

Mission in Contemporary Society

A Few Thoughts On the Move Away from Europe

Rev Roger Wild

P.T. Forsyth, Professor of New Testament at Aberdeen University in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a man who had a deep and firm grasp of the nature of Christ which inspired all his writings, predated Karl Barth in his emphasis on the objectivity of the word of God. He may have been overshadowed by Barth. He was writing before the catastrophic trauma of the First World War when the whole fabric of society was shaken to its roots: Barth's quest came with renewed energy and urgency. The war ushered in a century of unprecedented violence and war. No longer was progress seen to be inevitable, social hopes and aspirations were all dashed. Christian Europe had fought and destroyed itself, opening up the chasm for fascism and atheistic communism. How could this come about? Nearly all the royalty in Europe were in some way related to Queen Victoria. Czar Nicholas and Kaiser Bill were cousins. Countries which purported to be Christian had wreaked such havoc upon each other.

Where was the rule of law? The League of Nations was founded to give some kind of international answer to that question. Where could we find an objective norm whereby we could challenge and assess what had been done? Barth found it in the word of God. This is where P.T. Forsyth found it. Writing in 1911 he said that the greatest mistake he had made in his ministry was to overestimate his congregation's knowledge of Scripture. Jerome pointed out 14 hundred years before that ignorance of Scripture, meant ignorance of Christ and ignorance of Christ meant ignorance of salvation. During his term as Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Coggan recommended to the clergy of England Forst's book, *Contemporary Preaching and the Modern Mind*. Though written in the early part of the century it is still very pertinent for today. The preacher he says is the man in society who has real authority for he brings the word of God to society.

This statement can indeed beg many questions. St. Paul talks about rightly handling the word of life, St. James about receiving the implanted

word which is able to save your soul. I use these only as illustrations for the word is a central concept in the Biblical revelation. There in creation, in revelation, in the prophets, the psalms, the person of Christ and in his ministry- his word is a lantern unto my feet and a light unto my paths. Any preacher who has worked hard at his craft will know that the word speaks in all sorts of ways and times to all sorts of different people. Professor Norman Davies in a different context, in his book *The History of Europe* (the first new history to be written for 70 years) speaks of language being mankind's greatest tool. His ability, to speak, to write, to communicate.

Has Christianity failed?

Has Christianity failed in Europe? G.K. Chesterton said at the time of the First World War, "*It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried*". The mud, the blood, the pain, the anguish, the carnage, the futility of the Great War was a great and juddering shock to European society which so numbed it that in Britain today we remember the 11th hour of the eleventh month. Still a moment of national unity 84 years later. The poets of the First World speak of the pathos and tragedy; Studdert Kennedy an army padre sought to show how God was incarnate in such a situation and how at the centre of life lay choice. On the German side was Bultmann, also an army padre, who later sought to demythologise the gospel lifting it out of an ancient cosmology in order that the grace of God may come freely to people in need.

Revolution

The Bolzhevik revolution of 1917 took Russia into the embrace of communism until *perestroika* and *glasnost* broke its hold. Those who were traumatised by the experience later found meaning and identity through the management of the Gulags. Brutalisation leads to further brutalisation. (In the same way in Northern Ireland those children who were witnesses to the disturbance of the sixties became the fomenters of violence 20 years later). The biographer of Solzhenitzin has said that the most significant book of the 20th century was the *Gulag Archipelago* for it brought to the notice of the wider world the unbelievable barbarity of the Soviet system,

inspired by Lenin and perpetrated by Stalin. Solzhenitzin has said that for the seventy years of communist dominance it will take another seventy to put back what was taken out. His *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, speaks of the arid cruel monotony of life and work in the gulag with glimpses of Orthodox Christian faith and fortitude.

Hans Küng in his book, *Christianity* challenges the Orthodox Church over its inability to change, its lack of social concern and its traditional attachment to the establishment. Had it been otherwise he suggests that the whole of human history might have been changed. There would have been no need for a communist revolution. What was being sought was a freedom from serfdom but the gap between a voluntary, and an idealistic and a political communism was too great. It used to be thought that the Wesley revival averted revolution in this country when France was experiencing its revolution. The revival however carried lasting effects in Britain, America and further afield. Its social concern was carried into the formation of the Socialist Party and ultimately the Welfare State. Social concern must accompany proclamation and maintenance of tradition. In his book *Red Sky at Night* Kenneth Leech points out that both Christianity and Communism have both been distorted in the 20th century and that the best hope for the future lies in a restored communism concerned for the well being of all and a renewed Christianity refreshed with compassion. This coincides with Helda Camara's words, "When I ask, why are the poor hungry I am called a Marxist but when I feed the poor I am called a saint?" Good social analysis and compassionate concern are both called for.

