

Today the study of the history of local churches is more important than ever before. Local churches, once dependent on foreign missionaries, have matured and stand ready to assert their rights and assume their responsibilities as full members of the universal-church. These local churches are more than willing to join hands with other local churches in the universal-Church, which Vatican II tells us exists in and through the local churches. If there is a tension today between particularity and universality in the Church, this is a healthy tension. But the problems involved ought to be addressed and the tensions resolved. The study of mission history can help in this by placing the problems in historical perspective. Historia magistra vitae. Many solutions have been found to the problems created by mistakes made in the past. But we must not forget that it is the Spirit of the Lord that animates and imparts dynamism to all the local churches, who are one in the Lord. The study of this history keeps the Church alive, vigorous and creative.

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## THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF MISSION HISTORY

by Jean-Paul Wiest



A decade ago, someone interested in the development of Christianity in Third World countries could without too much difficulty keep up with scholarly publications written on the subject. Today, however, the number of books studying this same topic has substantially increased. The assistance of Bibliographica Missionaria the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Missiology, Tripod and the like has become more important to guide through the thicket of mission-related histories. Although these bulletins provide some evaluation of the reliability and quality of these studies, there seems to have been only a few attempts to discuss their relevance. (1)

The expression mission history serves as an umbrella to types of writings that vary widely in form and in scope. A partial survey of the field reveals that labels, which should not necessarily be interpreted as derogatory, are often used to distinguish one type from another. 'In

house' histories are written primarily to keep a missionary community aware of its roots and development. 'Official' histories have the endorsement of whoever may have commissioned them. 'Inspirational' histories are meant to edify the faithful and to arouse missionary vocations. 'Secular' histories consider the Christian mission phenomenon mostly as a religious manifestation of the broader socio-economic and political impact of the West on Third World countries. Even missionary chronicles that provide chronological records and little or no analysis are sometimes considered as mission histories.

These histories also differ from one another according to the types of people given prominence in the narrative. The bulk of the publications focus on the role played by missionaries. Fewer also include responses emanating from the local community, and an even lesser number consider the active part assumed by the local people themselves in the development of an indigenous form of Christianity.

Without claiming to be all encompassing, I would like to look briefly at the pros and cons of these most common types of histories. Then, out of my own experience, I will dare to suggest, for our times, a more comprehensive and relevant way of writing mission history.

### The Relevance of Different Genres of Mission History

Missionary chronicles are detailed accounts of events arranged in order of time. Because they are considered lacking analysis and interpretation, they are often ruled out as mission histories. Yet, as a first step in the writing of any history, their importance should not be played down. Without this painstaking and factual recording of events depicting the missionary aspects of the Christian heritage, there is too great a danger to misread small details for the whole picture or to miss important facts.

Contrary to the prevalent opinion, I would like to argue that chronicles are not as completely devoid of interpretation as it may seem. The mere choice of words often depicts a writer's standpoint on a particular question. For instance, referring to the Communist victory in China, does he/she speak in terms of takeover or liberation?

Events recorded or omitted also reveal the chronicler's inclination and, therefore, provide his/her analysis of the situation. For instance, the same story presented against the backdrop of Western, Third World, or global history often takes on a different meaning.

The relevance of missionary chronicles as a useful tool to further more in-depth mission histories is unquestionable. Their weakness, however, lies not so much in their lack of analytical content, as in their hidden interpretative element, which may mislead unwary researchers.

'Official' and 'in-house' mission histories share the common feature of

having been approved by a local church or a missionary society. However, whereas the term 'official' usually refers to works for public use, the expression 'in-house' applies to writings meant for private use.

Since 'in-house' histories are not intended for publication, they are often less polished than 'official' histories. They also tend to provide detailed accounts of events, places, and people that would hardly sustain the attention of readers not familiar with a certain church or missionary group. These stories, however, are most cherished by those who lived them and by those who followed after. By contrast, the official history is more concerned with making an impact on outside readership and, therefore, it often leaves out the apparent banal and repetitious accounts to extract the most striking ones.

Critics of 'official' and 'in-house' histories have long decried them for being written to order and for leaving out failures and mistakes. There is no denying that churches and missionary societies have been guilty of imposing censorship on the material printed and distributed. It is obvious, also that church history -- and mission history in particular -- has often been used to demonstrate the divine character of the church from its expansion in non-Christian lands and its wonderful achievements.

