

## Mission and dialogue – being Christian in a plural society

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Whenever Christians talk about mission, one aspect of it will in all likelihood be beyond dispute: Christians see themselves as members of a global family that is linked by mutual solidarity – or should be, at least. What distinguishes them from others is that their thinking does not follow narrow national borders. That is their personal aspiration, at least. Christians regard themselves as a global learning community, not as a Church whose boundaries are identical to those of a particular country. Consequently, for Christians there are no foreigners. In the Christian congregation and community, in the Church, there is – as Paul writes – no longer any division of people into Jews and Greeks, slaves and free men, males and females (Gal 3:28) and most certainly not in such a way that one group sets itself apart from the others and feels superior to them. In the Christian community, in the Church, these boundaries are to be abolished. This brings us to the egalitarian effect of the Gospel; for, as Paul says, “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28 NJB) People derive a sense of dignity, uniqueness and strength from their union with Christ and from the knowledge of being created and really wanted by God. It is crucially important that the Church – if it wishes to remain faithful to its identity as the Church of Jesus Christ – should regard itself as a church that overcomes boundaries. The Church, by its very essence, *is* the universal Church.

### **The crisis in the concept of mission**

There was a time when the word ‘mission’ rolled a little easier off the tongue and we believed that those who had not been baptised would not find eternal salvation. There was also a time when Europeans felt it was their duty to bring culture and religion to people in other parts of the world. The reports of the first Italian missionaries in the Congo in the second half of the seventeenth century are very revealing in

this respect. They considered it their obligation to bring “order, truth and eternal standards” to this world of “bizarre customs and satanic traditions” so that the inhabitants might be raised from the level of animals to humans, taken from barbarity to civilised behaviour and, rid of the lies of sorcery and idolatry, shown the light of reason and belief.<sup>318</sup> Over the centuries, therefore, and in many parts of the world the history of missionary activity has been closely associated with the history of colonisation. Respect was not always shown for the freedom of every individual to accept or reject the belief in the God of Jesus Christ – and without that freedom there cannot be any true faith.

This brings us straight to the fundamental crisis in the concept of mission in modern times. We know that God’s grace cannot be limited to the Catholic Church alone.<sup>319</sup> It extends to people who, for whatever reason, have not – or not yet – experienced the God of Jesus Christ in any tangible form or one that is relevant to them. Moreover, we know – and have done at the very latest since the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on Religious Freedom “*Dignitatis humanae*” (DH) – that the essence of belief resides in the ability to say yes freely to the God of Jesus Christ. No one can be forced to accept or discard a certain belief.

Referring to the deliberations of the Council, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde talks of a “Copernican revolution, a move away from the right of the truth to the right of the individual”<sup>320</sup>; this came about, in particular, as a result of the declaration “*Dignitatis humanae*”. DH renounces neither the Christian religion’s claim to the truth nor the obligation of every individual to seek the truth. But what is new is that the worldly power is declared to be devoid of any competence in this matter, because an option for the faith is a personal matter, in other words individuals must be free to decide in accordance with

<sup>318</sup> Mbulamwanza, M.-B., *Testi e immagini. La missione del Congo nelle relazioni dei cappuccini italiani 1645–1700*, Thèse Lubumbashi 1977, cited in: Bühlmann, W., *Wenn Gott zu allen Menschen geht. Für eine neue Erfahrung der Auserwählung*, Freiburg 1981, 94.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. Johannes Paul II., *Enzyklika REDEMPTORIS MISSIO Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Johannes Paul II. über die fortdauernde Gültigkeit des missionarischen Auftrages*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 100, Bonn 1990, 10.

<sup>320</sup> Böckenförde, E.-W., “Religionsfreiheit als Aufgabe der Christen. Gedanken eines Juristen zu den Diskussionen auf dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil (1965)”, in: idem., *Kirchlicher Auftrag und politische Entscheidung*, Freiburg i. Br. 1973, 72f.

their inner conscience. It should be added from a theological point of view that, by its very nature, turning to God transcends the earthly and temporal order.<sup>321</sup> This statement marks the final renunciation of the notion of a Catholic or Christian state that enforces the interests of the Church with the powers it has at its disposal. Mission in the wake of colonisation is, therefore, no longer conceivable.

