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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_anvil\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php)

# Mission

## Some personal reflections

### WERNER USTORF

Hamburg was a bombed out and heavily destroyed city when I was born there, a month after the end of the Second World War. As a child, I played amongst the ruins that the Nazi-dictatorship had left behind, in terms of urban devastation. As an adult, I had to come to terms with the devastation in both the intellectual and theological field. These ruins, to use the metaphor again, are all part of my memories. I find that I cannot deal with missiology without being reminded of history, especially of Hamburg's history. During those war years, the leading German missiologist, Walter Freytag, had his office in Feldbrunnenstrasse which was located in one of the upper middle class residential areas of Hamburg and which, at that time, was a traditional Jewish residential area. From his office in Feldbrunnenstrasse he walked regularly to Hamburg University, situated just opposite Dammtor station. Freytag gave lectures in missiology, e.g. on the psychology of conversion of the so-called 'primitive people', and on the ecumenical development of Christianity in Asia, in the Pacific, etc. In 1943 the Nazis struck him off the register of lecturers. The period of 1942/43 was the very time when the remaining Jews in Hamburg were forcibly driven to the Moorweide, and deported to the extermination camps. On his route to the University, Freytag had more or less to pass the Moorweide. I can only assume that he did know what was going on there at the time. He was certainly opposed to the Nazi terror, and by no means was he a follower of the Nazi 'German Christians'.

However, what was really the role of the missiologist in those days? It is surprising that even after the end of the war, Freytag did not take up the question of the extermination of European Jewry as a problem to and for missiology. Instead, he carefully elaborated an eschatologically orientated theology of mission which saw the existing world predominantly as a function of the coming. To put it in a somewhat metaphorical form: life was stationed in a departure lounge where one was resigned to have to wait for the plane to be eventually taken away. However, Freytag had much more to say on the subject, and I would not want to make an easy accusation. What I would like to say is that I cannot simply do missiology without recalling the war exterminations and the silence kept about it by some members of my discipline.

I have summarised my thoughts in the following four general points:-

### Mission in relation to NT Studies

Interestingly enough, most of the relevant studies of NT scholars on mission - at least in Germany, still date back to the sixties. How could one explain the silence of NT exegesis over the last two decades? One knows, of course, that the word 'mission' as such does not appear in the texts, and one might have to even acknowledge a certain degree of reluctance or an evident lack of interest in writing about it. But the reasons seem to lie much deeper. New hermeneutical approaches are claiming that the authors of the NT ought to be understood within and from their Jewish background. After all, Jesus was not only a Jew, but the whole NT revelation can be seen as a Jewish matter through and through. Paul, in Romans 8-11, understands Christianity as being deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. In fact, the question of mission had to be dealt with in a different light because the problem was no longer how Christians should independently define their attitude to members of other religions. The question really was how does the Jewish tradition solve the problem? Admittedly, Christians are neither alone nor free in this respect. They can learn from Jewry how to keep one's identity within the context of pluralism. The Jewish tradition survived for nearly 2,000 years, although its people lived in the Diaspora without the presence of an army, the strength of a powerful state, and even without a capital. This is still the case today, although the state of Israel offers an additional and different way to protect Jewish life and Jewish tradition. The Jewish people are faithful to their own tradition, and that is possibly a very good model for religious coexistence. In this instance, the God of Israel, the one who had chosen Israel as the people of God, who had chosen Abraham and Christ, this very God is also the God of the gospel. Christians owe their understanding of God to Israel, and this is where they search for their roots and origin and for their historical identity which they must not destroy. They cannot separate themselves from Israel, from their roots, without separating themselves from this God. This God, however, does not give humankind the authority to speculate on the truth or deception of other religions. The text of the NT, in itself, is rather contradictory if one compares, e.g. Rom. 2:14f. (the law written in the hearts of the Gentiles) with the intolerance, frequently found in the texts. The important matter is not the godliness of the others, but the roots of the Christians in the continuity of the people of God, composed of Jews and Gentiles. Apart from this rediscovery of the Jewish roots, the perspectives of the history of religions had influenced NT exegesis in a way that led to a rethinking of traditional positions regarding mission.