German expansion

A resentful, unemployed and hyperinflated Germany under the Nazi's sought revenge and dominance in Europe. The politics of the gutter were raised to international level. Within the country it became difficult to know where truth lay. Goebell's held the paraphernalia of propaganda in his power. Lutheran clergy met in groups to study together so that they would be able to bring some objectivity to their congregations. When Bonhoeffer spoke of "man come of age" he was speaking of the Gestapo, a breed of man who had no morals, no sense of accountability and no faith in God. Blitzkrieg, totalitarianism and holocaust tore Europe apart. This was the

second world war. The war in the East came to a conclusion with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then came the long cold war. The century ended more or less where it had begun with the euphemistically named ethnic cleansing of the Balkans. Twenty years after Niebur had written his book in the thirties, *Moral Man in Immoral Society* he said that he would change only one thing, the title. He would now call it, *Immoral Man in Immoral Society*.

Death of God

Not surprisingly did we have the death of God theology, the secular Gospel and the question raised by the Jews, "Is there any theology now after the holocaust?" One conference that I attended, the visiting professor spoke only of Rabbi Joshua and clearly instilled into the minds of his hearers the fact that there was no God, to which the reply came, "What shall we tell our congregations?" It is interesting that when man thinks that God is dead as a result of the destructiveness that he has inflicted on himself he forgets that God's revelation says of him that he is dead in trespasses and sins. We become theoretical believers but practical atheists. It reminds me of de Chardin's words, "It is not that we are physical beings who have spiritual experiences but that we are spiritual beings who have physical experiences". All depends on the assumptions from which we start. If we start with atheism we end with atheism. From time immemorial we have started with belief in God. The understanding that life has come to us from above rather than below. It is only in the last hundred and fifty years or so that the perspective has changed and life has been seen as coming from below. Our point of reference is particularly important.

Point of reference

If our point of reference is primeval slime then we return to primeval slime. If it is the ape then our point of reference is the animal world. If it is chance then we are no more than a unit in the collective mass. If it is God then we are his creatures and so much of our knowledge of him comes from within our own experiences. The experience of Europe had been one

of enormous cultural and social change and devastation by war that the faith factor took a very severe beating. Humans were treated less than animals and extermination took place as a numerical and bureaucratic exercise. In the post war experience of the 60's the humanist society had an influence out of all proportion to its size. The theatre, whose task in Ibsen's words, was to mirror society, was concerned with anger and absurdity. Osborne's, *Look Back in Anger* was about the anti-hero, the loss of empire and the search for purpose. Eonesco's absurdity was a reflection of his Rumanian fellow country man's reality. Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, was a waiting for what? Satre's, *In Camera* was a trinity of hell.

The Decade of Evangelism

In a Europe escoriated by war, become secular and affluent and technologically efficient, with declining church attendance a decade of evangelisation has done little to reverse trends. Not surprisingly has Professor Wessels posed the question, "Was Europe ever really Christian?" Following a visit to Ruanda as guest of the Archbishop of Ruanda I sent him a copy of the book. Ruanda had experienced spiritual revival in the 20's and 30's and now like Europe had experienced holocaust. Is there something here that tells of the failure of Christianity? Blood is still stronger than water. Old human nature is stronger than the waters of baptism. It is a sober check on Christian triumphalism. William Temple was the last Archbishop of Canterbury able to hold an audience of working men numbered in their thousands and that was over sixty years ago. Some years ago Archbishop Glemp said that Europe needed to be converted again as if it had never been converted. Professor Demant in his book *Christian Ethics* states that Christianity's greatest contribution to mankind is its check on human pride. I remember well Michael Ramsey expounding the kenosis of Philippians chapter two, banging one hand into the palm of the other and saying, "Man you have to come off it".

The Challenge

Is the pursuit of Celtic spirituality a search for some imagined simplicity? Certainly Lindisfarne and Iona are those thin places free from

industrialisation and pollution where the elements can speak and where I believe the early saints sanctified and personalised their experience. David Adam the parish priest on the island has had children from the city, gob-smacked and frightened of the elemental intensity of the place, so urbanised, suburbanised and secularised have we become that raw nature is a threat to us. The challenge that faced Columba and Cuthbert in their day was as great as the challenge facing the church today. But is church attendance the barometer of spirituality. Spirituality is again on the agenda but for many it is not found in the church as an institution. Spirituality is the human search for meaning.

Victor Frankl's influential book, *Man's Search for Meaning* came out of the experience of a hope and a love projected beyond the horrors of the concentration camp. This book formed the basis of logotherapy. We no longer go back to grass roots but to concrete and asphalt ways. The environment and stimulus around us is what forms our experience of God. There is no knowledge of the word, the environment is polluted and the social soul is deeply disturbed. The phrase has been coined that people are turning to God and leaving the church. It is a self evident truth that God is bigger than the church. To return to P.T. Forsyth, "the church has no purpose in itself only in so far as it fulfils the purpose of God."

