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The Returning Recognition of Religious Pluralism

FREDERICK W. NORRIS

The recognition of religious pluralism is returning with a vengeance. In 1910 at the Edinburgh Conference, Protestant mission leaders looked forward triumphantly to the end of every other religion and thus the dominance of Christianity. A minority report, however, suggested that world religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam were healthy and not intent on dying—and there was an aftershock when, by the '70s and '80s, it became clear that those world religions were not going to disappear. Theologians with earned reputations, such as Hans Küng, John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others, insisted that, contrary to what is suggested (but in their view, not definitively stated) in the New Testament, Jesus is not the single Lord and Savior. For them, Christianity's revised world mission involves ministering to the downtrodden and assisting people in the full pursuit of their own religions instead of fighting battles with one another.

Many such scholars have insisted that this religious pluralism has never before been seen. They think that our life in the global village demonstrates that it is something unique. Two observations stand against their conclusions. First, we need to revisit the research on Greco-Roman religions that informed our educations. In seminary thirty-five years ago, I took a course on that topic, one nestled in New Testament studies. There I encountered a few dozen gods in the pagan pantheon and some upstart deities from the East. Egypt seemed to be an oddity, with its many divine beings. But there were important things about those religions that I did not learn. Maximus of Tyre, a believer in such deities in a.d. 180, estimated that there were 30,000 gods worshiped in the Eastern Mediterranean. And Pausanias, in his tales of his travels in Greece, emphasized the local character of each god rather than lumping every temple of Apollo into the worship of that one deity. Indeed, if we look at Cook's standard work on Zeus, we discover that Zeus was multiplex, enriched at each site where a temple to him was erected, so that there were many Zeuses: at one place, Zeus Keranios; at another place, Zeus Kasios, and so on. The observations of Pausanias and the estimates of Maximus of Tyre were probably based on their sense that the local realities were larger than the Olympian singularities. Greco-Roman religion of the first century was much more pluralistic than the simple representation I learned in seminary.

A second factor, the claim of full establishment of Christianity in the West as the dominant religion, has undergirded the late-twentieth-century sense of religious pluralism that would abandon traditional Christian mission. Küng, for instance, has personal reasons for disliking established, domineering Catholic Christianity. He distrusts the early councils because they were politically supported; he distrusts the Gospel of John because it looks too much like the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Chalcedonian Creeds. We should concede that the Theodosian law code tried to stamp out ancient Greco-Roman



religions and establish in their place Catholic Christianity. Christian control in the West was often effective; it at least allowed much of medieval and Reformation life to be concerned more with Christian heresy than with pagan reality—or so it seems in most of our history books. But we are now getting newly researched conclusions that question whether Christian establishment was ever complete, or even quite so ascendant. We should with good humor recognize that new laws are not written against nonexistent lawbreakers. The Theodosian code would not have outlawed paganism if it had not existed. Frank Trombley, in a stunning two-volume work, has documented how Christian hagiography during the period of initial establishment and well beyond shows bishop after bishop returning to the high places to put the lids back on sarcophagi and scatter the sacrificial fires of pagan nighttime activity. During that era, the city of Gaza in Palestine had only small communities of Jews or Christians; the bulk of the population was pagan. Given the repeated reforms of the medieval West and the period we call the Reformation, it might be better to claim that Christian establishment came in waves in particular regions and always included opponents who resisted it—silently much of the time, and openly when given the chance.

If these two points are sound, then we must say that religious pluralism has always been a part of Christian life and, indeed, has rather regularly been a factor even in the West. East of Antioch, however, Christians have seldom reached a majority—perhaps in the Armenian kingdom and in parts of Syria, but not on the Silk Road, where communities grew, nor in massive countries like India and China. And when Christians have been a religious minority, they have often thought of themselves as having a mission. Christianity has also been successfully persecuted. Three hundred thousand Christians in Nagasaki, Japan, were a force during the sixteenth century but were nearly annihilated in massive attacks. I have heard it argued that Rome's wavering policy of consequent persecution was one primary reason for the church's early growth in the West.

When we consider contemporary religious pluralism and remember our history, we need to think of Christians from the East like Timothy I of Baghdad, who in the eighth century countered the Koran's misunderstanding of Jesus and stressed the importance of the Trinity. He had the caliph Mahdi pull something like a three-dollar coin from his purse and asked him if it were not both three and one.

Syrian trader-missionaries told the Chinese emperor's representatives about their religion. They found Buddhist terminology acceptable: Jesus as "Buddha," and scripture as "sûtra." They could praise Confucian understandings of family and social life. But in their worship these Christians sang a trinitarian hymn, and in their neighborhoods they told the story of Jesus the Messiah. Their writings were rediscovered late in the nineteenth century within a Buddhist library in Dunhuang, in western China.

