

## A World in Transition

In the 19th century Brothers Grimm fairy tale *The Cat Who Married a Mouse*, the cat found a large jar full of meat covered with fat. The mouse and the cat wanted to lay it in store for the winter. They had a long talk about the place in which to hide their treasure. At last the cat said, "I don't know a better place than the church - no one ever thinks of robbing a church; so if we place the jar under the altar and take care not to touch it, then we shall have plenty to eat in the winter."

Times have changed. Today, churches are being robbed and vandalized. The church is no longer a safe place to hide anything. The world and its institutions are in transition; civilization is in a state of turmoil. The old foundations are rapidly crumbling. Due to increased international travel, the development of modern means of communications, the study of world religions in universities, and especially the immigrants from non-European nations, we are being introduced to the reality of religions other than Christian. And in this changing world, the church has the mandate to proclaim the unchanging gospel - man the sinner and Christ the Saviour from sin.

But this can only be done when we earnestly study the religious life of the people we seek to reach. Many years ago Dr. Abraham Kuyper already said, "For Missions it is not enough that you personally confess Christ, learn the language of a foreign people, and personally give yourself to learn to preach the gospel in a foreign language; because what is as necessary as bread is the need to have a living rapport with the religious thought world of the people you want to convert, and ultimately find a point of contact, wherein you are one with these people."

To get a clearer picture of the mission challenge, it will be helpful to briefly survey the statistics for 1997 regarding the numerical strength of world religions. After Christians (1,995,026,000), Muslims are the largest group (1,154,302,000), followed by Hindus (806,099,000), Buddhists (328,233,000), new religions (124,835,000), tribal religions (100,137,000), Sikhs (20,159,000) and Jews (14,180,000).

How well is the church doing in its mission outreach to the millions of non-Christians? David Barret, Research Professor of Missiometric at Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, observes that the surprising and disturbing answer is that other Christians, including ourselves (that is, the Christian world), are the focus of all 97 per cent of all Christian ministry in the world. The remaining 3 per cent is focussed on those non-Christians we are already in contact with.

To say that our world is in transition hardly seems necessary. Yet amidst the peace and prosperity in Canada, one sometimes needs to be startled into the reality of this fact.

### Secularism

The chilling wind of secularism has wrought havoc in the Western world. In place of the Christian faith, secular ideologies have taken over. This ideology claims that the world

can do without faith in God. And this secularism spreads its message with missionary zeal and often with a devastating impact, also upon the church. In the Western world, churches take it for granted that by far the greater part of daily life of their members is conducted without any reference to the teachings of Scripture. Education, medicine, arts, music, agriculture, politics, all are treated as separate from the Christian faith. And the Christian who is involved in them does so as an individual and usually looks for guidance for his activities not to the church and Scriptures, but to the "experts" in each field of endeavour who may or may not be Christians.

The collapse of communism reinforced in the West the view that its secular ideology will triumph globally and hence is universally valid. Western society has become critical of the church and is alienated from it. Missionaries who return on furlough often assess the changed situation better than anyone else. Upon his return from Korea to England, Rev. Samuel H. Moffett wrote:

In the old days, furlough was a temporary withdrawal from the frontier for rest and recuperation in the warm embrace of the heart of Christendom, Christendom does not have a heart anymore, geographically speaking, and coming home is more of an icy shock than a warm embrace.

The two Parliaments of the World's Religions in Chicago, 1893 and 1993, illustrate the dramatic change in the West's spiritual climate. It shows a shift from a Christian to a non-Christian presence. In 1893 most of the delegates were Christians and two-thirds of the papers presented were by Christians. During the second parliament in 1993, no one received press coverage more than the final speaker, the exiled fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. No Christian missionaries presented papers or were members of any panel discussion. Not a single paper set forth in a clear and comprehensive fashion the heart of the gospel. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, observed that "Jesus did not get a fair representation" at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.

But the West has no reason for boasting. We are living in a dying culture. All signs point to a civilization in decline. The West's victory over the Cold War did not bring exuberant triumph but painful exhaustion. Samuel E Huntington, professor at Harvard University, is not hopeful about Western civilization. He says in his *book The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of the World Order* that "the central issue for the West is whether, quite apart from any external challenges, it is capable of stopping and reversing the inner process of decay."

## **Secular Europe**

And nowhere is secularism more pervasive than in Europe.

H. Dan Beeby, former missionary and now consultant to the British Bible Society, made the pessimistic statement that the deep-down door of the European mind has been closed and has shut out the gospel. He said,

Our European schools and universities, our factories and farms, our banks and politics - almost everything public - function without reference to revelation, deity, heaven, creation, redemption, miracle, prayer, worship, judgement, confessed absolutes, and eternal life.