Today, the question facing religions with a claim to universality in the context of a plural society is whether they can affirm a plural society on inner – theological – grounds. Only religions that can do so will remain compatible in the long term with modern, liberal concepts of society and the state.

### Christianity and culture

From the very beginning, Christianity has been facing a singular tension. Its task is to proclaim in word and in life what is new and distinctive with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In a process of *metanoia* or conversion, people are called upon in their lives to fully embrace the God of Jesus Christ, because life and salvation are to be found in Him. On the one hand, this message of Jesus Christ was understood from the very outset as being universal. In other words, it was directed to every individual in every culture at all times. It is not something of purely local or regional significance. This leads us almost automatically to the other pole in this field of tension. Conflicting with the universal claim of Jesus are the different individuals and, in particular, the culturally influenced life plans of people and nations in the world. These life plans include not only the individual's explicit religious belief in God, but also their different ethical culture. It is understandable, therefore, that the Pauline epistles and the New Testament Gospels show evidence of the intensive efforts made to find points of contact among the recipients of the message making it possible for them to comprehend and accept the message and person of Jesus and to fashion a life with Him on the basis of that message.

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<sup>321</sup> Cf., Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Die Erklärung über die Religionsfreiheit »Dignitatis humanae«*, in: Rahner, K./Vorglimmer, H.(eds.), *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg i.Br. 1982, 663-664, no. 3.

The first steps are well known and reported in the Gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew the message of God is introduced to a Jewish-influenced community and in the Gospel of John to a community which probably has no Jewish but Greek roots (deemed in the New Testament to be “heathen”) and is influenced by the thinking of Ancient Greece. The authors of the Gospels attempt to express their belief in the God of Jesus Christ in a manner compatible with the cognitive framework of the Jewish faith or of Greek philosophy. Paul adopts a similar approach with regard to the Christian ethos, which he interprets with the help of Stoic philosophy and presents to the people in the congregations he has founded and supervises. Evidence of this is provided by the ‘household codes,’ the catalogues of virtues and vices, which Paul took from the Stoic tradition and to which he gave a distinct Christian slant and orientation.

The Christian festivals, too, have pagan origins. Christmas, for instance, coincides with the winter solstice celebrations; for, according to Christian understanding, Jesus Christ is the real *sol invictus*, the sun god of the later Roman Empire.

In modern mission theology, the founder of the first chair of mission theology, Joseph Schmidlin – a missiologist from Münster – underlined the importance of conversion in the first half of the 20th century and of the preaching of the Gospel, which convinces people to convert and begin a new life in Christ.<sup>322</sup> In this respect he concurs with the Protestant missiologist Gustav Warneck. In contrast Pierre Charles, a Belgian Jesuit from Leuven, stresses the old mediaeval Church missionary doctrine of the planting of the Church (*plantatio ecclesiae*), the purpose of which was to ‘plant’ indigenous churches in the overseas colonies so as to give the new native Christians a chance to express their faith using their own cultural means.<sup>323</sup>

Taking this into account, the decree “Ad gentes” on the mission activity of the Church, issued by the Second Vatican Council, calls for the inculturation of the Gospel in all cultures, but also warns against syncretism and particularism. The basic idea conveyed throughout, albeit with different emphases, is that in the missionary endeavours

<sup>322</sup> See Schmidlin, J., *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss*, Münster 1923.

<sup>323</sup> Cf. Colzani, G., *Teologia della missione*, Padova 1996, 43-45.

undertaken by the Church an encounter should take place between the Gospel and the diverse forms of real life.

All those who concern themselves with the issues arising from Christian mission theology agreed in principle that “As long as the spirit and the message of the Gospel, as laid down and developed in the (faith) tradition of the Church, are preserved, every culture should have the right to find the form and expression of the faith that are appropriate to it.”<sup>324</sup> A closer examination of the matter in theological terms, however, brings a number of problems and contradictions to the surface, exemplified not least by the almost Babylonian linguistic confusion to be found in this field. Behind each of the terms used lies an implicit or explicit theological concept. The different terms reveal an attempt to respond to the fact that Christianity is no longer a purely European phenomenon and that, as of the 20th century, “the majority of Christians live in the southern hemisphere and derive their identity from the histories of non-European cultures and in the context of non-Christian religions.”<sup>325</sup>

Concepts that reflect the process of extricating the Church from its entanglement with exclusivity involve the use of words such as adaptation and accommodation and – more recently – the terms indigenisation, contextualisation and the explicitly theological concept ‘incarnation’ of the faith in non-European cultures. In the interests of simplicity, however, I will stick to the term inculturation, even though I am aware it has a number of disadvantages, in particular the fact that, in contrast to other terms, it does not emphasise the process that is involved.

