

Mission is dialogue and only dialogue

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The concept of mission as dialogue is something we have heard a lot about in recent times. However, the notion that it is dialogue and *only* dialogue – even in the widest sense of the word – is something that is mentioned less frequently. In this article I will try to set out some arguments to substantiate this proposition.

Let us begin by defining our terms based on the old practice of the *status quaestionis*: what do we mean by mission?

The word “mission” has two main meanings in our context. The first meaning is “assignment”, “task” or “duty”. Mission means the task that someone has or the intention or objective for which something is done. The other meaning is to be sent out or called upon to carry out a task that has been entrusted to us. Deriving from the Latin verb *mittere*, to send, the sense of being sent out for a particular purpose, and of setting forth on a journey to fulfil it, is inextricably linked with the word “mission”.

In the past few centuries – this is what our generation learned as children – the word was primarily used in the plural, “the missions”. This referred to the activities of the Church, specifically of the missionaries, who were sent out with the aim (mission) of expanding the frontiers of the Church and establishing it in places where it was not yet present. Missions were, therefore, not a concrete realisation of the Church’s great mission, but rather a missionary or missional mission under the leadership of the missionaries. The missions themselves were to a certain extent of secondary importance. They did not impact on the Church’s main aims and responsibilities and did not concern everyone, but only specialised missionaries.

However, in recent decades the plural “missions” has largely given

way to the more elegant-sounding and powerful word “mission” in the singular, the (great) mission of the Church as a whole, its main calling. In the post-conciliar age, i.e. after the Second Vatican Council, the word “mission” has been used to refer to the Church in its entirety. In the new ecclesiology (we should not forget that the 20th century is described as the century of ecclesiology) this term has been revived and endowed with new meaning: mission is now seen as central to the Church’s being and its fundamental self-image. One of the most influential texts here is Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: the Church recognises its true calling and deepest identity in *evangelisation*, the preaching of the Gospel: “She exists in order to evangelise [...]».¹² This is its mission, the great mission of the Church, the global mission, the Christian mission – something more far-reaching and deeper than just the Church’s mission.

The missions or the missionary/missional mission are part of the great mission of the Church, but they are not co-terminous with it, and are not even its most important part. I mention this here in order to place the missions or missionary mission in theological terms within the context of post-conciliar ecclesiology, as set out in the encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

When I speak of mission in this article I normally mean the missionary or missional mission; when I am referring to the Church’s fundamental mission, then I talk of the great mission.

After this introductory clarification let us turn to our topic.

Mission was not a dialogue

In human terms it is understandable, albeit reprehensible, to forget one’s own mistakes, to actively erase them from one’s personal memory or the collective memory in order to gloss over recollections that are uncomfortable or entail the need for forgiveness. This form of behaviour is often adopted by religions, which form part and parcel of human life. Over the course of history Christianity and the Christian churches have been no exception in this respect.

¹² »*Evangelii Nuntiandi*« Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World, promulgated on 8 December 1975.

The more serious the error, the stronger and more subconscious is the desire to forget. We do not speak or think about the errors of the past and are no longer able to recognise our own collective modes of behaviour that we regret. We only talk of our new attitudes, as if they had not been preceded by very different, even opposite forms of behaviour. We tend to forget that we said and did the exact opposite only yesterday. We no longer look in the mirror and see our reflection.

The new interpretations of mission also suffer from this form of behaviour. Many of the new ideas of mission studies seem to be built on ahistorical foundations, without reference to a past which needs to be evaluated or put right. People talk freely of mission as a dialogue, speak and write elegantly and throw a veil over the things that mission has done over the centuries or millennia even.

What I wish to say is that mission has not been a dialogue; indeed it has set itself against dialogue. It has refused to engage in dialogue and imposed a religious monologue, in some cases by force even. In the light of the history of missionary work I do not believe it is right to conduct a missiology of dialogue as if nothing had happened, as if we were starting from scratch and can say whatever we like with impunity. In my opinion, honesty demands that we face squarely up to reality. And intellectual honesty means that one does not forget what one has – historically speaking – just said. I, for my part at least, wish to be honest and acknowledge our past.

