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Howard Peskett

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**Review Article: Timothy Yates,**  
*Christian mission in the twentieth century*

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*Timothy Yates' important study of contemporary missionary thinking is discussed by Howard Peskett who is currently teaching in Trinity College, Bristol after previously working in theological education in Singapore.*

**Key words:** Mission; theology; ecumenism.

Could one Western author deal with the whole global scope and story of Christian (not just Protestant) mission in the whole of this tumultuous century in the 275 pages of *Christian mission in the twentieth century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp xvi + 275, paperback edition 1996)? It would demand encyclopaedic knowledge and miraculous skills of condensation! In fact, despite his title, Yates has attempted no such thing: we must take the title as one of the signs that hangs over the major alleys of a supermarket—as a brief summary of the tasty delights stocked below.

The book started as lectures in 'Mission and Ecumenism' in Durham and this orientation marks the three strands which it contains:

(a) Yates' historical interest shows in his surveys of some of the most important mission conferences held this century, in particular New York 1900, Edinburgh 1910, Jerusalem 1928, Tambaram 1938, CWME 1963, Vatican II, Lausanne 1974 and Nairobi 1975.

(b) Yates' biographical interest is revealed in his portraits of some of the most important missions writers and statesmen (there is almost nothing about women in this book although he notes the prominence of women at New York) of the century, in particular Hendrik Kraemer, John R. Mott, Stephen C. Neill, J.H. Oldham, William Paton and M.A.C. Warren.

(c) Yates' theological interest is focussed on the issue of the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and he traces the development of this, sometimes heated, debate from the writings of J.N. Farquhar and the report of Commission IV at Edinburgh 1910 (which was described by W.H.T. Gairdner, the chronicler of the 1910 conference as 'one of the most remarkable, perhaps the most remark-

able of a great series') through a brief discussion of changing Roman Catholic views after Vatican II to the contemporary views of men like John Hick and Lesslie Newbigin.

The book is carefully arranged, following a decade by decade survey format.

J.H. Oldham, a quiet, deaf man whose organisational genius underlay all aspects of the Edinburgh Conference, was prescient in many ways; but as far as we know he had no inkling of the way in which World War I would break out and rend the optimism with which the 19th century closed. Yates gives no substantial reflection to the consequences of World War I for the general missionary enterprise; for the decade of 1910–1920 we are taken off to Bruno Gutmann among the Chagga people in East Africa and Christian Keysser in New Guinea. The decade of the 1940s is also passed over in silence, which seems odd, especially the lack of reflection on the upheaval of the Chinese revolution, the exodus of missionaries and David Paton's angry outburst, *Christian missions and the judgement of God*.

Kenneth Cracknell is convinced that Commission IV of Edinburgh WAS indeed pivotal. He has devoted a book to the subject, published after Yates: *Justice, courtesy and love: theologians and missionaries encountering world religions, 1846–1914*, Epworth, 1995. Yates notes two voices coming out from Edinburgh, represented perhaps by the two figures J.N. Farquhar and A.G. Hogg. Farquhar's ideas about 'fulfilment' and Hogg's 'No!' were to continue in counterpoint through the century.

Chapter 2 contains what is perhaps Yates' most distinctive contribution to the story, a survey of the thinking and practice of Gutmann and Keysser, the issues of individualism versus people movements towards and within Christianity; the issue of Volk, Blut, Boden (Race; Blood; Soil). The rise of Hitler and his use of these terms for nefarious Nazi purposes blighted the prospects of understanding these anthropologically sensitive German practitioners of mission at the time. But later, quieter times have permitted a review. Vincent Donovan applied similar methods to his work among the Maasai; Archbishop David Gitari emphasised the importance of a communal approach at Lambeth 1988; and Donald McGavran even wrote a foreword to the English translation of Keysser's work, approving his concern for the minimum of social dislocation in moving towards Christianity.

For the period 1920–1940 the main conferences were Jerusalem 1928 and Tambaram 1938; and the main issue was the controversial work of the Laymen's Foreign Mission Inquiry from which W.E. Hocking compiled the book *Rethinking missions*, published in 1933. Yates is impressed by the volume and the quality of missionary responses to the inquiry, although he quietly hints at the Inquiry's theological inadequacy (71). He points out that two Christologies

became apparent in the Inquiry (as they were also at Jerusalem earlier); he characterises these as, on the one hand, 'Jesus, teacher, example, personality' and as, on the other hand, (somewhat unfairly) 'the heavily dogmatic preached Christ, encased in a certain rigid, even ossified, dogmatic clothing . . .' Yates has critically identified this issue as absolutely fundamental to the theology of mission; his hospitality to different views and his barometric sense of balance have hindered him from giving more radical theological consideration to the arguments. Yates notes a fascinating article by Edwyn Bevan in 1933, in which he points out that 'alone of the religions then in the world the two intransigent ones (Judaism and Christianity) have survived. Such intransigence is essential to Jewish and Christian belief.' (103f); but there is little intransigence, even in Christology, in Yates' book. Similar divergences of belief about Christ and about other religions were apparent at the Tambaram conference in 1938, which was, however, dominated by the Dutch missionary Hendrik Kraemer. Some more recent writers tend to castigate Kraemer as backward-looking; it is sobering to note that at the 50th anniversary celebrations of Tambaram, in 1988, Wilfred Cantwell Smith went so far as to say that 'any form of exclusivism in relation to other faiths was a form of blasphemy' (236); but it is interesting to note that Lesslie Newbigin has continued to be captivated by Kraemer's strong yet flexible and open spirit.

