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Introduction and background overview

The Church in its mission stands in the Biblical/Prophetic tradition, walks in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, and lives by the light and example of the Apostles and the early Church. It manifests a dynamic commitment to the human situation for positive change of thought and practice. This is an attempt to understand and meet the standards of the Kingdom of God in terms of its values and the demand to 'love the neighbour as yourself'. The Church in its mission at the global level, because of its on-going commitment to the ever changing world situation, has also adopted different discourses, e.g. evangelical, liberal and ecumenical and different paradigms: proclamation, dialogue or/and inculturation, etc. This has led current missiologists to think wholistically and pragmatically. Keeping in view the oppressive human structures and societal institutions, liberation theologians, especially during the 1960s, pleaded the case of 'liberation' of the oppressed and demanded emancipation of all those who have been vulnerable through the ages and have struggled for their release from bondage. Liberation theology has not been accepted as a 'package of commitment' by all Christians, yet the majority of them have accepted the need for the liberation of oppressed individuals and communities.

Recently it has been assessed that 'liberation of the oppressed' on its own, does not meet the full demand of Christian Mission. The wounds of oppression also need to be healed and there needs to be forgiveness of the oppressor on the part of the oppressed. Recent missiologists have identified the need for transformation of the oppressor as well as of the oppressed. For example, Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester, believes that human development hinges profoundly on inner transformation and renewal and therefore transformation and renewal need to come about first in the oppressor and then in the oppressed. Nazir-Ali is concerned that the oppressed may be a worse oppressor if he or she gets a chance to oppress those even less fortunate than them (Nazir-Ali, 1995:45-56). Robert Schreiter, Vatican II Professor of Theology at Catholic Theological Union, University of Chicago, pleads the case of a theology of reconciliation and peacemaking for mission, and highlights the place of seeking forgiveness of wrong done to the victim on the part of the wrongdoer. He says that the wrongdoer must repent of the wrongdoing and seek forgiveness from the victim. The victim also needs to forgive the wrongdoer and then there is reconciliation (Schreiter, 2004:16). Nazir-Ali wrote in the context of 'development' and Schreiter in the context of a 'theology of reconciliation'. Both have clearly upheld that reconciliation is a paradigm of mission.

Social bases as well as wrong doing have also kept people apart from one another. In African countries it may be the case of HIV/AIDS, in India an on-going practice of caste, or in Pakistan 'party-bazi', groups formed to oppose each other for personal gain. There is social discrimination on the basis of involvement in menial jobs in many developing countries. As an effect of secularisation in Western Europe there is discrimination against religious communities. For example, Christianity is hated most by the so called 'agnostics', and Islam is discriminated against on account of their stand on modesty of women signified by the wearing of veils or young women wearing scarves in schools.

Hatred harboured due to past events, e.g. the Crusades of the middle ages and Western colonisation of most of the developing countries during the last several centuries, is being

passed down in the hearts of those who adhere to certain geographical, religious or ideological boundaries. There is also a fresh layer of manipulation of world resources seen in the approach of institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and multinational companies. Global reforms are introduced in the name of 'a new world order' which actually have defended the privileges of certain nations and manipulated the remaining resources of developing nations. Free market trading and rapid sharing of information and technology through globalisation has widened the gulf between the rich and the poor.

All this poses great challenges to the notion of reconciliation of communities and for the understanding and practice of accommodating others within one's own world view. The Bible, however, condemns the imperialism of the past. This essay explores a missiology of reconciliation.

The biblical and theological basis of reconciliation as mission

Looking in the Bible, one finds God's concern for peace and reconciliation of all humanity as a permanent theme. God created humans in his own image (Gen 1: 26-27). By that very act of creation God reconciled humans to himself even before their fall. After the fall, God has always wanted Israel, a stiff-necked nation, and other nations, to be reconciled to him, by sacrifices in the Old Testament and the divine sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. The theologies of election and covenant between God and Israel through Abraham, the father of all believers, carry the divine plan of including all nations for God's salvation, justice and righteousness (Gen 17:2, Isaiah 42:6).

Exclusivism of any kind is not appreciated in the Biblical accounts. We note Isaiah's vision of international reconciliation: "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria...In that day Israel will be third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance'" (19:23-25). Israel as God's inheritance is mentioned in relation to Egypt and Assyria as God's people. Both Egypt's and Assyria's assault and oppression on Israel in the form of Egyptian slavery and Assyrian captivity are harsh experiences for God's people. But God wants a reconciling spirit among these three nations. This sounds like an eschatological hope which has current meaning and linkage. In the New Testament Christ called all people to himself saying, "Come unto me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest". 'Rest' is a blessing linked with 'shalom', an Old Testament concept. And then sending his disciples into the world, he said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Math 28:19). Reconciliation in terms of salvation is for all nations.

Regarding social alienation, the stories of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), are recorded to show Luke's particular concern for reconciliation of those who were alienated from society's mainstream on the basis of sickness, gender, race, colour, creed, etc.