The term inculturation, probably coined by the missiologist Pierre Charles in 1953, has been in use for less than sixty years. Originally, ‘inculturation’ was not a term used in mission theology at all.<sup>326</sup> It goes back to the American cultural anthropologist Melville Herskovits. In his cultural theory Herskovits uses the term inculturation to describe

<sup>324</sup> Müller, K., “Inkulturation” in: *Lexikon missionstheologischer Grundbegriffe*, Berlin 1987, 107.

<sup>325</sup> Collet, G., “Inkulturation: I. Begriff und Problemstellung”, in: *Lexikon Theologie und Kirche*, 1996, 505.

<sup>326</sup> Rivinius, K.J., “Inkulturation“, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 212 (1994) 687-696.

the process a child undergoes in its conscious and unconscious response to the cultural manifestations of its environment. It learns the habits it observes in its surroundings – from language to clothing and food, which gives the child security and a sense of orientation when confronted with the unfamiliar. Herskovits calls this process (in American English) ‘enculturation.’ This term was taken up by Joseph Masson in 1962. Writing in the journal *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* he talked about ‘Catholicisme inculturé’<sup>327</sup> and stressed the need for a “diversely inculturated Catholicism – catholicisme inculturé d’une façon polymorphe.”<sup>328</sup>

In Asia, the term was used at the first Plenary Assembly of the Asian Bishops’ Conference in 1974 in Taipei, where there was a discussion for the first time about the ‘indigenous inculturated Church’: “The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its root deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God’s Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition [...] so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in his Paschal mystery.”<sup>329</sup>

At this time the term ‘inculturation’ occurred in various Jesuit documents and became established in theological circles at the very latest in 1979 in the Apostolic Exhortation “*Catechesi Tradendae*” on Catechesis in our Time. This combines the theological principle of incarnation with the concept of acculturation found in social science. “The term acculturation, which is related to the ethnological term

<sup>327</sup> Masson, J., “L’Église ouverte sur le monde” in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 75 (1953) 15-32.

<sup>328</sup> Cf. Sievernich, M., *Die christliche Mission. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Darmstadt 2009, 150.

<sup>329</sup> FABCI, “Evangelisation in Modern Day Asia” (Taipei 1974), in: Rosales, G.B. / Arévalo, C., (eds.), *For all the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, vol. 1, Maryknoll, Quezon City 1992, 14, no. 12.

‘enculturation’ commonly used in anthropology, where it means the cultural contacts of an individual, describes the acceptance by an individual or a group of foreign spiritual or cultural elements.”<sup>330</sup> Acculturation, however, encompasses an additional, decisive aspect, which is that of mutuality. An exchange takes place that stimulates both sides and, ideally, triggers a common stimulus.

In this connection the Second Vatican Council uses the Biblical image of the seed. Section 22 of the decree “Ad gentes” states in poetic, conciliar language: “The seed which is the word of God, watered by divine dew, sprouts from the good ground and draws from thence its moisture, which it transforms and assimilates into itself, and finally bears much fruit. In harmony with the economy of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance.”<sup>331</sup>

Here the principle of incarnation has been chosen as an image to illustrate what is to happen in the handing on of the faith, in the mission. The Son of God has united himself to human nature and become a physical human being. In his physical presence as Jesus of Nazareth, born in Palestine under Roman occupation at the time of Emperor Augustus, and as a faithful and erudite Jew, his concrete historical figure becomes – in word and in life – the revelation of God, which is not restricted to the period and Jewish surroundings in which the historical Jesus lived. Rather, the message of Jesus is to assume a different form at every time and in every place in every culture.

