

## Chapter 4

# MISSION AND PLURALISM: A REDISCOVERY

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The awakening of national consciousness in the nineteenth and the twentieth century in many of the socio-economically “backward” countries which served as “mission fields” for Christianity, stimulated many socio-religious reforms. People around the world have become aware not only of Christianity but also of their own religious thought and culture. The rapid growth of communication facilities and a wider practice of travelling to other countries for pleasure and learning, have all contributed to the acceptance of the idea that humanity can survive only if we accept the concept of peaceful coexistence. It means that we have to respect and accept our neighbour as he/she is along with his/her faith, beliefs and cultural way of life. Europe and America which habitually exported Christianity (naturally associated with imperialism and colonialism in the minds of the nationalists) in return began receiving import of unfamiliar religious thought like Hinduism, Buddhism and others. The western universities and colleges introduced courses in various cultures and religions. Peace Corps and such other non-religious groups started taking over the educational and relief work earlier almost exclusively done by missions and missionaries. Freelance scholars and journalists enhanced the intensity of their investigations by seeking out more and more unknown socio-cultural groups. The cumulative effect of these and similar activities of man from time to time, has led us to seriously consider that no nation can be conceived as a “melting pot”

but could be considered at the most, as a “pressure cooker” which could handle a number of different items without losing original qualities. And thus all must admit that pluralism has come to stay.

Paradoxically, the arousal of pluralism may be considered as an outcome of the literacy drive, educational and health services, and stimulation for “knowing the Truth” initially activated by Christian missions in many a country. With the arrival of the idea of pluralism on the international scene, now the Christian and other religious missions are faced with the urgent need for rediscovering the meaning of “mission” in the context of a stable awareness of a pluralistic world-view. The situational context demands that we should redefine “missions” for making it more relevant and meaningful.

### **The Inevitable Pluralism and its Implications**

The rising aspirations of the teeming millions from every part of the world to develop themselves in their cultural surrounding lead us to an acceptance of inevitable pluralism. The uniform development of man no longer remains as a criterion but the acceptance of natural human differences is becoming the standard leading to multiform development and acknowledgement of dignity of all human existence. The arrival of pluralism has brought in certain implications for the “mission”.

#### *Multiform Approach*

Once we accept the reality that human beings are enriched by diverse cultural and religious thought, “the exclusive” superiority of one thought and one way of living becomes irrelevant. A multi-religious society with all its religious thoughts and ways of living has become a current reality. If one religious thought claims that it is “the only way”, it leads to dissonance in the context. Thus, the arrival of pluralism will demand a multiform approach from all religious groups.

#### *Freedom of Religion*

In a pluralistic situation, diversity provides the base for freedom of religion. Every religion is free to practice its own way while respecting the truth contained in the others. Faith and practice of any religion should not undermine the freedom of the others. Religious freedom necessarily will turn out to be the right of humanity. No group of people can legitimately hold monopoly over religious thought. If God can inspire and reveal Truth to one group, other groups are also capable of getting closer to Truth considering the basic dignity of human beings and God’s love for humanity.

#### *Multiple Good*

Another implication of pluralism is that religious thought needs to admit the possibility of multiple good. Even a monistic concept of God should make room for different modes of its expression. What is good for humans for the present and future both physically and spiritually can be found in all religions though one may accept only one by way of personal liking or compatibility in thinking and experience. However, the other thoughts may be considered as good and suitable for the differing spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of humans. God has to be visualized in multiple facets without quarrelling about it.

#### *Unity in Diversity: Nature’s Gift*

The unifying factor in pluralism is the nature of humanity itself. In spite of cultural differences and diversity in thinking, it contains the underlying principle of transforming humans for the endowment of divine nature. Thus, pluralism implies that all religious groups can strive eventually for unity, a true ecumenical spirit which covers all shades of religious thought. The apparent diversity has to be exhumed and the natural unity should be upheld. The process of recognizing Truth contained in all religious thought and respecting the freedom for each to present it amicably and peacefully is already on its way.

