

Implications of the New Concepts for Christian Missions in India and Japan

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INTRODUCTION

It is somewhat ironic that one so thoroughly in accord with “the new concepts” in Christian missions—or what I understand them to be—must begin with a demurrer about our theme. This paper supports—in general terms, at least—not only the integration of missions into the center of the Church’s life, measures of indigenization, revised policies and programs in certain areas, but even a reformulation of theological purpose. Yet I cannot accept the “de-emphasis of the words ‘Missions’ and ‘Missionary’” either as a valid and necessary concession to popular prejudice or as an adequate statement for the theme of this conference.

Of course, we must do all in our power to remove the stereotypes of missionaries as white representatives of an imperialistic West. We can do this not only by enlarging the present body of non-Occidental missionaries (now some 200 in Asia), but more basically by changing the attitudes and sometimes the roles which missionaries assume. But the offense goes deeper than that. Amid the resurgent and sensitive non-Christian faiths, the evangelistic imperative of every committed Christian is almost as objectionable as the organized effort at proselytizing (to use their indignant term). The offense comes not simply when Western churches send missionaries abroad to teach and to serve, but when any Christian insists on the essential uniqueness of the Christian revelation rather than acknowledging many paths to the One Eternal God. In a personal interview with the Indian Prime Minister two years ago I asked

Mr. Nehru about a published statement to the effect that he was drawing closer to Buddha and to Christ. “Did I say that?” he asked with a laugh, and then answered soberly:

Buddha has always appealed to me. Christ has appealed in a somewhat different way, as a very magnificent person. Buddha appeals to me in that way—plus his thoroughly undogmatic way... His normal advice to his followers was: “Don’t accept anything that I say. Experiment. Find out for yourselves.”

It is precisely this alleged dogmatism, interpreted as intolerance that non-Christians find offensive in the Gospel.

Nor can we overlook the fact that many sincere, devout Christians find the same offense in Christian missions. One need not go so far as the much-maligned Arnold Toynbee (who now acknowledges the cultural distinctions of various religions and takes his own stand as a European with Christianity, rather than seeking a synthetic world faith) to find widespread opposition to “imposing our beliefs on other people.” The very climate of democracy, humility, fairness, and courtesy impels us toward tolerance and peaceful coexistence. I have the feeling that much of our de-emphasis of “missions” stems from this internal censure rather than solely from external protest. We can mitigate both types of criticism by more Christian attitudes of charity, by more intelligent understanding of other views, by caring less about numerical expansion and trusting more in the Holy Spirit to define as well as to induce conversion. But unless we are willing to surrender our insistence that Christ is the Supreme Revelation, to be accepted as such by all people as the exclusive means of salvation, there is little value—perhaps actual betrayal—in trying to avoid offense by a change of terminology.

Addressing a Methodist consultation in 1956, Charles Ranson declared: “I am bothered by the people who are prepared to compass land and sea to find one synonym for the word ‘mission’ or the word ‘missionary’...We must not abandon the essential thing for which ‘mission’ stands...The word ‘missionary’ has got to be rehabilitated, rather than lost.”¹ Max Warren protests against the “virtually untranslatable designation of ‘fraternal worker’ and ‘Inter-Church Aid.’” Acknowledging the various misunderstandings involved, he speaks of the de-emphasis on the words

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1 *Adam, Where Art Thou?* Methodist Board of Missions [1956], pp. 7-8.

‘mission’ and ‘missionary’ as “very understandable, laudable in intention, and tragically misconceived.”²

We who are direct participants in the missionary movement must decide whether we prefer a concession to ignorant popular opinion or a full-scale effort at reinterpretation and re-education. Christians in the West stand in critical need of a vital doctrine of the Church and its mission. Christians in the East need to become so involved in that mission themselves that it no longer carries racial or national connotations. Both groups should express their “partnership in obedience” with greater humility and understanding toward non-Christian faiths. But neither segment of the Church should abandon its “sense of sentness,” its commitment to new creative channels of Christian outreach. (By outreach we should imply not destructive penetration, or the colonial terminology used forty years ago for “the Christian occupation of China”, but a hand outstretched in service, motivated by love.)

In other words, I am seconding Max Warren’s affirmation that the various missionary terms “speak to something fundamental to the life of the Church on (*sic*) the way that phrases like ‘fraternal worker’ and ‘Inter-Church Aid’ can never do.” Perhaps I should be embarrassed to take this stand at the very moment when my own title is shifting from Missions to World Christianity. But despite a recognition that Missions has little academic respectability, especially at the graduate level, our school is motivated not by the unpopularity or misunderstanding of the term “missions” but by the greater inclusiveness of “World Christianity” to embrace Ecumenics, and The Christian Critique of Communism, and International Relations as well as the traditional area of Missions *per se*.

