

FCI

St Thomas of India Unity Lecture 2009

'Mission Challenges from Contemporary India:

That they may be one, that the world may know ... John 17'

Given by the Rev Dr Joshva Raja, Queens College, Birmingham.

Missionary Challenges from Contemporary India

Looking for a Fourth Way in Missiology – moving from Church based Ecumenism to Cultural Ecumenism

Christian mission is a movement of the people of God in their contexts. When there is a crisis in their context the mission of God is for the people of God to recognise, engage and address it and thus witness to Christ in and through their words, lives and action.

Situation in India Today

Today in India we are faced with religious fundamentalism, linguistic chauvinism, caste exploitation, political vengeance and ideological conflicts in different parts of the country. The root cause of all these issues is poverty. Rich people's refusal to share their wealth, natural disasters and government inability to serve the billions of people are some of the reasons for poverty.

The need for strategic thinking

In order strategically to develop mission thinking and mission action, Christian communities have to find new ways of relating themselves to people of other faiths, castes and doctrines. Unless churches and Christian communities address this issue strategically it is impossible to do any kind of mission in India. Christians alone cannot address this issue by doing charity or 6 similar projects; rather they have to work together at various levels with other denominations, other religious communities and other ideological groups.

Nourishing wider cultural contacts difficult for Churches

Churches find it difficult to nourish wider cultural groups within their structure (or their doctrines) in order to create wider ecumenical and multicultural communities to address problems together. One has to recognise the fact, however, that cultural gatherings such as varanda (frontier of the house), tea gatherings, marriages, funeral meetings, cottage prayers, prayer halls, revival gatherings, clubs and teashop discussions are precise examples of actual encounters that are nourished by communities with wider interests.

Alternative Spaces: a dialogue

Christians often relate with others in these cultural gatherings. It is essential to encourage Christians to engage in such alternative spaces where they can work together ecumenically with other denominational Christians in sharing information and in pooling their resources, thus bringing about changes in their communities. To nourish such alternative cultural spaces, I am developing a model by holding a dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi (selfreliance of community),² Amartya Kumar Sen³ (freedom), Habermas (Public space)⁴ and Yunus (Micro economics)⁵. The present theological proposals for relating with others in order to engage with these issues such as exclusive, inclusive and pluralistic methods are not helpful in engaging and bring about transformation within the Christian communities.

Christian narratives are not absolute

Unless we take grassroots Christians and their simple faith in mission (which is to maintain the uniqueness and universal relevance of the Gospel) seriously, we may not find a common ground to encourage them to engage in such wider cultural interactions. Grassroots Christians may find a middle way of maintaining their faith in Christ as the Truth without offending other faiths or claiming superiority over others. Because they do not experience God through the religious faith and narratives of others they cannot make judgmental statements about others' faith. Their own Christian faith, though unique and universally relevant, is revealed by God through Christ completely. But God cannot be contained in any one of the Christian doctrines or denominational statements. In this sense Christian narratives are not absolute; rather, they enable Christians to relate themselves to God through Christ. In this way too, Christians can proclaim their narratives of the Gospel through words, action and their daily lives. Thus they invite others to accept them while recognizing the fact that the narratives are not absolute in themselves. It is the Triune God who is the absolute but mysterious and who cannot be contained in any human narrative completely. These narratives are secondary to the relationship with God and also secondary to the relationship with human beings. This understanding of Christian narratives in relation to the absolute and mysterious God affirms the life of every human being and thus becomes relevant to Christian faith and also evokes common values of humanity.

Alternative communities – a fourth way

Thus Christians may wish to work with their friends towards eliminating poverty through an alternative community, possibly even outside the church and with good relationships and coordination among them. At the same time they will maintain the fact that they would like to witness to Christ in every action and at the same time will invite people of other faiths than their own to listen to their faith stories as well. It means they will not make any judgement of other faiths and will respect people of other faiths and their friendship. If their relationship and friendship with people of other faiths are strong then they may critically and creatively engage with each other's faith. This is neither inclusive nor exclusive nor pluralistic – rather a fourth way which accommodates the Christian aspirations to share and witness to their Gospel without hesitation whilst being careful not to offend people of other faiths either by condemning or by judging their traditions and experiences. This is what I call a fourth way in doing mission in an Indian context.

My fourth way is to encourage Christian communities not only to engage with people from other denominations and other traditions but also with other faith communities in order to address together the issue of poverty and thus all other related issues. By bringing people together to eliminate poverty from across different traditions, denominations and religious faiths, lay Christians and also church leaders, may be able to witness to Christ in different ways in India. Such an attempt addresses the issue of development and poverty, interfaith relationship and also Christian witnessing in new ways in the Indian context. This is also a pragmatic way of doing mission among multicultural communities.

Joshva Raja ⁶

Endnotes

2. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/>
3. Professor Amartya Sen, Trinity College, Cambridge, U.K. (citizen of India) was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his contributions to welfare economics. c.f. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amartya_Sen
4. Thomas McCarthy: The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas, MIT Press, 1978.
5. <http://muhammadyunus.org/> Muhammad Yunus, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.



6. The Revd Dr Joshva Raja comes from the Church of South India Diocese of Tirunelveli. He studied for the ministry at Serampore College and after four years of parish ministry he taught at the United Theological College Bangalore from 2000 to 2006. He completed a Doctorate in Christian Communication at New College Edinburgh in 2000. He has written several books, including Facing the Reality of Communication ISPCK: 2001. Joshva is now teaching and leading research at the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies at Queen's College and is a lecturer at the University of Birmingham.