### *Learning Ministry*

In the pluralistic context, the churches will have to spare some time from their “teaching ministry” for a “learning ministry”. It demands that Christians should more seriously learn about other religions before they embark on their mission of “teaching” others about their own. The arrival of pluralism will mean recasting of our attitude in professional training and practice in relation to mission. Perhaps we will have to spend more time in learning at the initial stages, and be more humble and loving in teaching and preaching. The gospel message is not to be used to eradicate other religious thought and beliefs but to find its fulfillment in diverse cultural forms and living traditions of other people, without imposing our liturgy, forms of theology and practice of church governance.

### **Mission and Pluralism: Dilemma or Opportunity**

The implications for mission in the pluralistic context lead us to face a situation of dilemma. The ever increasing pluralistic awareness leaves us with very little choice. Now the question is whether we can convert the situation of dilemma into a new kind of opportunity. Is it possible to fulfill the mission entrusted by Jesus Christ, in a pluralistic context with equal commitment and enthusiasm? The answer lies in the wings of change, that is, the process of change that is set by the presence of the awareness of pluralism and the openness with which Christian leaders can project their mission in the living spirit of Christian love.

### *The “Only Way” vs “Many Ways”*

The immediate problem will be to develop a new understanding of the “only way”. The aggressive and “arrogant” attitude that only Christians possess the light and its ‘way of salvation’ will not be admitted and tolerated by pluralism. The idea that humans can adopt different ways to salvation, requires adequate reconciliation. The concept of sin and salvation will have to be rediscovered in this context by developing a new understanding of what Christianity can

offer. The strategy of simply condemning “many ways” and offering the “only way” will become irrelevant.

### *Humanness vs Warfare with “Many Ways”*

An affirmation of basic goodness gifted by God to all human beings (humanness) in modern society is strengthened by pluralism. Considering the potentials of humans for different ways of thinking and experiential responses, the “many ways” could contain elements of Truth because they have been found by earnest and sincere seekers of Truth in their way. Humanness, or the basic restoration of the goodness of people lead to the admission of “many ways” in the scheme of salvation and any warfare with “many ways” will turn out to be the rejection of the basic goodness gifted by God.

### *Uniform Creed vs Multiple Creeds*

Pluralism admits that the human race is enriched with differences in colour, culture, communication (language medium) and also creed (religious thought and belief). The authenticity and veracity of multiple creeds will have to be considered. For any one to offer one over the others as superior will lead to disharmony and destruction of peace and joy which Christianity intends to promote. The question is why should we insist on all believing a uniform creed for finding salvation (in the pluralistic context) and can Christianity offer something to enrich the multiple creeds?

### *Individual Peace vs Societal Peace*

It is hoped that the recognition of pluralism as a natural outcome of human nature, will promote peace and harmony among peoples on our planet. How can we gear the thirst for inner peace to fall in line with societal peace? A harmonious approach for coordination of the two cannot be evaded.

### *Uniqueness vs Synthesis*

A major dilemma for the Christian mission in the pluralistic context will be to abandon the traditional approach of “uniqueness” of Christian message or to attempt a kind of synthesis and assimilation drawn from all available sources

and to enrich Christianity in turn. Will such enrichment be more suitable to humans in a pluralistic environment or will it weaken the mission's claims?

## Mission Rediscovered

After having considered the realistic presence of pluralism and its implications and related dilemmas, it is necessary to make an attempt to rediscover the mission. First of all mission has to be looked upon as a dynamic concept, constantly striving to find new areas of its application to ease human suffering spiritually, mentally and physically in the changing world. Secondly, its objective should also be to usher inner peace which surpasses the constraints of diversity. Thirdly, the love of Jesus demands not only the regeneration of the individual but also the creation of a *new humanity in Christ*. The present commitment could also be given another dimension, that is, a commitment to the prophetic vision of a new humanity in Christ. The redemption of man remains incomplete without the restoration of the divine humanity.

