

The Problem: Mission and/or Dialogue?

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A Qualitative Change Took Place In The Relationship Between Churches And Religions, Mostly During This Century. While Exceptions May Be Found In Previous Centuries, As Evidenced By Book Titles Such As *Twenty Centuries Of Ecumenism* Or *Studies Of Some Instances Of Irenic Jewish-Christian Or Christian- Muslim Relations*, Most Readers Will Be Aware That Some Genuinely New Attitudes And Approaches Manifested Themselves In Our Own Age.

Previously The Prevalent Christian Concept Of Mission Was That It Was Jesus Christ's Own Command To Go Out And Preach The Gospel To The World. This Was Interpreted To Mean That The Sacred Task Of Christians Is Spread The Good News To Non-Christians And Turn Them Into Followers Of Christ. The Consequence Of This Understanding Was That A Tiny Jewish Sect Became The World's Largest And Most Universal Religion. Huge Masses Of People Were Converted To Christianity, Sometimes By Witness And Occasionally By Coercion (Note, For Instance, Charlemagne's Repeated Baptism Of The Saxons).

As Christianity Divided Into Rival Churches, Often It Was Believed That The Church's Mission Consists Also Of The Evangelizing Or Re-Evangelizing Of Those Who Had Drifted Away. Satisfaction Was Felt When Individuals Or Entire Groups Were Brought Into The "Right" Fold. It Was Believed That The Appropriate Targets Of Mission Were The Jews, The "Mohammedans" (As Christians Labeled Them Incorrectly), The "Heathens" Of Various Sorts (A Corporate Name For All The Others), As Well As The Heretics And Schismatics.

There Was Joy During The Protestant And Catholic Reformations When Segments Of Population Were Wrested Away From Each Other. There Was A Sense Of Accomplishment Of One's Mission When Jews Were Converted To Any Branch Of Christianity, Or When Lapsed Or Active Members Of Any Church Were Converted To One's Own Faith. In The Heyday Of The Missionary Enterprise In The Nineteenth Century When Christian Missionaries Reached Nearly All Lands There Was High Hope, Even Among The Liberals, That The World Will Be Saved In The Next Generation. On The Mission Field Intense Rivalry For Converts Developed Between Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Congregationalists, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, And So Forth. There Was Even Rivalry Of Sorts Between Various Catholic Orders And Between Missionaries Of Different Nationalities Belonging To The Same Church. The Targeted Population Was Not Infrequently Puzzled By These Rivalries, And Not Being Keen On The Details Of Christian Doctrine Or Polity Often Called The Missionaries Not By Their Denominational Affiliation But By Their Nationalities (German, British, American, Italian, Etc.). The Results Were Often Scandalous As The Denominational Missionary Competitiveness Reaped The Contempt And Ultimate Rejection Of Some Of The Pecuniary Manipulation Of What Was Being "Offered" By Others As People Followed The Highest Bidder. The Case Is Perhaps Slightly Over- Stated Here And Certainly These Were Not Universal Experiences. There Were Also Salutory Examples Of Cooperation. Essentially, However, The Picture Drawn Here Is True Enough. Were This Not A True Picture, The Modern Ecumenical Movement Among Protestants May Have Had A Different Inception. The Fact Is That One Of The Most Significant Impulses For The Eventual Creation Of The World Council Of Churches Was The 1910 International Missionary Conference In Edinburgh Where Missionaries Of Various Protestant Denominations

Faced Up To The Scandal Of Rivalry And Pledged A Change In Approach Which Affected Not All Denominations, But Certainly Those That We Now Call "Main Line" In The U.S.A.

This Is Not The Place To Trace The History Of Ecumenism Of The Twentieth Century Nor How That Intra-Christian Ecumenism Affected And Gave Spur To The "Wider" Ecumenism. One Thing Is Certain. By The Last Decade Of The Twentieth Century It Is Evident At Nearly Every Occasion Where People Of Different Churches And Religions Meet That The Former Zeal For Conversion And The Attendant Lack Of Respect For The Authentic Religious Experience Of Others Is Gone. The Notion Of Dialogue, Ecumenical And Interreligious (The Former More Than The Latter) Has Domesticated Itself In Our Consciousness And In Our Practice.

Volumes Have Been Written Since Then On The Purpose, Scope, And Method Of Dialogue, As Practice And Theory Intermingled. Astonishingly Great Leaps Were Made In Dialogue. If The Nineteenth Century Was The Century Of Mission, Then The Twentieth Century Is Certainly The Century Of Dialogue. Likewise, Volumes Have Been Written On Mission, Its Changing Nature, Scope, And Method And Here Also Much Creativity, Dedication, And Success Is In Evidence. However, A Certain Ambiguity And Even Tension Arose As To The Relationship Of Christian Mission And Interreligious Dialogue. Was Interreligious Dialogue To Replace Mission? Was It Either Mission Or Dialogue? Or Could They Go Together? Some Even Wondered Whether Interreligious Dialogue May Not Be A More Sophisticated Approach To Mission. Or Could The Content Of The Good News Be Disseminated By Dialogue? For Many There Was A Clear Switch From Mission To Interreligious Dialogue. For Instance, Religious Orders Or Agencies That Once Saw Their Purpose In The Conversion Of Jews To Christianity Became Among The Proponents Of Jewish-Christian Dialogue Strongly Emphatic That Its Ultimate Purpose Is Not The Of Making Jews Into Christians. The Same Has Often Become True Of Attitudes Toward Other Religions.