The second rediscovery was 'popular religion' - i.e. the realisation that the religious world of the NT belongs to the world of magicians, exorcists and miracle workers. There is no definite borderline with other religions or their popular versions. And this means that there is no absolute kernel of Christian truth that could finally be distinguished from a

surrounding and merely relative skin. The 'truth' is given in a particular shape - the story of Jesus of Nazareth, composed of the cultural and religious traditions of the world of antiquity, therefore not new to that world, but in the inseparable fusion of form and content gaining a new historical individuality and identity, being different from other traditions including the Jewish tradition. And this identity is what matters, and not truth in ontological objectivity as it was conceived in modern Europe. The 'truth' of this identity is different, and it helps the one who accepts it to live and to die for it.

Now, in respect of mission, this has the following consequences: Right from the very beginning, the Christ event means getting involved in the pluriform diversity of the ancient religious world. From its very beginning, the Christian movement was multicultural, polycentric, and united only in the intention of referring to Christ. Missiologically speaking, it means that there is a great hermeneutical freedom or liberty from the source to define the Christ event in a given or new context. The Greek and Roman interpretation and even the Palestinian understanding must not be taken as being eternal definitions of God's activity. Regarding non-Western Christianity, these insights are liberating. However, to all those who think of mission in terms of an export product, it can prove quite disturbing.

Thirdly, what has really influenced modern NT exegesis are new considerations in *Formgeschichte* and hermeneutics. I am told that it is highly unlikely that Paul really engaged himself in street mission or the like, but quite possibly in a more dialogic type of mission from person to person. His letters are really addressed to concrete persons with their own aspirations, fears and problems. Jesus himself, somehow preferred to celebrate with people and abstained from impersonal preaching to people. In other words, certain traditional European clichés of mission we exegetically regarded not only as hurting the dignity of the evangelised, but also as hurting the Christ event. Mission that refers to Christ, is in itself a hermeneutical process. As in the NT, there is a juxtaposition of different theologies and religious elements, generating a richness of diverse interpretations. The cross cultural process of mission today sets free new ways of expressing the Christian experience making the *Oikoumene* much richer. The criteria of this plurality is the affiliation to the common historical identity, that is, the intention to refer to Jesus of Nazareth, and in terms of ecclesiology, a congregation of men and women finding their way to God. This means becoming free from enslaving powers, being free to tell one's life story and how it should continue. This is not necessarily limited to the local parish church, because in fact there are many variations of congregations both inside and outside of the established churches. Seen from this angle, the gospel is a message of liberation, ecstatic joy and the wish to share this joy, and these are all the genuine origins of missions. In principle, Christian

missions are an invitation to take part in a celebration of joy, thankfulness and praise and also a festival where the individual and the common story of liberation is remembered and told. Christians cling to this liberation putting their names into this story, because they have to follow the God of life. Missions are based on the assumption that the promise of the gospel, the good news, weighs heavier than God's entitlement to the world and to humankind's life and death. God's judgment is not at human disposal, and so far, mission testifies to the gospel against the gospel.

### **Articulating Experience**

What does it mean to tell one's life story within the greater story of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ? I think there are many answers to this question and in different languages. For instance, Birmingham taxi drivers were very good at showing me that my academic theological language was not the only theological language that could be used. It may be just a Birmingham characteristic in terms of non-official or even underground religion, but on the two occasions I used a taxi on arrival at the airport, the taxi drivers turned out to be particularly religious in a specific way. The first one was an Irishman in his sixties whose wife had apparently left him. It appeared he was very interested in theology and used the traffic jam perfectly to try to explain to me, as I felt trapped in the taxi, his remarkable gift of receiving visions. The description of his visions did not contain much detail or precision, but what I could gather from them was the idea of a reconciled and holy community of which he thought himself a part. The man was not what one would call 'a regular church-goer', in fact he did not have a connection with any particular congregation. The other taxi driver was a young man of an Italian origin who claimed to have a gift of prophecy. His problem was that, although being a member of a Catholic congregation, he did not see any possibility of putting forward his special gift to the congregation. He never dared to reveal himself, and naturally felt alienated from himself and also from the Church. He felt unfulfilled, quite insecure and uncertain of what exactly his true role was.

Neither man used sociological language to describe their position of marginality, nor did they use traditionally acknowledged theological wordings in order to express their feelings or their wish to be united with God. Presumably, it would not have been their language. In their case, it appeared that vision and prophecy were a mode of expression, though on the whole a non-verbal one, that gave meaning to their situation. In a certain way, they somehow knew about this situation and the problem before even the matter was fully thought over and put into the objectiveness of verbal abstraction.

