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Ecumenical Pragmatism of the Serampore Mission

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Introduction

Serampore Mission came into existence on 10 January 1800 when William Carey, who had landed in Bengal seven years earlier moved from Mudanapati to Serampore and joined the Marshmans and Ward. It is to be noted that the bicentennial of this historic event of the establishment of the popularly called Modern Mission was on 10 January 2000. The Serampore Trio excelled in the way they functioned as interdependent members of a close-knit team, yet Carey was always accepted as *primus inter pares*. There were temperamental differences among them, and Carey's achievements reached a high order mainly because of the good fortune he had in having such first rate colleagues as Joshua Marshman and William Ward who were 7 and 8 years younger than him respectively and complemented him admirably. Hannah Marshman, mother of twelve of whom six died in infancy had to look after not only her children, the turbulent children of William and Dorothy Carey (Dorothy becoming mentally imbalanced after the death of son Peter) but also some missionary widows, domestic helpers and the school children. She outlasted the first batch of Serampore missionaries and died at the age of eighty after having worked in Bengal for 47 years. Because of her strong support to the whole team she was called "Mother in Israel" even as it is portrayed on her tombstone. There excelled a covenant within these servants of God which only death could break. Their missiological methodology can help us see their unique contribution to world mission in all profundity.

The scope of the present article is to bring out some features of the ecumenical pragmatism of the Serampore Mission and its significance for the missiological explorations of our time. The openness and the ecumenical vision of the Serampore Trio is clear from their naming the mission in the context of the place where it was established rather than being carried away by any enthusiasm of the Baptist tradition as such. In other words, Christian mission has to be carefully contextualised with the spirit of ecumenism rather than by any divisive ethos of denominationalism. Although they left Britain with clearly formed theology of mission, they were careful from the beginning of their work in India not to adhere slavishly to some fixed pre-determined plan of action. They studied meticulously the problems of the society and their root causes and had consequently changed their strategy to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As rightly observed by Christopher Smith, the Serampore trio became increasingly

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convinced through their experience in India that “there was no missionary blueprint which could be imposed on India.” [A.C. Smith 1993 : 21]

In order to make our study challengingly relevant to our time when Christians and their labour of love in our country are being misunderstood, and those involved in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ are being harassed and persecuted, can we learn some lessons from the Serampore heroes of faith so that we may participate in the ongoing work of God with greater love and deeper commitment to him? The following questions may help us to pursue our study better. In spite of their original commitment to a particular [Calvinistic] Baptist tradition how did they come to recognise the importance of not only praying but also sharing the sacrament of Holy communion with missionaries of other denominational background? How did they promote self-supportive and indigenous leadership for the then Asian Church? What was their commitment to bringing World Mission? What was their vision for theological education in this country? How did they want to participate in God’s mission of bringing about social transformation and national renaissance?

Prayer and Sacraments

“That they all may be one...that they become perfectly one” are statements taken from the eucharistic prayer of consecration of our Lord before he sacrificed himself on the cross for the sake of his disciples and the entire humanity of all time. In other words, ecumenism or Christian unity is a matter of great concern for our Lord and also for all God’s people. This unity is based upon the unity of the Father and the Son with each other in Godhead even as John 17.23 reads, “I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one.” Further, the main purpose of this authentic spiritual unity is prayed for ‘in order that’ the world may believe in Jesus’ divine origin and his mission. Ecumenical vision for mission is underscored by Christ’s prayer and it has to be adopted by all his followers whatever their background might be.

Based upon the high priestly prayer of our Lord which gives strong foundation for mission and unity, Carey wrote in his famous document on mission called *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians...* published in 1792, stating, “...prayer is perhaps the only thing in which Christians of all denominations can cordially and unreservedly unite; but in this we may all be one, and in this the strictest unanimity ought to prevail.” [Carey 1792:106] In fact, the missionary activities of the Serampore missionaries were undergirded by a covenant or Form of Agreement which they adopted in 1804 with eleven statements of purpose. They read the covenant publicly at least three times a year in their corporate worship on the first Lord’s day in January, May and October in order to renew their vows to God and their commitment to one another which helped them to uphold “honesty, intimacy and equality” in the community [George : 123]. In such corporate prayer meetings the Serampore missionaries were convinced to move beyond their particular [Calvinistic] Baptist tradition which had kept the non-Baptists away from the Lord’s Table originally. It may be recalled that under Ward’s special urgings the Serampore missionaries resolved to be “catholic”.

