1

Introduction

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THE CHRISTIAN WORLD – A DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

The greatest single change that has come upon the Christian faith during the last century has been the demographic shift in its focus away from its traditional centres in Europe and North America. There it has been in deep decline for three centuries, and today professing Christians probably number no more than 15 per cent or so of the population. By contrast the growth of Christianity in the 'South' or 'Third World' has, within the last hundred years or so, witnessed a phenomenal growth. In the Pacific, Christianity is the religion of the large bulk of the population, while in sub-Saharan Africa reasonable estimates would indicate that more than 60 per cent would claim to be Christian. Even in the vast continent of Asia, where overall Christians would not number more than three per cent of the total population, there are concentrated areas of Christian presence. The Philippines is largely Christian while Korea has a substantial and influential Christian minority. In India the ancient heartland of the Syrian tradition, Kerala, is perhaps a quarter Christian, while in the northern states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya, Christianity dominates. In Latin America, beginning from the fifteenth century when the cross of the Catholic priests accompanied the swords of the conquistadores, Christianity has overlaid the religion of the large proportion of the indigenous population. To all this must be added the resurgence of Christianity (along with other world religions) after the decline of communism in the former Eastern Europe and also in China. While simple data never tell the whole story, it is evident that Christianity can no longer be regarded as a 'Western' religion; it is a global one of which the Western church is only a small fraction.

Some evidence of the increasing importance of non-Western Christianity could be seen in the 1960s in the growing participation of Third World Christian leaders in world forums. At the Edinburgh Missionary conference of 1910 there were only three delegates born outside the Western world;

when its successor, the WCC, met in Delhi in 1961, the Third World presence comprised a substantial minority. In the same decade the impact of Third World bishops on the Second Vatican Council indicated the beginnings of a similar shift within the Roman Catholic Church. The ecclesiastical hegemony of the West can now no longer be taken for granted. If the demographic patterns of the past hundred years continue, Christianity will become only a residual faith of Caucasian peoples, while becoming the primary religious force in the southern continents, and a significant factor to be reckoned with in Asia.

Seen in the light of this radical 'moving of the centre' of the Christian faith it is remarkable that so little attention has been paid to the phenomenon of 'Third World theologies' in the theological discourse of Europe and North America. The irruption of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America did, it is true, create the beginnings of interest. Liberation Theology, however, presented less of a problem for it was initially conducted within the parameters of the Western intellectual tradition. But this did not prevent its being shunted out of mainstream theological discourse and confined to the ghetto of dangerously activist political theologies. Voices from elsewhere in the world, when granted a hearing at all, could be dismissed as exotics irrelevant to the 'real' task of theology.[1] In some ways the presence of Christianity in the 'South' itself represents a return to its geographical focus in the days before the rise of European christendom. Whatever the historical worth of the traditions that Mark founded the church in Egypt, or that Matthew visited India, there is no doubt that there was a Christian presence in these continents from very early times, and that Nestorian Christians had reached China before the capture of Jerusalem by the Muslims. In one sense, therefore, the growth of Christianity in Africa and Asia is simply its return to its orginal heartlands. The much larger scale of the Christian presence was, of course, due to what has been called 'the missionary movement from the West'. Beginning in earnest with the great voyages of discovery from around 1500, the expansion of the church to South America, Asia and Africa usually followed the European colonial enterprise. This association of the cross with sword and gun has left a continuing legacy which is yet to be completely overcome.

All theology is ultimately 'contextual', that is it arises from a specific historical context and it addresses that context. The questions which it

[1] It is perhaps significant that two of the widely acclaimed and widely used (and very bulky) theological 'readers', contain less than half-a-dozen contributions from contemporary Third World theologians between them: see A. McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd edn (London 2001), and C. Gunton et al. (ed.), *The Practice of Theology* (London 2001). The latter categorises all things non-Western, along with feminist theology (!) as 'local theologies'.

asks, and the answers it seeks to give, are determined by its specific historical situation. This situation may be no more than the intellectual tradition out of which it arises, and it may seek for no more than intellectual explanation. On the other hand, few theologians in the past have been able, or indeed wanted, to abstract themselves completely from the events going on around them, and these events, especially the more dramatic ones, have shaped both the questions they have asked and the theological answers they have put forward. Augustine's *City of God* would never have been written without the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410, nor would Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, had the First World War not taken place. To understand the rise of Third World theologies we also need to take serious notice of the circumstances, historical, political and social, in which they arise.

