

CHAPTER II
MISSION IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Nature of the Missionary Imperative

Given the prominence missionary endeavors enjoyed in the nineteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising that mission has come to be regarded as a Christian imperative. Victorian church historians frequently traced the history of mission in an unbroken line from the Pentecost experience in which Christ himself commanded the Apostles to spread the Christian message to the formation of the great missionary societies of the late eighteenth century. These historians reflected, in short, the general assumption that the evangelization of the world formed the "Great Commission" of the Christian church.¹ Quite aside from the biblical injunction to "go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every nation" (Mark 16:15), mission formed one logical extension of the Christian belief in the universality of its truths and the responsibility of believers for the whole of mankind. But in practice, mission has historically been less a fundamental principle than a response tempered by specific intellectual and social climates within both the Church and western society. The "imperative" has always been subject to such vagaries as the needs of the state, the condition of the church and the degree to which it met the emotional needs of

¹Eugene Stock, History of the Church Missionary Society, 2 vols. (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899), 2:4-5.

fervent believers. The record of mission has consequently been consistently inconsistent, ranging from periods of fevered enthusiasm to those of indifference or even hostility. Mission, in other words, has been a potential, rather than an inevitable, component of Western

When conditions have in fact favored the "outwardness" that mission requires, there has seldom been any consensus concerning either the precise nature of the Christian message or its presentation. Mission, moreover, requires Christianity to function outside its own historic geographic and cultural boundaries.² In a cultural and spiritual terra incognita, questions of how the message is to be presented, and who is best suited to carry out the work as well as matters of organization and authority, have proved perennially difficult and troubling. The fact that mission often had to operate in close association with expansionist nation states whose goals could hardly be characterized as spiritual has only complicated matters for Christian mission. Faced with multiple unknowns, the only reference points available to "determined Christians" in any age were to be found in their own cultural and intellectual milieus. As these milieus became more complex and diverse so, inevitably, did missionary response to the business of evangelization. Yet even in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Melanesian Mission undertook its effort in the southwest Pacific, many of the dilemmas it faced had always been part of Christian mission. This chapter will delineate those basic intellectual and practical problems.

²Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 15.

The Long View

Despite state persecution visited on Christianity in its earliest years, its early missionary endeavors proved extremely successful. The energy of the new faith, the example of its martyrs, the ease of movement provided by the Pax Romana and the presence, in the empire's Jews, of a core population already well-versed in its basic tenets all facilitated the rapid dissemination of Christianity. In the earliest centuries of the Christian era, anonymous believers carried out missionary activity on an informal basis. By the sixth century, however, the Christian Church had become a highly structured institution capable, even in the chaos following the dissolution of the Roman Empire, of undertaking the "Great Commission" of Christian mission as an organized endeavor.

In 596 A.D., Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) dispatched Augustine [of Canterbury] and a party of monks to Britain for the express purpose of converting that island's heathen inhabitants. Interestingly, though the Church's relative strength in this turbulent period has been seen by some scholars as one source of the tendency of believers to equate civilization with Christianity, Gregory's attitude toward the culture of those potential converts was remarkably accommodating.³ Having enjoined Augustine to utilize existing temples as places of worship and provide Christian festivals in exchange for pagan sacrificial celebrations, he urged a patient, graduated approach. "It is doubtless impossible to cut off all abuses at once from rough hearts, just as

³⁷Ibid., p. 66.

the man who sets out to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds but goes upward step by step and pace by pace."⁴

Within a century, Christianity in Britain became established and standardized to such a degree that the English church would be the great missionary church of the so-called Dark Ages; a point of considerable interest to mission-minded High Church Anglicans in the nineteenth century. This effort depended largely on the work of dedicated monks working alone among the pagans of northern Europe. The most notable example is that of Boniface in Germany, but other English monks evangelized portions of modern Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Stephen Neill, perhaps the most thorough recent historian of mission, maintains that the tradition of accommodation survived intact among these early English missionaries. Living at first alone and then in monastic houses among the peoples they served and from whom they drew recruits for their orders, they sought to transform rather than uproot or destroy the indigenous culture. Neill in fact credits these monks with the preservation of vernacular culture in northern Europe. For while they used Latin for the liturgy, they developed written forms for local languages and continued to use them for literary purposes.⁵

The principle of accommodation, then, whether out of pragmatic necessity or conviction, clearly played a role in the missionary efforts of the early Church. By the eighth century, mission had another, rather less attractive association--mission in conjunction with military

⁴Ibid., p. 68.