Ward says, “...rather than engage in a furious controversy about baptism, to the gratification of Satan, whilst the people perish, we rejoice to take off this apparent moroseness that has made us unlovely to our fellow Christians.” [S.P. Carey: 241] He wrote to Fuller on 15 December 1807 the importance of all Christians participating in the Lord’s Table together overcoming all denominational differences. He further added: “If this is not the spirit of the whole New Testament, I was never in anything more...mistaken.” [Potts:50] With this growing spirit

of ecumenism among Ward, Marshman and other servants of God representing different branches of the church, Carey was outnumbered and acquiesced.” [Hinson : 81]

Self-supportive Indigenous Leadership

Carey never used the terms such as ‘foreign mission’ or ‘overseas mission’. The Serampore missionaries shared all their resources raised within this country for their multi-faceted mission activities. It should be noted that they were not controlled in their finance management by the Baptist Missionary Society in England. In fact, the independence which they enjoyed from their parent organization became a cause for friction between them and the then BMS. Further, Serampore College was founded in 1818 mainly to raise indigenous leadership by training and equipping Asians for the future of the Asian Church and Society.

A year before the establishment of the College, Carey wrote to Ryland, “the work of duly preparing as large a body as possible of Christian Indians for the duties of pastors and itinerants is of immense importance...it is on native evangelists the weight of the great work must ultimately rest.” [S.P. Carey: 325] It would never serve the purpose if the Western Christian scholars alone study Indian philosophy, religion, literature and science critically and interpret them for the country however gifted scholars they may be. Even among the Indians, education has been “the prerogative and monopoly of Brahmins.” Socially ostracized Indians need not all their lifetime be subject to “mental disfranchisement and bondage.” This monopoly should be broken. The children of the poorest should have the access to learn Sanskrit and to study Indian philosophy and religion and they should become “the leaven in the lump” to bring about renewal in the society. India’s Christian leadership should gain “Indian individuality through Christ for the enrichment of humanity and the advance of the Kingdom of God.” [S.P. Carey:328] The gifted youth of this country, however humble and poor they might be, will have “an access to their own Indian scriptures and classics” along with Christian scriptures in their own vernaculars at Serampore College which will be a Christian Benares” and an Indian Halle.” [S.P. Carey: 330]

Dr. T. V. Philip is probably right in his claim that, “if the Indian Church were taught self-support from the beginning and were independent of missionary control, the story of the Indian Church would have been different today. Because of foreign dependence and foreign control, the Church in India remains a crippled body, alienated from the main stream of national life. It was the greatness and farsightedness of Serampore missionaries that they insisted on financial independence and freedom from foreign control. In this Serampore mission was unique among missionary societies.” [Philip: 9f.]

Concern for World Mission

There is a striking difference of emphasis between the Society for Propagating the Gospel [SPG] which was established by the Church of England in 1701 and the Baptist Missionary Society [BMS] by the Baptists in 1792. The former was founded “for the spiritual benefit of our loving subjects” with a colonial outlook whereas the latter was to work “among the heathen” with the spirit of outreach to all people who never had the privilege of knowing the good news of Jesus Christ. [Oussoren : 35] The concern for world mission by the Serampore missionaries enabled them to be committed to work as partners along with missionaries who represented other denominations of the Church in Asia in spite of the fact that they all had theological and many other differences back home. Their common task was to share the good

news of Jesus Christ in the needy world by word and deed. The missionaries of the LMS, CMS and BMS had meetings in common and had “preached in one another’s chapels.” [Potts : 58] In the Henry Martyn Pagoda at Serampore all denominational differences were forgotten when the Trio joined at prayer and praise with the Anglican chaplains, Martyn, Brown and Corrie. Since a good understanding existed between Bishop Reginald Heber, the Metropolitan Bishop of Calcutta and the Serampore Trio, the former expressed the need in his letter to Marshman to sort out the theological differences between the Anglicans and the Baptists so that a rich harvest could be heaped in the mission field and “the work of the Lord would advance among them [the local people] with celerity of which we have now no experience.” [Marshman Vol. II : 292f.] Carey applauded Heber’s kindness and expressed his gratitude for the Bishop’s liberality. [Potts : 59] Nathaniel Forsyth, a missionary of the London Missionary Society, established a school in the Dutch enclave of Chinsurah in 1803 with the valuable supply of school books which were published by the Serampore missionaries. Claudius Buchanan, a chaplain of the Anglican Church praised Carey’s work of translation of the Bible into Bengali. [Potts : 51]