### **Culture as symbolic interpretation**

Culture is the term generally used to express the sum of the means by which a human being expresses himself as a person, as an individual (individual lifestyle) and in a community (culture of a people, of a religious community, etc.). A person refers to himself and expresses the way he sees himself and the relationship he has with his surroundings

<sup>330</sup> Reimann, S., “Inkulturation – Zwischen Ritenstreit und Befreiungstheologie”, in: [http://www.kueichstaett.de/Fakultaeten/RPF/professuren/gemeindegemeinschaft/reader/readerHIII/HF\\_sections/content/Inkulturation.pdf](http://www.kueichstaett.de/Fakultaeten/RPF/professuren/gemeindegemeinschaft/reader/readerHIII/HF_sections/content/Inkulturation.pdf)(25.1.2010), 4.

<sup>331</sup> Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Das Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche “Ad gentes”*, in: Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H.(eds.), *o cit.*, 365, no. 22.

by means of symbols – and words. With the help of symbols – and, given the analytical, poetic and other functions that words have, they can be set alongside symbols – he classifies individual things as belonging to a larger whole in accordance with religious, aesthetic, philosophical or political points of view and thus gives them meaning. This is how people create what we call culture.

Furthermore, culture has an historical aspect (cultural heritage) and is at the same time a contemporaneous concept. In subjective terms, culture means the capacity to create and practise culture; in objective terms, culture manifests itself in cultural goods. Interpreted in this comprehensive sense, culture encompasses language, values, religion, art and much more besides. It is reflected in standards of thinking, feeling and behaviour.<sup>332</sup>

On the one hand, the term culture describes a permanent conditioning, a second reality for a person. On the other hand, it is also evident that culture is not simply a fate into which a person is born; while it is a given fact, it is also something he is called upon to fashion. In this respect, culture and the individual find themselves in a dialectical relationship.

A concept of culture framed in this way reminds us that human activity is not devoid of history, but comes face to face with the outcome of activities undertaken in the past. The cultural tradition encompasses the concrete, but also the noetic, i.e. conceptual principles, codes and standards. The cultural heritage is, in this sense, an incomplete aggregate sum. If cultural traditions are to survive, there must be anthologies and encyclopaedias, museums and books, memories and stores of all kinds. The most important storage medium is language, without which culture is inconceivable. Language plays a major role in cultural self-awareness and in appraising given cultural facts, their standards and codes.

For Christian theology, the principle by which the true Christian faith must abide is that it should not destroy any human culture. Quite the opposite, it can absorb elements of the prevailing culture

<sup>332</sup> Türk, H.J., "Kultur", in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (1997) 6, 514f, here: 515. Cf. Schwemmer, O., *Die kulturelle Existenz des Menschen*, Berlin, 1997; Moebius, S./Quadflieg, D., (eds.), *Kultur. Theorien der Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 2006.



and yet leave a decisive mark on this culture by placing accentuations, shifting horizons and injecting meaning of its own. Anyone who has looked into the mission history of Christianity will know that this model was not always the primary concern driving Church activities, especially in the period of colonialism. Since the Second Vatican Council at the very latest, but also long before that in the many efforts made by Christian missionaries<sup>333</sup>, Christian theology and the Church's message have stressed that in the encounter between Christianity and practised culture the aim must be to ensure a real meeting between the Gospel and the expressions of meaning found in the specific culture. This statement takes on a special significance if we interpret it against the backdrop of today's plural and liberal societies.

When we talk of plural societies, we mean societies with an essentially unlimited number of groups, each of which fosters its internal group culture. This culture moulds and strengthens the group's own members, but it also has and exerts influence on society as a whole. The various groups cooperate with each other, although they also compete in certain areas. The state does not consider itself responsible for matters pertaining to proclamation of the faith. In questions of belief it does not make decisions on behalf of people living in the country.