THE COLONIAL LEGACY

However much countries of the Third World may differ, there are a number of important characteristics which they broadly share. The foremost of these is what might be called the *colonial legacy*. If we exclude Japan (which, while in no sense part of the Third World economically, certainly has some minorities which are so marginalised as to make them 'a third world within a first world') only two countries have escaped colonial occupation of all or part of their territories.[2] It is a remarkable fact that for a period a handful of European nations could dominate and control the destinies of most of the world's populations. That period was indeed mercifully a brief one. The colonisation of Latin America by the Spaniards and Portuguese gave way to independence movements by the colonial conquerors from their European homelands, though in the process created a foreign ruling elite which made the conditions of the indigenous people no better. In Africa the colonial period lasted only about a century, in some countries of Asia somewhat longer. But the effect of imperialism was out of all proportion to its length. As Peter Worseley has written:

> Europe had accomplished a transformation which created the world as a social system. It was a world order founded on conquest and maintained by force. The 'new' order was no egalitarian 'family of nations': it was essentially asymmetrical. At the one pole stood industrialised Europe, at the other the disinherited. Paradoxically the world had been divided in the process of its unification, divided into separated spheres of influence, and divided into rich and poor. (Worseley 1978: 14)

[2] Even these two exceptions are more apparent than real. In Africa, Liberia, though never colonised (it was an enclave set up for freed slaves), has for periods of its history been to all intents and purposes under American tutelage; in Asia, Thailand, while retaining a semblance of independence, suffered brutal occupation by the Japanese in the Second World War.

Colonialism was thus a total system: it deprived the colonised of their own political structures, subjected their economies to the needs of the West, and destroyed large areas of cultural and social life. Though an external force of quite brief duration, it has shaped internal dynamics up until the present time. Though it has now run its course, its legacy is one that former colonised peoples still have to live with, and which determines to one degree or another the problems they face today. The carving up of the world between European powers (especially in the scramble for Africa) by drawing arbitrary borders, divided peoples against themselves by putting them into different new colonies. It imposed upon them new European languages and devalued their indigenous ones. Above all, however, the colonial era put into place an economic and political system which still dominates much of the world. The deleterious effects of this economic system were multiform, but determined very largely by the way in which resources could be used to enrich the colonial powers. The countries of the Third World became in effect vast plantation estates or sources of cheap raw materials. Conversely they were also seen as a markets for goods from the imperial countries. The effects of such policies were disastrous for the local economies. Little attempt was made to create a well-rounded economy, and a culture of dependence was set in place which stunted growth for long after independence had been achieved. To quote Worseley again: 'The most serious legacy of colonialism is in the economic sphere, in the form of backwardness, monocultural economies, foreign ownership of major resources, uneconomic "dwarf states", poverty, and an extremely low economic base' (Worseley 1978: 235). This is the more ironic when it is recalled that the larger percentage of the world's mineral resources and agricultural potential lies not in the rich Western world but in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The factors which Worseley has identified remain important determinants of the Third World context today. They have been exacerbated by the problem of foreign debt created by the eagerness of Western banks to lend to Third World countries – to lend, at varying rates of interest, the surplus monies that became available after the oil boom of the 1980s. 'Development' proved a chimera for many countries, for many reasons. The incompetence of international 'experts' and the corruption of elite national politicians were probably the most debilitating. The situation of the former colonial world even today gives little ground for optimism. According to World Bank figures the gap between the richest 20 per cent of the population of the world and the poorest has more than doubled in the last thirty years. Eighty-five per cent of the world's income is consumed by the richest 20 per cent,

and at the other end of the scale the poorest 20 per cent consume less than 1.5 per cent of its wealth. At the beginning of the twenty-first century some 40 per cent of the population of Asia and 50 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa are living in poverty, and some 37,000 children are dying each day of preventable or of poverty related diseases. Such conditions are exacerbated by low provision for health and education, by ecological spoliation, civil unrest and unstable governments. In such circumstances the question for Christian theology (as Gutierrez once put it) becomes one of how it is possible to speak of God to a world which is scarcely human. Before daring to speak about God at all it will have to analyse and reflect upon the social and political situation in which men and women exist.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL POVERTY