Much of the move to abandon traditional Christian mission because of a "new" religious pluralism springs from a mistaken understanding of three factors: the high degree of Greco-Roman religious pluralism, the merely partial effectiveness of Christian establishment, and the continued insistence on mission

by Christians who have existed as minority groups within cultures around the globe.

Various scholarly subdisciplines are not yet familiar with what I have sketched. Certainly, our students and churches do not know it. There is still a missionary zeal among many of our congregations that looks more like 1910 than 2000. Perhaps my anecdotal repertoire is too meager, but I am unaware of any studies that claim that Christian churches/churches of Christ are widely cognizant of our setting within religious pluralism. We are still mostly rural and suburban, rather than urban. My father is eighty-eight and still serves on Wednesdays as a hospital chaplain in Johnson City, Tennessee. He enjoys being able to go into a room

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and assume that the people there believe in God and that most of them want to see a Christian minister. We talk a bit about the special circumstances of his ministry. In sickness or near death, people tend to reach out to higher powers. But Johnson City has an active Muslim community, with about sixty adult members and nearly two hundred adults on its edges as what one might call “cultural Muslims.” There are two small Baha’i assemblies as well, and a Hindu group formed primarily of immigrants who work in the medical and scientific communities.

About six years ago, one of my students was infuriated by the scholarly studies of Jesus’ life and the insistence on religious pluralism that marked my class about Christology. He erupted on the final exam. But two weeks later when he came back for a summer

class, his honesty urged him to tell me of two experiences he had had back home in Harlan County, Kentucky—a place perhaps more deeply in the Bible Belt than Johnson City, Tennessee. First, when he had advertised in the local paper that he was looking for wooden bookcases, the man who had called him was a New Age believer with an unexpected knowledge of Hinduism. But it was the call from the chairman of the elders of his small church that had permanently changed his mind. The fellow’s daughter had come home from her first year at Eastern Kentucky University a convert to Conservative Judaism.

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As you probably know, Muslims are (or soon will be) the second largest religious group in the United States, surpassing in number those who count themselves as Jews and, for that matter, those Christians who call themselves Episcopalians. African American converts and immigrants from Muslim regions account for the explosion. Chicago has nearly 400,000 Muslims; the number in Atlanta is moving toward 50,000. When I was in Durham, North Carolina, in the spring of 2000, the local newspaper indicated that there were enough Muslim students in one area high school that a space had been set aside for their daily prayers.

Statistical data claim that nearly 40 percent of the country is in Christian worship each Sunday. We must keep in mind, however, that that represents an average. The numbers vary dramatically from region to region. I am told that in Seattle, the figure hovers around 1 percent. In fact, the only actual test of the percentage of which I’m aware occurred in Ashtabula County in northern Ohio, east of Cleveland. The on-site count of attendance at each church in the county amounted to about 20 percent of the total population.

At the same time that we in Christian churches/churches of Christ are recognizing the need to take more seriously the religiously plural climate in which we live, we are also experiencing a series of erosions in our mission outlook and practice. Certain factors, however, have masked those erosions. In 1997 our National Missionary Convention held its fiftieth meeting; about 3,500 people attended. That is impressive. Furthermore, Christian Missionary Fellowship, our largest organized effort, had a budget that year of \$5.5 million. Its missionary force included 39 adults in preparation, 105 adults on the field in eleven countries outside the United States, and work with Vietnamese and Hispanic groups in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Many more missionaries are on the field under the supervision of one local congregation or a series of churches.

Mission is not dead among us. But our cadre has steadily decreased from a high of nearly 1,200 in 1990. The 1996 number was just over 950. Since 1997 the figures have been published in a different way, making comparison difficult. But according to Reggie Hundley, Director of Mission Services in Knoxville, Tennessee, we have lost 20–25 percent of the 1,200 in this decade, perhaps more. Figures are difficult to

obtain and may have been accidentally inflated in the '80s. Hundley thinks that a recovery may have begun about five years ago, one that is reflected in increased high school and undergraduate interest in mission within the last two years. David Giles, who works in recruitment for Christian Missionary Fellowship, says that mission interest among youth is high, raised particularly through short-term missions. But a gap remains between those willing to go for a month or a year and those who intend to go, stay, and witness.