An Air Force chaplain from the Far East tells me that Clark Air Base in the Philippines is guarded by a contingent of pygmies with blow-guns and poison arrows, sentries who proved their skill in a planned test by slipping in and out of the heavily guarded area completely undetected. I would not want to push the analogy too far, but I would suggest that, even though jet-age changes are taking place in the very citadels of the Christian world mission—new concepts, new tactics, new instruments—we may need to retain at the frontiers of the Church some methods and labels and goals that are both radical and primitive in the profoundest original sense of those terms.

To suggest what some of these “jet-age changes” may be for the Christian mission is an assignment which most of you could perform in

2 Max Warren, *Challenge and Response* [Morehouse-Barlow, 1959], pp. 88-89.

far more scholarly fashion. Since you read the same books and articles that I do—only more of them—I must draw largely on personal observation. I spent just ten and a half months in India, more occupied with political and social trends than with the Church, and only three weeks in post-war Japan. The impressions, which follow, are therefore designed to provoke discussion rather than to proffer definitive conclusions. Where I am guilty of dangerous generalizations or the very dogmatism I deplore, these *may* be due to restrictions of space or to the deliberate sharpening of contrasts.

While the broad concepts appear to be pertinent to the world scene, I shall merely attempt to illustrate (from Japan and India only) selected problems and directions and relationships, which challenge world Christianity today. As our chairman remarked in a recent letter: “These are not new concepts in our field of instruction, but...they are not as widely understood by ordinary people in the church in America or abroad as the Boards and agencies assume,” and many mission societies still “take a rather dim view of these concepts.” I would add that neither we, professors, nor the Board secretaries, have fully grasped the implications and ramifications of these developments. In that sense, our overall theme is exceedingly timely.

A. THE POLITICAL STATUS OF MISSIONARIES

At the outset, of course, the prevalent concept of missions is reflected in government policies toward “foreign” missionaries. Presumably Dr. Reber’s paper will deal more fully with exclusion from some areas and restrictions in others, on the part of self-conscious, newly independent governments. Here I would only suggest a rather remarkable contrast between India and Japan. The Indian Government, protesting that there are now more missionaries in the country than under British rule, enunciates three general conditions:

1. No additional missionaries should be permitted visas, but only those who are replacing others who are retiring or withdrawing.
2. No evangelistic missionaries should be received, whose primary purpose is admittedly to make converts or proselytize.
3. No foreign missionaries should be admitted to perform any jobs for which qualified Indians can be found.

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Quite obviously, every case is considered on individual merit—and individual pressures. An ordained minister, assigned to open a new program of religious education at Leonard Theological College had been thrice refused entrance last year, reluctantly started Spanish study in Costa Rica, then was abruptly summoned with his family to India after the right string had finally been pulled. One of the most narrowly evangelistic of our recent Duke graduates sailed blithely to Bombay faster than our missionaries knew he was coming, while a classmate, an able and long-committed agricultural sociologist, had to settle for Pakistan instead. The reason given to me was disarmingly simple: the evangelist's wife was a nurse.

To the best of my knowledge there has been no direct persecution or harassment of missionaries in India since the Madhya Pradesh Inquiry and demonstrations some seven years ago. The door is not closed, although frustrating delays are common. Yet, there is no question that Indian immigration authorities look askance at the word “missionary” in a passport, even for visits across the Pakistani border. Indian Christians told me that Prime Minister Nehru was a bulwark of tolerance and fairness that many applications were taken directly to him, and that Home Minister Pandit Pant (since deceased) represented the conservative Hindu opposition to Christian missions. The two deputies who have succeeded Pant are presumably sympathetic on this issue, but there is no certainty that Hindu nationalism will not gain the ascendancy again.

What does this mean for mission policy? Under such close scrutiny for each individual case, it is doubtful whether any change in terminology will fool the government into admitting more “fraternal workers” than “missionaries.” Many people in this country have inquired how so many representatives of small sects and faith missions have gotten into India when older and larger denominations have failed. One answer given me—which I report with some reluctance—is that some of these groups deliberately lay down a barrage of applications, knowing that the vast majority will be rejected, but counting on religious toleration and political pressure to get a certain percentage in. The established boards, which have built up honorable ties with the government over many decades, feel it a matter of Christian honesty to request visas only for those particular missionaries who are designated for a particular post. If this is so, and if prior assurances about the type of work intended are deliberately violated, the whole missionary enterprise will in the long run be jeopardized.