A similar observation can be made in the field of Christian art which has the potential to depict a theological insight long before it is formu-

lated in theological terms. Compared with the discursive word, art is always polysemous, somewhat ambiguous and multi-layered. Regarding its capacity to shed light on existence, it goes well beyond the word and, in order to cope with the multiformity of reality, art uses symbols. Symbols disclose the reality and thus provoke the idea of putting into words what has been depicted. As an example I would like to use a well known wood-carving made by a Kimbanguist artist in Zaïre, very likely during the sixties, which is long before a proper Kimbanguist theology was developed from the late seventies until present times. Three Africans are shown on their way to Calvary. The first one is carrying the cross and that is Simon of Cyrene, who is identified with the shape and the memory of Simon Kimbangu, the prophet. The second one is Jesus in his Africanness, beaten by an African soldier. It is a strong expression of the rootedness of the Christ event in the African soil, including the violence and suffering that historically came mainly from white colonisers. With Christ, being in the centre of the woodcarving, the artist uses the symbol of the cross in order to answer the question of who is Simon Kimbangu. He is the one who carries Christ's cross, he carries it in Africa and thus Christ is discovered as being African. The story of Kimbangu and of the Bakongo culture, if not of Africa as a whole, it is now being connected with God's story with humankind. Suffering Africa has a particular place in God's plans. The new thing is not the knowledge of God because God was known in traditional Africa. The new thing is the relationship between God and men/women and men/women and God. The Kimbanguist experience of the Christian God is a God who is active in history and does not forsake his people. But this is only one of the possible interpretations. Art is polysemous. Eighty years before this woodcarving was made, and even before Simon Kimbangu was born, the black intellectual Edward Wilmot Blyden from Freetown, Sierra Leone discovered the archetypal meaning of Simon of Cyrene. He wrote in his book *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*<sup>1</sup> the following:

When, in his final hours, the Saviour of mankind struggled up the heights of Calvary, under the weight of the Cross, accused by Asia and condemned by Europe, Africa furnished the man to relieve him of his burden.

The variety of expressions the gospel takes on when diving into the richness of different cultures, languages and interpretations, is part of the process usually summed up as 'mission'. In this respect, the contribution of missiology could help to bring the diversity of the Christian experience, including the arts and the language of charisma into the awareness of theology in its 'academical' sense.

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<sup>1</sup> London 1888, p 135.



**What makes a missionary?**

If one went through the missionary journals of the self-confident or even triumphant nineteenth century, one would get the impression that in order to show the missionary in a favourable light, the so called 'mission field' was painted in the blackest colours, so to say, described as an impenetrable jungle inhabited by wild and dangerous animals and sly and obstinate people. Even today, there are still eager groups who long for 'pioneer situations', i.e. an environment that is as remote as possible from modern civilisation. The decisive feature behind this kind of attitude very often is weakness. If you lack confidence in the power of the gospel or even in yourself, than you need some secondary support for 'your' mission, and this support consists of being technologically and financially ahead of the 'objects' of mission. In short, it is material and structural power, and thus the relationship among missionaries and missionised becomes one of fundamental discrepancy. So, who, in fact, in this relationship is the missionary?

The Gospel according to Matthew contains more than the well known verses in chapter 28:19-20 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them', etc. However, it is not surprising that the missionary movements of the West in the nineteenth century picked up just this quotation, because they believed *they* were the teachers of all nations. Roland Allen reacted to this misunderstanding with his famous book *Missionary Methods - St. Paul's or ours?*<sup>2</sup> And indeed, the texts of the NT offer different and varied possibilities for an alternative understanding of mission. Matthew, for example, in chapter 25:31-46, gives a version that strongly underlines the aspect of a very earthy solidarity as an integral part of the faith. With that, any discrepancy in terms of power is excluded from mission.

But even this is not the last word. Up to now, I have defined the discrepancy as an imbalance in the distribution of material and intellectual wealth. The 'faith' is still untouched. Is a missionary someone who is ahead of others in terms of faith, or religious knowledge? Has he or she got something that others have not? In other words: Would *this* form of discrepancy turn out to be an inevitable, and thus a justified one?

