

# Historiography of missions: Cultural, social and economic implications

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*Para a historiografia das missões ser aceite entre os académicos fora do mundo «ocidental», é urgente que ela adquira a capacidade de se adaptar à cultura de interculturalidade.*

*As culturas de interculturalidade indiana e chinesa, com a sua pouca fé na «justiça humana» e em «salvadores divinos», continuam a dominar o continente mais habitado do mundo e têm muito para ensinar aos ocidentais acerca de diálogo inter-religioso e intercultural, para terem mais credibilidade como praticantes, e não somente como pregadores de democracia e valores humanos.*

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Instead of reviewing here the predominantly West-based historiographic efforts and pointing out their relative usefulness or uselessness to analyse the history of expansion of Christianity, I wish rather to raise issues that any Church historiography, worth its salt in today's world context, would need to address. My first blunt question for the self-examination of those engaged in such exercises would be: Are not the prevailing historiographies, consciously or unconsciously tainted by exclusive or quasi-exclusive religious (if not denominational) interest, leaving out or handling only marginally, the cultural, social or economic factors that underlie religious developments? I have yet to see any outstanding examples of research and publication which has paid a systematic attention to all the above mentioned aspects and have not failed to analyse in depth the nexus of Christianity and colonialism, a nexus that has moved to a new phase in the post-colonial era. Any historiography that sidelines or soft-pedals when it comes to exposing the historic realities of a large number of "converted faithful" among the third world citizens is bound to continue to serve the Western strategy of dissimulation through the simulation of impressive historiographic research and scholarship.

The real problem of most of the western historiography is part of its general societal malaise, namely its inability to assume the historic guilt and steer away from self-justifying motions of having served or continuing to

serve the “poor and the oppressed” till the ends of the earth. It would be more helpful instead if such explanations addressed the plight of the new “poor and oppressed” that the “new world order” has brought into existence on a massive scale with the collaboration (often tacit or naïve) of the Church during the colonial times. It is with the help and support of the political, financial and marketing-cum-publicity structures of the same West-based capitalist system that the Christian churches continue their “missionary” projects around the globe. It would be too naïve to dismiss this as unwarranted ideological claims based on prejudices or a third-world bias. The theologies of “liberation” around the globe could endorse these claims. They are genuine expressions of native cries, which are oftentimes, and not surprisingly, resented and silenced by the “institutional” Church interests and the hierarchical-theological structures of power. I doubt if any mission historian who has the courage to adopt a perspective that we are suggesting here is likely to find favour or support of the western hegemonic interests, whether outside or inside the church circles. Such an attempt is likely to be deemed “unscholarly”, and as such, promptly rejected as unworthy of any serious consideration.

One serious fault of historiography of missions heretofore is its failure to give a rightful place to a frank and in-depth presentation of the historical continuity of the western tendency to impose its cultural model and values upon the rest of the world by identifying them as “human” and “universally” valid values. There is also hardly much questioning of the fact that the principle of contradiction of European logic need not be “logical” to, say the Indian or to the Chinese mind, which are more at home in a culture of interculturality and do not favour exclusive or monopolistic truth-claims. The Indian mind is expressed in that great passage of the *Rigveda* (I,164,46): The truth is one, the wise men name it in manifold ways [*Ekam sad viprâvahudhâdvadanti*]. Similarly, the famous Chinese saying: “San jiao, yi jia”, which means three teachings, one family. This deep-rooted conviction of the Chinese mind was also applied to the three main religious and philosophical *weltanschauungen* in China, namely Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

The culture of interculturality has not been a tradition of the semitic religions that left the shores or the land frontiers of the Arabian desert. The geography has affected their missiologies. They all suffered from the proselytizing mentality and promised to their followers lands beyond the desert, lands flowing with milk and honey! This applies to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a result, *one* God, *one* faith, and other sorts of “ones” are never likely to foster the spirit of tolerance. Unlike such cases, conversion drives were never in the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian or Taoist traditions. The nature’s bounty did not require from these societies a compensation through missiologies of cultural imposition, backed by political and economic domination. In the context of the post-colonial trends of globalization and multi-ethnic and cultural tensions, it is urgent that Church historiography places these issues at the centre or near-centre of its methodological concerns, if the ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue are not be viewed as revised versions of the past cultural manipulations. It needs an admission of the fact that cultures may not live in pure form and in isolation from external influences, but neither can there be any single culture as unique model to be forced upon all. Cultures are not just fashion designs or forms of culinary art. They are centuries-old spiritual experiences and ethos, which may, for instance, as is in the case of

Hindu and Buddhist cultural traditions, postulate karma-doctrine and rebirth, revealing their faith in long-term personal efforts rather than in ever more suspect human justice or even in a divine saviour.

We could have a more contextual Church historiography, if it would adopt a relevant methodology and terminology, integrating the human quest for liberation, rather than pursuing the traditional and west-cultured missiological quest for salvation. It would be more in line with the age-old eastern *môksha*, *nirvana*, *kaivalya*, *satori*, etc. as well as the more recent Christian theologies of liberation.

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