
My Pilgrimage in Mission

(shortened version!)

by Peter P.J. Beyerhaus

My passion for foreign missions arose already early in my childhood. In a school essay, written at an age of 13 years, I accounted for the first time for "Why I Want to Become a Missionary". But through the Second World War and its aftermath Germany was separated for a long interval from her mission fields, and during my theological studies at several German universities (1947-51) I did not encounter any missiological teaching. Thus there was little to keep up my missionary interest.

This deplorable situation changed decisively when I went to *Sweden* to study a semester in *Uppsala*. There I had my first encounter with the world famous Swedish professor in the science of mission, *Bengt Sundkler*. He conducted a highly stimulating course on ecumenical mission theology in his home. I caught fire immediately. Therefore, after finishing my basic theological education at Germany, I returned to Uppsala to engage in advanced studies for a doctorate in missiology under his tutorship. Uppsala was destined to shape my biography in a double way: *Firstly*, in connection with my degree work my latent desire to become a missionary was aroused again and took concrete shape in my registration as a candidate in the service of the Lutheran Berlin Mission. – *Secondly* this choice was motivated additionally by my engagement with a Swedish fellow student *Ingegärd Kalén*, who independently of myself had felt a call for mission work in Africa. Thus we found it appropriate to go to a field where German and Scandinavian Lutheran missions were involved in a close cooperation. This was the case in the South African province of *Natal*, where Lutheran bodies from Sweden, Norway, Germany and American background jointly sponsored a Theological Seminary seated originally in *Oscarsberg* and later-on (since 1962) in *Mapumulo*, Zululand. Before we could be sent out, we both had to conclude our degree work.

During the dissertation phase I was invited by *Dr. Walter Freytag* (1899-1960) to serve as his assistant at the headquarter of the *German Missionary Council* in Hamburg. Freytag and Sundkler shared that *heilsgeschichtlich* (*salvation-historical*) concept which was typical for evangelic mission theology on the European continent especially since the 1930ies. Freytag wanted me to substantiate this tradition by writing my doctoral thesis on "The Kingdom of God in the History of the Protestant Missionary Movement". However, I did not dare to adopt such immense topic but preferred another, more down-to-earth-theme suggested to me by the Lutheran missiologist *Heinrich Meyer* (1904-1978): "The Autonomy of the Younger

Churches as a Missionary Problem".¹ The proposal was influenced by the shocking experience of the debacle of Western Missions to China, when after Mao's victory in 1951 the indigenous churches were forced to organize themselves into the "Patriotic Three Selves Movement", and polemically severed all ties with the Western "imperialistic" missions. After all: The famous formula "Self-Government, Self-Support and Self-Propagation" had been the avowed goal of Protestant missions ever since the ministry of the two home-board secretaries *Henry Venn (1796-1877)* and *Rufus Anderson (1796-1880)*, who had coined it in the middle of the 19th Century. The scope of my thesis was primarily both to prove the practical relevance of that concept to missionary policy, especially after the termination of the paternalistic era, but also in the light of the Church's oneness to criticize the ecclesiological error contained in a formula that stressed so much the human "self". "Christonomy" rather than "autonomy" should be the goal aimed at by joint action of national and expatriate fellow workers in fulfilling what *Stephen Neill* called the "Unfinished Task", the evangelization of the non-Christian world.

Immediately after defending my thesis, my wife and myself, together with our first-born child Karolina, were sent out in January 1957 to *South-Africa*. My ministry in the provinces of Transvaal and Natal was devoted in fairly equal division to three tasks: *evangelism* as career missionary to start with, *teaching* both at the Seminary and by in-service-training of church workers, and synodical commission work. Now the theme of my thesis was transformed into a strategy of helping to lead our congregations into the responsibility of fully organized regional churches, still aided by mission agencies and united under a joint constitution: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. – In our attempts to lead the African church into full responsibility we had, however, to face a number of considerable *obstacles*.

According to universal opinion South Africa's overarching problem during this era was the ideological system of *Apartheid*. Yet in the Bantu reserves ("homelands"), where the majority of our congregations lived, we did not experience the colour bar as the most burning ecclesiastic issue. We were worried, however, *firstly* by the *low ebb in the spiritual life* both amongst church members and even amongst many of our black fellow workers: elders, evangelists and pastors. The former vitality that had marked the first generation of converts had vanished. Spiritual awakening – starting from our own midst as missionaries, breaking out also in the lives of our African fellow ministers, congregations and students became the central concern of our prayer meetings and retreats. As a tool for this purpose we established a

¹ Published in English with Henry Lefever under the title: "The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission", Grand Rapids/London 1964.

fraternity amongst Lutheran missionaries and pastors that received its impulses from semi-monastic evangelical communities in Europe (e.g. *Taizé*).