“In Nippon quite the other way, for ‘missions’ is the word to say.”
(One group of Japanese customs officials laughed boisterously over asking a

missionary how much tobacco and alcohol she was carrying; whether at the absurdity of the idea or of doubting a Christian's declaration, the grateful missionary neither knew nor cared.) The Methodist Woman's Division secretary for Japan tells me that her own visiting permit is always labeled "missionary" and that immigration authorities request the designation of "missionary teacher" rather than just "teacher," because "the processing of a 'missionary teacher' is much quicker than for one who is just designated as a 'teacher'". Some reasons may be obvious. Japanese nationalism is infinitely more secure than that of India. Conversely, her religious unity is virtually non-existent today. Americans, especially on short-term assignments without language study, are in no sense the economic threat to Japanese that a foreign teacher would be in India. Furthermore, Japanese culture thrives on adaptability and absorption, and hence welcomes increased Western influence. Underneath these superficial factors—political, social, cultural—I believe there are some profound differences in the historical and contemporary role which Christianity has played in the two countries, differences which we shall discuss under such headings as indigenization, theological creativity, social and evangelical outreach.

B. INDIGENIZATION

Since one of the basic connotations of "missions" is "foreign," the Church, if it is to inject new meaning into old terminology, must accelerate indigenization of many types. We have talked in mission circles for decades about making use of native architecture, art, and music. Except for Christmas cards, portraying the Nativity Scene in countless cultural settings, we have largely abandoned the path, which Daniel Fleming pioneered twenty-five years ago with his *Christian Symbols in a World Community, Each With His Own Brush*, and *The World At One in Prayer*. Even the new churches whose dedications I attended—a Pentecostal chapel in Lucknow, a great Centenary Church in New Delhi—would fit unnoticed into any American town. There are, thank God, exceptions, like the chapel at Isabella Thoburn College but I saw very few.

Now I am well aware that nationals (sometimes more often than missionaries) feel it necessary to escape from the pagan environment and assert their "new life in Christ" in cultural terms. This kind of fear may have been valid fifty years ago, but I sincerely question whether it is today as critical a need as that of identification with their own national communities. I know American tourists thrill to visit an otherwise unintelligible worship service in Calcutta or Kobe and find the congregation singing familiar hymn tunes. But I wonder whether the Church's greatest concern today

should be the homesickness of a tourist or the alienation of a non-Christian neighbor. One of my most emotional moments in India came as I sat on a dusty rock-pile (gathered laboriously by an outcaste Christian flock to prove their determination to build a church) listening to *bhajans* (hymns set to the tunes of folk songs and ballads) accompanied by brass and wooden castanets traditional to Indian music and dance. Before we can express the universality of the Gospel, we must prove that it has relevance, appropriateness, concern for the Indian villager—and this applies to its outward manifestations as well as its inward grace.

Japan faces much less tension at this point precisely because of the adaptability already mentioned. When my wife bemoaned the Western “corruption” of Japanese television (Annie Oakley) talking Japanese, and nightclub trios screeching hill-billy blues), our keen young missionary guide insisted that no such dichotomy could be made, that whatever its origin this *is* Japanese culture today as truly as *bazebol*. There is no incongruity about the Catholic Peace Cathedral in Hiroshima or the modern chapel of International Christian University (as there would be in India) because Western styles have actually become indigenous. As William Woodard has said:

“Westernness” is not in itself an obstacle; how could it be when Japan is being modernized and Westernized so rapidly? The obstacle is rather the fixity of the Western pattern: Christianity persists tenaciously in resisting any adaptation to Japanese culture.³

Very little needs to be said about devolution, the indigenization of leadership in the Christian Church. Most of the major denominations have moved rapidly in this direction—some would say too rapidly—although certain smaller groups still make little or no effort to transfer authority to nationals or to develop an indigenous ministry. Related to this problem, however, is the need for Christians to play a more active role in government and society. I shall return to this again, under “Social Outreach,” but two incidents will illustrate the point here. First, it was remarked in India that many of the most highly placed Christians have cut themselves off from active participation in the life of the Church. It is not that they have abandoned their faith; they are devout individual Christians in government. But they are not witnessing participants of the corporate Church. Again, of course, there are exceptions, like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. Second, I was told of one occasion on which Nehru, after greeting

3 William Woodward, “Japan: Three Obstacles to the Gospel,” in *Christian Century*, March 7, 1962, p. 288.

a Christian delegation most cordially that morning, denounced a Hindu cabinet minister profanely for taking part in “such trash” as an anniversary observance of St. Thomas’ arrival in India. In other words, he can be tolerant of Christians and Christianity as a part of his foreign relations, but he does not see them as part of the life and heritage of India. The fault, I am convinced, lies partly with generations of Christians themselves, both Indians and missionaries.

