion. However, when we converse or have dialogue with men and women of the other religions, we cannot forget other religions. In our Asian context, there are those who still believe that outside the church there is no salvation. This is not a sufficient approach. An "inclusive pluralism" is a more suitable approach in our Asian societies. Immediately after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed that there is salvation outside the Church.

Lyn de Silva, another Sri Lankan theologian, says that religion should create space for the growth and development of other religions. In 2003 an Anti-Conversion Bill was presented to the Sri Lankan Parliament. This created many tensions between Buddhists and Christians in the South and between Hindus and Christians in the North of the country. Several pastors were physically attacked and churches damaged. In Sri Lanka, "conversation" would seem a better option than "conversion" and it would help to minimize tensions between communities and reduce violence.

However, we cannot forget the statement that Stephen Neil made at the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975 about the uniqueness of Christ. It is always a danger that

when we practice conversation and dialogue, we tend to push the uniqueness of Christ into the background. This is an ongoing theological struggle.

### **From Christo-Centric to Theo-Centric thinking**

Albert Schweitzer, in the book, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, reminds that the Jesus who lived in Nazareth had given an important place to God or Theos during his life and ministry. Rudolph Bultmann in *New Testament Theology* speaks of the New Testament writers as having given emphasis to the "Christ of faith" rather than the "Jesus of history."

Both statements show the important place that Jesus gave to God in his life. Dr. Aloysius Peiris, in his book, *The Cosmic Christ*, speaks of the cosmic Christ who was before Jesus. With a theo-centric position, communicating with people of other religions becomes much easier. In Sri Lanka, following the liberalization of the country which took place in the late 1970's, the influx of younger churches to the country has created many problems with Buddhists and Hindus, giving space to accusations of unethical conversions. This is so because these new churches do not wish to look at kingdom values from a theo-centric perspective.

### **From Personal Salvation to Community Salvation**

In Sri Lanka, we face two major issues: war and poverty. Both disturb the lives of our people. During the December tsunami in 2006, around 35,000 people lost their lives. The civil war has continued over three decades. In 1981 over 60,000 people were killed by the nationalist Marxist party known as the JVP or people's liberation party. In 1995 in Jaffna, because of the military's "Operation Liberation", over 600 youth disappeared. In Killinochchi, some 200 youth disappeared in 1998 during operations. The prevailing situation in Jaffna speaks of about 1070 disappearances or kidnappings. Even in the south, bodies of armed forces and police personnel killed during the war are received daily. The war creates much tension between the communities who live in Sri Lanka. When we look at the plantation sector in the hill country, poverty, unemployment and poor education remain huge problems. In the midst of this difficult situation, the church attempts to act as a mediator and liberator, giving a certain degree of liberty to people. In general, however the church's messages are of personal salvation rather than community salvation. The church finds the task of Samaritan Mission easier to fulfill than working to eliminate the root causes of our problems. These ideologies therefore become barriers to fulfilling the Holistic Mission of the Church.

From the perspective of mission-receiving countries the shifts from church-centered thinking to reign of God thinking, from conversion to conversation, from Christo-centric to Theo-centric thinking, from personal salvation to community salvation, are necessary to fulfill the Holistic Mission of God.