Let me make it quite clear at this point that it is not a question of condemning anyone. I am well aware of the wonderful generosity of spirit and extreme self-sacrifice of many missionaries who have gone before us. I cannot imagine that we would have acted differently or better had we been in their historical and intellectual situation and lived with the theology and spirituality of their age. It is possible to acknowledge a dark past unambiguously without condemning anyone. It is common practice to try and find people who are personally responsible but it is not always right to do so. After conducting a historical survey of mission Reinhold Bernhardt comes to the conclusion that “in this criminal history of Christianity responsibility falls back on the overall theoretical structure, which was what made

this arrogance possible in the first place”¹³ People were not evil, they were constrained by circumstances; they were the victims of their own ideas, their own philosophies and theories and, in this case, of their own theologies.

The theology of mission (its approach, justification and theoretical interpretation) was not dialogical – perhaps it could never be so; its inability to engage in dialogue shaped generations of Christians and missionaries.

What were the theoretical elements that prevented the missions from taking the form of a dialogue and led them instead to impose their ideas by force? It is important to identify and analyse these elements to ensure they no longer exist. If we forget them, as we tend to do with many parts of the Christian world view, we might well hold on to this non-dialogical approach for a long time – sub-consciously perhaps, as if it had been “swept under the carpet”, but still allowing it to influence real forms of behaviour in the world. We will therefore attempt to draw out these theoretical elements schematically and synthetically.

Exclusivism

The first theoretical element that by definition forms the basis for the absence of dialogue in mission is exclusivism; the idea or, indeed, the conviction that one’s own religion is *the* true religion. Within Christianity this is symbolically represented by the famous saying of Fulgentius of Ruspe¹⁴: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Even if this saying is framed in a Christian context, it has a universal meaning. In ancient Egypt, which believed itself to be the centre of the world or the central setting for creation, it was widely believed that »*extra Aegiptum nulla est salus*«¹⁵. The potential sins of the Christian mission resulting from

¹³ Bernhardt, R., *La pretensión de absolutz del cristianismo. Desde la Ilustración hasta la teología pluralista de la religión*, Bilbao 2000, 315-316.

¹⁴ Although it is most commonly attributed to Fulgentius, St. Cyprian of Carthage appears to have been the first to formulate this statement, even though it was not apparently his intention to contribute anything to the theology of religion. He merely wished to draw attention to the danger (*nulla salus*) of attempting to build a congregation outside the Church (*extra Ecclesiam*).

¹⁵ Donner, H., *Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn in Grundzuegen*,

exclusivism are by no means exclusive. Exclusivism is a mindset, a way of interpreting the world, which is characteristic of humanity's infancy. One could say that while all cultures – and religions are part of them – have gone through this phase of development some of them have not yet completed it. Just as all children are born self-centred and subconsciously enjoy being the focus of their family, so religions are egocentric when they emerge. They believe they offer the only means to salvation and have an innate superiority complex. This attitude naturally makes a genuine dialogue fairly unlikely. It was time, history, experience and the advancement of human knowledge that enabled Christianity to overcome its egocentricity. Christianity came to realise that it is not the centre of the world, that there are other equally valid reference points and that relations with them should be driven not by domination and antipathy but by dialogue.

Under these circumstances and with these theoretical underpinnings, vision and theology, mission was not a dialogue.

Greed and imperialism

Religions do not exist in an ideal world far removed from misery and human evil but in the midst of this real world. Religions and cultures are the soul of a people and people are human, all too human in fact. Power struggles, wars and imperialism are routine features of our history, and religion was always bound to be caught in the middle, either promoting love and justice among the peoples or justifying wars and imperialism. It is worth remembering that all empires down to the present day have been religious. There were no atheist empires and no empires without religion. Because these empires were a human construction, they were religious, because people have always needed religion. Imperialism always had a religious component, which legitimated and sublimated it. Wars and empires flourish better in God's name, as the presumed will of God or protected by God's grace, than without this religious dimension.

The religion of an empire – itself imperialist – evidently suffers from the same superiority complex as we mentioned earlier. The

Grundrisse zum Alten Testament, volume 4/1, Göttingen 1984, 24, in turn quoting E. Uphill, *The Nina Bows*, JEOL 6 (19) (1965/66) 393–420 (italics in the original).

religion of an empire can recognise the validity of other religions, but only on condition that these religions in turn recognise the supremacy of the empire that has been chosen by God to rule over other nations.