The divine humanity will usher peaceful coexistence in which one cares for the other. "Wolves and sheep will live together in peace and leopards will feed together and little children will take care of them"(Isa. 11:6). It will be a revolutionary lifestyle indeed! The Church is to serve as the vehicle of such a Christian revolution. How do we translate these revolutionary ideas in concrete and practical terms in our own context? The task before us is seemingly impossible – it means that we have to exercise our compassionate concern for the victims of hunger, exploitation and oppression. It means that we cannot sleep in our cozy beds comfortably when we know that 40 percent of our countrymen still live below poverty line, awaiting the process of death to be completed. We cannot hibernate in our churches and mission stations when 71 percent of our people remain illiterate, ignorant and vulnerable to disease. We cannot let the creeping culture of affluence devour us as we enjoy the stupor of its comfort and let the slavery of human dignity and violence breed right in front of our eyes. We have to do something about

it if the divine quality of humanity has to be restored. The idea of a new humanity insists that we catch the vision of "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Our rediscovered mission will be to keep it as a dynamic concept which aims at inner peace and building of a new humanity in Christ. It requires our efforts to bring about a spiritual awakening among the Christians and extend the spiritual regeneration to others. We have to have a group of new beings with the compassionate conviction of Christ. It has to be manned and supported by people who live, move and exist in Christ as new creatures . . . filled with God's vision for the restoration of human dignity spiritually, mentally and physically leading to the new humanity which restores the humanness gifted by God to everyone.

## Mission's Emerging Task

The emerging presence of pluralism necessitates us to take up a reconditioned attitude to the task ahead. The spiritual regeneration in Christ offered to individuals should also find another dimension of its application to the problems of human misery. The application of spirituality is the outflow of the new humanity itself which should bring about spiritual peace, human development and restoration of the forsaken humanity. The most important emerging tasks may be listed as below:

- (a) To assist individual humans to understand the love of Christ and lead him/her to the experience of spiritual transformation and help him/her to get personally committed to the "Christ Ideal", and not necessarily to a particular church organization.
- (b) To help people to understand the love of Christ as a basis for communal harmony.
- (c) To demonstrate Christ's love through sensitivity to current problems of human suffering and to promote World Brotherhood through active service to all who are physically, mentally and spiritually tormented.
- (d) To promote inner peace and consequent communal harmony and world peace through the "Christ-Ideal".

(e) To develop a constructive spiritual renewal programme for all people who are known as Christians, as a first step before “winning” people from other faiths.

(f) To strengthen people to fight against poverty, disease, socio-political injustice, communal hatred, racial conflicts and warfare.

(g) To come to terms with pluralism by acknowledging the elements of God and Truth contained in other sources and to establish that Christ’s mission is not to destroy but to fulfill. The objective of “conversion as making others to become members of a Christian church” that has been leading to resentment and communal violence in a pluralistic society will have to be replaced by a mission of love and mutual respect. The church should not engage in counting of heads and emphasizing separatism but in stimulating spiritual growth, implicit faith and unity of humans.

(h) To seriously engage in developing a relevant theology of missions in the context of pluralism and its application in the mission field.

(i) To encourage people to absorb, adapt and innovate various cultural forms of spiritual expression rather than strictly sticking to “European and American forms of Christianity”.

(j) To develop an idea of a “Fellowship of Believers” without any barriers similar to the concept of “Durbar of God” projected by Narayan Vaman Tilak, a well known Christian poet-saint of Maharashtra.

(k) To create an awareness of the freedom of religion among Christians and others by enriching one’s spiritual growth in a pluralistic environment.

The major thrust of these suggestions is to seriously encourage our seminaries, theological colleges and missionary training institutions to do some “revolutionary thinking” so that the presentation of the message of Jesus Christ can serve as a message of fulfillment in a pluralistic context. Let us, pause, think and act accordingly.

