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The Expansion of Christendom, its Crisis and the Present Moment

THE EXPANSION of Christianity from the fourteenth century onwards, that is to say in modern times, had many positive aspects, but also a fundamental limitation. It was the expansion of Christendom, as a total historical package, which included, implicitly although not always explicitly, the Christian religion, the churches (first the Catholic, then the Protestant from the eighteenth century onwards). Kierkegaard criticised Christendom in the name of Christianity. Christendom was the 'making worldly' of Christianity, making it a Church identified with the State, a 'positive', objectified, alienated Christianity.¹ The prophet of Copenhagen based his criticism on the subjective, internal values of tormented individuality which called for a 'world turned upside down'.² In fact Christianity is Christendom turned upside down, but perhaps this inversion should have a more radical, essential basis.

I. PRIMITIVE POPULAR CHRISTIANITY AND THE BIRTH OF CHRISTENDOM³

As we have seen from previous contributions, the Christian communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire performed their task of evangelising in an exemplary manner. Among the oppressed classes in the Empire (slaves, slum dwellers in the cities, exiles, etc.), they preached the gospel even when they had to brave the hostility of the State. In fact the persecutions were a sign that the Church threatened the ideological hegemony of the Roman State, by denying the consensus of civil society which accepted the State's authority. During its first three centuries, the Church gained acceptance among the oppressed and did not compromise in any way with the repressive apparatus of the State which maintained a system of slavery. In its pastoral practice the Church had a 'model', a 'model' of a 'people's Church'.

But from the moment that the Church attained first liberty and then dominance within the Empire, in the fourth century, a different 'model' of it appeared. *It was not a different Church* but it conceived itself differently in its relations with the world. The 'model' of *Christendom* (which now emerged as distinct from the 'people's Church') situated its hierarchical structures within the political establishment. The State began to control the Church (like the Emperor of Constantinople, Charlemagne, the *Reyes Católicos* (Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain) or the King of England in the case of the

Church of England, etc.). And at the same time the Church received support (military, economic, etc.) for its pastoral practice among the 'Christian people' (who were now thought of as a more or less passive mass of 'laity'). The Church guaranteed the consensus of civil society in its acceptance of the authority of the State; the State guaranteed the Church's exclusive dominance in religious matters within its frontiers. The ecclesiastical structure tended to link itself to the ruling class in the particular society and thus gave its support and blessing to the ruling social order which was sometimes oppressive. Thus it blessed feudalism and later on colonial capitalism. The ruled and dominated, although they were the 'Christian people', had to suffer the contradiction of submitting to this domination, which they were told was based on Christian principles. This 'model' of Christendom is a long way from the gospel and from Christianity. Christianity has been caught in a structure which enslaves and uses it. This is the subject of this article: the equivocal situation of Christianity since the fourteenth century, when European Christendom expanded throughout the world (Latin America, Africa and Asia), preaching the gospel at the same time as it strove for the expansion of capital: gold and silver for the Iberians, slaves and primary materials for the English, Dutch and French, and every type of merchandise that made possible the increase in industrial or financial capital from the end of the nineteenth century.⁴

2. MERCANTILE CONQUISTADOR EXPANSION OF IBERIAN CHRISTENDOM

In Spain and Portugal, as in no other European kingdoms, there were the geopolitical, military, economic and religious conditions for the *reconquest* of their own territories from the Arabs (which was completed by the taking of Granada in 1492), to be continued in the conquest of the rest of the world. Spanish and Portuguese Christendom already had a century's experience of 'trans-Mediterranean' navigation, which allowed it to escape the enclosure the Muslim world had created in Europe for centuries and to launch out to control the Central and Southern Atlantic.⁵ Enrique the Navigator (1394-1460) enabled Portugal to conquer West Africa, supported by many papal bulls which blessed anti-Islamic crusades. Ceuta fell into Christian hands in 1415 and in 1418 the first Afro-Christian diocese was established. In the same year the Portuguese crossed Cape Bojador. In 1420 they occupied the isles of Madeira and their influence extended over the whole of Atlantic Africa.

