

The Missiological and Pneumatological Challenges in a Pluralist Context

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T. V. Philip points out that from the very first Mission Conference at Edinburgh (1910), every conference has wrestled with the meaning of Christian witness in the world of religions. From the Edinburgh conference which 'was convened to discuss the evangelisation of non-Christian lands' to the Salvador Mission Conference (1996) which, according to Christopher Duraisingh, was "a shift in mission thinking and practice from colonial to post-colonial and Euro-centric to polycentric," - from one major ecumenical gathering to another - there has been a growing sensitivity to the participation of people of other faiths along with Christians in God's plan of salvation.

At the International Missionary Conference in Tambaram (1938) one of the crucial questions raised was about the meaning of Christian witness in a society of different religions and secular ideologies. The mood at the Conference, unlike at previous mission conferences, was decisively in favor of the 'younger churches' situated in pluralist contexts. Hendrick Kraemer was emphatic in his assertion that the divine revelation in Christ transcends Western Christianity and that this transcendence makes Asian and African incarnations of Christianity not only legitimate but also imperative. As he put it: "The point that needs now to be made is that in principle and for reasons of history, new incarnations and adaptations of Christianity in the concrete Asian and African settings are natural and legitimate." The argument for contextual 'incarnations' of Christ emerged from the understanding that revelation in Christ transcends all religions and cultures including perhaps, Christianity as an institutionalized religion. Kraemer came in for serious criticism from Asian theologians for his almost absolute separation of the ultimate truth from penultimate values and for giving syncretism a rather negative theological meaning. His focus on the need for Christian mission to be sensitive to multi-faith contexts, however, set the pace for the theological discussions on "other faiths and ideologies" over the next few decades.

The Athens Mission Conference (2005), however, seemed to have reversed this process. Among the five hundred participants from over one hundred nations, there were no delegates or guests from the other faiths. The focus on the Holy Spirit in the theme of the Conference ("Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities"), though, had the potential to provide for a deeper discussion on the understanding of mission in the context of religions and cultures. The other major ecumenical gathering that had invoked the Holy Spirit to 'renew the whole creation' - the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1991) - related the Holy Spirit to the spirits of all those who have laid down their lives for the cause of freedom and liberation throughout history and affirmed: "Without hearing the cries of these spirits, we cannot hear the voice of the Holy Spirit." Several delegates present at Canberra were greatly disturbed by 'a tendency to substitute a "private" spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits for the Holy Spirit who proceeds

from the Father and rests in the Son.’ What was seen at Athens, however, was an apparent swing to the other extreme where the work of the Holy Spirit was identified with “the healing that takes place through prayer, ascetical practices and the *charisms* of healing, through sacraments and healing services, through a combination of medical and spiritual approaches, and through sensing the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit, even when we accept and continue to struggle with illness and traumas.” The wider world of religions and cultures was left out of this missiological – pneumatological framework.

Such an intensely personal and liturgical understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit has traditionally been an integral part of several Christian traditions including the Orthodox and Pentecostal churches. The current context, however, calls for a more dynamic understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Our society today is not merely pluralistic in the traditional sense of the term as being multi-religious and multi-cultural; the phenomenon today is a volatile situation of growing fundamentalist forces in most religions. A generation ago, Harvey Cox wrote in the book, *The Secular City* about the world of declining religion. His thesis was in tune with the theory of the ‘melting pot’ where social scientists claimed that with modernisation of a pluralistic society, cultural and religions distinctions will disappear or at least become irrelevant and that all the citizens of a country would evolve a common identity. As the forces of sectarian and fundamentalist forces are increasingly on the rise all over the globe, this theory has been abandoned. Harvey Cox later revised his theory when he wrote, in *Religion in the Secular City* that rather than an era of rampant secularisation and religious decline, it appears to be more of an era of religious revival and ‘the return of the sacred.’ Whether it is the redemptive or the demonic elements of the ‘sacred’ that have returned to influence so profoundly the course of current history, is the question before us.

Today we face new challenges. The common space that diverse people share is shrinking rapidly due to our current economic and ecological crisis. Traffic across borders, in the form of migrants and refugees, has today led to the globalization of pluralism where people from diverse races, religions and cultures come together to share a common space. There are often encounters, at times hostile, as new religious and cultural communities move into the neighborhood. They are often legitimate concerns, but they are also ways of expressing fear and uncertainty about newcomers in the community.

The ecumenical mission today would need to address our rapidly evolving context. There is the need to challenge the churches to be sensitive to the emerging pluralist context. A dialogical relationship with the new religious movements and secular ideologies too is necessary, in the process revealing both common understandings and real differences. As the meaning of *oikos* includes the economic and ecological dimensions as well, the current challenges we face too need to be within the scope of our discussion.