Our *second* problem arose out of our discovery how deeply African Christians were still ensnared by the bonds of animistic concepts and practices stemming from *tribal religion*. As younger missionaries we discovered the alarming dimensions of this surviving paganism while we extended our regular visits to our out-stations in the bush field by spending several days in the kraals. When sitting around the fire places, our African brothers and sisters overcame their psychological inhibition and conceded to us how in critical situations even they would resort to traditional cures and rites, including consulting witchdoctors and sacrificing to the ancestral spirits. Our eyes were opened to the reality that most African Christians still shared the magic and spiritistic worldview of tribal religion, and that accordingly they habitually practiced two divergent cults, the Christian and the Animistic, side by side to provide both for their spiritual and physical needs. This disclosure marked a turning point in our service to the African church. We tried our best to make our black fellow ministers realize that indulging in pagan practices was tantamount to a breach of the First Commandment which could result in demonic enslavement. The synod agreed, and we were commissioned to develop a new project of fact finding, biblical enlightenment, spiritual discernment and exorcising confrontation. This virtually affected all aspects of our ministry: preaching to heathen, church planting, in-service-training, church discipline, catechetics, liturgical reforms. To myself it was the existential discovery of *the antagonistic dimension of Christian mission*.

A *third* obstacle to the formation of solid national churches that vigorously applied the Gospel to the needs of the people were the *confessional and denominational divisions* imported from the Western mother churches and proliferated by additional schisms and separatist movements, particularly in South Africa. Too much energy was consumed by such frictions! I, therefore, gladly participated in interdenominational enterprises like the *Student Christian Association* and in so-called *Staff Institutes* for theological seminaries which were sponsored by the *Theological Education Fund*. They brought about a new sense of fraternity across the various institutions, even Roman-Catholic ones.

In 1964 the *University of Tübingen* asked me to succeed *Gerhard Rosenkranz* (1896-1983), an authority on East-Asian religions, on his chair of missiology and ecumenical theology. I accepted reluctantly, on the condition that my call was postponed for a year until I had concluded my various responsibilities in South Africa. The beginning of my teaching in Tübingen in the first half of 1966 coincided with several important gatherings – widely

different in character – which proved to be crucial for the further course of world mission and evangelism: The first *World Congress on Evangelism* with Billy Graham in *Berlin*, the mass rally of the emerging *Confessing Movement "No Other Gospel"* in Dortmund, the *Wheaton Congress* of North American Evangelical Mission Organizations and the ecumenical expert conference on *Church and Society* in *Geneva*. I was not invited to any of these meetings. But their theological and missiological consequences touched immensely on my own existence and forced me to dedicate much thought to the contemporary issues and to define my own stance:

The late sixties were marked by the breakthrough of a view on history with a apparent Marxist leaning, and by an ecumenical engagement in socio-economic and political problems in a world-wide horizon. In rapid speed modern theological propositions succeeded each other: the theologies of secularization, of hope, of revolution and of liberation. They penetrated also into the new concept of mission develop by the WCC between its Third Assembly at *New-Delhi 1961* and the 10th CWME conference of the at *Melbourne 1980*. This development reached its climax at the Forth WCC Assembly at *Uppsala 1968* with its notorious clash between s.c. *Ecumenicals* and *Evangelicals*.

Personally I started to realize that drastic change in ecumenical mission thought and practice when I studied the “Drafts for Sections” written in preparation of the Uppsala Assembly. My apprehensions were confirmed by some outstanding evangelical spokesmen with whom I got into contact and even close friendship, especially *Donald McGavran*, father of the Church Growth Movement, and *John R.W. Stott*, who was the champion of evangelical concerns at the heated plenary debate at Uppsala and later became the chief theologian of the *Lausanne Movement*. Another international author who early articulated the issues at stake between the s.c. "verticalists" and the "horizontalists" was *Lesslie Newbigin* (†1999) whom on my extended return journey from South Africa to Germany I had visited in his episcopal residence in Madras in December 1965. When according to McGavran's evaluation Uppsala indeed had "betrayed the two billions" of those "Latfricasians" that never had got the chance to respond to the Gospel, I resolved to enter the missiological encounter. I did so by writing a booklet that by its translation into several European and Asian languages received international attention: "Missions – which way? Humanization or Redemption?" (1970). An even stronger impact was achieved by a manifesto issued on March 4th, 1970 by a group of confession minded German theologians, called the "*Frankfurt Declaration on the Fundamental Crisis in Missions*". This document, drafted by me, did much to catalyze the unavoidable polarization between the two rivaling thought schools in the international