But there was also a second form of exploitation, no less damaging than the economic, which has concerned Third World theologians, and which they have termed *anthropological poverty*. What is being identified here is the denigration of integrity, humanness and culture. Perhaps the most obvious way this was done was the imposition of an alien language upon colonised peoples. As Ngugi wa Thiongo has eloquently pointed out, language speaks of personal and cultural identity (Ngugi 1993). Allied to this went the denigration of aspects of culture, and in particular of indigenous religions. If economic and political disruption resulted from Western imperialism, the demonisation of indigenous cultures was more likely to be the result of European Christian missions. This happened most dramatically with 'traditional' or folk cultures, from which the majority of Christian converts came. Popular Hindu 'idolatry' or African 'fetishism' became frequent themes, especially of Christian missionaries eager to gain support from their Western churches. In the process of description these forms of religiosity were demonised by the use of emotive and pejorative terminology. Little attempt was made to understand the kind of spirituality which gave rise to these religious forms. While colonial administrators were on the whole less likely to be concerned with value judgements on traditional religion, Christian missions usually pursued a policy of seeking to wipe the slate clean of 'paganism' so that the true faith could be written afresh on the mind of the native – a theory of 'displacement'. Bénézet Bujo has well captured this attitude when he describes how the Superiors of the Catholic Mission in the then Belgian Congo petitioned the government to take action against those elements of culture which it considered to be against good public order (by which they presumably meant their understanding

of Christianity). These included offerings to spirits and ancestors, rites of passage – especially those surrounding birth, circumcision and female puberty, and marriage – and rituals for success in hunting and fishing (Bujo 1992: 44). Other elements of African religion were effectively secularised and thus trivialised: masks, which represented the deep sacrality of the presence of the ancestors, found their way into European museums, dances originally associated with rituals became mere tourist attractions. Deeply held religious beliefs were also dismissed as superstition, and little attempt was made to analyse the rationale behind the concepts of evil and causality. Even the most experienced of missionaries often quite misunderstood the belief systems of those to whom they sought to minister. There were indeed some remarkable exceptions, like the Belgian priest Placide Tempels, who as far back as 1945 published his analysis of Bantu thought forms in which he argued that they constituted a logical and coherent system (Tempels 1959). Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion* appeared in 1954, and soon African Christian theologians like Harry Sawyerr, Christian Baeta and E. Bolaji Idowu were rediscovering the real values of their religious traditions and seeking to bring them into dialogue with their Christian faith. The emergence of an African Christian theology had begun. But we are anticipating.

In those lands which had a long tradition of writing, with scriptures and learning which went back long before the Christian era, a casual dismissal of indigenous cultures by European missionaries was scarcely possible. While village Hinduism could be rejected contemptuously as simple idolatry, this was hardly possible with erudite and scholarly religious texts. Consequently a different tradition grew up, beginning with the translations of the Chinese classics by Catholic priests at the end of the fifteenth century, and continuing through the remarkable achievements of Carey and his followers in India. The textual study of non-Christian faiths came to the fore, not indeed for the missionaries as an end in itself, but as a means of demonstrating the supremacy of Christianity over ancient Asian faiths. A theory of 'fulfilment' took hold, which argued that all religions are fulfilled and superseded in Christianity. These earlier forays into how one deals with the impact of the Christian faith upon other religious cultures – however inadequate the replacement or fulfilment theories may have been – underline an ever present issue in doing Third World theology: that its context is a multi-religious one.

In those areas where Christianity has been to a large extent successful in overcoming traditional religiosities – in South America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific, and tribal Asia – it has by no means eradicated them.