In the bull *Rex regum* (4 April 1418) Pope Martin V invited European Christians to unite with the Portuguese in their crusade against the Muslims. Thus Portugal acquired a right of control over the Church (the *Padroado*)⁶ and at the same time the duty to 'propagate the faith' ('...*fidei propagationem et divini cultus augmentum*').⁷ Portugal acquired privileges from the bull *Romanus Pontifex* (8 January 1455) and Spain did likewise in the Canaries and especially in Granada, where through the bull *Provisionis Nostrae* (15 May 1486) it defined the model of colonial Christendom which would be applied in the rest of the world (in Latin America and the Philippines, and also in Africa and Asia by Portugal).

The arrival of the Spaniards in the Caribbean (12 October 1492) and of the Portuguese in Brazil (Cabral arrived in 1500) opened a new horizon to European Christendom. Between 1519 and 1550 the whole Aztec Empire, the Mayas and the Incas, were conquered and evangelised. 30-40 million people (at the highest estimate but at any rate no less than 15 million) accepted Christianity under the domination of Christendom. The mercantile world of the Mediterranean overflowed into the Atlantic. Weapons preceded the gospel and gold and silver were the precious goods, whose acquisition was far more important than the life or death of the natives.

In this violent expansion of Christendom, the aims of Church and State were united.

In the beginning of his *Recodification of the Laws of the Indias* (1681) the King of Spain declared: 'Through his infinite mercy and goodness God our Lord has deigned to give us such a large part of the lordship of this world. ..we have happily succeeded in bringing to the Holy Roman Catholic Church the innumerable peoples and nations who dwell in the Western Indies. ..and others subject to our dominion.'⁸

The first American dioceses were founded in 1504 and 1512 (in Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico) and with them a Church bound up with the ruling State; the ecclesiastical hierarchy was closely linked with the ruling class (who were partly traders and shortly to be traders in negro slaves). There were prophets (like Bartholomew de las Casas) and saints (like Toribio of Mogrovejo, Archbishop of Lima who tried to escape from the system of patronage), but as a rule Christianity remained caught in the toils of Christendom which savagely put down any people who rebelled against oppression.

Portugal, for its part, established contact between the Southern Atlantic and the Indian Ocean and extended its power to India and the Far East. The dioceses of Funchal (1514) in the Madeira Isles, San Salvador (1551) in Brazil, San Salvador (1585) in the Congo, Loanda (1596) in Angola, Goa (1534) in India and Manila (1581) in the Philippines (dependent on Spanish Mexico) extended the Church throughout the world previously violently conquered by soldiers and traders.⁹ Iberian mercantilism, which had first conquered commercial routes from the Arabs and afterwards conquered them at Lepanto, was spiritually legitimised by a preaching of the gospel, which in the eyes of the conquered peoples frequently seemed like forcible acceptance of the conqueror's culture.

Witnesses like St Francis Xavier (who lived in Goa from 1542-1545 and died in Sancian in 1552), Francis Ricci (who arrived in Candragiri in 1601) or Roberto de Nobili (in Madure in 1606) demonstrate Christianity in conflict with Christendom. However, Christendom won, at least on the question of the liturgy. By the bull *Omnium sollicitudo* (12 September 1744) Benedict XIV condemned the Indian liturgy. This shows that Roman Christianity had identified with Latin culture and a great struggle would be needed to free the gospel from European culture, the feudal and monarchical system of Christendom.

3. THE CAPITALIST EXPANSION OF OTHER FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY

The emancipation of Holland from Spanish rule enabled the emergent capitalist nation to take its place as a new colonial power and propagator of Christianity. In 1602 the Dutch East India Company was founded. Its ends were purely commercial but it also employed missionaries. Years later Guilherme Usselinx founded the West Indies Company with religious aims 'to lead many thousands of people to the light of truth and eternal blessedness'.¹⁰ The 'model' of Christendom appeared again, this time not with Catholics but with Protestants and linked not to mercantilism but to capitalism which was moving towards the industrial revolution.