⁵Ibid., p. 78.

conquest. The subjugation of the Saxons by Charlemagne consisted in equal parts of armed force and the imposition of religious conformity. This pattern repeated itself with regularity as newly Christian kingdoms gained strength against their barbarian opponents. By the thirteenth century, when the whole of Europe save a few pagan enclaves in the southern and eastern Baltic region had converted, the Order of Teutonic Knights received outright permission to annex any lands of pagans they might conquer with the proviso that they furnish religious instruction by way of "compensation." In other words, the entire construct of Christianity in these areas arrived as an accompaniment to military conquest. Conversion became a matter of command rather than persuasion.⁶

This association with conquest and force characterized mission throughout the Middle Ages. While the revival of trade, an aggressive Islam, and the Crusades forced the societas Christiana of medieval Europe to formulate a more complex view of the unbeliever, that view which emerged did little for the cause of accommodation and patient persuasion. In a culture in which everything ultimately depended on the grace of God and the ministrations of his church, anyone who defied and offended God threatened the very foundations of society. The non-believer, therefore, represented at least a potential threat which, by 1200, was increasingly associated with the aggression of Islam. The association of mission and force is not, in these circumstances, altogether surprising. It remained, with many refinements, a persistent

⁶Ibid., pp. 112-113.

element in the history of mission. Some scholars of mission indeed see in the Iberian conquests of the New World the continuation of the medieval crusade.⁷

The final failure of force in the Crusades, however, also stimulated a more thoughtful consideration of mission in the medieval period. By the thirteenth century, three approaches to mission as an avenue of peaceful conversion were discernible. Each of these approaches held particular appeal for one or the other of the monastic orders which continued to be the mainstay of mission activity. The philosophical approach assumed that educated non-Christians would accept Christianity once they were presented with rational truths. This assumption was itself a response to increased exposure to educated Jewish and Muslim populations possessing at least some cultural commonality with Christendom. The Dominican order found the philosophical approach particularly congenial. The apocalyptic view saw mission as an essential condition for the imminent end of the world. Miraculous wholesale conversion fulfilled one of the biblical conditions for the end of history. Finally, the Franciscan order sought to teach the non-believer by the example of personal spiritual perfection how to prepare for the Last Judgement. That example included martyrdom which figured prominently in Franciscan mission.⁸

⁷Owen Chadwick, The Reformation (London: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 322-23. Also see Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980).

⁸E. Randolph Daniel, The Franciscan Concept of Mission in the High Middle Ages (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), pp. 5-22.

At the onset of European expansion in the late fifteenth century, then, certain features of Christian mission were already in place. These included both the association of mission with the state and military conquest and the older tradition of mission as independent function of the Church and, more particularly, of certain monastic orders. In the latter case, persuasion through Christian example and reason, patience and cultural accommodation had all, from time to time, formed part of the methodology of mission. The discovery of the New World, however, portended dramatic developments for Christian mission both in terms of scale and intellectual complexity. However significant early Christian and medieval mission may have been in defining basic issues, the effort was undeniably desultory and sporadic. With the new awareness of the sheer numbers of lost souls and their new accessibility, mission, in some quarters of Christendom, assumed the aspect of a religious emergency, requiring new dimensions of organization and training. The crisis was met in part by expanded use of the traditional tools of mission: the creation of new monastic orders, the Jesuits and the Capuchins, and the reliance on an expansionist state to assume responsibility for the dissemination of the Christian message.⁹

But by the early seventeenth century, the papacy was clearly aware that mission had grown to the point that it required the guidance and direction of the institutional church. Previously, it had been designated the responsibility of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns.

