

The Challenges of Proselytism in the Context of Christianity in Asia

There can be little doubt that the active participation of the Catholic Church, the Evangelicals and the Pentecostals have been a potent transformative force in the recent ecumenical movement. The initial periods of the movement had been energised by heady dreams of the imminent union of churches, almost as if to approximate the apparent unity of the Christian Church in its early history. However, with the displacement of this unrealistic expectations the ecumenical movement suffered a diminishment of its motive force. In fact, one could state that there were several setbacks to its laudable objectives, occasioned in part by the radical alterations of political and social transformations that have swept across Europe and Asia.

A resurgent spirit in the ecumenical movement was noticeable with the formation and activities of the Global Christian Forum, which brought together Christian churches which had hitherto remained at a distance. While the Catholic Church had in its own fashion, pursued its ecumenical agenda with impressive results, its active participation in the GCF provided a strong impetus to a revitalized ecumenism. And just as noticeable was the transmutation of the concept of ecumenism in the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which had, until recently, perceived ecumenism as an unacceptable concept. Yet another positive development is the initiative taken by the Lausanne Conference to foster a spirit of engagement with the Orthodox Oriental and other churches. From their initial dialogues with the Eastern and Oriental Churches held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and others, these churches have now revamped their approach so that today we are witnesses to a consultation that has brought together all the major representatives at this Consultation.

While the confluence of all these Christian Churches have in general been positive, it is also true that mutual dialogue and encounters have brought to the surface smouldering issues that need to be addressed as these consultations move forward. Issues such as personal religious freedom and missionary strategies of the various churches which were in conflict, even antagonistic, have to yield to a spirit of recognition, friendly acceptance and Christian unity if the objectives of such a meeting are to provide enduring results. The deep-seated mistrust between the Churches continues to linger despite the advances in ecumenism, if some reports on the Papal visit South Korea are to be believed. For many Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, the visit, despite the ostensible welcome given, stirred deep-seated anxieties as they surveyed the future of the impact of the charismatic Pope on Christianity in their region.

I have been asked to deal with the topic “The Challenges of Proselytism in the Context of Christianity in Asia”. However, I confess I do not have the breadth of experience nor the reservoir of knowledge to do justice to such a comprehensive subject. I am a metropolitan of the Malankara Orthodox Church in India; consequently my understanding is limited to my encounters with Evangelicals and Pentecostals in the Indian Context and oriented from the

perspective of my Orthodox theological convictions. But I am hopeful that what I present here as the challenges we have to face are applicable to the Asian context in general and will be helpful in charting out our roadmap for the future of these Consultations.

A brief demarcation on the use of terminology would be helpful for our ensuing discussion. The background to the elaboration of our theme is obviously evangelization, with the previous term “mission” being substituted by a more neutral “evangelism” in such circles. From an Orthodox perspective an even better term would be “witness” or “witnessing”, which would carry a deeper and broader conceptual meaning. However, for our purposes, it is an acceptable word. There is unanimity on the point that the commission to evangelise is one that our Lord and Saviour entrusted to the Church. So the history of Christianity clearly evidences that this mandate has been pursued in one fashion or another by all Churches. It is, unfortunately, in carrying out this agenda that we come across our major challenges. Some of the evangelism of recent vintage can be better categorized as “proselytism”, a term freighted with the negative act of enticing members of one Christian church to another. In broad terms, therefore, I would be in agreement with Elmer Theissen’s paper when he presents “evangelism” as an “ethical evangelism” following Christ’s Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) and “unethical evangelism”, which falls under the term “proselytism”. While this is frequently justified as a part of religious freedom and personal choice, the biblical, theological, ethical and cultural issues created by such practices are often ignored or swept under the carpet.

Returning to the concept of “witness” or “witnessing”, one of the challenges one would encounter is the individualized outreach practiced by Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Perhaps, it is the absence of a developed ecclesiology that encourages such an outreach pattern, but little attention has been focused on the community aspects of witnessing, which is essential. There appears to be an over-emphasis on a personal response to the gospel without the concomitant of how a community is to witness or exist in holiness, probably the unexamined use of methods of Western Christian models. It is as if the New Testament affords only a Pauline paradigm of how to evangelise, while models of making disciples, as proposed either by St. John or St. Peter is virtually ignored. Such a model of evangelism perpetuates a canon within a canon hermeneutical approach, which requires correction.

For churches which have emphasized the firm adherence to the New Testament, it is distressing to see that the guidelines in evangelization are so readily sidelined. To the Galatian Christians who were pressured to follow “another gospel”, St. Paul is insistent that such evangelists stood under a very severe indictment (Gal 1:8-9). On another occasion he suggests to his listeners that he is not in the practice of building on another person’s foundations (Rom 15:20). Certainly, these Pauline guidelines should constitute an essential aspect of how evangelization is formulated and conducted by the churches.