C. EVANGELISTIC OUTREACH

The resented “proselytizing” role of the foreign missionary in India can be reduced only as Indians themselves assume a vastly greater initiative in evangelistic outreach. With tragic unanimity, outside observers find the Indian Church an ingrown, self-conscious minority, its pastors at best concerned with the preservation of their flocks, rather than a permeation through society.

Historical explanations abound. The earliest Syrian type of Christianity apparently settled into minority ghettos long before the Muslim avalanche swept over India. That these groups have emerged with vigor and ecumenical leadership in the twentieth century is a miracle in itself, but they have never propagated their faith with missionary zeal. By the Christian era, Hinduism had already solidified if not petrified its socio-religious structure so that alien faiths could take root only at the risk of total absorption. Islam, the one exception, planted itself by conquest and thus intensified Hindu determination to preserve its traditional culture inviolate. There may be some connection between this history and the fact that the Church of South India seems to display more evangelistic energy than Christian groups in the “Muslim north.” By and large, as we all know, Christian converts have come almost entirely from the outcastes, who had nothing to lose and something to gain by apostasy—and even some of these are drifting back to Hinduism now that the government offers reserved seats in government, university fellowships, and other inducements for Harijans (as Hindus but not as Christians).

Christians, then, have in many respects been outcasts from their own communities. The East India Company and the British Crown were so reluctant to encourage communal strife that by the time British protection became a real material asset to converts; it had become a political liability. Thus, it is understandable that Indian Christians have regarded themselves as a constantly threatened minority, on the defensive against an environment, which even today exerts social pressures often more exclusive and intolerant than the official positions of Muslim

Pakistan and Malaya, or Buddhist Burma and Ceylon. Christians have not wanted to call attention to themselves by any evangelistic thrust. They have become another enclave in India's pluralistic society, too poor and educationally backward to achieve the influence of the Parsis, too passive and widely dispersed to wield the power of the Sikhs (who are roughly equal in number).

For the most part, Indian Christians have not yet dared to recognize that times have changed. Religious freedom, constitutionally guaranteed and officially protected, is more readily accorded to nationals than to "missionaries." To be sure, Indian Christians who attempt evangelistic outreach will meet fierce resistance in some segments of Hindu society, especially since their own defensiveness tends to make them more rigid, dogmatic, and even antagonistic than many Westerners. But courage, plus a sympathetic understanding of their non-Christian neighbors, must be forthcoming if the Indian Church is ever to escape the stigma of "missions" and "missionaries."

Still, another factor, which I believe to be operative here, is the hierarchical tradition in politics and religion. Whatever the degree of local "democracy" and freedom, Indians for centuries have accepted the authority of Mogul emperors and the British *raj*, while Hinduism has stressed Brahmin supremacy over both religious and secular society. Carried over into Christianity, which was introduced by Western missionaries and propagated largely among unlettered outcastes, this subservient attitude obviously contributes little to evangelistic responsibility. It is the pastor's job to preach. When the transforming power of the Holy Spirit actually does spread from one outcaste group to another, it offers irresistible proof of the miracle and the hope of the Gospel. But that is still too rare in India; there is still too much conviction that the *missionary* evangelist must carry the Good News to the frontier.

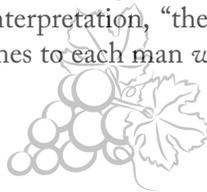
In a totally different cultural setting, I believe that much the same situation exists in Japan. The Woodard article already quoted makes this challenging new concept very explicit:

Foreign organizations should stop promoting evangelism by methods, which create the false impression that Christianity is a Western rather than a universal faith and that the Japanese church is almost completely dependent on Western Christians for leadership and support. In particular, there should be an end to foreign-sponsored crusades directed by foreigners and featuring foreign

evangelists. Evangelistic activities should be under the complete control and direction of Japanese Christian leaders themselves...The evangelization of Japan is the responsibility of Japanese Christians.⁴

From superficial observation, I would say that the Church in Japan has made more progress in this direction than the Church in India. A relatively larger and better-trained ministry is accepting responsibility and manifesting leadership in many ways. Vigorous programs of newspaper evangelism, industrial evangelism, and rural evangelism are apparently moving out from ecclesiastical offices into the villages and factories of Japan. With all due awareness of the gulf between educational ratios and educational systems in the two countries, the vital, dynamic student activities in Japan (still too largely in missionary hands!) contrast sharply with those in India, where (outside of church-related colleges, though sometimes including them) I saw only two or three really effective student programs in government universities (and one of them, a Quaker center, emphatically disavowed any evangelistic aim). Last but not least, I assume that Japanese laymen bear increasing responsibility for Christian witness, both in their secular vocations and in organized evangelistic programs.

