

MISSION AND TRADITION

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At the end of Matthew's exposition of the parables of the kingdom is this interesting verse:

Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old' (Mt.13.52).

A missionary theologian attempts to draw on those traditions which help to illuminate and stimulate the work of the kingdom in a particular place. Tradition however is a very mixed bag. Some of the ingredients help. Some hinder. Drawing on tradition is a bit like playing scrabble. You can put your hand in the bag and draw out a letter which makes it even harder to put the rest of your letters down. You do not often draw out 'universal blanks, indeed they do not exist for there is no such thing as 'pure gospel tradition'. Gospel and culture are always muddled up together.

I wish to look at the progress of Christianity through three environments of faith; from pre-modernity, through modernity to post-modernity. In very rough terms the first environment is tribal, hierarchical, communal, and visual. It is reliant on oral transmission and uncritical accepts its own traditions, customs and myths. The second phase, modernity, values reason, fact and democratic ideas. It is very critical of what it regards as myths and superstitions. Here tradition is expressed through books and history. The Western scientific revolution arose during this phase of modernity because of a philosophical separation of 'subject' and object', 'us' and 'them', the material and the spiritual, the real and the ideal. The third phase of post-modernity, which describes our contemporary Western culture, is highly individualistic, distrusts all institutions and has replaced history with nostalgia. It rejects the idea of absolute truth and instead values image, intuition, and sensation.

We in the Protestant West draw our 'tradition' from the Bible and mostly from this second phase, modernity. Important theological questions are arising in the Western Church because our culture is moving into the third phase of post-modernity. On the world stage things are very different. New Christians are emerging from a pre-modern culture. I want us to use this rough categorization to see how tradition contributes negatively and positively to our understanding of the mission of God today.

EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD CHRISTIANITY

In 1893, 80% of the Christians in the world lived in Europe and North America. Now almost 60% of Christians throughout the world live in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. In 1900 there were 10 million African Christians; now there are 400 million, the larger percentage of these being found in the African indigenous Churches. Similarly in Latin America, once the bastion of Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism has transformed the Christian landscape. It has been estimated that by 2050 only about one fifth of the world's three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetime.

We belong to a tradition which assumes that the West is the centre of the Christian world. Indeed Christianity was the Western religion. We now face a situation comparable to that of the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD when the leaders of the mother Church decided to drop most of the traditional Jewish requirements so that non-Jews could become God's people without becoming Jews. We detect in the some of the letters of Paul the problems which arose for the Jerusalem Church as it realised that it could no longer impose its own traditions (circumcision) and authority on the vibrant emerging churches of the Greek and Roman world. Not only was a new strategy required, Paul also attempts to forge a new inclusive theology. This is the challenge which faces us.

I therefore ask, has our Western tradition become an impediment to mission? James Laney in his reflections on Ephesians 2.11-22 says, 'When we look back at the history of the Church, every time we see that the Church has become captive to the dominant identity of its society, every time it has become comfortable with its role in culture, it has lost its universality. With the loss of universality, it has lost the power to create, not merely to evangelize, but also the power to become renewed.'

LOOKING BEYOND THE FIRST WORLD (From pre-modernity to modernity)

The Pentecostal wind is blowing strongly. Already on the world stage, Pentecostalism is the most significant alternative to Roman Catholicism. It has been suggested that Pentecostalism grows because it affirms a traditional Biblical faith, makes real demands of its members and uses the music, symbols and oral traditions of the poor who are attracted to it. Moreover these indigenous Churches from tribal cultures retain their emphasis on the supernatural. Standing on the edges of encroaching modernity they see this new environment both as threat and promise. Further, the migration of people from the rural areas to cities, (i.e. from cultures of pre-modernity to modernity) detaches them from their traditional communities and structures. This sense of anomie (rootless ness) makes them very receptive to any expression of faith which offers a new identity and sense of belonging.

Philip Jenkins in his book, *The Next Christendom*, suggests that along with the Pentecostalists, the Roman Catholic Church can survive and thrive, which we would expect given its emphasis on inculturation and solidarity with the poor. However, says Jenkins, it will do so only in as far as it adopts the conservative tone of African and Latin American Catholicism rather than the

liberal ideas of many Roman Catholics in the Northern hemisphere. But there is also another conservative faith which is even more suspicious of European culture.