During The Last Decade This Problem, Which Has Been In The Making For Many Years, Reached A Confrontational Stage. Within Many Churches As Well As Across Denominational Lines Two Positions Seem To Have Solidified. One Promotes The Missionary Activity Of The Christian Church, Giving Priority To The Task Of Evangelizing All Those Not Yet Reached By The Gospel. Some Spell It Out As The Unabashed Call For The Conversion Of Non-Christians To Christ And Christianity. On The Opposite End Of The Spectrum Are Protagonists Of A View That Advocates Interreligious Dialogue As The Proper Way Of Relating To Others, Urging That Conversion Be Renounced As An Explicit Goal Of The Christian Mission And Declaring That Dialogue Is The Mission Of Christians Today.

As Noted, Up To The End Of The Nineteenth Century Most Christian Missioners Went To 'Save' The Non-Christians Or "The Heathens" Or "Pagans"; Some Harbored Hopes That By The Twentieth Century The World Would Have Accepted Jesus Christ As Their Savior. However, Practically From The Outset It Became Evident That Souls Cannot Be Saved Without Attention Given To The Body And Mind, And Thus The Missionary Enterprise Both At Home And Abroad Soon Included Schools, Hospitals, Orphanages, Old People's Homes, And Many Other Forms Of Charity-In Fact, This Had Been Characteristic Of Catholic "Foreign Missions" Since The Sixteenth Century. Increased Attention Was Paid To Development. Thus Agriculture, Crafts, Health, Education, Social Services Were Included In The Notion Of Mission. Mission Meant Not Only Sending Clergy To Lead People In The Salvific Experience Of The True God But Also Sending Educational, Medical, Agricultural, And Technical Experts.

Many Christian Missioners Took A Serious Interest In The Native Religions And Became Increasingly Appreciative Of The Authenticity And Sincerity Of The Search For God Or For Salvation And Liberation Among Those Whom They Had Come To Convert. Serious Tensions Occurred As It Became Evident That Missionary Outreach Was Often Accompanied By Colonization And Exploitation Of The Various Population By Westerners Variousy Linked To The Missions, If In No Other Manner Than By A Shared Religious Affiliation. Further, It Became Apparent That Somehow The Mission-Sending People Saw Themselves As The Subjects Of Mission And The People To Whom The Missionaries Went As The Objects Of Mission. This Too

Created Resentment As Well As A Realization That The Message Of Christ Is Needed Just As Much In The Mission-Sending Countries As In Those To Whom The Message Was Originally Targeted. Many Are Now Praying For A Reverse Mission Whereby Christians From Africa And Asia, And Perhaps Buddhists, Hindus, And Confucians, Would Come To The Former Mission-Sending Countries To Save, To Inspire, To Heal, And To Teach-In Other Words, To Light A Fire Among Jaded "Believers."

When In The Twentieth Century The Ecumenical Movement Produced Dialogue First Among Various Christian Missionaries And Churches And Then Increasingly Across Religious Divides, The Movement For Interreligious Dialogue Emerged. A New Appreciation Developed For The Values Found In Other Religious Approaches As Well As An Awareness Of The Failures And Hurts Produced By The Christian Missionary Endeavors. Interreligious Dialogue Produced In A Relatively Quick Time Some Very Satisfactory Results And Gained An Enthusiastic Following Even Among Many Missionary Personnel And Leaders. Many Predicted An End To The Proselytizing And The Beginning Of The Cherishing And Valuing Of Truth, Goodness, Justice, And Peace Wherever It Was Found. Conversion Was De-Emphasized To A Mere By-Product, Which Might Be Avoided Whenever Possible.

The Conflict Has Now Reached Critical Proportions In Some Churches Where A Battle Is Waged For What Seems To Be The Very Soul Of The Christian Church. Different Churches Wrestle With The Issue In Different Ways. In Some Churches Where The Mission Board Or Agency Has Emphasized Dialogue With People Of Other Faiths Rather Than Conversion, Some Disaffected Church Members And Leaders Created Rival Mission Agencies For The Purpose Of Sending Out Missionaries Who Would More Aggressively Pursue The Evangelization Of Non-Christians. This Provokes Impulses To Oust Such Proponents Of The Traditional Missionary Enterprise, While They In Turn Charge That The Church Loses Its Identity When It Stops Its Assertive Spreading Of The Gospel. They Point To The Numerical And Institutional Growth Of Those Churches That Continue Their Missionary Activity At Home And Abroad Unabatedly. In Other Churches Where The Sending Of Missionaries Espousing Only A Certain Theological Mold, Members Of More A Dialogical Orientation Are Creating Their Own Missionary Agencies With A Different Thrust. In Both Instances The Confrontation Is So Sharp That It Threatens Schism. Still Other Churches Battle It Out Without The Threat Of Overt Breakup; Nevertheless The Differences Of Opinion Are Palpable. Nearly All Major Denominations Face This Crisis Regarding Mission Over Against Interreligious Dialogue.