More in keeping with the patterns of proselytism is the dichotomy introduced by evangelical and Pentecostal churches between the preaching of the gospel and culture. From the perspective of the New Testament, and the Orthodox Church, the incarnation has underscored the fact that there cannot be a separation between evangelism and the local culture. In fact it is

through the form of the local culture that the gospel *can* be preached, one factor which would explain the national character of the Orthodox churches. The pattern of evangelism adopted by many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have paid scant attention to this important concept, so that in their efforts to spread the gospel the culture of a village, a society or even a nation is seen as an adjunct, and not a necessary aspect of the preaching of the gospel. Especially in the context of Asia, this cultural assimilation is one aspect that must become an important part of the how Christian churches can express its belief structure in the language of the local culture. It has been this dichotomy introduced between the gospel and a culture that has led to many to view Christianity as a “foreign religion” and a threat to local stability and harmony.

Proselytism, for the most part, attempts to entice a member away from his/her membership in an established church into an evangelical (“born again”) sub-group or Pentecostal church. The targeting of such members is especially when they are in vulnerable situations emotionally, either when they are sick or distressed or when they are alone and isolated. No doubt such an effort on inducing a Christian member affords a much easier goal than the more difficult task of converting a person from a non-Christian background. How such individualized efforts at proselytization adversely affects the harmony and peaceful atmosphere of a family cannot be calculated. Families are turned into religiously-divided camps where an ongoing battle becomes the environment of the home. And societies in Asia have traditionally placed a premium on family integrity and unity. In such a context, proselytism must be viewed one of the challenges that this consultation will have to deal with in mapping out the future of our engagement.

No doubt a factor in such a campaign of proselytism is the focus on the *number* of converts brought into the church of the parent body. Statistical increment, rather than a qualitative change is often the benchmark by which a successful programme of evangelization is evaluated. A usual justification advanced for such proselytism is that such members are being converted to a better spiritual level, especially when they are seen as leading a deficient spiritual life. Examples advanced are those members who have left their original church affiliation to become active participant either in “born again” communities or Pentecostal groups. Surely, this is to compare apples and oranges: a third generation person of such converts exhibit no better spiritual condition than a third generation Catholic or Orthodox Christian! Lest one interprets this response as a broadside only against the Evangelicals and Pentecostals, I have to add that proselytism is one of the serious issues that the Orthodox Churches sees in its relationship with the Catholic Church. One must add to this situation the virtual mutual ignorance between the churches, between the Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Protestant churches. Where a better recognition and awareness of other churches are present, there will be sensitivity to how faith and spiritual maturity are developed in its members.

Such an ignorance consigns the previous history of a church established in the locality. In the course of time, such a church would have developed its own understanding of dealing with religious pluralism and social situations. In casting aside the fruits of such a historical experience, proselytism upsets the delicate balance of co-existence that has characterized the presence of Christianity in the Asian context. It is probable that one of the reasons for the

backlash against Christianity in the countries in Asia has been this upheaval and the injection of an element of colonial arrogance and lack of sensitivity to religious pluralism coming out of such proselytizing programmes.

What has exacerbated evangelization in the Asian context is also free-market economics, where the liberal infusion of funds into a local situation has implicitly supported a prosperity gospel. One of the inducements to convert from an established church into an evangelical or Pentecostal church is the assurance that such a person will be blessed with financial riches. Does such an approach hold true to the pattern of discipleship taught by Christ? Rather, one must see this as yet another introduction of free-market economics into the programme of Christian evangelization. Adequate supervision of how funds are utilized in evangelization is lacking in parent churches so that a picture is developed of local churches have access to an incessant supply of funds that can be freely disbursed locally. There is thus an impression created that Christians are people who live in the lap of luxury because of such a financial flow from parent bodies.

An issue of serious concern from the Orthodox perspective would be a lack of Trinitarian emphasis in the preaching of many churches. There is an over-emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of a developed Christology, or a Christology that lacks a proper appreciation of the roles of the Father and the Spirit. How these deficits impacts the approach to other theological issues are concerns that have to be addressed in the future.

Weightier points that devolve from these issues that arise out of proselytism probably have been discussed, or will be discussed, in these Consultations and so only a passing reference is made to them here. As our ensuing dialogues make clearer our course for the future, it will be necessary to deal with other theological issues such as Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology and liturgy. But we have made a beginning. And I pray and trust that Almighty God will so bless this Consultation that it will be the harbinger of a fruitful and promising engagement between all the participating Churches present here.

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