

Faith and Good Works

A Religious Issue

The Missionary's Policy - It is acknowledged policy among missionary priests working in developing countries that the first duty of Christian missionaries is to help to answer the most pressing needs of the people they are sent to: too often this means lack of food, water, medicine, and many other economic privations. In doing this missionaries tread a delicate boundary between the old evils of imperialism, paternalism, thinly disguised racism (the superior attitudes of "developed" towards "underdeveloped") and the sort of indifference that lets people live or die according to their own powers of survival - which are often dictated anyway by economics.

In India we are seeing a long story of conflict between the State and Christian missions. It is deeply resented that Christians from the West should seek to convert Hindus to the Christian faith, especially when the missionaries come bristling with Western scalpels and hypodermics. So a non-religious medical relationship, like that offered by Dr Jack Preger on the streets of Calcutta, for instance, is regarded with deep suspicion by the authorities, not because he is a bad doctor, not because he happens to be a Christian, but simply because he is not an Indian, and is therefore conspicuously a foreign body intervening in low-caste Indians' lives, and therefore *probably* subversive to the culture of the state. He is refused a license to practise medically. He is consistently hunted off the streets and runs before the police squads, even while hundreds of street-people await his care. He is frequently imprisoned.

In Muslim-dominated countries there are even more difficulties for Christian missionaries, in proportion to the militancy of the Government in religious terms. In countries like Egypt, an avowedly secular state allows local officials to turn a blind eye to persecution of Christians, especially the indigenous Copts, whose presence in Egypt predates Islam by several centuries. In Indonesia the militantly Muslim government watches with indifference whilst the population of East Timor, evangelised by Portuguese missions, is brutalised by police.

The Church's Dilemma - It is clear that, despite the assumptions of Western commentators, religion is far from being a dead issue in the world. It is acknowledged to be a powerful force; like all such forces, it can be used for human ends; it is one of the handles by which human beings can be caught and influenced. This is an issue in the home, in the classroom, in our own society just as much as in the world at large; however, there is no hope of *evading* it, any more than the experience of abuse or friction in family relationships can be *evaded*. It is part of being human that we are born into families, and we all benefit from them, and we all suffer from them. Religion will not go away, and a person who has "closed down" his religious nature is as crippled as one who has "closed down" his relationship with his family.

The Church could be asked by a hostile world to do its social duty to feed the poor and heal the sick, etcetera, and *keep its religion to itself*. Unfortunately, this is not an option the Church is free to adopt, because the principal task of the Church will always be to proclaim the Gospel. Feeding the hungry is necessary before the Gospel can be proclaimed; you cannot bring good news by preaching to a man who is starving before your eyes. But the generosity of Christians is part of their response to the Gospel; they could not feed the poor without raising the question of *why* they are poor, and then the discourse would become political, and the secular state would be disenchanted with the social work because it comes attached to the Gospel. In this way the presence of Christians involves precisely the confrontation between the Gospel and the world - and this brings into play the reality of the Cross. Our religion is much more than "spiritual"!

If the world hates you, you must realise that it hated me before you. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too. If they accepted my word, they will accept yours as well; but it will be on my account that they do all this, because they do not know the one who sent me

The World's "Ignorance of the Father" is displayed in its desire to act independently of religious facts and beliefs. Perhaps this is what deprives modern states of effectiveness as unifying powers, as builders of community. They assume they *cannot* address the souls of their citizens, so they attempt to treat them as primarily physical realities. There are ragged and ulcerated interfaces between state policy and, for instance, education; *pace* the University of Nottingham, education can hardly be religiously neutral ("a secular University") without some attempt to evade the spiritual realm. An education which "evades the spiritual" is inconceivable. You reduce its students to impotency, to being commentators; the Music department might produce (very poor) historians of music, but it could not educate *musicians* (except by accident). In the Theology department, you might train historians of religion, but you would never produce a *theologian*. It would be as barren an environment as a Science faculty that was forbidden to lay its hands on chemicals or materials, or an engineering department confined to drawing-boards.

"Liberal" is a word often attached to this kind of thinking. The avoidance of questions of faith, of personal commitment, the creation of a way of life which leaves much that is personal in a private cocoon, making do with an impersonal contribution that is quantifiable, measurable, economically exchangeable, produces a world that does not involve persons, but identifies them as economic factors - or as nothing. Those whose cocoon is well-furnished and secure may think themselves well-treated, happy to be left in peace. Those who have little by way of spiritual resources may starve to death.

The Church must undoubtedly be sensitive to the situations of countries labouring to preserve their very life, let alone their religion and culture. Further, the Church must be friendly to human culture wherever and however it expresses itself, by carefully nurturing all that is good in every part of the world. Within that discipline, however, *we must proclaim Christ* - not a prophet, not a theorist, not a weapon for domination, but the Word of God, made flesh in our sight, and raised from the dead, not for any nation or culture, but for all humanity.

It is a great grace for us that Jesus was not a Westerner, not a European or an American, but an Asian, born of the least dominant of Middle-Eastern peoples, at a time when imperialism was all on the side of their opponents. In the Christian civilisation to which we belong, we are all followers of one who is culturally vastly different from us. The more we can understand that, the more confident we can be in finding the right place for the Church in the world.

Above all, I believe, we should be confident in proclaiming to the world we inhabit - at this point the world of the University - a whole view of our nature, with all its dimensions; we should not accept the assertion that any human being has a spiritual dimension that is irrelevant to others, or that it is possible to live a full life without taking a proper attitude towards the questions we call religious - the ones which address questions about why we are here, where we are going, and how we are to think and act. To offer discussion or even guidance in these realms is not an assault on the humanity of others. I think it is vitally necessary for the survival of our culture.