What does this say to missions and missionaries? For one thing, if true, it “throws a monkey wrench” into the blithe assumption that missionaries who have been relieved of administrative and institutional leadership in the cause of devolution can and should be redeployed on evangelistic frontiers. Apart from considerations of nationalism and indigenization, I have long been convinced that linguistic and psychological and sociological barriers keep even the most conscientiously “identified” missionaries from being as effective in the pastoral, evangelistic field (the last frontiers, the regions beyond) as most trained nationals would be. This reorientation in evangelistic outlook means (as I shall try to say more fully in the final section of this paper) that the Church in the West must not only accept and encourage new, indigenous *methods* of evangelism, but also various reformulations of the *content* of evangelism. Not until that has been accomplished within the major cultures of mankind will we have, instead of a Western interpretation, “the whole Gospel for the whole world,” a Savior who comes to each man *where he is*.



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4 *Ibid.*, p. 289. THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

D. SOCIAL OUTREACH

The Social Gospel still has its vehement critics, many of them basically unfamiliar with Rauschenbusch, Gladden, and Frank Mason North. On the other hand, as Harold Lindsell says: “The arch conservative was often guilty of failing to recognize that there are social applications of the gospel and that the Christian faith is designed to do something about conditions in this life as well as about a future life.”⁵ Unfortunately these same critics too often assume that the use of such terms as “fraternal worker” and “interchurch aid” indicates a strictly humanitarian approach, an abandonment of the essential mission of the Church. I happen to believe that Christian service (medical, agricultural, educational, etc.) is justified even in situations where evangelization and conversion are legally prohibited. But I believe that these services represent not an auxiliary instrument but an integral part of Christian *missions*, that we are *sent*—by One who first loved us—to minister in love and gratitude to the needy and the lost, whether or not they even receive baptism or accept Jesus Christ as only Lord and Savior.

In other words, the social outreach of the Church appears to me as a Christian imperative, not apart from our witness to God’s Love, but as an indispensable manifestation of it. For that reason I was appalled to find in India so little concern for the social revolution now going on. Oh, there are abundant examples of famine relief, orphanages, clinics, agricultural extension projects, and so on, many of them truly inspired and truly inspiring. One such school and orphanage, full of “tender loving care” within but literally barricaded against the sins of the city outside, I characterized with mingled admiration and despair as the finest example of nineteenth-century missions still extant.” Yet, several Indian Christians, some of them actually participating in this kind of work, remarked that the leadership, which the Church had exercised in social welfare and social reform during the nineteenth century, has now passed to the Ramakrishna Mission. The All-India Women’s Conference, the Women’s Department of the National Congress, the Servants of India Society, and the Ministry of Community Development, all have found some kind of motivation (which some of them frankly call “missionary zeal”) that is conspicuously lacking in the Church as a whole.

In my teaching syllabus the “new concepts in missions” should include an awareness of social and political forces: land reform as well as famine relief, slum clearance as well as recreation, credit cooperatives as

5 Harold Lindsell, *Missionary Principles and Practice* [Revell, 1955], p. 49.

well as trade schools. Warren quotes P. T. Forsyth as saying in 1905: “It seems that we are at the end of what is morally possible for our magnificent philanthropy to do, and that the situation demands a more searching enquiry as to Christian justice. Philanthropy can deal with symptoms and effects, and we ought to get at causes.”⁶ Over half a century later, we are just beginning to fulfill this prophetic challenge. In India, one of the most enlightened programs is the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, with its related conferences, projects, and study centers. It holds a constant stream of seminars on regional problems or national issues, drawing together many of the most distinguished interdenominational leaders as well as occasional Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics. I attended one such stimulating conference on “Christians and Indian Foreign Policy.” The [late] C.I.S.R.S. Director, Dr. P. D. Devanandan, delivered the address on “Witness” at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches and of recent years has published by far the most significant studies of Christian apologetics and encounter with non-Christian faiths.

Yet repeatedly I heard Indian and Western Christians dismiss the project as irrelevant, unrelated to the local church, dangerously syncretistic, too intellectual, and so on. If any of these charges are true, the fault lies with the Church as a whole, not merely with the C.I.S.R.S. To be sure, there are few channels of communication from the Institute to illiterate congregations. Devanandan has not even held a position of trust and influence in the adjacent United Theological Seminary in Bangalore, and many missionaries virtually ostracize the “sociologists,” Western and Indian, who work with the C.I.S.R.S. Yet, if the Christian Gospel is to overcome its Western connotations, its alien perspectives, its pietistic irrelevance, it *must* be brought to bear on economics, caste, communalism, foreign policy, and the rest of Indian life.