While This Is Not An Altogether New Concern Expressed In Writing, No Collection Of Such Explorations Has Been Published As Yet. We Felt The Need For Adding More Light Rather Than Heat To This Perplexing And Difficult Problem. The Idea For This Volume Came When The Editors Read An Address Of Jozef Cardinal Tomko, "Missionary Challenges To The Theology Of Salvation," That Was Delivered As The Opening Address At A Missionary Congress In Rome In November, 1988. We Wrote To Him Asking For Permission To Use The Article As A Springboard For A Broader Discussion And Invited A Number Of Scholars, Ecumenical Leaders, And Missioners To Respond To The Article And The Issues Which Cardinal Tomko Raised So Pointedly. He Not Only Graciously Consented But Offered To Read The Responses And Write A Concluding Essay Reacting To Some Of The Issues Raised By The Respondents.

In Our Selection Of Respondents We Did Not Try To Be Comprehensive, But Did Attempt To Provide The Balance Of A Variety Of Respondents Representing Different Denominations, Nationalities, Church Positions, And Viewpoints. Actually When The Essays Reached Us We Saw That None Of The Respondents Lined Themselves Up On An Extreme End Of The Either/Or Spectrum Alluded To Above, Because Cardinal Tomko's Nuanced Address Elicited Nuanced And Thoughtful Responses. For Most Respondents It Is Rather A Matter Of Both/And, But With Leanings In Either Direction, Since No One Tried An Impossibly Perfectly Centrist Position.

Most Christians Agree That The Church Has A Task To Communicate The Source, The Inspiration, The Life Upon Which It Lives-God's Revelation In Jesus The Christ. The Church

Cannot Change Into A Society For Interreligious Dialogue Or Into A General Soteriological Enterprise. The Church Must Proclaim Its Specific Kerygma, But As Distinct From Earlier Ages It Can Do So Dialogically. If The Church Holds No Distinct, Worthwhile Message And Cause, It Need Not Bother Enter Into Dialogue, Because It Will Have Nothing To Give In The Give-And-Take Of Dialogue. The Great Czech Marxist Philosopher, Milan Machovec, Once Wrote That He Does Not Want To Dialogue With A Christian Who Does Not Want To Convert Him, Namely, With One Who Holds That The Christian Truths Have Only Subjective And Thus Limited Validity, A Mere Personal Preference. Machovec Wanted To Dialogue With A Christian Who Is Persuaded That The Christian Truth Has A General Validity. He Was Saying That He Would Rather Meet In Dialogue A Christian Who Was Hot Than One Who Is Lukewarm. Sharing This Valid Truth Or Experience Need Not Be Done Triumphalistically, Intolerantly, And Exclusivistically. One May Embrace The Reality Of Pluralism With A Genuine Warmth And Enthusiasm And Yet Not Become Lukewarm In Regard To What One Stands For.

Interreligious Encounters, Study, And Living Has Lifted Dialogue As The Superior Manner To Relate To Each Other. A Sort Of Copernican Turn Took Place In The Traditional Understanding Of How To Deal With The Truth Claims Of Other Religions. When Other Religions Are Taken Seriously, Appreciatively, And Are Allowed To Impress Upon Us The Significance Of Their Experiences, Aims, And Truth Claims, Such New Insights Affect Nearly All Our Previous Perceptions Not Only Of The Other Religions But Also Of Our Own. A Shift Takes Place From, "I Used To View And Accept Unhesitatingly And Uncritically That We Are Completely Correct In All Things," And "I Could Not Even Think Of Viewing Appreciatively And With Understanding Another Religion," To A Far More Unitive View Of All Religious Experiences And Expressions. Naturally This New Unitive Approach Threatens To Break The Former Unitive Perception Of Truth Apart.

In This Struggle To Interpret And Reinterpret The Fundamental Truth Claim And Message Of The Christian Religion Great Cleavages In Understanding Occur As To How To Communicate Our Mission To Those Who Do Not Already Share It. So With The Changed Times And Procedure It Is Being Questioned As To Whether At The End Of The Twentieth Century It Is Still Proper And Important To Speak Of The "Mission" Of The Church. To This Question Even The Most Enthusiastic Practitioners Of Dialogue Can Answer Emphatically, "Yes!" Though The Interpretation And Packaging Of The Mission Is Likely To Diverge From The Previous.