

A Hermeneutic Principle Applied to Theological Training in India or: Anachronistic Theological Colonialism?

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I. Observations and experiences

"The Church today is largely an 'answering church.' As before, men expect it to give answers, but they no longer expect its answers to mean anything to them. The reason why our contemporaries regard what the church has to say as so irrelevant is not so much that the church's answers have been handed down from the past. This is also true in part of the 'hermeneutic sciences.' The reason is rather that the church is answering questions which are no longer asked by our own time. The usual punctuation mark in the church's statements is the exclamation mark, not the question mark. Its statements usually take the form of an appeal, not an argument. And the principle virtue it preaches is obedience, not thinking for oneself. The church hurls its answers at men's heads like meteorites from a distant star."¹

This statement of the German theologian Heinz Zahrnt was referring to the attitude of Churches in Europe. I am afraid the situation in the so-called "mission-field" is even worse and more complicated. O yes, I know, we ought not to speak any more of "mission fields," but rather of "self-reliant young Churches," or even better of "interdependence in the Body of Christ." Wonderful words — from my point of view: marvellous phrases!

A lot has been said about "indigenisation." The process of transposing into practice what has been discussed during so many missionary conferences started in India a long time ago; but it seems to me that it got stuck. What are the reasons?

From the beginning of Christian mission in India European missionaries had a sense of appreciating the local culture. The history of Serampore College, where I help to train theological students today, is an admirable example of the attempt of European missionaries to indigenise the Gospel. From the foundation of the College onwards it was made imperative that it "should be open to all without

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¹ Heinz Zahrnt, *What Kind of God?*, London, 1971, p. 84.

distinction of caste or creed, with the understanding that the instruction be divested of everything of sectarian character."² The original generous strength and *exousia* of such an attitude is gone. The local community of Serampore is small in number; the Theology Department of the College is rather timid to stabilise the present position. St Olave's Church, in which William Carey took the first service, is now visited only by the theological students once a week. Who else shall use that historical building? The Danish cannons posted outside the Church seem to stress that the Christians of Serampore remained something alien in this town; but those who occupied the Church's compound indigenised the cannons according to their need: they are used to dry their washing.

More than a decade ago the Assembly of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Mexico stated that the old distinction between "sending churches" and "missionary lands" was no longer applicable. But still even today I would hold that there is a very one-sided relation between Indian and western churches. This is due to many reasons: one is money, another one is tradition. Our college is entirely depending on western money and, though we are an ecumenical college, the various teachers — Indian and western staff — are expected to represent the denominational tradition they belong to, a tradition imposed by western Church divisions. That is why we celebrate our services according to a Lutheran or Baptist liturgy, that is why we sing Wesley's hymns, that is why we discuss Reformation Creeds, that is why students belonging to monophysite churches get to know that they are heretics according to the Chalcedonian Formula! And all that is happening on Indian soil.

II. Searching for reasons

How is it possible? Money and tradition are not sufficient reasons. The main reason for that one-sided relation between Indian and western Churches is rather what I would like to call with Raymond Panikkar an "anachronistic theological colonialism." The dominant form of Christianity tends to be equated with Christianity itself. And this tendency will hardly change as long as the situation of theological training in India is not radically converted.

Two-thirds of the theological teaching staff in Serampore are Europeans, consciously or unconsciously introducing western ways of worship and prayer, western hymnody and above all western theology. The Indian staff members without exception finished their post graduate studies at European and American universities. This situation may differ from college to college, but the disproportionate western influence is to be found in the Christian colleges all over India. Most significant for that fact is the preponderant number of western theological books in the various college libraries. Concerning theological

² *The Story of Serampore and its College*, ed. by the Council of Serampore College, Calcutta, 1960, p. 21.

training³ the stress is still laid on traditional western theological issues and their understanding.⁴ Contextualisation of a curriculum means more than offering some courses about Indian philosophy or Indian theology. A "functional curriculum"⁵ is needed for theological training in India.

However, it still seems to me that we have not yet hit the point. The number of theological books written or published in India is slightly increasing; the proportions between Indian and western staff at the theological colleges are improving; better curricula could be worked out. But I am afraid this is scratching the surface only; the very cause for these symptoms lies deeper: it has a theological and a hermeneutical aspect.

The theological aspect is similar to the issue in the early Church about circumcision. The modern counterpart question seems to be: does what God has to offer to India in Jesus Christ and through the Christian Church entail Indian Christians' opting for participation in the western form of Christianity and in the western tradition of theology? The answer can only be "No"! But we are hesitating to give that answer due to many reasons. One is the fear of shifting into a kind of syncretism. But the best way of avoiding syncretism has always been the attempt to formulate the Gospel in contemporary and contextual thought patterns by "baptising" and transforming these thought patterns into something new. We must not hinder the Word of God from becoming an incarnated Word,⁷ incarnated in the historical form of a servant. We have to preach and to teach Christ, not a particular sociological form of Christianity!