Similar examples can be cited at the grass roots level. Some of you know of one long-time missionary relieved of his appointment by his board in this country because he is devoting himself to a Sarvodaya Ashram, working with the non-sectarian Gandhian movement for village uplift. More of you have heard of Welthy Honsinger Fisher, widow of a Methodist bishop, whose Literacy House outside of Lucknow (refused even building space on mission property within the city) provides a center for training illiterates, holding rural extension courses, and giving writers a haven for composing literature of social significance. Her House of Prayer is truly “for all people” and therefore has a fountain and a spire but no sectarian symbol. I am convinced that both of these Americans are

servicing—at real personal sacrifice—as “partners in obedience” to the One Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Yet, because they have chosen unorthodox techniques they are almost literally excommunicated by the Church. Perhaps it represents an epitaph on Indian Christianity when a fellow-missionary says of Mrs. Fisher: “There is nothing Christian about what she is doing.”

Japan has an advantage in this area, too. I do not have time for historical reasons even if I knew them. But from the time Toyohiko Kagawa made Christianity in Japan synonymous with cooperatives, slum improvement, public sanitation, and civic reform, the Church there has had a purpose and a program beyond its own membership. The Government’s assumption of social responsibility can be traced in large degree to Christian influence and to the past and present participation of so many Christians in this field of public service. Under the Social Welfare Act of 1951, most Christian agencies declare in their constitutions that “this social welfare corporation will conduct social welfare in accordance with the Christian spirit.” The League of Christian Social Work Agencies is one of three principal bodies (with the United Church of Christ and the Education Association of Christian Schools), which form the Council of Cooperation with eight supporting boards in North America.

As Woodard says, “Christian leaders, Japanese and Western, should be encouraged to find ways of working with those of other faiths in building a better society and a peaceful world.” This requires not merely welfare services, but an active concern for social reform. Such Christian social outreach in any land will help allay the fears of nationalists that the Gospel is a foreign ideology brought in to subvert citizens away from their own traditions. It will help to justify missions in the eyes of those Westerners who applaud the Peace Corps and humanitarian service but regard Christianity as pietistic, individualistic, and spiritualistic. Most important of all, it will remind all Christians that the Master said, not of baptism or conversion but of social service, “Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me.”

E. ECUMENICITY

More than any other nations on earth, Japan and India focus Christian thought on the relationship between ecumenicity and mission. It would be superfluous here to review the historical backgrounds or the organizational developments of the Kyodan and the Church of South India. We are all conscious of the missionary origins of the modern ecumenical movement, whether we look to William Carey’s dream of a Capetown

conference in 1810, or to its fulfillment at Edinburgh in 1910. Most of us are challenged by the New Delhi preparatory statement that “the mission of the Church and the unity of the Church both belong, in equal measure, to the essence of the Church.” We are not yet in full agreement as to what this means in any specific situation.

One of the most obvious “offenses” in the presentation of the Gospel still proves to be competitive denominationalism. We all know stories like that of an Indian sub-caste of 100,000 whose leaders decided to become Christians, only to find that 33 different churches were at work in their area, so that the relative unity of Hinduism seemed preferable to the disunity of Christianity. This so-called “scandal” of the churches hampers the “revolution in missions” from several angles. Overlapping and competition among denominations increase the financial burden of church programs and evangelism, thus delaying the day when national churches can assume responsibility for self-support. Sociologically the obvious rivalries, based often on historical traditions from Europe and America, confirm the impression that Christianity is a foreign ideology, representing Western thought patterns rather than universal truth or a Christ above culture. Politically the attachment to American Methodism or the Southern Baptist Convention seems to validate the suspicion of imperialism and alienation. Theologically our divisions deny the very oneness we claim in Christ and seriously handicap the formulation of indigenous theology.

The achievements of the Church of South India in developing organic union, producing creative liturgies, and demonstrating evangelistic vigor, deserve wider understanding and admiration. They make all the more tragic the recent news that negotiations in North India and Pakistan have “bogged down,” due partly to personal jealousies and partly to mutual suspicions about the *interpretation* of “wider commissioning” behind the already accepted form of the ministry. In Japan, it will be some time yet before elements and attitudes of federalism give way to organic union in spirit. Local churches still preserve their former denominational practices; certain institutions are still thought of as belonging to a particular board in America. But when a new member of the Kyodan, told about Methodist and Presbyterian conference America, asked, “What are they?” Christian unity has made at least one kind of progress. Whatever the difficulties and disadvantages, there can be no doubt that these national churches do much toward overcoming prejudice against “foreign missions.” As Luman

Shafer said as early as 1949: “The new loyalty [to the Kyodan] makes it impossible to ever again consider missions in traditional patterns.”⁷