The Gospel according to Mark gives a disturbing answer. There is the encouraging story in chapter 5:25ff. of a woman who was suffering from permanent bleeding until she touched the clothes of Jesus and was healed. She was healed, indeed, even before Jesus spoke to her. In other words, in order to be whole - and it was she who defined wholeness - the woman took something from Jesus. She came with her world of imagination and plausibilities and fitted in to it what was lacking. Her faith made her whole, but was it the faith Jesus had?

Another, even more surprising case, is the story of the Syrophenician

<sup>2</sup> London 1912.



woman in Mark 7:25ff. She was not Jewish and therefore Jesus refused to help her daughter. Jesus used a comparison which would sound rather strange to modern ears. He compared Jews to heathens in the same way as children to dogs. And then, the woman takes up the comparison and inserts the story of her suffering daughter into this ethnocentric metaphor, saying that the dogs under table eat the children's crumbs. So she, being a foreigner, a heathen, plays Jesus' own tune. And this changes everything, because this tune, let us call it the salvation-to-the-Jews tune, contained much more interpretative potential than Jesus realised up to that very moment. The Syrophoenician woman, so to say, cleared away cultural obstacles that prevented the tune from being heard more fully. Salvation transcends ethnic limitations. Jesus learned something he did not know before. Who was the missionary in this case? Certainly, the situation was marked by a sharp difference. Jesus was the mediator of God's healing power, the woman being on the receiving end. There was a discrepancy, but this process of receiving was basically active and initiative. The woman was changed, and so was Jesus. A real two-way interaction was going on, and it is really impossible to decide whose part was greater. So again, what makes a missionary? Obviously, the conversion of one's own missionary convictions is part of the answer.

#### **A missiology within Western culture**

In order to avoid misunderstandings, I would like to underline that I am not going to say that mission should simply change its focal point from the traditional 'foreign' to 'home' mission, assuming that the more or less secularised West will be the new and main mission field of the next century. Things are really not that simple. What I am going to say is that missiology, being a theological discipline, which has learned to think in missionary terms in other cultures and contexts, *could* review the situation of the West comparatively and appreciate the present challenge in the West rather sensitively. I said it *could*, because in fact, it really *cannot*. Missiology seemed to believe that it could do without a proper analysis of Western culture. Recently, some initial steps have been made, and it will be one of the tasks for the coming decade to strengthen a missiology which embodies the witness to the redeeming love of God in Christ *within* this Western culture. This is certainly different from using the already existing structures and concepts of mission and simply applying them to the Western context. This approach could be called a missiology *for* Western culture. One might presuppose that modern Western culture, being a 'secularist' culture, was godless. This, of course, is an existing missionary concept, which was used in the nineteenth century to explain the necessity for religious conquest, for instance, of the allegedly godless Black Africa. But, whatever the cultural or historical situation may be, and whatever degree of de-Christianisation may ever be

reached, God is always there. He never abandons his world. Western culture, therefore, must not be seen in terms of a religious *reconquista*. Thinking in terms of dominance and totalitarianism could turn out to be not a biblical, but very much a 'Western' idea. What matters is really being obedient to God's mission, i.e. to look at God who is already at work transforming our world in the perspective of his kingdom. Missiology is not outside history, and does not possess or produce privileged knowledge. Instead, it helps like a midwife, to bring new languages of faith into discussion. I am confident that Western culture will contribute to discussion with new languages of faith, though the challenges are quite amazing.

If Western society is really an important mission frontier, and I think it is, then it has to be admitted that mission studies as they are presently taught are not yet in a position to respond adequately to these challenges. A conclusion based on recent missiological studies is that new approaches will have to be found which will take into account the evidence that there is no binding and normative language among the different traditions of this world and not even within the Christian tradition. In connection with the hermeneutical discussion, this leads to the idea of a missiology that respects other people, religions or opinions as subjects of equal dignity. If the reader and the reader's interpretation are part of the biblical text and in this way a part of the message, then the text opens up new options. The readings and discoveries of Western atheists, disillusioned or secularised men and women, are essential, not only because they provide information about the process of the cultural incarnation of the Gospel, but also because without their interpretation, the full tune of God's mission would remain unheard. Western culture, having absorbed more than 2000 years of its own history, as well as parts of non-western traditions, is a very rich culture in terms of arts, music, literature, science and religions. Its potential is enormous, and it is high time the missionary movement made good use of it.

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