The concept of mission must be reconsidered in view of life as it is lived in such liberal societies. Here the formulation contained in the policy paper adopted by the German Bishops' Conference "His Salvation for all Nations" (2004) points in the right direction. It states that mission means "transcending the boundaries that separate us from others and, while respecting their otherness, bearing witness to and proclaiming the Gospel so credibly that they feel invited to follow Jesus and to accept His Gospel."<sup>334</sup>

The French Bishops' Conference presented its thoughts on the proclamation of the Gospel under the heading "Proposer la foi –

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<sup>333</sup> See also, for example, the efforts made Matteo Ricci, a missionary to China; inter alia cf. Haub, R./Oberholzer, P., *Matteo Ricci und der Kaiser von China: Jesuitenmission im Reich der Mitte*, Würzburg 2010.

<sup>334</sup> Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 76, Bonn 2004, 37.

Offer the Faith, Let People Decide”<sup>335</sup> The message they wished to convey was that the task Christians face is to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ and the God of Jesus Christ so convincingly through their own way of life and ability to communicate that people feel invited to move down the path that Jesus walked and defined. This makes it clear that for people walking in the footsteps of Jesus there cannot be an either/or between the spreading of the Gospel and a commitment to social justice. The same is true when it comes to bearing witness for those still searching and to an involvement in a sincere inter-faith dialogue. All these are different manifestations of the Christian way of life.

### **Christian mission rests on dialogue**

The Christian message can only be embraced in freedom. However, that does not mean renouncing one's own identity. Rather, the person who has come to believe in the God of Jesus Christ places his own identity in a larger context. The Christian belief is capable of inculturating itself in different environments. This is true of the major cultures in the world. Christians regard this as both an opportunity and a challenge in respect of the many sub-cultures and milieus in which they move in European societies. When we talk about inculturation, we do not mean just the culture of the elites. On the contrary, we cannot afford to lose sight of the cultures and sub-cultures of the marginalised, the excluded, the forgotten and the poor. We need to remember not just the many lifestyles which people the world over pursue to express the image they have of themselves and the way they interpret the world, but also the various strata, groups and milieus in Germany and other European societies.

In my view, what Alfons Auer has said about the relationship between faith and life, between world ethos and salvation ethos<sup>336</sup> can be transferred, *cum grano salis*, to the issues we are addressing here: the integrative, critical and stimulating role of faith with respect to culturally influenced life as it is lived.

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<sup>335</sup> Conférence Episcopale Française, *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle. Lettre aux catholiques de France*, Paris 1999.

<sup>336</sup> Cf. Auer, A., *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube*, Düsseldorf 1971.

- The belief in the God of Jesus Christ is an *integrative* factor within an existing culture. It is capable of absorbing aspects of that culture and placing them in the larger context of a belief in creation which assumes that everything has its origins in God and finds its fulfilment in Him. Culturally determined forms of coexistence are thus given a meaning and rendered amenable to the comprehensive reality of the Lord. For the believer they can be an expression of his faith in God.
- Secondly, the encounter between belief and an existing culture involves a dialogue that draws *critical* attention to aspects that are not reconcilable with belief in the God of Jesus Christ. In this context reference can be made, for example, to the importance of the individual who, in the course of European cultural history, has been strongly influenced by the Christian belief in creation and redemption. Acceptance of the significance of individual human dignity means there can be no toleration of slavery or the death sentence. In this respect, and in many other questions of human coexistence, the Christian faith has a *critical* impact on possible cultural realities.
- In the encounter with an existing culture, faith plays an integrative, critical and *stimulating* role by pointing the way forward and aspiring to initiate, inspire and impel a development that ultimately leads to a more humane world and a life more worthy of human beings.

“Our service to the faith”, says the 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits, “must not disregard the good forces in the cultures in which we work, nor must it impose anything foreign on them from outside. It strives to ensure that the driving forces at the heart of a culture move it towards the Kingdom of God.”<sup>337</sup>

With regards to its relations with the cultures and milieus in which people live today, the Christian message does not wish to formulate any fundamental opposition to a certain culture or to people’s life plans. It does not intend to establish an alternative world, but to be

<sup>337</sup> 34th General Congregation (1995), in: Provinzialskonferenz der Zentraleuropäischen Assistenzen (ed.), *Dekrete der 31. bis 34. Generalkongregation der Gesellschaft Jesu*, Munich 1997, 421.

