

THE UNIVERSAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

AS I face this audience I am overcome by that compounded feeling of fascinated envy and sheer fury which overtakes, in different proportions, my countrymen when confronted by the quintessence of English cultural achievement, Oxford; so profoundly attractive and so irreconcilably alien. As a child I thought that Englishmen were just the same, Scotsmen with a different accent; but now I know, through experience, that they are different; that environment and tradition have moulded their characters according to a different pattern, a difference which expresses itself in a thousand subtle contrasts of emotional reaction and temperament—perhaps most strikingly emphasised in the contrast (so difficult to define) between English humour and Scottish wit.

Such contrasts, deeper experience shows, do not utterly divide. Quite apart from their common history, not always a uniting factor, both peoples recognise that they share a common culture pattern and, more important, that they are the same kind of beings. No doubt a platitude, but one pregnant with significance.

Generalise the analogy! Within infinitely greater contrasts, beneath the most diverse cultures, breaking through cleavages due to colour, custom and opinion, which stretch back indefinitely beyond recorded history, man remains irreducibly man. Biologist and theologian are at least agreed in that.

Irreconcilably opposed in everything save their humanity! If you doubt it look at the record of history: issues, so easy to settle, so simple at root, twisted and travestied beyond recognition and buried under the bodies of whole generations till the problems they beget are so beset by tension, so clouded by emotion, that they can only be solved by annihilation.

For the Christian, in relation to the subject matter of this paper, two points emerge: (a) a diversity among peoples which has become embedded in their cultural outlook and behaviour patterns, and (b) something even more mysterious, the futility of man when seen over against his own aspirations and ideals. This is not the

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place in which to state the Christian doctrine of man. But it must be remembered that the problem it answers and the questions it involves lie behind, and to a large extent condition, the discussion of the topic of this paper.

What, then, of our subject? I can do no more, and I am not competent even to do this, than to comment on the terms of the title—‘the Universal mission of the Church.’

As she emerges in history the Church appears as a fulfilment and an answer. She is the answer to the hope of Israel; in her the promise to Abraham is realised, for as St Peter reminded his hearers, ‘this is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel’. It is the great day of the Lord, the day of the victory of the Spirit. In her the purpose of God is revealed in its undreamt-of richness. The tension between the universal Lordship of Jahwe, based on the recognition of his prerogatives as Creator, and the calling of Israel, a people set apart to be a ‘peculiar people’, a priestly people, is removed or rather transcended. God is Lord, unique and absolute, and therefore what he says to and for the people has an exclusive value which sweeps aside and destroys earth-bound platitudes. His truth is absolutely valid, because he is universal Lord. He is Truth itself, unrestricted and unconfined, which confronts the people as a Person manifesting himself in history.

First, very gradually, the people are taught that the exclusiveness all lies on the God-ward side. It is his truth, his revelation that had absolute value. Indeed neither the tabernacle nor the temple, neither the race nor the land but he that cometh after them, he alone may be adored, for in him the figure is transformed into the reality, the tables of stone are transcended in the spirit-dominated flesh.

The Israel of God in the teaching of Christ is no longer the old racial group, but, the work of preparation over, the values it expressed are integrated into the new Israel. Israel is the kingdom of God, the Messiah is the beloved Son whose kingdom, though not of this world, is the rule of God among you, present, yet full of future hope.

In the kingdom of the Messiah the ‘middle wall of partition’ is broken down in order that the people may come from the east and the west. There are no divisions in the kingdom for from the very foundation of the kingdom the spirit was poured forth on all nations. (*Acts 2, 9ff*).

The second chapter of *Acts* gives us a picture of the Church in her universality bound together in a unity which transcends diversity. The subsequent struggles and explicitations—Stephen, the conversion of Cornelius, Jerusalem and the Antioch episode—but give emphasis to what is manifest from the beginning. The kingdom is the re-creation, not simply of one people or nation, but of the whole cosmos through the victory of the second Adam.

We note, however, in the picture, that though diversities are transcended and union reached, that it is a union based on God's power, on the power of grace to make men sons of adoption, that it consists in a new, and real, relationship to God, which is social in character. This unity does not negate differences derived from the *humanum*, though it does transform them, or ought to transform them, if the barrier of pride, of assertion over against God, is overthrown.

With this general position in view, a position which the text, 'God then hath also to the Gentiles given repentance unto life', sums up, we can proceed to consider some of its implications.