³ Take for instance a course like ch. 6 of the Serampore Curriculum, "Modern Christian Theologians," which is described as presenting "Important thinkers and theologians from the time of D. F. Schleiermacher to the present."

⁴ See J. Russell Chandran's comment on that issue in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XX, no. 3, 1965, pp. 247-259.

⁵ As a good example of an integrated curriculum design I would like to recommend the approach of Rarongo Theological College in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, for all those who agree that our curriculum is too western, too theoretical, or otherwise inadequate: Patricia J. Harrison, "Some thoughts on curriculum design for theological education," in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, no. 1, Oct. 1977, pp. 141-150.

⁶ Nobody accused Paul or John of being Gnostics because they were using gnostic ideas; on the contrary, by using gnostic thought patterns the Gospel was understood even by gnostics and their sympathisers.

⁷ "People have said for years now that the foreign strand in the life of the Church here prevents the Church from 'incarnating' Christ — its real vocation — and without this it will be held back from deep spiritual experience, the spontaneity of its living and proclaiming the Gospel will disappear, and men of other faiths will be blocked from knowing who Christ is." C. Murray Rogers in *Missionary Service in Asia Today. A Report on a Consultation Held by the Asia Methodist Advisory Committee*, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 126.

Closely related to that theological aspect is a hermeneutic principle due to which a radical change in the present situation of theological training in India is unlikely to happen.

III. A hermeneutic principle

Let us briefly consider at this point the main principle in the "technique of understanding expressions of life set in written form" (Wilhelm Dilthey). I would like to remind ourselves of "the simple fact, that the presupposition for understanding is the interpreter's relationship in his life to the subject which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text."

We western "missionaries" might argue: that is exactly why we prefer western theologians like Bultmann or Tillich, because they are dealing with the biblical text in that existential approach. Now, I do not want to apply that hermeneutic principle to the professor, but rather to the situation of an Indian Christian student coming, let us say, from a village in the Khasi Hills and preparing for his BD examination. The "text" he is dealing with is still the biblical text, that is true to a certain extent. But his main concern according to the curriculum will become the understanding of another "text" which seems to be totally alien to his cultural and historical background and to his existential questions: the creeds of the early Church formulated in Greek-Latin terms, Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages, the confessions of the Reformation and after (Indian students do not know any Latin!), up to pietistic, liberal, dialectic, existential and political theology. Every Indian student preparing to be a pastor in India has to be circumcised by western Christianity and western theology. That is what we believe and that is what we practise. An Indian student coming from Assam confessed: "Many biblical passages spoke to me directly, but when I entered this college, things became so strange and complicated." Some others even have an inferiority complex because of this same feeling.

"Interpretation ... always presupposes a living relationship to the subjects which are directly or indirectly expressed in the text,"⁸ says Bultmann and he is speaking about the biblical text. Now, we might think this is our concern too, but we prescribe thought patterns and theological systems to the students which are alien to their background. We are still convinced that this is the only bridge to grasp the biblical message, not being aware enough of the fact that they might become a hindrance instead of a bridge.

The hermeneutic principle mentioned above applies last but not least to the sermon, which the student in our college is being prepared to preach. Will there be a "living relationship" between the Indian

⁸ R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, London, 1955, p. 241.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

parish and a western dogmatic system? And if not, which will have preference: Barth's Dogmatics or the needs of the parish members?¹⁰ We may argue that this is a very wrong alternative and it is only a matter of translation and contextualisation. But if that is so, whose task is that translation and contextualisation? The student's or that of the theological college, that is the task of the professor concerned? Even if the professor is competent to do this, the curriculum which, despite all efforts, still includes the learning of a lot of prescribed lessons militates against such a "living relationship" developing.

IV. Evidences

Before trying to draw some conclusions from what has been said so far I would like to give some examples which might illuminate my point.

1. This term I am offering lectures about the "Doctrine of God" and it seemed to me suitable to include such a very much discussed book as Robinson's *Honest to God*¹¹ on the restricted shelf of our seminar. While discussing the book with the students I realised that it did not really meet the demands of the student. Living in a Hindu environment, the exciting message of the Bible has been for him that God is calling and encountering man as being over against him rather than being the "depth of man's life," which seems to be similar to the Hindu idea of *atman*. Robinson's book has a lot to say to a western generation who discovered that God cannot be thrown overboard with a special kind of religious language or the theistic world picture. But it seems that the East does not feel that problem.