heard in the world in which people live. Here in Europe, Germany, in particular, it is becoming progressively more difficult to understand this world, because it is getting more complex and diverse. Recent studies have shown that the Christian churches often reach only very specific, limited milieus.<sup>338</sup> One reason for this might be because Christians sometimes pay too little attention to the fact that it is not simply a question of drawing a line between the right and convinced believers on the one hand and the ‘unbelievers’ on the other. “The dividing line between the Gospel and modern or post-modern culture runs right through the heart of each and every one of us. Everybody [...] encounters the temptation to yield to unbelief in themselves first of all. Only after we have learned to handle this conflict in ourselves can we talk to others of God.”<sup>339</sup>

One thing is quite clear, however. For Christians in Germany, being a missionary Church increasingly means they must become more interested, than in the past, in the many cultures and sub-cultures in which people live – and enable them to find a home in the Church that aspires to be a Church of all nations, strata and milieus. This requires a fundamental openness to the different lifestyles people choose nowadays. Ultimately this requires the courage to accept contemporary society in a secular world. “The service we provide for atheists and agnostics either takes the form of a meeting between partners engaging in dialogue on an equal footing who address questions together – or it remains an empty gesture. This dialogue will proceed from a common life, from a common active commitment to development and liberation, from commonly advocated values and common human experience.”<sup>340</sup>

### **Mission as the inculturation of faith**

If Christian faith cannot exist in any other way than in the varied forms that are characteristic features of the different cultures, then those who are offering others the Gospel must be critical about their own ways

<sup>338</sup> See Sellmann, M., “Theologisches Gestaltsehen. Die Sinusstudie über Kirche und Religion als eine Wahrnehmungsschule für Theologie und Pastoral”, in: *Pastoralblatt* 2/07, 41-49.

<sup>339</sup> 34th General Congregation (1995), in: o cit., 425f.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid*, 427

of expressing the faith. They must be aware of their cultural identity in order to avoid putting the Gospel they proclaim on par with the practices they have absorbed from the cultural contexts in which they live. This requirement is not simply a strategic or pragmatic necessity taken from the realm of communication sciences. It is the outcome of a fundamental theological consideration.

The relationship between the Gospel and culture is defined once and for all in the person of Jesus Christ. By becoming a human being, and therefore one of us, he embraced a specific culture and language, incarnated himself into the life of a people and shared its thoughts and feelings, values and attitudes. It was to this people that he proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom of God, which again is a culturally determined concept. Jesus Christ took the thinking, belief and life of this people as his starting point and extended this thinking, belief and feeling by pointing to the source of all meaning. He does not oppose the religious cult, for example, pointing out instead that the main thing is to serve God in truth and in love (Matthew 5:17 NJB). The core and the essence of everything that a person should experience is: He must love the Lord with all his heart and all his soul and his neighbour as himself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets, too (Matthew 22:37-40 NJB).

The aim of Christian mission is that all people should be reborn in the resurrection of the Lord. Inculturation means that the faith incarnates itself into history and implants in it – metaphorically speaking – the power to change and transform, which the Paschal power of love brings with it. The Council draws attention to the fact that it is the Spirit of the Lord that gives all people – in God's way – the possibility to share in this mystery of the resurrection.<sup>341</sup>

Hence, the inculturation of the faith does not contradict a certain culture. Rather the faith introduces into that culture the power of transformation that corresponds with the Spirit of Christ: the power

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<sup>341</sup> Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Pastorale Konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute (Constitutio pastoralis de Ecclesia in mundo huius temporis) Gaudium et spes*», in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, Teil III, Freiburg i. Br., Basle, Vienna 1968, 351-355, no. 22.

of the Sermon on the Mount<sup>342</sup> and of the Beatitudes,<sup>343</sup> the priority of service over rule, the defence of the small and the weak<sup>344</sup> and the desire and the willingness for universal reconciliation that is prepared to overcome apparently insurmountable barriers. This is where Christians in many places in the world, including in our plural societies, see their task.