If we relate all of the above to Christianity, we should not forget that Christianity – and by this I do not mean the Jesus movement and what it set in motion – was organised by the Roman Empire and initiated by Constantine. Christianity is the offspring and true heir to the Roman Empire. The Christendom of Christianity configured itself as an empire and literally functioned as an empire for centuries. In this empire the Pope played the role of emperor; he was able to install and replace kings, mediate in disputes, draw frontiers and give away newly discovered lands. Even today Roman imperial law forms the structure and basis of the canon law of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is undoubtedly the last remaining absolute (imperial) monarchy in the West; the last of its kind which has not yet abdicated. It is self-evident that this imperialism, which is rooted in the genetic makeup, the DNA, of Christianity, was bound to have a negative view of other religions. Indeed, it regarded them as diabolical and refused to countenance any possibility of a dialogue. Moreover, Christianity has always maintained the religiousness of its own followers just as empires have consistently done with their religions: by holding the empire together through force if necessary, promoting the initiation of children into the official religion, compelling the people to take part in the religion, prohibiting freedom of worship and conscience, forbidding all criticism and dissidence, persecuting and executing heretics and increasing the number of believers by imposing the faith on conquered peoples.¹⁶ Against the backdrop of this historical inheritance and as long as a religion does not liberate itself and explicitly disown this “genetic” imperialist approach, it will evidently not be enough to simply forget and no longer talk about it, as has already been discussed. Mission as dialogue will never be possible with an imperialistically-grounded theology and the violent suppression of other peoples and religions.

¹⁶ The Gospel text »*Compelle eos intrare*«, “Compel them to come in”, was used to justify the proselytising mission.

Inclusivism

Given the growth in transport and communications, the globalisation of relations worldwide and the consequent appreciation of cultural and religious pluralism in the past century, exclusivism forfeited its plausibility in more culturally advanced circles. As humanity had advanced so far, accepting religious exclusivity proved virtually inconceivable. This gave rise to the option of inclusivism as an intellectual strategy, enabling the exclusivity of a religion to be pushed metaphysically into the background (even though it continued to be seen as willed by God and as the convergence of all other religions), while at the same time accepting the positive points and even the salvific relevance of other religions, although one's own religion was still regarded as being superior to all others.

While it is now recognised by most theologians, inclusivism is in effect a civilised and moderate form of exclusivism, which involves a partial acknowledgement of the other religions, but preserves the exclusive priority of one's own religion. Inclusivism is ultimately a form of exclusivism.

The same cultural situation which raises doubts about exclusivism also means that a mission relying on compulsion and disregarding dialogue loses all plausibility. Mission has to develop a civilised approach based on inter-religious dialogue. But a dialogue is impossible if inclusivism is unable to overcome the exclusivism inherent in it. Dialogue is not possible as long as the mission is based on exclusivism or inclusivism. Exclusivism rejects all types of dialogue and even anathematises it; anathema is preferable to dialogue. Inclusivism maintains the appearance of dialogue, but in principle the modes of behaviour and beliefs which make dialogue impossible are continued. A religion which (a) sees itself as the only true religion, (b) regards itself as destined by God to provide the final eschatological inclusion of other religions and (c) puts all this on the list of its irrefutable dogmas will never be able to engage in dialogue with another religion. This religion can only sit down politely at the discussion table and wait for the other religions to surrender to it.

Inclusivism, therefore, maintains the appearance of dialogue while making genuine dialogue impossible. Hence mission under the banner of inclusivism cannot involve a genuine dialogue either, if what

is meant by that is a dialogue of open-minded equals ready to listen to and learn from each other and willing to embrace change if necessary.

Mission as dialogue

While it is not my intention here to justify pluralist theology, I wish to pursue a number of suppositions on how we might conceive of the relationship between mission and dialogue in all religions from a religiously pluralist viewpoint.

The pluralist vision does not tie salvation exclusively to a single religion. That rescues it from the fear of seeing the world as lost in damnation, since it no longer views the faithful of other religions as having been deserted by the hand of God. The pluralist vision gives the faithful of all religions a “soteriological optimism of eschatological salvation”, which frees them from the feeling of fear, the pressure to proselytise and the oppressive responsibility arising from the risk of damnation.¹⁷

If a religion overcomes exclusivism and inclusivism and turns towards pluralism, the original motivations of the mission change. They lose their frightening sense of urgency, their fanatical haste and their responsibility for the situation in the world which inhibited exclusivist and inclusivist believers. Trust is now placed in a positive plurality of paths to salvation. First of all, religions are freed from exclusivism’s incapacity for dialogue. If a religion no longer sees itself as being surrounded by false, inferior or diabolical religions, pluralist religions feel freed from the incapacity to engage in dialogue from which religions with an exclusivist attitude suffered. Given that salvation is possible beyond their own confines, religions can liberate themselves from their judgemental attitude towards other religions and thus adopt a positive attitude to dialogue.