Whatever happened to Christian Europe which once sent missionaries across the globe? In the 18th century William Carey from England became "the Father of Modern Missionaries," and through the movement he founded, vast parts of Asia, Africa and Pacific Islands were eventually lit up with the gospel as a result of the ministry of thousands of missionaries. Today, Europe is now the focus of a growing influx of missionaries.

### **The influence of the media**

Rampant secularism has led to an alarming deterioration of moral standards. Pornography, breakdown of the family, drugs, corruption and contempt for authority are the order of the day. And the media have greatly contributed to the degeneration of society. They treat religion either with suspicion or outright contempt. Religion is seen as a hobby, trivial and unimportant for serious people. Major newspapers encourage reporters to acquire expertise in law, economics or sports, but I don't know any Canadian editor requiring journalists to brush up on their theology. The media are willfully ignorant about the Christian faith. When reporting on religious matters, it seems too much to ask journalists to read the Bible in order to understand Christian values. Christians and secular journalists no longer speak each other's language.

But religion is still the central force that motivates and mobilizes people. To a very large extent, each of the major civilizations has been closely identified with a world religion. As Christopher Dawson said, "The great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest." For example, we won't begin to understand the conflicts in the Balkans if the history of Islamic domination of the Serbs is neglected. And the constant tensions in the Middle East cannot be grasped apart from the rise of militant Islam.

### **Nationalism**

The post-World War II de-colonization process led to the disintegration of order and a return to chaos in Asia and Africa. The African continent is still suffering intensely from political upheavals, revolutions, ethnic cleansings, chronic poverty and corruption. De-colonization gave a strong boost to nationalism. Nationalism as an ideology has given many people a spiritual home. It opens up the possibility of return to traditional religious practices and world and life view. For example, Serbs have returned to the Orthodox church for their national identity, and former non-practicing Muslims have gone back to the long neglected Muslim traditions to recover their own sense of community.

Today, regional movements clamour for either substantial autonomy or outright secession. Many of these conflicts are not resolved by peaceful negotiations but with guns and bullets. Huntington observes that as of early 1993 an estimated 48 ethnic wars were occurring throughout the world, and 116 "territorial-ethnic claims concerning

borders" existed in the former Soviet Union, of which 30 had involved some form or armed conflict.

### **Crisis of confidence in the gospel**

In the aftermath of the destructive 1914-18 World War, there was a crisis of confidence about the value of the gospel. Many Christian thinkers began to ask if the "Christian countries of Europe" could make war on each other, then what was the use of evangelizing non-Western societies? One missionary at the time even concluded, "Either Christ has failed, or we have failed."

The greatest danger to the Christian faith is not the threat of the great world religions, how strong and powerful they may be, but it lies within Christianity itself, with the denial of the basics of the Christian faith by ivory tower academics.

At the second World Missionary Conference, held in Jerusalem in 1928, a revisionist understanding of the mission of the church was advocated. The revisionists promoted the idea that the Christian claim about the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ was no longer tenable in view of the reality of other world religions. In this thinking there could be no exclusive salvation through Christ alone, for other religions were considered as equally valid ways of salvation for their followers.

The Christian attitude to other faiths became a highly controversial issue shortly after the Jerusalem meeting. At the heart of the dispute was William Ernest Hocking, professor of philosophy at Harvard, who was critical of the exclusive attitude of Christians toward other faiths. He argued that the challenge to the Christian faith did not come from other world religions but from anti-religious and secular movements, and claimed that "ministry to the secular needs of people in the spirit of Christ is **evangelism.**"

The abandonment of the centrality of Christ in salvation was accompanied by an accommodation with science and its surrender of its insistence on the biblical account of creation and miracles. Liberalism emptied pews and became an obstacle to missions. If all paths lead to God, why missions?

Many leading theologians today no longer accept the historic orthodox view of Christ. The well known Dr. Kuitert, who has managed to stir controversy throughout most of his academic career, says that Jesus is not the Son of God as traditionally understood. He believes that the expression "Son of God" means that Jesus is "occupied, possessed, filled to the brim by God."

The World Council of Churches has struggled for many years with this issue of the uniqueness of Christ in salvation. At the 1983 assembly in Vancouver there was quite a commotion when the concept was introduced that the WCC should not only recognize the uniqueness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, but also recognize God's creative work in the religious experience of people with other faith convictions.

