

I AM A MISSIONARY. DOES CHRISTIAN MISSION DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

By Jochen Teuffel

The Lutheran „Crossing Community“ published the translation of my article „Ich bin Missionar. Richtet die Verbreitung der christlichen Botschaft Unheil an?“ (which originally appeared in October 2007 in the SUEDEDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG) thanks to Ed Schroeder, a former Seminex Professor, who translated it.

Granted, I'm a missionary. Back in the 19th century missionary was an honorable calling. Missionaries going overseas enjoyed widespread respect in German society. Au contraire, today being a Christian missionary exposes one to criticism. Winning other peoples for the Christian faith is often seen as destructive of a people's own culture. The German heart is moved by calls for help in time of catastrophes, but for the salvation agenda, "everybody knows" that people work out their salvation in their own way. No outside help—even worse, interference—needed or desired.

Being a missionary today in Hong Kong does not put me in the front ranks. Young Chinese Christians telling their circle of friends about their own conversions are much more convincing than attempts by those of us who were cradle-Christians. Consequently my work at a theological seminary consists primarily in teaching theology students from Southeast Asia the grammar of Christian theology. Today's missionary isn't missionizing any longer. Instead we serve an indigenous partner church in its own efforts to promote the Christian faith.

If you confront Hong Kong Christians with German-style critique of mission work, they will shake their heads. Why not promote the message that you have experienced as healing for yourself? So it is no surprise that among Christians in Hong Kong there is a strong impulse for Mission. Congregation members use their holidays to make mission trips to China; various churches send missionaries to other countries. In doing so they are following a widespread trend. If mission in earlier years was the work of Europeans and North Americans, mission activity today—already since the mid 20th-century—has become the agenda of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Nowadays Germans, weaned away from church life in secularized Europe, can hardly imagine that Christianity on other continents is "hot." It is received in these places as a resource, not only for coping in one's own life, but also for improving it. The grounds for this is a dimension of reality that is fundamental for non-European cultures. Beyond the visible world that is susceptible to scientific analysis, there is the sphere of the intangible, highly influential, powers and spirits. They operate organically and symbiotically in human life with either positive or negative consequences. So keeping good relations with them by proper actions and behavior is crucial.

It is this organic symbiosis of daily life that is the Petri-dish-culture from which conversion to Christian faith arises in Asia. The Christian Gospel comes across as an effective teaching for spiritual well-being, "dietetics" in the Greek classical sense of a healthy way of life. That Gospel offers rescue from personally-known guilt, and then access to God's own superior power, his protection, his healing, his blessing. Finally these Christians often find themselves empowered by the Holy Spirit and hear God's call to a new way of life in the world—and to live that life in confidence.

Life, Translation, Formation

There is more here than just finding meaning in life and coping with contingency. Christian faith proves to be a resource for living, not an imposed “you gotta.” People come to Christ because it fits the realities of their life. Biblical patterns of daily life are much closer to the daily-life situations of Africa and Asia than they are to post-industrial Europe. Therefore a simple linguistic translation of the Gospel without extensive hermeneutical efforts suffices. If then people you know verify these truths of salvation, making the move yourself is not too difficult. Conversely, when someone you know becomes a Christian, it confirms your own Christian commitment. So Christians are motivated to speak of their own experience in winsome ways to those who are not yet believers.

It is significant that Christian Mission in Southeast Asia was especially successful among minority peoples, for example, the Chins in Burma, the Montagnards in Vietnam. In some cases mission was carried out against the policy of the European colonial administrators—e.g., among the Nagas in Northeast India, where over 90% of the population today are Baptist Christians. When ex-Monty Python Michael Palin, doing a BBC TV series on the Himalayas, asked his native translator why the Konyaks (a Naga tribe once headhunters), why they became Christians, he received a quick short answer: because of education.

It is a fact that Christian mission has been a major agent for education. The school systems in many countries take their origin from earlier mission schools. In contrast to the Koran, the Bible from the very beginning was translated into local languages. Protestant missions were emphatic about making the Bible available in local languages, and thereby created written languages in many cultures that were previously non-literate. God was speaking in people’s own mother-tongue. To encounter God’s word for your own life, you must be able to read the Bible in your own language. In tribal cultures the incentive is strong to learn one’s own written language. The next step then is to use that skill in creating a written record of one’s own culture. The significance of Bible translations for preserving the heritage of tribal cultures cannot be overestimated.

Neo-heathen paternalism

Tribal societies today are under constant pressure to assimilate—pressure from colonization, nation-state territorialism or economic globalization. Where traditional gods and spirits are unable to ward off this pressure, a power vacuum arises that can easily lead to culture-destroying fatalism. Christian doctrine embedded in one’s mother tongue brings with it the support of God’s own power for coping with the dilemma. With that sort of backing modern influences from the outside can be appropriated while still preserving one’s own cultural identity.

Thus contrary to the current (western) prejudice that Christian mission destroys local cultures, the opposite is true. It is precisely such indigenized Christian teaching that protects the identity of tribal minorities from the onslaughts of assimilation by dominant “state-majority” ethnic groups, such as the Barma in Burma. Without one’s own people-state tribal societies are exiled from the community of nations – but not from the world-wide ecumenical church. This global network of partner churches becomes a protective shield and a resource for creativity, items otherwise denied to them in their own country.

When Europeans reject Christian mission, they are ignoring their own tribal history. European civilization owes its existence to the fact that Christian mission among Teutonic tribal socie-

ties more than a thousand years ago was successful. Without the Christian church on European soil, European literacy and its appropriation of classical culture can hardly be imagined.

Why not grant this option to other cultures today? If today mission is largely the work of local national Christians, the suspicion of paternalism is actually reversed. Europeans who demonize Christian missions are projecting their own neo-heathen conditions onto other cultures. “What we no longer think has any significance for us, can surely not be any good for you either.” So it is not mission, but its rejection that is a Euro-centric attempt to paternalize other peoples.

The claim that we only want to protect other “authentic” cultures signals a NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC-naturalism or romanticism that denigrates other peoples and their own aspirations. The claim to be preserving cultural authenticity reduces such people to exotic candidates for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC reports, objects for ethnological research or tourist attractions. This attitude is but one step away from a racist distortion whereby such primitive “nature-peoples,” along with wild animals, are supposedly protected in their alleged “natural environment.”

Exactly opposite is Christian mission with its rejection of any form of racism, since all people are addressed—irrespective of race or gender—as having equal status, either as death-destined sinners who are NOT hopelessly lost, or as sisters and brothers in the Lord. Missionaries do not claim any superiority over others, but offer to others what they themselves have encountered as healing for their lives. When other people appropriate the Christian message for themselves, a community of mutual responsibility is created, and, yes, that frequently results in inner tensions. Exotic “nature-people” can always be kept at a distance. Not, however, fellow humans of whom Jesus said in his Judgment Day parable [Matthew 25] “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”