⁹Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America, p. 42.

Hence, in 1622, the Church, for the first time in centuries, formally addressed itself to the question of mission when Pope Gregory XV created the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide [The Propaganda]. The Propaganda was composed of a congregation of thirteen cardinals, two prelates, and a secretary. It provided missionary training and a missionary press and, equally important, sought to make Rome and the Papacy the principal authority for Christian mission. The Church now sought, in short, to develop through The Propaganda some consistency and continuity in mission policy. Prior to the foundation of the Propaganda, that policy had varied with the degree of interest of the papal incumbent, Portuguese and Spanish colonial polity and the predilections of particular monastic orders.¹⁰

Under the Propaganda's first secretary, Francesco Ingoli, mission policy reflected elements of the ancient vision of mission as an independent, essentially spiritual endeavor. Ingoli sought, for example, to disassociate mission from the Spanish and Portuguese colonial enterprise by increasing the number of colonial bishoprics and staffing them with clerics more closely associated with Rome. Of even greater interest is his commitment to the development of an indigenous clergy. "The Christian faith," he wrote, "must be delivered from those colonial associations which condemned it to be everywhere and in permanence a foreign religion."¹¹

¹⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, 7 vols. (New York: Harper, 1937-45), 3 (1939):20-38.

¹¹ Neill, Christian Mission, p. 79.

The effectiveness of the Propaganda in determining the character of mission was, however, limited from the outset by the close association of mission and colonial conquest. The Portuguese and Spanish crowns retained the right to build churches, administer ecclesiastical revenues, submit candidates for colonial church offices, and veto papal bulls pertaining to the colonies not previously approved by the state. In effect, this meant that every missionary cleric, from bishop to priest, was a crown-approved appointment, largely dependent on the crown for financial support. Only dogma and doctrine remained the exclusive domain of the church. In other respects, the Iberian colonial clergy functioned as crown officials, and it was the crown's wishes that ultimately determined mission policy.¹² Catholic mission throughout the early centuries of European expansion was thus characterized by considerable discrepancy between mission policy and theory as formulated by Propaganda and mission practice in the field.

The tension between the interests of the state and Church's mission ideal was not the only source of this discrepancy. The Christian ideals of universality and human equality now had to contend with heathen so radically different that they could be contemplated and absorbed, in cultural and even psychological terms, only with the greatest of difficulty by those who encountered them. Certainly the Iberian missionary record in the New World and elsewhere suggests as much. The controversy over the creation of an indigenous clergy provides

¹²C. R. Boxer, The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion, 1440-1770 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 79.

an instructive example. The development of indigenous clergy had not only been the historical practice of the Church but was, as we have seen, the official position of the Propaganda. In practice, too, there were no initial barriers to the recruitment of indigenous peoples for clerical training. A number of Africans, for example, received training for the priesthood in Lisbon, and one was even consecrated titular bishop of Utica in 1518.¹³ In the New World, the College of Santiago de Tlateloco, founded in 1536, aimed at the education of the sons of Aztec aristocracy and a few mestizos with the view of admitting the best pupils to minor orders and perhaps even the priesthood.¹⁴ As late as the mid-seventeenth century, the papacy appointed one Matthew de Castro, a Brahman convert from Goa, to fill the new position of vicar apostolic.¹⁵

But the perception of "the other" as different and inferior was present from the earliest days of contact as well. The Indians of the New World were dismissed by the fifteenth century Spanish historian, Oviedo y Valdes, as ". . . naturally lazy and vicious, melancholic, cowardly and in general a lying, shiftless people . . . they are idolatrous, libidinous and commit sodomy."¹⁶ In fairly short order, this sense of the indigenous peoples of the colonial world as different

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵The position of vicar apostolic involved ecclesiastic supervision of colonial territories with direct responsibility to the Papacy rather than the Crown. Neill, History of Christian Mission, p. 101.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 171.