Lois M. Wilson, a president of the WCC (1983-91), ordained minister in the United Church of Canada, visiting lecturer on missions and evangelism in several theological colleges in Canada, and at the Ecumenical Center in Bangalore in 1975, said during a recent TV panel debate on Jesus as the only way to God, "I think (it) utter nonsense to say that Christianity is the only way to God."

### **The resurgence of Islam**

While Christianity in the Western world is being undermined by liberal theology and secularism, there is a rapid political resurgence of Islam. It gathered force in the third quarter of the 20th century and became a powerful, popular, and even frightening phenomenon in the 1980s. The British historian Paul Johnson notes that Islamic militancy involves vast numbers and a huge geographical spread, curving in the long crescent from West Africa, through the southern Mediterranean, the Balkans, Asia Minor and the Middle East, across the interior of Southwest Asia, the Indian subcontinent and down into Malaysia and the Philippines.

The revival of militant Islam explains in large part the failure to introduce democratic principles in much of the Muslim world. Islam is a complete fusion of religious faith and political power. Militant Islam is a threat to peace. Huntington says that Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbours. And he states, "Muslims make up about one-fifth of the world's population but in the 1990s they have been far more involved in inter-group violence than the people of any other civilization."

Christians are obliged to proclaim the Triune God and Jesus Christ, God's Son, as the only way to the Father. But Islam neither believes in the Trinity nor in the deity of Christ. The Muslim scholar Dr. Arafat El-Ashi writes:

According to the Quran both Jews and Christians have gone to extremes in their attitude towards Jesus Christ... Jews said he was a product of adultery and deviated from their inherited religion, thus he was killed and deserved it. Christians, on the other hand, go to the other extreme and claim Jesus to be God and Son of God.

In Islam there is religious intolerance and outright persecution of Christians, the institution of holy war, the ideal of revenge and retaliation, and the suppression of women.

### **Persecution**

So far I have portrayed a rather negative view of the many changes that have taken place in the world. And there is indeed reason for concern. In many Islamic nations Christians are living under conditions typical of the early church. Persecution is rampant in many countries. Yet this growing persecution is largely ignored by the press. The Western world is strangely indifferent to the beatings, the jailings, the torture, and even

crucifixions of Christians. Governments even deny the existence of allegations of widespread persecution. When Canadian government leaders visited China to drum up support for business, not a single protest was heard about the violations of human rights, while the suffering of the Chinese church has been well documented. The growth of this church has come with an enormous cost of lives. Someone wrote:

The reason for the growth of the church in China and for the outbreak of spiritual revival in many areas, is inextricably linked to the whole theology of the cross .... The stark message of the Chinese church is that God uses suffering and the preaching of a crucified Christ to pour out revival and build His Church. Are we in the West willing to hear?

More Christians have died for their faith in our century than all previous centuries combined. Dr. Paul Marshall's well documented book *Their Blood Cries Out. The Untold Story of Persecution Against Christians in the Modern World* should be mandatory reading for all English speaking Christians in the Western world, as Scripture teaches believers to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). And we can neither meaningfully pray for our persecuted fellow believers nor make protestation on their behalf unless we are informed about their suffering.

### **Growth of the Church**

Thanks be to God, there is also tremendous church growth to report. Christianity is now a world religion. Churches are rapidly growing not only in China, but also in South Korea and in many African nations.

One of the most remarkable stories of church growth is found in South America. Through large scale missionary efforts, mainly financed by evangelical Christians in the United States, evangelical churches made huge advances. David Martin, emeritus professor at the London School of Economics and one of the world's leading scholar of Latin America's religious revolution says, "More and more Latin Americans are opting out the religion of birth (Catholicism) in favour of a religion of choice." Martin points out that this "religion of choice" is overwhelmingly conservative and evangelical. For example, he estimates the Protestant population of Brazil at more than 30 million, or 20 per cent of the country's total.

Through conversion life styles have changed. Economic conditions have improved. Elisabeth Isias, the publisher of the Mexican newsletter *Noticiero Milamex* notes:

The Protestant church believes in honesty, integrity and hard work. In other words we don't believe in *mordidas* (bribes) and *San Lunes* (the Mexican term for mission work on Monday because of weekend partying). When a worker becomes a Christian, that goes by the board and they no longer do it. People who are drunkards become model employees.

The time is now for Christians to appraise the times. Scientific materialism, atheism, resurgent Islam, sects and cults are everywhere opposing the gospel. We are involved in a spiritual warfare with the gods of our age, but this should not hinder but rather encourage the church to bring the gospel of Light to this dark world. And let the gospel be the gospel. The church has nothing to communicate if the gospel is obscured, undermined, diluted or mutilated.

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