In the 1970s, oil-producing nations in the Middle East united to raise significantly the price of oil on the world market. Their economic strength was accompanied by a growing political and religious power, often in opposition to the US and Europe. Islam rose on the tide of a new-found nationalism. The very conditions, described above which make people open to Christianity also makes them receptive to Islam. In some situations Islam is even more attractive because it offers a counter cultural alternative to the globalizing and exploitive tendencies of the rich West which in the imagination of many is still identified with Christianity.

It would seem that the future lies with the theologically conservative. How do we Western liberals respond to such this conservative challenge?

LOOKING AT THE FIRST WORLD (From modernity to post-modernity)

Callum Brown in his book *The Death of Christian Britain* charts the relentless decline of Christian Britain and pours scorn on the facile responses of church leaders who naively think they can reverse the process by changing the ecclesiastical structure or the liturgy. John Drane in his *McDonaldization of the Church* latches onto the post-modern value of 'consumer choice'. Examining some of the so-called 'growing' Churches in Britain, he points out that dissatisfied Christians from the traditional Churches are either leaving or 'shopping-around' for a more lively Church. Membership growth in one Church precipitates a fall of membership in another in an overall saga of decline. The irony is that since the late eighties a new interest in spirituality has swept through Western culture. It has tragically by-passed the churches. This is because we have the secularised church of modernity in the new-age culture of post-modernity.

In his book *Liquid Church*, Pete Ward describes two types of Church; 'solid church' and 'liquid church'. He argues that Western culture is moving to a more fluid form of modernity. Technological innovation, he argues, is now occurring at such an alarming rate that change has become the name of the game. Hitherto, modernity has substituted one solid bureaucracy, institution, set of values, or order of relationships for another. Modernity is now undergoing a liquefying process so that everything is becoming flexible, fuzzy and subject to obsolescence. Our liquid culture has undermined time-honoured values of loyalty to place, tradition and denomination. 'Solid church' has all the features of a heritage site, a refuge and a nostalgic community.

Missiologists speak of 'inculturation'. This process has its source in the theology of the incarnation where the Word assumes the flesh of the culture into which it is incarnated. Inculturation is the process whereby the symbols and traditions of the outside community are appropriated, not uncritically, by the Christian. In most traditional Western Churches, outsiders have to fight their way through a jungle of obsolete Christian cultural trappings to find out about Jesus. In my book, *Into the Far Country* I argue that Churches must free themselves from ecclesiastical mumbo-jumbo and move their centres to the edges. Like the reluctant apostle Peter, in Acts 10, comfortable dwellers in the mainline Churches of Britain are being called to forsake the familiar and enter the uncomfortable world of God's extra-mural activities. God is calling us to ditch a lot of tradition in order to do a similar thing today. I argue in my new book, *Beyond the Box*, that God is calling us to plant 'fresh expressions of Church' in this new soil. The importance of inculturation is still to be recognized in most of our churches where buildings and the inherited traditions of 'solid church' now get in the way of mission.

THE AGE OF VIOLENCE

The four horsemen of the apocalypse are galloping across the planet leaving trails of destruction in their wake. The white horse of imperialism - some would label as American globalisation; the fiery red horse is military invasion and terrorist atrocity; the black horse is plague famine and natural disaster and finally the pale horse is ecological death.

Where does violence come from? The French anthropologist Rene Girard argues that violence had its beginning in Cain. Cain was not only the first murderer; he founded cities to hide in and launched a culture of destruction. This thread of murder runs through the story of humanity, for violence imitates itself and pollutes the earth. There is an extraordinary verse in the story of Cain and Abel which is always mistranslated (Gen.4.8). Read literally it says: 'And Cain said to his brother Abel and it came to pass that when they were in the field Cain arose against his brother Abel and killed him'. The syntax is fractured. Cain said - but the Hebrew text does not say what he said. Conversation ends. Violence begins.

The violence not only fragments humanity it destroys the environment. There are also gender issues at work. In the Genesis account of creation there is hierarchy. We in the rich West, drawing on the tradition of modernity, find the idea of hierarchy politically distasteful. The problem however is not with hierarchy but with exploitation. Hierarchy in the opening chapters of Genesis quickly dissolves into patriarchy. Women become less than men. Woman, like the earth, can be subdued and raped. They become the symbolic terrain on which the struggle for resources is acted out. The exploitation of women, the world of violence and the wounding our planet are all part of the same agenda.