missionary movement. Now I started to receive numerous invitations to lecture, preach, attend congresses and to conduct courses in all six continents. Perhaps my most dramatic or rather traumatic experience was when on the proposal of the general secretary of the Indonesian Council of Churches, *Dr. Sohito Nababan*, I was invited by the DWME to serve as consultant at the 8th World Missionary Conference at *Bangkok 1972/73*. It dealt with the highly sensitive theme "Salvation Today". But I was dismayed to discover that the findings had already been programmed in advance and that the participants were geared to adopt them by the use of the psychological tool of group dynamics. The appeals made by *Dr. Arthur Glasser* and myself to the conference to lend an ear to the soteriological concerns raised by the Frankfurt Declaration were plainly dismissed from the chair. I left Thailand under the abiding impression that Geneva's new concept of "world mission" – which according to the closing speech of DWME director *Emilio Castro* now had replaced a "missionary era" – not merely indicated a distorted balance between evangelistic and social responsibilities. Rather it seemed to express a fascination by an ideological or syncretistic utopia of the *One World*, which in the minds of its proponents was tantamount with the biblical expectation of the Kingdom of God. To prove the validity of my critical assessment I continued to lecture and to write about the evangelical-conciliar controversy until the year 1989 when it manifested itself once more in the juxta-position of two world conferences held that year, i.e. *San Antonio* and *Manila*. I attended both and witnessed the contrasting replies to the burning question, whether Jesus Christ really is the only way to salvation.

By that time much of my contributions to missiological thought had been made on account of my involvement in the *Lausanne Movement*. At the First International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne 1974 I presented a plenary paper on the topic "World Evangelization and the Kingdom of God", and at the II. ICOWE in Manila I conducted a seminar on "Eschatology and World Evangelization". As a member of the Lausanne Working Group on Theology I attended most of its consultations, for the last time the one on Conversion in Hongkong (1988).

By that time it had become evident that the probably most important problem of our age is the *relationship between the Gospel and non-Christian religions* and the proper approach to the latter. It constitutes a challenge not only to missiologists but to a combined response by representatives of all theological disciplines. This question has constantly engaged me in my own teaching and research. In South Africa I was faced by it in its concrete application to tribal religions and nativistic movements. In Tübingen I entered into the tradition of "Evangelische Religionskunde" (= interpretation of the religions in the light of the Gospel),

which had been so aptly handled by my predecessor Gerhard Rosenkranz, and which from the late 1920ies until the early 1950ies had brought together an alliance of outstanding dogmaticians like *Karl Heim*, *Emil Brunner* and *Paul Althaus* as well as of missiologists like *Karl Hartenstein*, *Hendrik Kraemer*, *Georg Vicedom* and *Walter Freytag*. Their approach does not fit into any of the triple categorical system of *exclusivist*, *inclusivist* and *pluralistic* theologies of religions. It could rather be called *dialectic*. Adherents of non-Christian religions are viewed *diacritically* as sinners who simultaneously are in search *for* God on their flight *from* Him and in a satanically inspired rebellion *against* Him. The evangelic view of non-Christian religions takes into account *three constitutive elements* in them: the *divine* due to general revelation, the human due to man as (distorted) image of God, and the *demonic*. To describe this I have coined the term "*tripolar view of religions*" and have followed this approach consistently. Pleading the *primacy of atonement* in the Church's mission to the gentiles, putting this into an *eschatological framework* and pointing out its *antagonistic dimension*: these are the three main concerns which so far have dominated in my pilgrimage in mission.

But there is still a fourth one, which dogmatically supercedes them all: the *doxological motive*. When after my retirement from regular teaching I now find more time to contemplate on the permanent foundations of mission, it appears all the more evident to me that the ultimate goal in the eternal plan of creation and redemption is nothing else than the *glorification of the Triune God*. This ought, indeed, occupy the highest rank in missionary endeavor. Only in realizing this doxological Trinitarian perspective we can hope to overcome the anthropocentric shortcomings both as Ecumenicals and as Evangelicals, who so often conceive missions basically as meeting human needs, whether spiritual or physical. It is thrilling to discover how organically this classical Trinitarian view, which is safeguarded so faithfully by our *Orthodox brethren*, matches with the salvation-historical concept enhanced by Bible centered Evangelicals. I hope and pray that I may conclude my pilgrimage in mission by having come more closely to such truly an ecumenical synthesis.