Christ's healing ministry focused on reconciliation between God and man. The healing of the paralytic (Matt 9:1-8) was recorded with a focus on forgiveness of sins by Jesus, with an additional command to take the mat and go home. The sending home of the healed paralytic was a manifestation of Christ's concern that sick people are forgiven by God where they have committed sin and should be accepted by the family, clan and friends. The same concern should apply to people who are sick today with diseases such as HIV/AIDS which carry with them a stigma.

St. Paul has a great commitment to reconciliation of humans to one another and to God. He mentions the role of the Church in reconciliation saying:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; and the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16-19).

This has implications for the Church's role as reconciler among different communities separated on the basis of some historical grievance or present crisis, or even some future speculation. The Church as the ambassador of Christ has a role to bring communities together in human unity, thereby establishing God's kingdom, so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven – the prayer the Lord taught his disciples.

The horizon of reconciliation

Healing of broken relations or traumas of the past are contributory aspects of reconciliation. This reminds us of the Biblical accounts such as the healing of enmity between Jacob and Esau, the traumatic experience of Tamar who was assaulted by her own half brother Absalom, the grief of Naomi after returning to her homeland, and the mending of the cracks in the life of the Prodigal Son in the parable. The main issue in all these experiences is that forgiveness is not sought at the expense of mere forgetting the events and happenings, neither is it expected as a free pardoning of the torturer. Rather, justice is sought for the victim. Schreiter raises three areas of concerns and points of attention – (1) truth-telling (2) the pursuit of justice and (3) healing the memories; forgiveness is the key issue in the process of healing the traumas of the past.

In truth-telling he says that the hidden secret during the conflict should be told and discussed. For example, people often are not allowed to speak of the atrocities they have experienced in totalitarian regimes, says Schreiter. Or there may be unspeakable experiences of men and women working under the control of private managements. In the name of efficiency and managerial skills people are looked down upon and controlled like animals in many developing countries where human rights of employees are not respected. Even in homes, the rights of children are not accepted and the role of women is not appreciated. Gender and role discrimination creates situations where poor people, women, children and other vulnerable people lose their personal identities and experience conflicting situations.

Pursuit of justice is a biblical concern. The books of Micah and Amos are full of economic, political and social concerns. "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God", is Micah's understanding of what God desires from his people. In the same way, Amos raised the issue of judicial justice saying, "Maintain justice in the courts". In many places things are not done justly and love and mercy are not maintained. Furthermore judicial procedures are adopted to cripple certain groups, such as religious and ethnic minorities. Discrimination against any social and religious group creates a situation of on-going oppression which is the cause of conflict. There is a place for both punitive and restorative justice. Take for instance the case of Mukhtaran Mai, a Pakistani woman who was raped and made to walk naked in her own village in front of her people by a group of village leaders. This was on the pretext that Mukhtaran's younger brother (who was under age) had crossed boundaries of relationship with a young woman of the village (this comes under the practice

and custom of maintaining 'honour'). Mai's case was highlighted at national and international levels. She received both punitive and restorative justice. Her assaulters suffered legal punishment and she received support to establish an institution where she is educating young women and helping them to live honourably.

Healing of memories and forgiveness according to Schreiter involve not forgetting the past but remembering it in a different way. What happened during the wars between different countries can be a point of hatred during the whole of the nation's life. But in many situations, new levels of relationship can also develop and people, without forgetting their past, can cherish this new development. In the Sub Continent of India and Pakistan, despite the three wars between them and their traditional rivalry in areas such as cricket and hockey, Pakistanis and Indians have learned to respect each other and are coming closer to each other day by day. Similarly, the Germans cannot forget the wounds of separation of the Berlin Wall but they have cherished the reconciling experience since the wall was demolished in 1989. It is an accepted fact that many of the past and recent wars and conflicts in the Middle East have arisen because of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and the other Arab nations. If these issues are talked through fully, and if reality and justice are pursued, reconciliation will take place and peace will be established.

Peace is the end product of reconciliation which is both a socio-political and religious and spiritual experience. Shalom, in the Hebrew language carries a comprehensive expression of inner and outward peace of individuals and of the nation. It involves both religious as well as economic well being and socio-political stability. It therefore carries the connotations of development, prosperity and spirituality. The New Testament writers are equally committed to peace through reconciliation with God and humans. Mere religious observance is not salvific, unless the one involved in presenting the sacrifice is reconciled to his or her angry brother, according to Jesus (Matt 5:23-24).

Conclusion

A commitment to inter-religious dialogue, a development of understanding and an enhanced level of acceptance of 'the other' among different religions and social groups, would be positive steps towards international reconciliation and peace. There is no need to worry about one's uniqueness because there is no compromise on that required in this process. The issue is that religion must not be used to promote hatred, and give birth to new conflicts. Rather, people should come forward with new aspirations to forgive and forget the conflicting aspects of the socio-religious atmosphere. Soon they will discover that there are more commonalities than differences among different religions. These very commonalities can be exploited for international peace.

Bibliography

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