and inferior was formalized even in the church which proclaimed the equality of their immortal souls. In 1544, in Mexico, the head of the Dominican order insisted on the unfitness of Indians for the priesthood. For most of the colonial period, Indians in Latin America were effectively barred from taking orders.¹⁷ The Portuguese record on indigenous clergy remained marginally better, but in Africa the intensification of the slave trade gave increased prominence to the color bar.¹⁸ The small number of Indian clergy in Goa were confined to minor orders, and the consecration of an Indian bishop did not occur until 1923.¹⁹

This reluctance to share sacerdotal status with non-European peoples even several generations after their initial conversion supports C. R. Boxer's contention that European missionaries in the early centuries of expansion were ". . . by and large, predisposed to consider themselves the bearers not merely of a superior religion but a superior culture."²⁰ Yet in the same period, the contemplation of alerity produced among some missionaries responses far more complex than a mere nod to the fundamental sameness of the indigenous soul. Out of his love for the New World Indians he served, the Spanish priest, Bartolome de Las Casas, approached a cultural relativism in which individuals were seen in relation to their own values rather than in

¹⁷Boxer, The Church Militant, pp. 16-17. ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 2-14.

¹⁹Neill, History of Christian Mission, p. 183.

²⁰Boxer, The Church Militant, p. 40.

terms of a single ideal. Thus in his famous defense in 1550 of the Indian practice of human sacrifice he argued that sacrifice as an expression of the love of God shared by all men was part of natural law. Its form and practice varied from culture to culture, but the instinct was universal. Las Casas could respond to "the other," not just with equality of identity but equality of perspective.²¹

Las Casas's response was unusually complex, but it was not altogether unique. Witness the rather astonishing instructions issued by the Propaganda to missionaries in the field in 1655:

Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain or Italy or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them but only the faith which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people, always supposing them preserved unharmed. It is the nature of men to love and treasure above everything else their own country and that which belongs to it. In consequence there is no stronger cause for alienation and hate than an attack on local customs. . . . This is more especially the case when an attempt is made to introduce the customs of another people in the place of those which have been abolished. Do not draw invidious contrasts between the customs of the peoples and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them.²²

In at least one mission--one, interestingly, outside the Iberian sphere--this adaptive approach was put into practice. The French Jesuits who served the Indians of eastern Canada in the seventeenth century saw in Indian culture enough "moral consciousness" to convince

²¹Todorov, The Conquest of America, pp. 188-92.

²²Neill, History of Christian Mission, p. 179.

them that the indigenous culture could provide the foundation of a native Christianity. The fathers actively sought to disassociate the Christian message from the trappings of European culture and find, by living with the Indians in their own manner, meaningful reference points for conveying that message.²³ In the process, they came to see Indian religious practice, including the concept of a spirit realm that occasionally impinged on the world of the senses, as a real, if incomplete, phenomenon. Their appeal to the Indians centered on the belief that what they offered bore certain metaphysical similarities to existing concepts. The Jesuits' ability to take this view had its origins in their own Counter-Reformation experience. In their reaffirmation of Catholicism, they fully credited traditional spiritual values, including the belief in the manifestation of the non-corporeal to individuals in this world. There was therefore little theological logic in denying the Indians they hoped to convert the perception of the unseen world so vital to their cultural existence. That perception could be retained albeit from a different vantage point. Simply put, these fervent Christians who themselves believed in visions could concede the reality of Indian visions.²⁴

By the eighteenth century, the energies of Catholic mission had dissipated. The decline reflects both an unfavorable climate for mission within the church itself and the waning power of the Iberian empires.

²³James T. Moore, Indian and Jesuit (Loyola University Press, 1982), pp. 41-58.

²⁴Ibid., p. 104.

But the failure to develop an indigenous clergy, the insistence on Latin for the liturgy, and the general persistence, with important exceptions, of the view that "the faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith"²⁵ also limited the ability of local populations to absorb the new religion.

On the whole, in the first wave of mission enthusiasm precipitated by European expansion, militancy and cultural aggression formed the most common pattern for mission. It must be noted, however, that practically every approach to mission, including adaptation and accommodation, had a hearing.²⁶ Advocates of alternatives to militant, state-supported mission were to be found not only among individual missionaries in the field but within the official hierarchy of the Church. It would appear, then, that even in an era usually characterized as expansionist and aggressive, European culture and European religion retained at least the possibility of recognizing the reality of "the other" and defining Christianity in something other than strictly European terms.