Since 9/11 storm clouds have rolled over the horizons of the rich West. We have entered a new age of violence. The ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia; the bitter cycle of violence between Israel and the Palestinians; the 'war against terrorism'; the military assault on Iraq and the increasing xenophobic colouring of our discussions on immigration are all warning signs of a growing global insecurity. These destructive outpourings can be seen as a negative by-product of the Western civilizing

enterprise. Are we now reaping the consequences of our lack of enthusiasm in pursuing economic justice for all the nations of the earth?

Philip Jenkins in his chilling book *The Next Christendom* suggests that the very expansion of Christianity and Islam across countries and within countries will precipitate more fanatical religious conflicts, creating more ecological disasters. The ever growing depletion of natural resources will certainly fuel such conflicts. Jenkins presents us with a bleak future as Muslims and Christians blunder into new conflicts, and he asks us to imagine what it would be like to live in the world of the thirteenth century where soldiers instead of carrying swords and shields are armed with nuclear warheads and anthrax.

To what extent has the tradition of the church ignored the issue of violence or indeed fed it? Justice for the planet is a recent add-on to the missionary task; can we draw from the riches of tradition a theology which makes mission to the planet a central ingredient rather than an appendix to mission.

RESPONDING

There is a rabbinic comment that when God finished creating he showed Adam all the glories of nature. 'Behold the beauty of this world', he said. 'I am handing it over to you. Be careful that you do not damage it, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend it.'

Those of you who have visited the Sistine chapel will see over the altar Michelangelo's terrifying picture of the last judgment and above on the ceiling nine great panels depict the Genesis story from the creator God to the drunkenness of Noah. It was a moment of illumination when I learnt that Michelangelo did not begin painting God and then moving on through the stages of creation to the deluge. He started with Noah's drunkenness and worked backwards. His was not a story of fall downwards but of recapitulation; of fall-upwards. The Roman Catholic theologian Anne Primavesi wrote a book with the title *From Apocalypse to Genesis*. Christianity usually looks back to the day of creation and onward to the day of Judgment. She reverses the direction. Apocalypse is now, the future is Genesis.

The entire cosmos, so the Hebrews believed, stood on two pillars: a pillar of justice and a pillar of righteousness (Ps.97.2). If a crack appeared in either, the ecological system would become unbalanced (Ps.82). If a serious rupture occurred, then the primal chaotic waters, which in Hebrew mythology were held back by the dome of the heavens and fabric of the earth, would pour in to destroy all life. This is what happened in the flood (Gen.7.11). But there is a rainbow sign which suggests that Apocalypse can become Genesis.

When I bring the clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh (Gen.9.14-15).

Partnership in God and with God is expressed in the Bible through covenants. A covenant is an arrangement whereby two or more partners bind themselves to each other for their mutual benefit. In this first covenant all are called to be partners and co-creators with God in the priestly task of making justice, renewing relationships and protecting God's planet. Made in God's image, all women and men become partners with God in an 'ecological mission'. We are to 'go forth' and 'bring forth' a new world. The Church's mission is ecological and relational which is what one might expect if we are truly made in the image of the God the creator who is Trinity.

Noah seeing a rainbow sign above the desolate landscape had a glimpse into the heart of God. The Hebrew word qesheth, 'bow of war', occurs many times in the Old Testament but it is used only here and in Ezekiel 1, 28 to describe the 'rainbow'. This sign suggests that God will never again loose his bow against the world and reduce it to chaos. But the war bow now points upwards, as it were, into the heart of God. God risks himself for the sake of the world. The pain of all things is written on the heart of God so that he 'comes down' (Gen.11.5) into his violent creation and embraces us in a covenant relationship. The cross existed in the heart of God before it was planted on Golgotha's hill.

One of the most important missiological insights of the 20th century was the realization that mission was first and foremost the mission of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church's mission throughout the world is therefore to see what God is doing in our own place and joining in. While tradition is important the Church is called to be the vehicle of God's tomorrow, not the museum piece of God's yesterday.

POSTSCRIPT

So I return to the scrabble game with which I began. Because tradition is a very mixed bag we must now amend the scrabble rules. When we draw out a letter instead of groaning or smirking we should hold up the letter to the group and say 'would any of you like this letter? Will it help you? It will become a very different sort of game. There will still be winners and losers but there will be no more despair for we are on our way from Apocalypse to Genesis.

Some Books

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