2. B. E. Fernando, Vice-President of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka, wrote in "A Study of Foreignness versus Indigeneity": "While in the West every person makes his own decisions without consulting the family, in the East the family is always consulted and often the interest of the clan is also considered. The Gospel of individual salvation must be so presented that no ... disruption ... takes place."¹² I appreciate Fernando's point, but wonder whether we should speak of "individual salvation" at all! In many parts of India we come across a western type of pietistic theology¹³ which is concerned only with the salvation of the individual soul. This is of course very

¹⁰ Cf. on this question K. Koyama, "From Water Buffaloes to Asian Theology," *The International Review of Missions*, LIII (Oct. 1964), no. 212.

¹¹ Five copies in our Library available.

¹² In *Missionary Service in Asia Today. A Report on a Consultation Held by the Asia Methodist Advisory Committee*, p. 150.

¹³ This is very common, for example, in the interpretation of *en sarki* (in the flesh) in a moral and sensual sense contradicting the *pneuma*, thought of as the supreme part of man. This wrong kind of Western theology has influenced especially the Churches in the North-East.

adaptable to Hindu ideas, but this is not the indigenisation we want and need in India, because it is no longer the Gospel.¹⁴

3. A so-called "modern theologian" like Rudolf Bultmann may be the worst to solve the problem. His existential approach does not overcome individualism. On the contrary, he surely underrates the individual's need of the community. "For Bultmann church and world remain largely peripheral to the personal salvation of the individual."¹⁵ Another question is whether Bultmann's programme of demythologising is so necessary in an Indian setting, where mythological language and thought patterns have still their original strength of expression. Even his one-sided stress on present eschatology may be misunderstood against a religious background in which the biblical understanding of history is totally alien.¹⁶

4. Bultmann may also be taken as an example of the bad practice of our theological training in India in transferring a western theologian inconsiderately to a different setting in a naive way: this is often being done. I feel free to take Bultmann as that example because I appreciate him very much.¹⁷ But Bultmann cannot be understood unless I know something about Heidegger and existential philosophy; and existential philosophy cannot be understood without some knowledge about Kierkegaard, who is only to be grasped as the antipode to Hegel. And how can Hegel be understood unless there is some background knowledge about rationalism and enlightenment? Does an Indian student preparing for pastoral work really need this deviating approach for his reflection and proclamation of the Gospel in his specific surroundings? I doubt it.

V. Conclusion

Indian churches are surrounded by a vast number of religious systems which hold already the answers to the key questions about life and death.¹⁸ The Christian Gospel does not have a completed system or fixed answers. It rather refers back to God's action in

¹⁴ The God, whom the Hindu tries to find *in* his inner self, is only to be found *out* there at the cross and *out* there at the cross of his neighbour. This is the stumbling-block and the message for today's India, I am afraid! A pietistic theology ignoring the historical and political dimension of the Gospel and even teaching a dualistic anthropology as indicated in footnote no. 13 above lessens the weight and blunts the point of the biblical message in India.

¹⁵ S. Paul Schilling, *Contemporary Continental Theologians*, London, 1966, p. 100.

¹⁶ I personally feel that future eschatology and the apocalyptic tradition have more to say to India.

¹⁷ Most of my theological teachers have been Bultmann scholars. Moreover Bultmann himself was my direct neighbour during my studies in Marburg/Lahn for about four years.

¹⁸ This is true for Advaita Hinduism as well as for Primitive Religions.

history and points to God's and man's future which is promised, but still to be discovered. What seems to be the weakness of Christians in India may become their strength, provided they start listening and asking for God's will in their particular setting. The answer, for instance, to questions like: how to cast out demons or how to encounter superstition, will not be found in a western book. We must no longer present to our students answers which they have not asked for.¹⁹ We have to ask with them in our theological colleges in a deep solidarity. If we Westerners want to go on playing the role of the midwife or at least of the spoon feeding babysitter, we should go home immediately:²⁰ the child is born and quite grown up! Let us rather be the salt: one of its characteristics is to dissolve...²¹

¹⁹ Or even worse: answers which cannot be understood or will be misunderstood!

²⁰ We might play a very helpful role as real partner, but this presupposes independence from each other on both sides! If our theology does not speak about Indians in the Twentieth Century, it cannot speak about God! If our theology does not listen to the questions and needs of Indians, it is not worthy to be called the theology of the incarnated One, who did not utter timeless, abstract formulas, but lived a very concrete, "indigenised" life and spoke in pictures and terms which were taken from the language and everyday experience of his own people.

²¹ This applies to personnel, books and money!