The underlying traditional worldview has remained as a sub-stratum which has to be taken very seriously, and a main task of Christian theology today has become one of struggling to give meaning to the ancient tradition within the new. In most parts of Asia, religious plurality raises a different problem, namely of how to exist as a Christian in a context which is determined by Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or other religious or ideological values, and how to relate Christian theology meaningfully to a total culture which has no Christian (or indeed post-Christian) heritage. This is a context of doing theology which is unknown to the West. Despite the rapid secularisation of the Western world, and the more recent emergence of movements which claim to draw upon 'primal' pre-Christian survivals, Western theologians can by and large assume they have a thousand years of Christian civilisation (in one sense or another) behind them. Third World Christians in their own contexts have no such tradition on which to draw, and indeed may even find this tradition limiting rather than positive.

A NEW APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

What can we say about this newer – or better, resurrected – Christianity? Despite its modern origins from the missions of the mainstream Western churches, and in some areas its conservative tendencies, it primarily seeks to define itself in contradistinction to the churches and theology of the West. Bujo's assertion that African theology is a reaction to not being taken seriously by the Western church (1992: 49) is perhaps typical. In Africa this reaction may be seen in its most colourful form in the so-called African Independent Churches (more recently termed 'African Initiated Churches'), which have their own leaders and prophets, rituals (often quite elaborate) and theologies (usually unwritten) which seek some kind of modus vivendi with traditional cultures. Mainstream churches, that is, churches deriving from the work of Western missions, too have sometimes experimented with indigenous cultural forms. In terms of theology, it is probably true that a good deal of non-Western Christianity has still fairly uncritically absorbed without too much heart-searching traditional positions of the West (especially the more conservative ones). But a progressive trend in Third World theologies, that of questioning the form, content and categories of Western Christianity, has an impressive pedigree, which in India stretches back to the beginning of the era of Protestant missions in the sub-continent. Consequently, if we are to look for what is new in Third World theology, we would have to say it is a dynamic search for self-identity, an identity which takes seriously the traditions and cultures

in which it is located, but at the same time seeks to address the social world in which Christians now live. What this in effect implies is that Third World theologies have rejected the theological agendas which are set by the West. The agenda must come from the context in which Christians live; since Christians outside of Europe and North America must live their faith in different historical, political, socio-economic and religious contexts, the kinds of questions they are asking will be substantially different from those in the Western tradition. As Desmond Tutu has remarked, Western theology has some splendid answers, but they are answers to questions that no one elsewhere is asking! While no theology can help being in one way or another contextual, making *explicit* the centrality of contextual issues does represent a departure from the current Western mainstream, as does the deliberate use of the social sciences to evaluate that context. Whereas the Western tradition has generally proceeded (at least until fairly recently) by marrying theology to philosophy, Third World theologians have preferred a marriage with the social sciences. A further methodological question is the point at which the theologian begins – should theology start with its traditional sources (Bible, church tradition and so on), or by analysing the context with the help of sociological tools? Most Third World theologians have preferred the latter starting point. Context has therefore become primary for the theological task.

In 1972 the Theological Education Fund of the WCC launched its mandate *Ministry in Context* for which it coined the cumbrous term *contextualisation*. Contextualisation was understood as a critical assessment of the peculiarity of the Third World contexts in which Christian theology has to be worked out. While it did not ignore what it called *indigenisation*, that is the response of the Gospel to traditional cultures, contextualisation went beyond this. It sought to take into account 'the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterises the *historical moment* of nations in the Third World' (TEF 1972: 19). The Taiwanese theologian largely responsible for this initiative, Shoki Coe, later elaborated on this position (Coe 1980: 48ff.). Indigenisation, he believed, was a static metaphor which was in danger of being past-oriented. Contextualisation, on the other hand, 'seeks to press beyond for a more dynamic concept which is also open to change and future oriented'. Thus 'the particular historical moment, assessing the particularity of the context in the light of the mission of the church' is the important factor. This could only be done by involvement and participation, it 'involved not words but actions'. True contextualisation is therefore in his view always prophetic. 'Arising out of a genuine encounter between God's Word and His world (it) moves out