On 5 May 1806 William Carey wrote a very important letter to Andrew Fuller, the General Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, from Serampore which is quoted in almost all documents related to the history of Ecumenical Movements. In this letter Carey pleads: “Would it not be possible to have a general association of all denominations of Christians from the four quarters of the world held there [Cape of Good Hope] once in about 10 years?...let the first meeting be in the year 1810... we could understand one another better and more entirely enter into one another’s views by two hours’ conversation than two or three years’ epistolary correspondence.” Unfortunately Fuller responded negatively without even giving a trial to Carey’s proposal, and dismissed it saying that it was part of the “pleasing dreams” of the “enlarged mind” of Carey; for, “in the gathering of all denominations there would be no unity(!), without which we had better stay home.” [Carey : 253] The proposal of Carey sent out from Serampore Mission was for spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not a denominational Christianity and it had to wait for a century until the first World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh in 1910. Maybe, Andrew Fuller who had no practical experience in the mission field, did not realize the urge for Christian unity at that time of Church history.

At the meeting of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, in 1961, the International Missionary Council was renamed as the Council for World Mission and Evangelism and it became a unit within the structure of the WCC. It was a great occasion for celebration since the international Christian community had affirmed mission to be of concern to the whole church; and there can be no church without mission. Quite a few references to the foresight of William Carey were made in New Delhi that year when his birth bicentenary was also celebrated by several missionary movements. How true it is to note that ecumenism became a visible reality in our time because of deep concern for world evangelism by visionaries like Carey. Brian Stanley is right in describing the early work of the BMS in terms of “Evangelical Ecumenism.” [Stanley : 20]

Ecumenical Vision for Theological Education

Even though the Serampore Mission wanted pre-eminently a divinity school for raising indigenous leadership, the Trio were careful to do theology along with other secular disciplines. This shows that they were “against narrow-minded theologues” who had no interest to relate

their theological insights with other disciplines of study, and wanted the future leaders of the church and the society to be people of “sound learning, genuine piety and sterling character.” [Story 1927 : 75] The intellectual capacity and catholicity of interests of the trio enabled them to promote training for Christian ministry in a holistic manner. Therefore, in the curricula those days, they had included Sanskrit, Bengali, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, English, Ethics, Logic, Religion, Botany, Astronomy and so on. They were convinced that India needed not only trained evangelists and other Christian workers, but also teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists and so on, trained with the spirit of service to people. Educating theology students along with students of other faiths and with those doing secular disciplines was often thought of as a danger since the pious youth were likely to be corrupted by the others. The resolve of the Trio to have the Theology Department to function along with liberal Arts and Science programmes shows their serious concern that students of Christian theology should not develop “contracted views” like “sheltered invalids” but be “virile men.” [Carey : 330] In other words, the breadth of the curriculum and the openness of the College to people of many faiths and ideologies were conceived by the founders of Serampore College as integral to rather than subversive of its missionary character.

It is indeed amazing to note from the statutes and regulations of the College constituted by William Carey in 1833—a year before his demise—that the Serampore Mission had the foresight to plan for an ecumenical body of theology students residing, worshipping and studying together in the College. The section 13 of the Regulation reads, “Students admissible at the discretion of the Council from any body of Christians, whether *Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek or the Armenian Church...*” The Senate of Serampore College, established one hundred years after the college, has certainly been ecumenical in bringing the Protestant and Orthodox and some Pentecostal seminaries together under the same evaluating criteria of theological education. There is indeed a great deal of interaction in theological pursuits between these churches. As a matter of fact, in some disciplines especially in Biblical studies, there is a great deal of interaction between the Roman Catholics and other Churches. Nevertheless, the dream of Carey for candidates representing the Roman Catholic Church along with those of other churches doing theology together by residing in the same institution has not yet been fulfilled in this country. The time has come when a common programme of ministerial formation for the candidates preparing for full time ministry within the whole Church of God [which includes the Roman Catholics] can be seriously planned and implemented in the Third Millennium. This is important not only for strengthening our witness as Christians in this country where Christians make a small minority, but for the enlargement of our vision for a meaningful experience of ‘One Church, One Faith, One Lord.’