For want of a more appropriate category, I would mention here the new program of ecumenical mission, in the sense of international, inter-racial, interdenominational partnership. The Indian Church has long sent representatives to work with Indian communities in Africa and Malaya, but only recently have “missionaries” gone to serve other groups in Indonesia, Sarawak, and elsewhere. With Christian statesmanship, the National Missionary Society of India accepted a share of responsibility for the brand new United Christian Mission to Nepal, and one of its pastors is serving a prison sentence for “proselytizing” in defiance of Nepalese law. In similar fashion, the Church in Japan has moved beyond its ministry to Japanese in Latin America, Taiwan, and Okinawa, to send missionaries to Thailand, India, and Bolivia. These are not only witnesses to a universal Gospel, increasingly liberated from Western procedures and Western attitudes. They are also the vanguard of volunteers whose own Asian leaders said in 1953: “Do not send us missionaries who will look at each other critically over denominational walls...We need missionaries who are ready to work in full fellowship with those whose traditions and ways of worship may be very different from their own.”⁸ I believe that Christ looked far into the future when he prayed “for those also who through their words put their faith in me; may they all be one...that the world may believe that thou didst send me,” (John 17: 20-21).

F. THEOLOGICAL CREATIVITY

Another closely related aspect of indigenization is the need for encouraging theological creativity among the younger churches. Not only to remove the taint of Western indoctrination; but, in order to demonstrate and apply the universal truths of the Christian Gospel, our faith must be expressed in language and in concepts meaningful for other cultures and psychological patterns. It has been said, only half facetiously, that a Christian community has come of age when it has developed an original heresy. Certainly, the vitality and depth of Christian belief can be measured in part by contributions to theological discourse.

Despite its age, the Church in India has displayed very little of this kind of wholehearted involvement in the Gospel. Piety, yes; even

7 Katharine Johnson, *In Our Time* [Inter-Board Committee, 1956], p. 24.

8 Rajah B. Manikam, ed., *Christianity and the Asian Revolution* [Madras, 1954], p. 289.

some measure of social ethics; but theological creativity or profundity, little or none. Yet, Indian propensity for subtleties of speculative metaphysics might lead one to expect some theological pioneering. It is ironic that some of the most significant theology today is being produced or collected by Devanandan and others whose basic orientation looks toward religion and society, toward Christian apologetics, rather than toward systematic theology as such.

Japanese Christianity, on the other hand, has wrestled for many years with Western theological currents, and has shown particular affinity for Continental thought as contrasted with American liberalism. While I was in Japan in 1960 Paul Tillich and Cornelius Van Til were competing for the attention of seminaries and even non-Christian audiences. Outside the main building of Doshisha University in Kyoto were two large posters, one announcing a protest rally against the so-called Security Treaty, the other a lecture on Kierkegaard. But that is not all. Creative theological trends from within characterize Japan today to a unique degree. Michalson's *Japanese Contributions to Christian Theology* is a brilliant summary, which could be written in no other Oriental country. The doctrines with which he deals and the indigenous movements which he describes (No-Church Christianity, for example) are in themselves evidence that the Christian faith in Japan is going beyond mission—perhaps in a sense beyond the Church itself—to probe the existential heart of the Gospel.

In addition one should mention the innumerable new sects, some of them extremely original, many of them obviously drawing on Christian elements, which mark the religious milieu of post-war Japan. I do not say that all of these movements are beneficial to the Church—quite the contrary, although the way the Church reacts to the intellectual currents may well determine its own future freedom or bondage. I do say that such theological encounters—even with non-Christian, semi-Christian, or pseudo-Christian schools of thought—give promise of remarkable vitality and maturity in the Church. As Woodard suggests,⁹ it is when “Christianity does not seek to enrich or fulfill but to displace” that it becomes an “obstacle to the Gospel” and falls under the condemnation of law rather than under grace.

One specific manifestation of theological independence is the development of creeds. The prime factor in the Church of South India—a factor widely and admittedly lacking in North India—is the conviction that this is God's will, participation in the very Body of Christ, the leading of the Holy Spirit. The next cohesive element has clearly been the creation

9 Woodard, *loc. Cit.*

of a genuinely ecumenical liturgy, the blending of historic creeds into an indigenous affirmation of faith. In Japan certain denominations withdrew from the post-war Kyodan because it was “not a true Church,” did not possess a creed, and was determined to take the necessary time to compose one. Now some of those same groups are equally suspicious that the new confession is too original, too indigenous, too ecumenical,—perhaps even that it *proves* the Holy Spirit is at work *today*.

G. REFORMULATION OF MISSIONARY PURPOSE

To many Christians in the “mother churches” of the West, such loosening of the “apron strings” constitutes a threat to the True Faith. We preach often of the Cross as “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks,” seldom of Paul’s admonition in the same letter to “give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God,...to meet everyone half-way, regarding not my own good but the good of the many, so that they may be saved (1 Cor. 1:23, 10:32-33).” We take our missionary text from the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) — “Make all nations my disciples, baptize men everywhere”—even though the Trinitarian formula makes the text itself dubious. We are less content to “bare witness for (Him) in Jerusalem and allover Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the Earth” (Acts 1:8), leaving the results to the same Holy Spirit who provides the promised power.