Nowadays, however, such criticism is mostly undeserved. An increasing number of published authorized histories are not triumphalistic and apologetical historiographies, but scholarly studies that do not hide the blemishes or avoid sensitive issues. Moreover, the fact that their writers have usually experienced missionary life does not necessarily make them uncritical and biased historians. Their love for their local church or community is qualified by their understanding of the ambiguities of the missionary movement and its weaknesses, including the mistakes of cultural imperialism and colonial exploitation.

Ideally, these writers are trained historians who have the advantage of being able to look at their topic both as insiders and detached observers. From this vantage they can impart their studies with an element of warmth and humaneness that is often absent from other scholarly works. Secular mission historians may have an understanding of the missionary enterprise in its totality, but few can display the perceptivity that comes from having personally shared the goals, the joys, and the sufferings of other missionaries.

Inspirational mission histories are a variation of official histories that maximize the appeal of a missionary figure or group. They emphasize the spiritual values, dedication and heroism of missionary life. They also often stress the socio-economic betterment brought by the missionary presence. Their purpose is to convince readers to follow in the footsteps of missionaries, or, at least, to support the missionary enterprise spiritually and financially. Failures and mistakes are not included

in this type of writing, except to show how they were overcome and remedies found. The emphasis is, therefore, more on being inspirational than being historical. Such particularity greatly limits their value as a product or tool of historical research.

Secular mission histories are written by scholars who analyze the cultural, social, economic, and political factors of the missionary situation, but do not touch upon the theological dimension. As Eric Sharpe puts it, what concerns them is, "The empirically verifiable ('the fact of the case')" and not "the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1)." (2)

These histories are usually excellent works of scholarship that present all available natural criteria of explanation. This is in sharp contrast to some official mission histories which try to mask the weakness of their analysis or to gloss over embarrassing situations by superimposing the will of God upon the records. On the other hand, however, many of these secular histories are limited or distorted because they leave out supernatural criteria of explanation that shed a different and complementary light on the motives and deeds of missionaries as well as the development of church communities.

Without doubt, the best published mission histories follow either the secular or official approach. However, between the two, exists a psychological blockage -- sometimes fueled by mistrust -- which is difficult to overcome. Official mission histories are rarely taken seriously in academic non-theological circles. Similarly, in religious circles, secular mission histories are often considered missing the most important point, which is God at work through the preached word and the lives of missionaries and converts.

A truly relevant mission history, however, should be one that combines the best elements found in the secular and the official approaches.

## A Relevant Mission History for Our Times

### More than a Secular History

Nobody will refute that the historian's task is to establish the genesis of facts and to study the intentions of human beings within a cultural, social, economic, and political context. Yet, once these factors are well understood, there is no arrogance in saying that the mission historian should also possess the skills of a theologian. Indeed, to leave out theological concerns such as the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the church's vocation to evangelize would deprive mission history of one of its most important dimensions. As theologian Walbert Buhlmann says in God's Chosen Peoples, "Purely profane methods will never sound the deepest essence of the church. From its foundation to the parousia-- hence, in all its history -- the church is an object of faith." (3) In the same way, purely profane methods will never sound concerns



such as God's call to a missionary vocation or the work of the Spirit in the lives of individuals.

Mission history should go beyond looking at the physical ability and the frame of minds of missionaries and converts to uncover part of their souls and their relationship with God. Therefore, any thorough study on the missionary aspect of the church should be conducted at two levels, the historical as well as the metahistorical or theological. For example, one can extract the positive side of Western missionaries' education work in China, and still say that some of their methods were contrary to the core of the gospel. Or, on a larger scale, one cannot understand the history of the Catholic Church in China without examining not only the methods of the missionaries, but also their theology and their understanding of mission -- in sum, the spiritual legacy of the China missionary.

#### A Tool for Evaluation

A mission history should, as much as possible, tell the whole story by considering the donors' point of view, as well as the recipients' point of view. Traditionally, mission historians have concentrated their research on archives of mission societies and accounts by missionaries. Today, however, Asian, African, Latin American or Melanesian Christians provide personal testimonies and analyses of the beginnings of Christianity among their own people which do not necessarily correspond to earlier missionary versions. However many versions there are, all of them should be equally important to a mission historian who strives to interpret the past accomplishments of a missionary society -- successes as well as failures in their inner causes and outward connections.