Taking into account that there is no one religion determined by God to ensure the world is ruled by a chosen people, religions which take a pluralist approach cannot be imperialist. Imperialism appears as a negation of God’s universal will for justice and salvation. A pluralist religion offers no scope for political imperialism, just as it has no place for cultural, religious and imperialist attitudes. A

¹⁷ Casaldàliga, P./ Vigil, J.M., *Spirituality of Liberation*, Tunbridge Wells 1994, 171.

pluralist religion is more willing to criticise and to take a stand against the political, cultural and religious imperialism of its own people. A pluralist religion will develop greater sensitivity to cultural pluralism and be much less likely to be drawn into cultural aggression against other peoples. In their missionary work pluralist religions will not attempt to extend the influence of their own culture or the Church which supports this mission. Pluralist missionaries do not see it as their job to act as cultural agents or to promote nationalist feelings, as was the case in the colonial (or imperial) age.

Pluralistic religions allow for a plurality of autonomous paths to salvation. They regard God's universal will for salvation as undeniable and mysteriously omnipresent. This is reflected in religious variety or religious biodiversity. If God's mysterious presence can be found everywhere, then it is also conceivable that we encounter Him in religions, which can be seen as sacred sites of God's presence. That is the reason for religions to enter into inter-religious dialogue: a dialogue which manifestly does not seek to convert the other person and get him to renounce his faith, in order to incorporate him into one's own faith, but which offers the possibility of looking for God's presence where it is revealed – in all religions. Thanks to the differing world view inherent in the pluralistic paradigm, pluralistic religions are open to the idea of looking for God outside of themselves and in dialogue with other religions, which they regard from the outset as sacred places of God's revelation. A vibrant, pluralistic religion will attempt to broaden its inter-religious relations in order to experience God more and in a better way, to learn spiritually and find new aspects of God in all His different names.

The missionaries of the pluralistic religions base their mission on a pluralistic perspective. These missionaries do not want to standardise pluralism in any way, seeing it as a right, as something willed by God and a sign of His immeasurable abundance. As a result they do not lean towards proselytism or conversion. Nor do they teach, being bent on listening to the other religions, learning from their hidden riches and experiencing God in them. They are not just willing, as we would say nowadays, to inculturate themselves (instead of deculturating or acculturating people), but are also prepared to "inreligionise" themselves. In a nutshell, they are willing to incarnate themselves in the other's culture and religion and transfer the riches they find to

their own religions. They are also evidently prepared to share their own religious riches. Dialogue therefore means interaction, back and forth, give and take, I give you something and you give me something in return, I give of myself and accept you. Mission as exercised by pluralistic religions is a dialogue, an exchange, mutual learning, investigation without limits and mutual cross-fertilisation performed unselfishly, freely and sincerely. There is no pretence of a dialogue in order to prepare the ground for a proclamation of one's own religion as the only true one. There is no pretence of a dialogue to maintain modern appearances, without having any real interest in dialogue and only in order to smooth the path for potential new followers.

The mission therefore continues. It could not be any other way. But it has a different purpose and has been reborn, resurrected. The proselytising mission of the past, which largely involved attracting and converting believers from other faiths along with the dissemination of its own culture and its own faith in foreign countries, is now dead. The dedication of the missionaries who gave their lives to save others and convert them to the Christian faith, as St. Francis Xavier did, is worthy of admiration. He is regarded as the patron of all missions and the patron of the old kind of missionary work which, seen from a modern pluralist perspective, he might no longer even take part in himself. I could imagine that a saint of his stature would participate today in the new contemporary mission with the same dedication. He would be involved in dialogue, not in proselytism based solely on conversion, the conversion of ourselves and all others.

In summary we can say that dialogue is the new perspective for mission. Even more than that: mission is only dialogue. Hence everything that is not sincere dialogue or is opposed to dialogue cannot be part of the true mission. This is true, in principle, of all religions, but in particular of Christianity.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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