It is interesting to note the incredible change that had taken place in the attitude of the Serampore missionaries towards Roman Catholics during their years of service in India. At the beginning of the Serampore Mission, Ward had printed a tract, entitled “A Protestant’s Reason why he will not be a Papist..”, for distribution among the poor Catholics. Those days the Baptists had an innate prejudice against the Catholics and were obviously critical of their veneration of statues leading towards ‘Idolatry’, infant baptism, their unwillingness to make the Bible available to the lay people and their worship which was held in Latin or Portuguese and hence hardly understood by the ordinary people in their church. In fact one of the early converts Carey gained in Bengal was Ignatius Fernandez, a Catholic born in Portuguese Macao, opposite Hong Kong. Fernandez became very helpful to Carey, supplying him candles made

of wax which gave better light than the dim lamps burning out of mustard oil. In a few years Fernandez became "an honorary missionary" at Dinajpur, North Bengal. [Carey : 170] In spite of many obstacles for the Baptists for reconciliation with the Catholics, they gradually learnt "the value of using indigenous missionaries from the Catholic endeavours, and found it an example worth adopting." [Potts : 61] If only the dream of Carey were fulfilled that theological education and ministerial formation could be carried out by the Protestants, Orthodox and the Roman Catholics jointly, as spelt out in the statutes and regulations of the Serampore College, it will indeed not only be a revolutionary step towards ecumenism of our faith in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church", but would strengthen our witness unsurpassingly in our land. In other words, Christians of all traditions are brought together not just when they all suffer persecution at the hands of a section of Hindu fundamentalists, but always as their faith in Christ demands them to be one Church.

Holistic Mission to Humankind

The God of the Bible whom we worship is concerned about the whole universe in all its colour and complexity, about the sacred as well as the secular. This concern is made explicit in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ who claims, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold.. ." [John 10.16] "Whatever you have done to the least of these brethren, you have done it unto me..." [Mathew 25.40] These texts indicate that Christian mission is ex-centric and inclusive. Archbishop Temple claims "Church is the only cooperative society which exists for the benefit of non-members." [Stott : 24] David Bosch points out that one of the elements of the emergent ecumenical missionary paradigms is that unity in mission does not "merely serve the Church but, through the church, stands in the service of *humankind* and seeks to manifest *the cosmic rule of Christ*." [Bosch : 466f.]

Any missiology developed on the basis of the Serampore ethos cannot ignore global as well as local issues which affect humanity day after day. Carey and his colleagues fought against all forms of injustice done to women, children, old people, lepers, the poor and the destitute, and by their ministry brought social transformation to a good degree. The concern for a sustainable ecology, and as a response to the serious problem of deforestation, Carey established a Botanical Garden and Agri-Horticultural Society in Calcutta. In 1820, he wrote, "...in one of the finest countries in the world, the state of Agriculture and Horticulture is so abject and degraded and the people's food so poor and their comforts so meagre, India seems to have almost everything to learn about clearing of jungles, tillage of waste, the draining of marshes, the banking of river courses, the irrigation of large areas, the fixing of compost and manure, rotation of crops, betterment of tools and transport, breeding of stocks, culture of new vegetables and herbs, planting of orchards, budding, grafting, pruning fruit trees, forestation of timbers..." [Drewery : 180] The mission of the Serampore missionaries was holistic since they not only developed the secular disciplines by teaching subjects such as Botany, Geology, Chemistry, Anatomy and Astronomy, but also authored text books for disseminating knowledge to the youth in these areas of study in Bengali and English.

The Trio were not only convinced that theological study should be carried out in conjunction with the secular disciplines, they went all out to take whatever skills were available among the local people to propagate the gospel. They did a stupendous job of translating and printing the scriptures in several Asian languages, including Burmese and Chinese. They did their work along with pundits, munshis, teachers and type cutters, almost all of them belonging

to other faiths. Without the active participation of these skilled labourers the gospel could not have been communicated in such a vast sub-continent in the local languages. It may be noted that they had no inhibition to serve and work with people of different traditions and faiths. Therefore, the second part of section 13 of the Statutes and Regulations of the College reads, "...no caste, colour, country shall bar any person from admission into Serampore College.." The Trio made an indelible mark by setting afoot the parturient process of development of an ethos of Indian culture by their creative participation in the struggles of the people. In other words, they were able to shape the people's thought with new values which made an impact on the national renaissance even as it is acknowledged by the secular Asiatic Journal (1938) which reads : "Their educational exertions were such as no preceding gentlemen had made nor have any hope that men with equal knowledge and benevolence will again be born and impart such benefits to us."

Conclusion

The churches in India and other Asian countries owe a great deal to the Serampore Mission which was inaugurated two hundred years ago on JANUARY 10, 1800. The foundation laid by the Serampore missionaries is strong, since they were deeply committed to Christian unity. Their claim for unity was not simply a theory or a theology, but had many praxiological benefits. Their concern for self-supportive indigenous Christian leadership, vision for common theological education for the whole church and the holistic mission to humankind need to be taken seriously in the Third Millennium.

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