From personal experience I can vouch that the Maryknoll Society and Congregation followed this path when, in 1980, they opted for an "objective and critical study" (4) of their past history in China. Researchers reviewed all the facts, recalled key experiences, and surfaced patterns that would help Maryknoll better assess the present reality and prepare for the future. The published study incorporated the narratives of the Chinese converts as well as the written accusation of those who rejected Maryknoll or turned against it. Inclusion of these Chinese views contributed to a more nuanced and less Western-centered evaluation of Maryknoll in relation to the church and the society in the United States as well as in China. (5)

#### A Service and a Step Toward Partnership

A mission history that would focus only on Western missionaries and their sending churches -- even from an all-inclusive point of view -- does not go far enough. It should also delve into the study of how missionary efforts combined with local responses to give rise to an indigenous church. Ideally, therefore, in the present context of indigenous and independent Third World churches, a mission history should be

as much the story of Western missionaries as the story of the beginning of a local movement perceived in indigenous terms and motivated by indigenous considerations.

This task is challenging and may well go beyond the expertise of a single researcher and writer. Perhaps, as Paul Jenkins has suggested, this equal emphasis on mission history "here and there" should call for a "division between studies that focus mainly on the Third World, and those that must be seen as an aspect of Western history." (6) This approach, however, could split the field of mission research and weaken it if researchers confine themselves within the limits of their Western or Third World approach. On the contrary, if they combine their efforts, the results of their joint research will be new syntheses and more rounded works in mission history.

As seen above, understanding of past history, spiritual benefits, guidance for present and future missionary service are all good reasons why missionary societies and sending churches from the West should encourage mission research. Yet, the most profound reason probably still rests with the missionary vocation of these societies and churches. In spite of obvious mistakes, they provided their best people, and gave their best efforts to foster the rise of indigenous churches in the Third World. Indeed, mission histories that incorporate vital aspects of the emergence, growth, and pain of the Catholic Church around the world provide missionary societies with an additional avenue to implement their commitment to serve Third World churches. Such histories are like prefaces, or at most first chapters, of the unfolding stories of the Third World churches. Mission histories, therefore, fit into the context of service and partnership, which characterizes today's relationships between churches.

### Building a Legacy of Understanding

When it comes to writing, a mission historian's first responsibility is not to prove or disprove any hypothesis, but to give a voice to the past. After a minute investigation of the facts, he/she holds the power to screen them and to select what to tell and what to ignore. A well-balanced mission history is not just a history of how structures, hierarchy and official theology were established; it is also a history of encounters between people of different cultures. The front stage should not only be occupied by the policymakers of a missionary society or an indigenous church, but also by 'average' missionaries and local Catholics. Through the flesh-and-blood stories of these people, one can genuinely sense the ups and downs of intercultural relationships and transcultural evangelization.

A mission historian who is a good storyteller can, therefore, make a deep impression on the reader through the images of the past he/she chooses to highlight. But, more than purveying information, he/she also

interprets it and passes judgments that influence the reader even more.

The task is not an easy one. If the mission historian misreads the past, or analyzes the research in a careless manner, he/she could leave a legacy of misunderstanding about the missionaries as well as Third World churches, or about the relationship between both. If, on the contrary, the mission historian is a successful storyteller and a keen analyst, his/her images of the past and allotment of praise and blame will be appreciated by both missionaries and indigenous churches as a true measure of their common history and relationship.

### NOTES

1. Two articles addressing the question are worth mentioning: Paul Jenkins, "Mission History -- A Manifesto," Missiology, 10, No. 2 (April 1982); 199-210. Eric J. Sharpe, "Reflections on Missionary Historiography," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 13 No. 2 (April 1989): 76-81.
2. Sharpe, 80.
3. Walbert Buhlmann, God's Chosen Peoples (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 66.
4. Maryknoll Fathers Archives, Maryknoll China History Project, Joint Advisory Board Minutes of February 14, 1980.
5. Jean-Paul Wiest, Maryknoll in China: A History, 1918-1955 (New York: M.E. Sharpe 1988).
6. Jenkins, 201.

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## The Idea of Inculturation in Catholic and Protestant Historiography

by Jean Charbonnier

Inculturation can be broadly understood as the expression of the Christian Faith within the context of a local culture. It includes the idea of "contextualisation" which is more familiar to Protestant circles and takes more into account the socio-economic circumstances. In Western Christian History, the principle of inculturation was used by some Greek Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and