This final section is *not* designed to raise theological controversies among my peers. It is intended for one purpose only: to defend the imperative and the urgency of the Christian mission within *any* theological context. Ironically enough, there are both self-styled liberals and self-styled conservatives who seem to believe that only an extreme Barthian stance of “radical discontinuity” can justify the mission of the Church, that any hint of natural theology or general revelation or universalism or adaptation must undercut the vital incentive of Christian witness. I cannot agree. I believe that we can testify to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ without denying all other channels of divine redemption. I believe that we can speak of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, the supremacy of the Gospel, the superiority of a truly Christian life, without condemning—personally or soteriologically—those who find God’s presence some other way. I believe that we can and must serve *mankind*—and proclaim our inner motivation—not from ulterior aims at conversion, but because God’s love overflows.

May I quote at length another paragraph from Woodard’s article in the *Christian Century*:
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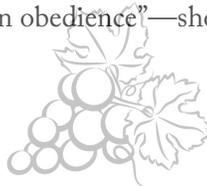
The missionary imperative remains unchanged, but its strategy must be adapted to new situation. We are living in a religiously pluralistic society, which will remain so for a long time to come; the world is not going to be evangelized in this or in any presently foreseeable generation. An effective Christian witness today can be made only in a context of understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation, without any compromise of fundamental principles ... Either the church will make the necessary adjustment or it will become the cult of a small Western-oriented community. In the past such interpretation and adaptation have been shunned because of a mistaken fear that the gospel might thereby become lost in an abyss of relativism and syncretism. This is an unworthy fear based on lack of faith in the power of the gospel to preserve its own integrity. Adaptation is not, and need not become, syncretism.¹⁰

To take such a position is neither to abandon faith in the power of the Holy Spirit nor to deny the validity of the Christian mission. In fact, to measure its success or failure in visible, numerical terms seems to me to put *less* trust in God's omniscient and omnipotent purpose. Within foreseeable human history, I believe that we must think and work in terms of coexistence; if we seek to emulate the spirit of Christ, it must be not only peaceful coexistence, but humble and sensitive as well.

Paul Tillich, reportedly going to Chicago this fall for special research in Christianity and non-Christian faiths, has asserted that "only missions can provide ... the proof of the universality of Christianity and the claim that Jesus is the Christ."¹¹ I am suggesting that it does this in at least three ways: through the transformation of individual lives, through the expansion of the Christian community, and through the permeation of Christian love and Christian ethics into the social and cultural fabric of the world. If factors like nationalism or communism or materialism seem to restrict the second of these areas that is no reason why the Holy Spirit—or we "partners in obedience"—should discontinue the mission in the other two.

10 *Op. cit.*, p. 289.

11 Cf. Paul Tillich, "Missions and World History" in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, Gerald H. Anderson, ed. [McGraw-Hill, 1961], pp. 281-289.



Despite widespread doubts among many missionaries and even among “younger Christians,”¹² I believe in the *re*-emphasis of the words “Missions” and “Missionary.” First, because we as individuals are sent to witness, regardless of external results; second, because of the acute shortage of men and women who are willing to devote themselves to service in areas of human need; third, as a visible demonstration of the universal (international, inter-racial, inter-denominational) character of the Church of Jesus Christ. Woodard refers to the profound and sobering insight of a Zen priest who remarked: “We think there is something to Christianity, but we don’t think the Christians know what it is.” It took an Indo-Spanish Roman Catholic priest, brilliantly learned in Hindu philosophy, to show me why so many Indians feel the same way.

Perhaps this suggests a conclusion long overdue. This paper and others of our series are filled with *our* answers to problems that confront us. We are sincerely troubled because so many people—In India and Japan, in Europe and America—are uncertain whether there is something to Christianity or not. It may be that one way to find out one role for the bewildered missionary today, is to stop propagating *our* Gospel—by which, of course, I mean our interpretation of it—and start listening. If we listen humbly, to Christians in India and Japan but also to Hindus, Buddhists, secularists, and communists, we may find that, the Holy Spirit not only speaks to them but also through them to us. It may be that we can find one mission for one world. It may be that together we shall learn what there is to Christianity that, in every nation and culture, can save man from himself.



First Fruits

12 Cf. Yoichiro Saeki, “Don’t Let Japan Be a Graveyard for Missionaries” in *The Christian Weekly* [Tokyo], May 12, 1962.