The Dutch made their presence felt through their companies and their missionaries in Australia (1605), Indochina (they took Solor in 1613); they fought the Portuguese over Angola and they ruled part of Brazil (1630-1654); they took Malacca in 1641 and in 1614 they founded New Amsterdam (which was to become New York). The presence of capitalist traders with their ships and their armies enabled the missionaries to preach and the missionaries for their part legitimised the action of the colonisers and conquerors (the Europeans' 'civilising mission'). Once more the gospel had been absorbed by the 'model' of Christendom. In 1668 Ernest de Welz, a missionary and preacher of Christianity, died in Dutch Guyana.

From the sixteenth century onwards England fought with Spain for the dominion of the Caribbean with its pirates under State orders. In 1655 it occupied Jamaica in the heart of the 'American Mediterranean'. The Church of England was not linked to the State in the same way as the Catholic Church in Spain, but the results were the same. It struggled for dominance with the bourgeois class which came to power with Cromwell. Slowly England displaced Holland in all the seas. In 1639 they were at Madras, in 1661 in Bombay, in 1696 in Calcutta, English colonists arrived in North America in 1620 with the Pilgrim Fathers. It is interesting to note that the Society of New England (the first English missionary society) was founded in 1649, the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge in 1698 to support the missions in India and in 1701 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (which came to mean something like *Propaganda Fide* for the Catholics). The expansion of the British Empire brought with it the Anglican evangelisation of its colonies.

France was not left out either. It made its presence felt in the empty spaces in the colonisable world: in 1608 Champlain founded Quebec, for a short time the French occupied part of Brazil, and their pirates sailed the Caribbean Sea (which resulted in the occupation of the islands of Santo Domingo, Haiti and many other islands: Guadalupe, Martinica, French Guyana, etc.). In 1643 they occupied the Reunion Islands in Africa, and in 1664 the 'French East India Company' was founded in competition with the British.

But the great expansion of the missions from these three powers (Holland, Britain and France, to which we should add Denmark) took place in the nineteenth century, after the Restoration (of the French monarchy) made possible the explosive growth of European capitalism in its form which succeeded free trade: imperialism (centring round the decade 1870-1880). Geopolitically it was Africa, already bled white since the sixteenth century by slavery, which was the centre of European *pillage*.¹¹ In 1787 the Methodists had founded their missionary system. Shortly afterwards the Baptist Missionary Society was founded and then in 1795, the interdenominational London Missionary Society. On the Catholic front the White Fathers were founded by Lavignerie in 1868 and the Lutherans had the Evangelisch-lutherische Missionsgesellschaft (1836). Between 1849 and 1856 Livingstone began his journeys, which were continued shortly afterwards by Stanley (1879-1881). This is what brought about the 'carving up' of Africa in Berlin (November 1884-February 1885). The 'body' of Africa was cut up into pieces which the Christian colonising States divided 'rationally'. When the Boers were defeated in 1902, the whole of Africa was one huge colony. Along the railways and roads which transported the wealth extracted from the colonies, the missionaries travelled, justifying once more the power of the rulers of the world. Beside the British and French soldiers, the merchants, the mining companies, the exporters of primary materials came the flourishing Christian missions. Many natives were converted. Becoming a Christian meant ceasing to be African or Asiatic (just as in the sixteenth century the American Indians suffered the same fate). The Christian religion had almost become identified with 'western civilisation'. The model of Christendom linked to the expansion of capitalist imperialism became world-wide. British domination lasted till 1945. Another Anglo-Saxon power was to take its place.