I can only suggest some reasons why we have suffered a decrease in long-term missionaries and are experiencing difficulty in recruiting others. First, many of our lifelong missionaries have retired or passed away. Second, people like my wife and me have served terms of five or ten years and then returned home. Third, the culture in the United States has changed since the end of World War II. In the '20s and '30s, people in Christian churches/churches of Christ, recently separated from the Disciples, had begun to build some

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Bible colleges, only to be hit by the Depression and then the war itself. But soldiers returning from the conflict, convinced of the need for Christ everywhere and not needing much money to support the "American" life they had known, began to go out in increasing numbers. These days, campuses such as Pepperdine and Emmanuel are communicating to their students through the design and furnishing of their physical spaces that missionaries should not have to get by on next to nothing as Christians do in Oceania, Africa, China, or elsewhere. I have had students tell me that a so-called third world country is too poor to be their next place of ministry.

There is no certainty that we can replace our long-term missionaries. One interesting development is the rise of short-term trips all over the globe that are supported, as is our seminary, by the discretionary income that so many of our church members possess. Five years ago I taught a course on Christianity in the East; sixteen students took it. Nine of them had made at least one short trip outside the country; one young woman had been on three—the last, for four months to Nepal.

Perhaps lifelong missionary service will not be a frequent choice of young adults from the United States. That represents a waiting tragedy, because learning a culture, along with its subcultures and languages, is not something that can be accomplished in a few months. I felt just barely proficient when I left Germany after five years. Well-meaning, competent folk from the United States who spend a few weeks in another cultural setting often can converse only with those who speak English. Therefore, most of their information passes through the filter of resident bilingual speakers. For example, some years ago I took a seventeen-day trip to Brazil. I have marvelous mental pictures of the trip, and I still hear the moving Brazilian music, but I came back with very little knowledge of the people. The deepest sensitivities that I gained came from a German Roman Catholic priest who ran the retreat center at which I spoke to Methodist pastors and their families. He expected that I would share his sense that all Brazilians are uncultured, even dangerous, primitives. We spoke in German so that he could talk freely without the natives hearing what he thought of them after thirty years of service. No Brazilian could have told me such inner thoughts in the language of his or her heart, because I do not know Portuguese.

It may well be that most Christian missionaries from the United States will have mission experiences of less than a year in duration. Various mission administrators ask us at Emmanuel about the possibility of a one-year certificate program, or a one-year master's degree. My mind boggles, but I try to listen. Susan Higgins, my missiology colleague at Milligan College, a past president of the Association of Professors of Mission, tells me from her expertise in sociology that our culture is moving, not just toward having second

careers, but toward having eight or nine careers in a lifetime. Perhaps you read a recent article in U.S. News & World Report that encouraged changing jobs as frequently as possible. Look every year for another place, it advised, not necessarily to move that often, but in order not to let anything pass you by. The truth was simply put: the corporate world does not respect people who stay.

A defining characteristic of first-time missionaries of the late '40s and '50s who went out for lifelong service was their experience of war and of the need for Christ. Later Korean veterans, converted as adults or recommitted through harrowing battle experiences, increased the cadre some, but the Vietnam soldiers, people my age, became a lost generation in many respects. If they arrived in seminary, they were accompanied by a host of demons.

The crisis/opportunity that we face in mission is daunting, primarily because of the culture in which we live. Americans who view their desires as absolute needs do not work well in North American urban settings, or nearly anywhere else on the globe. Given the diminished requirements of university or seminary study and the material desires of many professors and students, we are threatened with a sea of mission mediocrity at a time when young people all over the world are looking for a simpler life and deep religious values.

After thirty years of teaching, I find myself actively engaging students, calling them to think more clearly about what the gospel is, what cultures are, what other religions are, and how they might be able to show and tell people about Jesus. I think most Emmanuel students expect something like what we provide. But we know that they do not learn the biblical languages and cultures well, that they bring too little critical knowledge of their own culture, and that only on rare occasions have they had long personal experience with other cultures and religions. In the latter part of his career here, Charles Taber, the Christian church/churches of Christ's only internationally renowned missiologist, found few students who were willing to follow the curriculum that he designed to equip them wisely for mission. I have not yet devised a different strategy that would lead successfully to that goal.

I would like to be thirty years younger, because I think that institutions in the United States like Pepperdine and Emmanuel are being forced to rewrite their curricula and approach their students in ways that we were not taught. I was Jaroslav Pelikan's graduate assistant my second year at Yale. His honored five-volume history of the Christian tradition is a well-written masterpiece of intellectual history. But in that work, Pelikan excludes discussions of ethics and practice on the grounds of properly defining the discipline that interests him; the only woman he mentions is the Virgin Mary; and he treats few locations east of Antioch or south of Carthage. Students interested in world mission and world religions are making us ask different questions—and in many instances, despite their limited knowledge and maturity, they are right. There is promise in their energy and commitment. Christianity has always been a missionary religion, living in varying circumstances of religious pluralism. That fact will not change; neither should the basic aspects of traditional mission be deserted.

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