toward the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical situation.' Theology as a praxis which emerges from a response to a specific historical situation is a theme which also characterised the emergent Theology of Liberation around about the same period. A possible objection to contextualised theology, Coe agreed, is that it could become a 'chameleon theology', changing its colour according to its context. However he argued that it is precisely by taking the concrete situation seriously that contextual theology becomes truly catholic. For Coe, true catholicity is not the same thing as what he calls 'colourless uniformity', but rather a manifold and diverse theology which responds to a different context, just as 'the Incarnate Word did on our behalf, once and for all'. The theological ground for contextuality is therefore the fact that the Son of God was incarnated within a specific human history and culture, through which grace has been made available to all.

Other writers have preferred different terminology. On the African continent 'indigenisation' was quickly replaced by terms such as *adaptionism* (or *adaptationism*) which implied the use of African thought forms in Christian theology and of African rituals in the liturgy. *Incarnationism* later found more favour with Catholics, while some missiologists coined the term *translation*. While these terms have been sharply defined by some writers, Third World theologians tend to use them with a fluidity which defies rigid definition. Ironically all are terms which derive from European languages and are to some extent Western, and therefore alien, categories. The coining of categories of theological methodology from non-Western languages is as yet fairly undeveloped, but will need to develop if Third World theologians are fully to break out of First World parameters of doing theology.

A NEW THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The context is both the framework and part of the source material for doing theology. Theology however also implies a way of looking at the world, bringing to the task something of one's own historical and cultural experience. As Franz Rosenzweig once remarked, 'We all see reality through our own eyes, but it would be foolish to think we can pluck out our eyes in order to see straight.' If creating theology is in part a matter of perspective it should not be surprising if Third World perspectives often differ drastically from those of the West. The primary factors which have helped shape what might be called a Third World epistemology have already been

discussed – the impact of colonialism and Western missions and the situation of religious plurality. Much Third World theology has taken the form of reaction against Western Christianity. To escape from the 'colonisation of the mind' self-definition and affirmation of identity is necessary over against the colonising other. It is perhaps significant to note in this respect that a number of the prominent members of movements for political independence both in sub-Saharan Africa and in India were Christian. The question for theology also became one of 'how should our theology be different?' This took different forms indeed, but the assumption was always the same, namely that the kind of Christian thinking which had been inherited from Western missions was altogether inappropriate for the needs of the non-Western world. As far back as the beginning of the twentieth century the Bengali Christian and political activist Bhavani Charan Banerji (better known by the name he later assumed, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya 'friend of God') was protesting that the very foreignness of Christianity kept Indians from embracing it. 'It is the foreign clothes of the Catholic faith,' he wrote, 'that have prevented our countrymen from perceiving its universal nature . . . When the Catholic Church in India will be dressed in Hindu garments, then will our countrymen perceive that she elevates man to the Universal Kingdom of truth by stooping down to adapt herself to her racial peculiarities' (quoted in Boyd 1975: 83). His solution to this problem was to replace the Graeco-Roman categories in which the Gospel had been handed down by those of Hindu philosophy, on the grounds that just as Greek thought was a vehicle for the truths of the Gospel in Europe so 'the truths of the Hindu philosopher must be "baptised" and used as stepping stones to the catholic faith' (Boyd 1975: 64). Banerji believed that the validity of the religious experience of Hinduism could not be denied. But he was inclined to regard this as 'culture' rather than a religion in opposition to Christ. Thus it was possible for him to be a 'Hindu Catholic' since 'by birth we are Hindus and shall remain Hindus till death'. Conversion to Christ therefore does not deny personal identity or tradition, and conversely that (Hindu) tradition provides the religious categories, the 'field', within which Christian faith is understood. Banerji stands within a tradition of Indian thinkers who straddle the boundaries between Hinduism and Christianity. He thus typifies what has become a distinctively Asian contribution to Third World theologies, that of rethinking Christian faith within the parameters of religious pluralism.

Indian thinking about the meaning of Christ was already nearly a hundred years old by the time the Latin Americans dropped the second