The whole stress of the preaching of the Church is God-ward and although nothing escapes the providence of God (and in that sense all things serve his purpose) it is none the less true that the kingdom, which is the Church, is not of this world. Its teaching cannot be adequately expressed in values based on the outlook of the world, and though nature is good, it is overlaid with an infinity of sin, misery and distortion. In the face of a historic situation of a divided world, of the colour bar, of exploitation, the duty of the Church is to bear witness to her mission, for like the Apostle Paul, she preaches not herself but Christ Jesus. It may be true that philosophers can formulate a theory of man which is noble, which recognises man's duty to man, but with this, save in its auxiliary function, the Church is not directly concerned. The Church does not preach a human solution, but a God-given one, and therein lies the force and the authority of her faith.

From this some practical conclusions follow. The concrete situation in which we (Christians) encounter others (non-Christians) is full of diversity and complexity. We meet not only Hindu metaphysics but the living tradition of India, not simply Confucian theory, but that theory embedded in a culture; not simply pagan ritual, but that ritual existing as a feature in a delicately balanced psycho-physical complex.

Each practical issue calls for sympathy, learning and care before it can even be appreciated and frustration is inevitable if it is not realised that we preach, not the English way of life, not French modes of thought, but Christ. The constant effort of restraint, of suppression of an instinctive loyalty to human particularism, of humility in preaching is an essential element in any missionary work. We cannot, it is true, step outside our own tradition, but we must transcend it, if we are to avoid the trap: 'If they are enlightened, converted, they will become like us'. God forbid: why should the Indian join the ranks of the West European bourgeoisie? Like Christ, yes; like us—

How many times has the cause of the Church been retarded by the secularised zeal of her apostles? Cases in point are supplied by the history of the Indo-Chinese missions and the *padroado* in India.

Pope Benedict XV wrote, 'Remember that it is not a kingdom of men which you have to propagate, but the kingdom of Christ, and that you have to make citizens not of any country upon earth, but of the heavenly country. . . . We have been greatly grieved by certain publications. . . . in which less desire is apparent for the increase of the kingdom of God, than for the influence of the writers' own country.'

The same principle can be expressed in a slightly different manner when it is said that the missionary activity of the Church is not a sort of 'spiritual colonialism' in which one group keeps to itself the rights, while another is allowed to participate only in the duties. It is true that partisans of the 'colony' viewpoint have fortified their position with theory—but it is bogus theory. The Spaniard who contended that the American Indian had no soul, the 17th-century missionaries at Maçao who despised the Chinese, the French bishop who thanked God he had never laid hands on a black man, are all in their folly refuted by the Gospel and the evidence of heroic lives and deaths. If a man can read the history of the Church in China, in Japan or in Uganda and remain unmoved in prejudice, it is not simply his good sense that is called in question, but the quality of his Christianity.

It is of vital importance to see that principles are involved and that compromise, in terms of worldly issues, only breeds disaster, a disaster which so often falls on the innocent.

The judgments of God, as expressed in history, have driven us

back on a realisation of our own failure. None the less it is a mistake to waste time in futile lamentations. The spirit of the flesh has, obviously enough, intruded itself in the past and, obtuse though we are regarding our own faults, we know that it insinuates itself now. The important thing is that it should not masquerade as something else; that the children of mammon should not be disguised as the children of light and that the children of light should be clear as to their own principles, which should first be used to criticise themselves.

Nor is there any use in indulging in one of those interminable arguments about the positive work done by the missionary. It is true that one might say it is all very well to criticise, but men like the Jesuits in Paraguay or the Franciscans in Mexico dealt with the Indian problem in a way that has never been surpassed, and in spite of some defects a good case can be made for holding that they were the only people who have ever dealt with the problem at all. One could cite instances of heroic and hidden work *ad infinitum*, but this approach is mentioned only to be rejected; and for two reasons:

(a) The argument is not about who or what has exercised the greatest cultural influence. Because grace perfects nature, Christians hold that Christianity must have the greatest cultural success; but in the eyes of the world their standard of values is paradoxical. It does not consist in any form of the top-nation theory, whether 'topness' refers to drains or sophisticated culture. The Church may build a civilisation, give birth to a culture, but she does so absent-mindedly, for her treasure does not lie there; her task is to re-form, re-orientate lives, to bundle souls into the kingdom of heaven. What to the secularist is most real is to her relative, illusory if seen as an end in itself, though perhaps of importance as a means.