In fact the thirteen British colonies in North America had attained their independence in 1776. They had grown. Their messianic Christianity grew together with the expansion of free trading capitalism and the small landowners in New England. This was a long way from 1649 when the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England was founded to convert the Indians. First it was necessary to reach Texas and California. From 1898 onwards a missionary Protestantism appeared in Puerto Rico and Cuba, then in Panama and the Caribbean, the whole of Latin America (after the Congress of Panama in 1916), in Africa, and especially in Pacific Asia. The American

Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had been founded in 1810 and the American Bible Society in 1816 and their missionaries crossed the seas. Thus it appeared that the Christendoms of developed capitalism had universalised Christianity. However, the limitations of this 'missionary spirit' soon became apparent. Although it produced great heroism and even sanctity in many cases, and at the subjective and individual level it was a worthy cause, it was tainted with a fundamental ingenuousness about its ultimate real significance: the 'missionary zeal' of European and North American expansion legitimised, in the name of Christianity, their domination of all the rest of the world: Africa, Asia, Latin America. ...This is the fundamental ambiguity of the whole modern enterprise of evangelisation. The missions imposed their own culture and Christendom used the churches to guarantee the hegemony of the State and the ruling classes. They imposed a consensus among the colonised people, which allowed oppression to go unchecked.

4. MOVEMENTS OF EMANCIPATION AND THE CRISIS OF CHRISTENDOM

Byzantine Christianity was destroyed in the middle of the fifteenth century and at the same time Latino-German medieval Christendom suffered the crisis of passing from feudal decay to the rise of capitalism. From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards another crisis arose, which will continue well into the twenty-first century. This is the process of the emancipation of the colonies (political and military emancipation) which continues as a struggle for self-determined development (financial, industrial and technological) and the passage from a capitalist to socialist society (a process which has been undertaken by 40 per cent of mankind). The crisis will get worse for Europeans and North American Christendoms. And worse still for the Third World churches, confronted with the process of national emancipation and liberation from dependence on capitalist regimes. This will require the creation of a new 'model' for the Church (perhaps it might be an old 'model'-the earliest one?).

After the emancipation of the United States and Haiti in the eighteenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies became independent during the first quarter of the nineteenth century (with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898). Colonised Asia had to wait till the Second World War to gain its independence (in particular the independent republic of India under Nehru in 1950). Africa's independence came even later (Ghana attained independence with Nkrumah in 1957). This process which is by no means complete presents the churches founded in the Third World in a 'missionary spirit' with a double challenge. They must become separate from the founding churches and then, if possible (as in Latin America), to try to form a national model of Christendom (in relation to the new independent State). This re-establishment of a national Christendom in Third World countries is not possible when Christians are a very small minority (as in Asia), only when they are a majority (as in Zaire). At any rate this is the end of the age of missions and the beginning of the relative autonomy of the churches in the Third World. Christendom dominated by Europe and the United States (whether Catholic or Protestant, from Spain, Portugal, Holland, Britain, France, Denmark, Belgium or the US) is now confronted by the Third World churches and their growing awareness of the need for Christianity expressed in terms of their own cultures and not a dubious dominating universalism.

Added to this there is a second crisis. The countries dominated by British (now North American) capitalism, are faced with a struggle for liberation from their financial, industrial and technological dependence on the central capitalist countries (Europe, Japan and the US). In the seventeenth century Protestant Christians originated

capitalism, and after many crises Catholicism adapted to its ends at the end of the nineteenth century. Today it is difficult to grasp the needs of a post-capitalist society. It requires the abandonment of that model of Christendom and the deposing of the State and the bourgeois ruling class as the propounders of this model. The Third World churches have to seek a new way to evangelise their newly emerging societies.