Protestantism and Mission

Thus when John Coleridge Patteson as missionary bishop of Melanesia in the nineteenth century decried "the importing of our own ideas into their [Melanesian] peculiar circumstances . . . a great mistake and

²⁵Boxer, The Church Militant, p. 40.

²⁶Neill, History of Christian Mission, pp. 203-207.

an excessively common one,"²⁷ he expressed a persistent intellectual tradition in the history of Christian mission. The appeal of this position and its translation into mission practice depended on both the character and historical circumstances of individual missionaries. In the case of the Melanesian Mission those circumstances included the peculiar development of Protestant mission.

For most of the first two centuries of European expansion Protestant Christianity exhibited little interest in the Great Commission. In the early years of the Reformation its struggle for survival left little time for such ventures. Nor were the Protestant states of northern Europe, in an age which saw mission as a state responsibility, involved with the larger world in the same sense as Spain and Portugal. While their rulers were willing enough to accept responsibility for the spiritual condition of their own subjects, they had neither the resources nor the inclination to extend their concern to non-Christians elsewhere. In its theology, too, Protestantism initially placed little stress on mission. Luther himself maintained that the injunction to preach the gospel to all the world only applied to the original apostles and that the imminent end of the world made mission a moot point in any case. Some extreme Calvinists regarded mission as a highly questionable activity in that it could be seen as an interference with the predestined fate of souls. Personnel constituted another barrier in that Protestantism banished from its sphere

²⁷Patteson Papers, SPG Collection, 1861, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. Australian National University, microfilm.

the monastic orders which had traditionally provided the organizational base of mission.²⁸ For these and other reasons, Protestant mission remained a marginal enterprise until the end of the eighteenth century when the Pietist movement in Germany and the Methodist revival in England found in it an appropriate expression of Christian zeal. Where it did exist it followed the established model of close association with the state or the trading company. Dutch clergymen charged with the spiritual welfare of Dutch citizens overseas, for example, functioned as salaried civil servants who received a cash bonus for each indigene they managed to baptize.²⁹

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, Protestant Christianity by its very nature contained elements of critical importance for the future development of mission. The emphasis placed on the individual religious experience, the greater role given the laity in the community of believers and the diversity of belief in this religious sphere all ultimately influenced the character of Protestant mission. The old hand and glove association of mission and the state, for example, tended, in the absence of religious uniformity in the rising Protestant empires, to disappear. Mission, in the Protestant context, ceased, in fairly short order, to be regarded as the exclusive responsibility of the state or even the clergy and became the concern of the devout laity. As mission evolved into a popular concern, it found itself

²⁸Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, 3, pp. 25-26.

²⁹Neill, History of Christian Mission, p. 224.

subject to a much broader spectrum of influences and could itself, in turn, influence popular perceptions of the larger world.

The lack of any central authority in Protestant mission also furthered its potential for diversity and conflict. There could be no Protestant equivalent of the Propaganda, which whatever its limitations, did provide consistency in training and doctrinal authority for Catholic mission. In the absence of institutional authority, questions of how the Christian message should be preached, who should do so and what in fact constituted the message loomed particularly large in the Protestant mission experience.

The importance Protestantism placed on individual conversion experience led to an indictment of mass or community conversion as superficial. Traditionally, conversions of this sort had been an acceptable, if not completely satisfactory, mark of Christianity. For Protestant mission, the issue of conversion was more complex. The concept of personal religious experience had been predicated on the assumption of at least a nominally Christian society. Could the criterion of individual religious conversion be applied to those with no prior experience of Christianity?³⁰ The Protestant encounter with "the other" was therefore potentially more complex. This complexity stemmed from the demands placed on the individual convert, and the diversity and independence of Protestantism itself. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the missionary history of that most diverse of European Protestant societies, England.

³⁰ Ibid.