### Ecumenical developments

The Protestant churches have been confronted by developments similar to those experienced by the Catholic Church in its critical appraisal of the connections between colonialism and missionary activity. A good example is provided by Albert Schweitzer, who explicitly regarded his service as a missionary doctor in Africa on behalf of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society as atonement and retribution for colonial injustice.<sup>345</sup>

The 1910 World Missionary Conference in the Scottish city of Edinburgh is seen as a milestone in the realignment of Protestant missionary activities. It was attended by over 1,200 delegates from various Protestant missionary societies and movements that wished to pool their resources and strove to bring about a more tightly-knit community and international cooperation. This first world missionary conference was followed by others, new ground being broken, in particular, at the conferences held after the two world wars. In Jerusalem (1928) the unity between mission and Western civilisation was called into question and the division of the world into Christian and non-Christian countries was renounced. At the suggestion of Karl Hartenstein, mission was seen as “*Missio Dei*”, as work originating in God. In 1961, the World Missionary Conference organised by the International Missionary Council was integrated into the World Council of Churches as the Committee for the “*Universal Church and Evangelisation*”.<sup>346</sup> An extension of the Protestant concept

<sup>342</sup> Matthew 5-7.

<sup>343</sup> Matthew 5:3-12.

<sup>344</sup> Mark 9,33-37.

<sup>345</sup> See Sievernich, M., *o cit.*, 102.

<sup>346</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

of mission can be found in the ecumenical declaration “Mission and Evangelism” (1982), in which the cause of evangelisation in all areas is stressed, especially with regard to the poor, believers in other faiths and missionary work on six continents. The key concept of mission as a reconciliation service was the main theme at the World Missionary Conference in 2005 in Athens.<sup>347</sup>

Missionary work is intended to help people to be open to the God of Jesus Christ. In the message of the Gospel and in the personal union with the God of Jesus Christ, the God of reconciliation, justice and love, the believer finds the freedom that makes him peaceable, non-violent and inwardly free for a sincere inter-faith dialogue.

### **Commitment to sincere inter-religious dialogue**

Dialogue with other religions and their traditions is not an option for Christians. There is no alternative to it. “The proclaiming of the Gospel is [...] inseparably bound up with inter-religious dialogue.”<sup>348</sup> The idea behind inter-religious dialogue is not to convert others to one’s own faith. Its purpose is to understand the reasons others have for their faith and to present to others the plausibility of, and reasons for, one’s own belief. The document “Proposer la foi” issued by the French Church states the following: Inter-faith dialogue, the dialogue with believers who profess different religious traditions, “makes it possible to learn how the quest for God and the relationship with God – for all the differences there may be – leave their mark on a person’s life.” (Part 1, II 3)<sup>349</sup> This takes place on the basis of the conviction that Christians can only offer and bear witness to their belief in the

<sup>347</sup> Cf. Günther, W., *Von Edinburgh nach Mexiko City. Die ekklesiologischen Bemühungen der Weltmissionskonferenzen (1910–1963)*, Stuttgart 1970; Sievernich, M., *o cit.*, 102f.

<sup>348</sup> Conférence Episcopale Française, *o cit.*, Part 1, II 3.

<sup>349</sup> See Paul VI., *Apostolisches Schreiben “Evangelii nuntiandi” Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Pauls VI. an den Episkopat, den Klerus und alle Gläubigen der Katholischen Kirche über die Evangelisierung in der Welt von heute*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 2, Bonn 1975, 53: “The Church respects and esteems these non Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul and vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable “seeds of the Word”.

God of Jesus Christ and perhaps, up to a certain point at least, provide intellectual access to it. That is ultimately the task of theology. However, conversion is not the work of human beings. Christian theology is, therefore, well advised today not to talk of mission as an attempt at conversion in the sense that conversion is the work of those who bear witness to their faith in a missionary manner. Conversion is always the work of God, the work of His universal love.

According to John Paul II, dialogue is an activity which has “reasons, requirements and a dignity of its own”. The Federation of Asian Bishops says, in full agreement with this view, that dialogue must “never be turned into a strategy to produce conversions”.<sup>350</sup> In today’s closer-knit world, however, mutual understanding and the reduction of mutual prejudice are indispensable. Moreover, it is desirable that people should show greater kindness to one another, even if they belong to different religions and come from different religious cultures; for there is no meaningful alternative to shaping the world together and making it a just and peaceful place.

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<sup>350</sup> FABCI, *o cit.*, quoted in: 34. General Congregation (1995), in: *o cit.*, 432f.



# MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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