A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER WITH WORLD RELIGIONS

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A missionary encounter with other religions rests on a twofold basis: the comprehensive scope of the gospel and an understanding of religion as a comprehensive vision and way of life.

Category: Observations

Christianity now lives in a multi-cultural world and must come to serious grips with other religions.

AN URGENT ISSUE

The Expansion of Plurality

Massive global migration means that adherents of the great religions now live in close proximity to each other. The church can no longer ignore the claims of other religions.

The Global South: A Christian minority amidst a sea of religious plurality

The majority of the Church now lives in the global South; however, this means they are also surrounded by other religions. In Asia, Christians are only 9% of the population.

The sharp differentiation between religion and public life that we experience in the West is not shared in other parts of the world.

Ideology of religious pluralism

Especially in the West, people value religious pluralism and reject any absolute claims to truth on behalf of one faith over others.

Global crises and the fragile interdependence of the world.

Religious tensions have heightened ecological, political, economic and military crises that threaten the very future of our planet.

THE PROPER POSTURE AMIDST RELIGIOUS PLURALISM Â€“ A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

A missionary encounter is an encounter between ultimate and comprehensive religious commitments that shapes different ways of life. The word encounter advocates an unflinching commitment to ultimate and all-embracing claims and precludes the accommodation of any religious vision into another more ultimate and comprehensive one. A missionary encounter with other religions rests on a twofold basis: the comprehensive scope of the gospel and an understanding of religion as a comprehensive vision and way of life.

The Comprehensive scope of the gospel and comprehensive scope of religion

â€œThe gospel is a message that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has revealed and accomplished the salvation of the whole world and all peoples.â€ It is a universal claim.

Western culture has reduced this claim to an individual, spiritual one and scientific research has become the arbiter of ultimate truth. This distorted view of religion is unique to the west. In other cultures religion is seen as an all-embracing vision of life.

To understand a missionary encounter with religions, we have to be clear what we mean by religion:

- Over and against *dualism*, religion is comprehensive and shapes all of life.
- Over and against *individualism*, religion is a social and cultural phenomenon.
- Over and against *secularism,* religion is a matter of spiritual power.

Missionary encounter takes religion seriously and emerges out of four interlocking realities

- Religion is a comprehensive way of understanding and living in the world
- There is a plurality of religious visions of human life
- All religious visions claim to be true
- Adherents of these religions want to live out their comprehensive commitments.

There will be an encounter between religions in all areas of life â€“ noncoercive, nonviolent and gentle. A call to conversion offering the gospel as an alternative.

Islam has a similar clash with other religions as Christianity; but this time the encounter is coercive and may be violent.

Two popular positions that pre-empt a missionary encounter.

Ideological pluralism and the study of comparative religions are ways of avoiding or pre-empting a missionary encounter.

Comparative religion assumes that there is a neutral scientific standpoint from which all religions can be viewed. Pluralism insists that all religions are true.

Both of these pre-empt a missionary encounter by both elevating their own truth claims and by not taking seriously the visions of the various other religions.

The Western humanist story as one more religious vision

Religion is at the core of Western culture. Modern culture is based on certain suppositions about man, his place in the world and his responsibility towards God and this implies a definite worldview.

Secularism is religious and comprehensive in its scope.

A CHALLENGE TO PLURALISM

Pluralism stands apart from all other Christian positions as it denies the Gospel and the uniqueness of Christ. It is difficult to see how it is really Christian.

Reasons for the widespread popularity of â€œChristianâ€ pluralism

- Pluralists have accepted the religious position of the post-enlightenment West.
- Closeness to other religious traditions has allowed us to see some value in them.
- A fear that one claim to universal truth could unbalance society.
- In pluralism, Christianity is made to conform to the spirit of the age, not the other way round.
- Pluralism is arrogant; it holds to an exclusive centre by which all other faiths are judged.
- It substitutes impersonal and abstract ideas for the centre around which all religions must gather. They talk about God, but which God?

A critique of pluralism

A BRIEF SKETCH OF A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Two problems:

- Theological neglect
  â€œTragically, many seminar and divinity school programs have been slow to respond to this new situation. It is quite astonishing that theological students in the West will spend countless hours learning about the writings of a few well-known, now deceased, German theologians whose global devotees are actually quite small and yet completely ignore over one billion living, breathing Muslims who represent one of the most formidable challenges to the Christian gospel today.Â â€œ (Tennent)
- The reigning pluralism.

Starting with the public truth of the gospel

In this environment, the church proclaims that salvation is found in Christ alone. Our theology of religions must start with the public truth of the Gospel. Jesus stands at the centre of a long biblical story.

Tennent speaks of three non-negotiables:

- The uniqueness of Jesus Christ
- The centrality of his death and resurrection
- An explicit response of repentance and faith (some disagree with this last point)

Revelation beyond the gospel

To affirm the truth of the gospel does not mean a denial of revelation outside of the gospel. Truth is most fully revealed in Jesus and that is the criterion by which all truth claims are to be assessed. (Acts 14:17, Rom 1:19-20)

This revelation does not bring salvation, but it does have a good effect on human society.

Religious conscience and empirical religions.

Godâ€™s revelation in creation produces a religious conscience in humanity and leads to historical religions. All human beings, made in Godâ€™s image, are religious creatures and have a conscience.

Our conscience is always distorted by sin.

- Human beings supress the truth.
- They exchange the truth for idols.

Each religion arises in the context of historical circumstances.

Orienting core and the various components of religion

Religions have a core from which the peripheral aspects such as worship practices and social structures are derived.

The core of Buddhism is the pursuit of deliverance from transient existence. The core of Islam is to proclaim one transcendent God and to found a community ruled by God and his prophet.

A MISSIONARY APPROACH AND SUBVERSIVE FULFILMENT

If God is revealing himself to all peoples, the longings of their hearts need to be heard.

Sympathetic, insider approach

We need to hear the cry at the core of the religion and show how the gospel addresses this.

Critical, outside approach

The gospel affirms religious longing, but challenges the form that it takes.

Allah is not the God of Abraham and the response of Islam is not the same as the scriptural covenant relationship.

Subversive fulfilment

A missionary approach will both affirm and challenge each aspect of a religion.

THE CHURCHÂ€™S MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The gospel is not just a good teaching; it is the announcement of historical events, the life and death of Jesus on the cross.

Point of Contact

We need to have a point of contact with people of other religions. Our approach should make the gospel attractive to them and we must present the gospel in a way that is understandable and offers good news to people.

Dialogue

For two long â€˜dialogueâ€™ has been used to promote pluralism.

Dialogue should be an expression of our love for others. True Christian dialogue is built on a Trinitarian foundation. We dialogue on the basis of the Fatherâ€™s work, as a witness to Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

This is part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture,*

History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â