John Robinson's book, *Honest to God*, drawing upon Bultmann, Bonhoeffer and Bishop Bell put the cat amongst the ecclesiastical pigeons. So much had changed and yet the church had changed so little. Iconoclasm was necessary in order to form a new image of God that was not tied to nationalism or locked in the past. Nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries had caused so much suffering and had evoked God to be on its side. (In the recent entry of American troops into Afghanistan Army padres were draping the altar with the stars and stripes!)

Western Man

So much was taken out of Europe and so much destroyed within Europe that the story is told of Western Man visiting heaven and saying that he is tired of war and violence and needs the fruits of the Spirit. Approaching the heavenly counter with his requests he is refused them because heaven does not sell fruits, only seeds. If so much has been taken out, how can it be put back? If we have become so proud in our own conceits, how can

we be humbled? Spengler writing in 1918 in his *Decline of Western Civilisation* said that when western man had grown tired with the imaginative fascination of science he would return to religious fundamentalism. Can we see this happening today? There are certainly many fundamentalisms abroad in the world; it is so much easier to put one's own prejudices above the pursuit of truth.

Professor Overy, the Editor of the *Times History of the World* following his over view of world history indicated that the three major issues facing us in the 21st century are, demographic, environmental and religious. The opening war of the 21st century was a war against fundamentalist terror but also it was set in the context of different religious perspectives and mindsets.

How long will the historic parochial system in England be sustainable? For those who are seeking to sustain it they are worn to a frazzle. Mission by maintenance has become a key idea. In France there are no vocations to the priesthood. And for those tired of ministry and who are constantly seeking something new the Toronto experience drew from British Christians more than £20 million in crossing the Atlantic. This raises the question of consumerism which has become such a prevalent force within our society. In 2001 the Christian Aid course was entitled Love and Money; the two most influential forces upon our lives.

Redirection

Clearly the evidence is that the centre of Christian life and practice has moved from Europe to Africa and Asia. Hence the shift in CMS policy; from any where to every where. Britain would no longer be at the centre of mission sending, but a receiver and giver in the global context. I believe that there is no such thing as a dead church per se: it may be stunted, limited, partial, unbalanced but there is life of sorts within it. In Britain it may be that we move more to the American Episcopal position of gathered churches. On leaving the diocese of Ripon and Leeds I asked the bishop what his vision was for the diocese and he commented that it was the pursuit of local relevant visions. This is preferable to having a monolithic and inappropriate vision. To get local churches to create vision statements that can be owned by the congregation sets the parameters of operation and the goals of attainment. Over the years I have spoken on

the qualities that make for *church* and worked on the provision of a form of template that can be used when creating a statement. Vision statements are about direction and purpose whereas mission statements are about present action and performance. Helen Keller said that there is only one thing worse than being blind and that is being blind and having no vision. In Britain two of the greatest needs for church growth are vision and a new collegiality amongst clergy and leaders.

Poverty and Spirit

If poverty of spirit is the sine qua non of spiritual experience; indeed it prefaces the beatitudes, then our affluence and pride are the barriers to simplicity of spirit. It has been pointed out that even if you win the rat race you are still a rat. Mother Theresa refused to eat at the banquet in Oslo at her reception ceremony for the Nobel Prize as the cost of providing the banquet would have fed her people in Calcutta for one year. In Crowther Hall the best attended seminar is good news for the church of the 21st century. The removal of third world debt would be as significant as the abolition of the slave trade and the most fitting way to commemorate the beginning of the third millennium. In Kampala we met with industrial squalor as evidence of the movements of people from the country to the city, urbanisation. But in Congo there was no squalor, when I mentioned this to my daughter who was teaching in the country, she simply said, "But Dad, there is nothing to throw away". I discovered that I could buy a second hand sardine tin in the market! She informed me too, that an American missiologist had said that francophone Anglicanism may be the salvation of the Anglican communion.

Conclusion

So much of what the church used to do in Europe has been taken over by the state. The church was the pioneer in education, in health, in social services and the hospice movement. In Africa it is still playing that role. In our affluent dependency society the appreciation of grace, of that which is given appears to have gone. It now becomes mine by right. We have an aging society whereas in the Third World there is a young society. Young,

poor and energetic. When writing about our society Collin Morris entitled his book, *Unyoung, Uncoloured and Unpoor*. Beware of a God over the age of thirty who is wealthy and thinks that he is white. And so the winds of the Spirit move into other parts of the world.

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