5. TOWARDS A NEW 'MODEL' OF THE CHURCH?

If Christendom was the 'model' in which the hierarchical structure of the Church took its place in political society allied with the system's ruling class, legitimising the State and, vice versa, using the State to enable it to accomplish certain pastoral tasks¹² among its Christian people, this model is no longer viable for two reasons. Either the emancipated State no longer wishes to fulfil this function (as in Asia and the majority of African nations) or the State is no longer capitalist (as in Vietnam or Cuba for example). In both cases the Church must take its place in civil society and begin (without the aid of 'establishment' by the State) to preach the gospel straight. But in its preaching to the whole society it must start with the poor and oppressed, in whatever situation the country happens to be at the moment. It may be in the final throes of capitalist domination (which can last many decades and produce many martyrs, like the Archbishop of El Salvador, Mons. Oscar Arnulfo Romero) .It may be actually engaged in the struggle for liberation. It may be in a period when an ill-conceived 'democratic centralism' exhorts its people to fight to strengthen democracy in socialist countries. The Church must be a people's Church; today in the Third World it must stand with the people. This siding with the oppressed requires anew 'model' of the Church, or perhaps a return to the model that existed before the creation of Christendom.

This is why choosing the poor, preaching the gospel from local communities, the presence of Christians in the fight for liberation (as in Nicaragua), the struggle for human rights, and the witnesses of countless Christian martyrs are signs of change, of the birth in the Church of a new 'model' a new way of seeing the relationship between the Church and the world, the hierarchy and the State, the Christian faith and history.

The Church's position will be different in different situations, in the main capitalist countries, the dependent capitalist countries, developed socialist countries, etc. It will not be the same in Poland where Christian workers are fighting to democratise the socialist system in the name of their faith, as in El Salvador where Christian workers and peasants are fighting to free their country from capitalism itself. In both cases the Church, if it is *with the people* and supporting the people's cause and not that of the political society or the ruling classes, must have as its model a 'people's Church'. The model of Christendom must be superseded, looking sometimes to the past and sometimes to the future. Nothing in history is perfect, although some acts are more paradigmatic than others.

That is why when Jesus was asked whether he was the Messiah or was the Messiah still to come, he replied, 'The poor have the gospel preached to them'. If the Church preaches the gospel to the poor from among the poor, it will be a 'Church of the poor'-as John XXIII liked to call it-a *people's Church*. The present contradiction in the Church is the contradiction between the two models: one representing the power of the Church allied to the rich States and ruling classes, the other the Church siding with the oppressed and fighting for the freedom of the poor countries. The contradiction between capitalism and socialism is also a contradiction in the Church. A Church on the model of a 'people's Church' is the one which has the hope of fulfilling its mission, preaching the gospel, growing, proceeding towards the Parousia in a future egalitarian

society, without rich and poor countries, even though new forms of oppression may arise to be combated in their turn.

The crisis of Christendom offers a great opportunity to Christian creativity. Christendom is dying. Let us be glad because this will enable Christianity to grow.

Translated by Dinah Livingstone

Notes

1. See *Werke* (Jena 1909) VIII p. 319; VII pp. 61ff.
2. 'Eine verkehrte Welt' (see Pap., p. 129).
3. See vol. 1, chap. 3 of our *Historia General de la Iglesia en America Latina* (due shortly from Sigueme, Salamanca; Orbis Books, New York; Vozes, Petrópolis). Commissioned by CEHILA. And see the bibliography therein.
4. This is the subject of part 1, vol. 1 of the work cited in note 3.
5. See Pierre Chanu *Conquête et exploitation des nouveaux mondes* (Paris 1977).
6. '...jus patronatus et praesentandi personas idoneas ad quaecumque ecclesiae et ecclesiastica. ..' (*Bullar. Portug.* I p. 99).
7. *Ibid.* p. 31.
8. Book 1, para. 1 law 1.
9. See Kenneth Scott Latourette *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids 1976) III, V, VI and VII.
10. C. Ligtenberg Willem Usselinx (Utrecht 1913) p. 69 (quoting Klaus van der Grijp).
11. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan *Colonialism in Africa* (1870-1960 Cambridge) I-II, 1969-1970. See especially chap. 14: 'Missionary and humanitarian aspects of Imperialism' (I pp. 462ff.).
12. See para. 1 of this article.