This is not to say that the world is evil in the sense of being corrupt throughout; it rather presents a subject-matter which can be transformed. The created is not irrelevant, but it cannot contain the effort or the aspiration of the Church; it is, rather, contained by the Church, drawn beyond itself into a communion which is no static thing. It is a communication which reveals that the meaningful centre of life is outside all that is commonly called life, and, though it presses on us now, is only achieved in the summation of personal and cosmic history.

(b) The standard of values accepted by the Christian and that maintained by the secularist are incommensurables; the one cannot be compared with the other. The same is true for the other religions, for however much truth be found in them, however much of grace may work in them, truth is only there, grace only works, through the power of the unique Son of the unique Creator. In other words the Church asserts that her claims are unique in their absoluteness, though it does not follow that we must adopt the 'conspiracy' attitude towards everything outside the walls of a sacristy. It does follow, however, that the debate is not about points of detail, but about total viewpoints, with attempts to account for the whole of experience in its breadth and depth.

Here, I think, there is a debate, but not an exhaustive one, for the God-wardness of Christianity escapes categorisation.

To return to the main point: the essential constitution of the Church is God-given and must prevail over human creations. It is also clear that, if the adoption of sons and the breaking down of the middle wall are more than mere metaphors, the Church can take to herself, and in doing so, remake anything of the subject matter which is not in conflict with her constitution.

This, of course, raises most complex problems, one of the most difficult of which is: given that a particular religious attitude is integral to each of the great historic culture groupings, what has the Church to say about it? The question of the Chinese rites shows how subtle are the issues involved and indeed each case can only be decided on its merits. Two generalisations are possible:

(a) Under Providence, Mediterranean thought forms have exercised a dominant influence on the manner in which the deposit of faith has been expressed. A distinction must surely be made between the values or contents expressed and the counters or symbols which are used in the expression. These only live for us because we belong to a particular tradition, and it must be realised that a mighty effort of translation must be made if these terms are to be related to modes of thought which have grown up in another culture. Unless the content is made to live in another context it must appear as dead or, worse, be accepted subject to a radical misunderstanding.

(b) In any historic situation it appears that some form of accommodation (in non-essentials), some period of preparation inter-

venes. In this period, which is one of purification, notions and activities are rescued from distorted uses and those primitive urges, which religion ignores at its peril, are harnessed to the ideals of the Gospel. It is not surprising that the Creator should have spoken to man in terms which man can understand and in language which is pre-figured in the history of religions.

In the letter of Pope Gregory found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (I. 30) we have a clear recognition of the truth that for the majority grace works through the social context (though not exclusively) and that therefore that context must be captured.

It might be objected to all this that these formulations represent a setting of the problem which is out of date. The last hundred years have seen a vast movement of unification through worldwide adoption of similar technical methods. How far this has affected traditional differences it is hard to say, but it does appear that just as a technical advance in the past has stimulated culture changes, so the profound modifications of our time must be expected to exercise a profound effect on man's outlook. Indeed it appears that such an outlook has emerged and found one formulation, at least, in Marxism. The pattern of the future may well be one of progressive unification on a secular basis, technical methods providing the means whereby pragmatic force breaks down traditional barriers and economic interdependence imposing an inescapable bond of unity. All this is provided with a myth, the myth of the proletariat, which by its force and appeal drives out the old secular myths and proclaims a world without God. And this not only in the West, but throughout the world, in the cities and in the rural backwaters the new kingdom of Mammon is set up; so that the problem of the universal mission of the Church must not be conceived simply in terms of preaching to the 'other' man 'abroad' but begins at home and extends out to meet every man. Foreign missionary work is only distinct in so far as it is the work of establishing the Church in some country where Christ is not yet proclaimed, where the witness of the visible Church is absent, but the mission of the Church is to the heathen everywhere.

The challenge can only be faced (*a*) if we Christians give all, stop this interminable potheration about particles, and concentrate on the building up of the kingdom of God; (*b*) if we realise the radical nature of our vocation. (It is sometimes said that Chris-

tianity has never been tried. That is not true; it has, and the results were extraordinary—read the second chapter of *Acts*). (*c*) if we reject the standards of the world as ultimate, realising that if we do not do so willingly God will strip away our secular powers and ambitions so that we shall have to face the issue. This, indeed, is the meaning of much contemporary history; and (*d*) if we constantly remind ourselves that the 'sending' of the Church, that our vocation rests on the divine command 'go teach all nations'. We, of ourselves, have nothing to preach; of ourselves we would never dare to preach: the command, none the less, has been given. 'Come, follow me'.