Yates characterises the 50s as the decade of 'presence' and 'dialogue'. Max Warren, general secretary of CMS, edited the Christian Presence series, which emphasised 'finding the Christ already present . . .', 'taking off your shoes . . .', 'finding the unknown Christ. . .'. This reflected the inappropriateness of Western superior-mindedness in a changing world, and also a reaction against too strident an emphasis on proclamation in some quarters. Kenneth Cragg wrote his classic book *The call of a minaret*, in which he interpreted the call as an invitation to Christians to listen constantly, passionately, before and while they talk. Stephen Neill also contributed to the discussion about dialogue, robustly noting that any mission of any kind involves dialogue, that some proclamation is too aggressive, but that dialogue for the sake of a timorous coexistence was an abdication of mission. Michael Polanyi wrote in the same decade that all knowledge has a fiduciary framework; scientists do not just agree to differ about their theories: they pursue and advertise their hypotheses courteously, but with universal intent.

Chapter 6 is perhaps Yates' most disappointing chapter; there are no personalities in it; it has a diary, dictionary-like quality about it. Probably this is because Yates is less confident in dealing with the tremendous changes taking place in Roman Catholic missionary theology in this decade, especially following Vatican II. It was a restless decade;

in some ecumenical circles it almost seemed from some church-hating utterances that the church was the primary obstacle to mission. One letter of the alphabet, the letter 's' caused very significant argument, when the title of the journal *International Review of Missions* was changed to '. . . Mission'. Yates casts his eye forward to the evangelization-minded Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, promulgated by Paul VI in 1975; but even this document and the much more recent encyclical of John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, cannot disguise the fact that there is much confusion in the Catholic Church today about other faiths, about whether they have any saving efficacy, and if so, what precisely is the 'extraordinary grace' that becoming a Christian confers.

In the 1970s evangelical distrust of the WCC reached its peak, and Stephen Neill himself wondered after the CWME conference in 1973 whether the WCC had not lost its sense of Christian direction. The Programme to Combat Racism aroused a lot of controversy; the famous call for a moratorium on sending missionaries came in 1971. Emilio Castro was able to shift ecumenical thinking significantly in the direction of evangelical concerns by 1975, but Professor Beyerhaus in Germany remained deeply sceptical. Curiously enough, evangelicals were gradually recovering a more holistic view of mission, especially as Two Thirds world Christian leaders made their voices heard. Donald McGavran continued to emphasise evangelisation, but TEAR Fund, which was founded in 1968, grew very fast, and today has an annual budget of over £20 million, far in excess of any traditional missionary society. Yates says (but does not, I think, prove) that dialogue with other faiths came to be looked upon with more favour by evangelicals in this decade. He does not note the tremendous decline in personnel in the mission agencies of the mainstream churches in this period; and although he has a brief section on the faith missions, the two he highlights (Wycliffe Bible Translators and New Tribes Mission) are not the most representative; he does not reflect on why these agencies grew in marked contrast to mainline decline; and perhaps he was not aware, when he wrote, of Klaus Fiedler, *The story of faith missions*, a very thorough work published also in 1994.

In his final chapter Yates reflects on the development of radical pluralisms; he notes Stanley Samartha's efforts to give the word 'syncretism' a positive valency; he revisits Hocking's attempt to reconceptualise Christianity, adding to it insights from other faiths; he observes W. Cantwell Smith turning from objective 'religion' to subjective 'faith'; and, more revolutionarily (and prolifically) John Hick's calls for a Copernican revolution in Christianity's relation to other faiths: Jesus being just one of the points at which the divine Logos has acted; Jesus as a particularly God-conscious man; and, in place of the

old Christian policy of world conversion, instead religions need to interpenetrate one another for the sake of world unity and peace. In a review article in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* for January 1994 Lesslie Newbigin reviewed a book by the general secretary of the WCC, Konrad Raiser, published in 1991, entitled *Ecumenism in transition: a paradigm shift in the ecumenical movement?* Towards the end of the article Newbigin says, '... this total amnesia in respect of the missionary and evangelistic work of the churches is (for me) the most remarkable feature of this book'. Yates' final section takes the form of a summary statement in answer to the question, 'What is Christian mission?' and three important statements about the relation of Christianity to other faiths (We must study those who have studied other faiths; we must be committed to honest dialogue, without concealing the intransigencies of missionary faiths; and there is no agreement on the theology of religions). He concludes that worshippers of the Lamb who was slain want to reaffirm the absolute Lordship of the One they love. But this claim must not be made into a 'threat in an authoritarian and oppressive fashion' (250). I regret that Yates hasn't been a bit more outspoken about his theology of religions, and, in particular, how it would appear that some recent pluralist statements really mean the death of 'mission' in any widely received sense, the 'euthanasia of mission' in a completely different sense from that of Henry Venn, whom he reveres.

Yates writes meticulously and conscientiously, without stridency; his fire is heavily banked down: a glow or a flame is only visible occasionally. He writes as a scholar, of statesmen and conferences; there is little sense of what it feels like to be an ordinary missionary in the year after year slog of presence, encounter, evangelism, story-telling, poverty, church planting, suffering, loneliness, separation, joy. There is very little about Africa, where the whole story of Christianity has been changed this century, and very little on decolonisation. We hear hardly anything from those who, for the sake of the Pearl of greatest price, turned from their ancestral beliefs and became Christians. There is almost nothing about the exponential growth in Two Thirds world missions, so that 'mission' no longer means from the north and the west to the east and the south. There is little sense of the fascinating patchwork quilt that global Christianity has become as indigenous theologies are developed which are both local and catholic. But Yates' modest preface anticipates these, and many other, deficiencies. We may be grateful that we are the beneficiaries of his wide reading and his summaries which are often judicious and always without rancour; and we may conclude our reading of this book with a renewed conviction that the question which he isolates for special consideration is indeed one of *absolutely fundamental importance* for our individual and corporate lives as Christian believers.