

Postmodernism and the Crisis of the Paradigm Change in the Christian Mission

Ovidiu Moldovan

Doctoral School of Theology and Religious Studies,
University of Bucharest, Romania
ovidiu-lucian.moldovan@s.unibuc.ro

ABSTRACT: Postmodernism brought about changes that affected almost all aspects of social and religious life. The Christian world's perspective on its mandate to mission all nations of the earth has substantially redefined itself after the 1950s to bring itself into line with the new globalizing mentality. The old missionary paradigm was replaced by a new one, and the consequences at the level of theology, especially Protestant theology, were consistent, often nefarious, and especially affected the church in the long run. One of the new attributes of missionary work and Christian theology, in general, is relevance. It will often decide what the essence and meaning of the Christian perspective is in the face of the great challenges of the world today. This article argues that the church today is facing great and important challenges. Adhering to the old mission paradigms can jeopardize not only its present actions but future survival.

KEYWORDS: postmodernism, mission, paradigm, globalizing mentality, relevance

1. Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century, it has become increasingly evident that humanity is about to enter a new age of history. Postmodernism, a socio-cultural emulation that emerged as a reaction to the devastation caused by the two world wars, popularised the thesis of the 'programmatic rejection' of the concepts or notions that had previously underpinned the idea of modernity. Raschke sees postmodernism as a kind of philosophical and theological iconoclasm designed to dynamite the doctrinal position of Western Christianity.

Built on the idea of a relationship with a personal Christ, Western Protestantism will propose a GloboChrist, that is, a universal, global body as the new Body of Christ. The new globalized Church becomes a network, each believer representing a node of that network (Raschke 2008, 21). The failure of this project of modernity (Habermas) was argued by some thinkers by evoking the horrors of war and the collapse of that Eurocentric, Christian,

Enlightenment, racist, colonialist and industrialist mentality. Braidotti identified this European human ideal that lay at the foundation of modernity in da Vinci's depiction of Vitruvian man (Braidotti, 2016, 25).

Modernism had aimed for world peace, but unfortunately failed. Taylor, considered that this period was characterized by a great exaltation of the autonomy of human reason and its involvement in all areas of life (Taylor 2000, 73). In contrast, postmodernism was directed against metanarratives, considered to be the vehicles of modernist ideals. This led to the distortion of the perception of science (truth), culture (the beautiful) and religion (the sense of moral good).

The metanarrative, Bauckham explains, represents for the exponents of the new wave "the attempt to tell a single story about the whole of human history in order to ascribe a single meaning to human nature" (Bauckham 2003, 87). The reason why postmodernism set out to abolish metanarratives was because they were guilty of being totalizing and supportive of the thesis of societal progress and human nature. Lyotard, for his part, has sown a general suspicion of all metanarratives (which he labels authoritarian and oppressive), which of course includes the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. He notes, "Science has been at odds with narratives since its inception. According to its own criteria, most of these stories turn out to be fables... Simplifying to the maximum, we regard as 'postmodern' the distrust of meta-stories" (Lyotard 1993, 15). The church, a promoter of its own set of meta-narratives, has been directly affected in its ontological (those that define the church's being) and existential (which concern the church's relationship to the individual and to the world) underpinnings. Curiously, the extent of the religious transformations during this period is almost completely ignored by historians. Jenkins notes, "Neglect of religious factors at the turn of the millennia can be seen as comically short-sighted, on a par with those who would talk about eighteenth-century history without mentioning the French Revolution" (Jenkins, 2002, 1). The period of the 1960s, then, saw an unprecedented escalation of attacks on key concepts of Christianity. One of the most targeted was that of Christian mission. The so-called 'Christian' world abounded in 'missions' and 'missionary strategies', but with an equally strong counter-reaction from the secular world (Rotaru 2006, 251-266).

Moreau distinguishes between 'mission' and 'missions'. If Christian mission was defined in the past as 'what the Church does for God in the world', some speak today of missions that can be projected onto socially nuanced goals, but not necessarily very clear in their biblical legitimation. These are directions along the lines of philanthropy, education, medical support, anti-hunger efforts, developing inter-ethnic relations, etc. (Moreau, Corwin and McGee 2015, 70). It had become clear that the Christian perspective would soon face an important paradigm shift, not only in its missionary approach (suspected of being a disguised form of colonialism), but in many of its doctrinal, practical and institutional components. At a certain point, a certain semantic tension even arises between the old meaning of the concept of Christian mission and another, which is emerging on the horizon:

global mission. In Raschke's terms, 'globalization' - the heraldic signifier of the new postmodern society - is no longer about 'what' and 'where', but much more about 'however' and 'wherever' (Raschke 2008, 30). True, the new terms are vague, strange, different from those inherited from the Protestant tradition. Many of the 'new missionaries' will adjust their 'visions', bewitched by the promises of globalization (Taylor 2000, 60). However, Taylor argues, to doubt that Christ's Church will be able to face the tempting prospect of globalization is misplaced. "Viewed from a biblical perspective, it is globalization that must confront the Church's perspective" (Taylor 2000, 60).

2. Christian mission to the end of the modern period

Until the 1960s, the concept of 'Christian mission' held a perhaps broad, but nevertheless concrete meaning: mission was the crossing of cultural barriers in order to establish new human relationships in the name of Christ and to plant new local communities of believers. Specific reference was made to the following structural-functional aspects: a) sending groups of missionaries (men, women, with or without much training in missiology) to certain areas targeted by the strategy of the local churches, b) establishing a set of 'missionary activities' (basically preaching, teaching, medical care), c) delimiting an area of impact of that missionary circle, d) providing material support by the missionary organization running those activities, e) estimating the mission field, that un-evangelized territory to be explored in a later phase of mission expansion, f) building a centre of operations for that mission, g) motivating the local religious community to provide spiritual support (fasting and prayer) during the mission, finally, h) providing the minimum set of specialised (lay) services that that mission can offer.

The fundamental biblical concepts of the mission of the Christian Church until near the end of the second millennium are broadly the five listed by John Stott: mission, evangelism, dialogue, salvation and conversion (Stott 2008, 9). There is a danger, however, that the new times prophesied by postmodernism will change the meanings of these terms, giving them semantic connotations other than those proper to Scripture. These fundamental concepts, Stott argues, must answer the most important question facing the church: What is the responsibility left by Christ to Christians to the rest of the world?

The model of modern mission, Bosch explains, was biblical, taking up the agenda of the Great Commission: spreading the gospel, converting unbelievers, and ultimately planting new churches (Bosch 2011, 22). These biblical categories, however, Stott warns, should never have come under the influence of postmodern trends of social renewal or idealistic trends militating for world peace. The inner crisis of the 'Christian' world, coupled with attacks on its recent past, should have awakened Christianity from its centuries-long numbness and confronted it with a

new reality. The world was changing significantly in the second half of the 20th century, and the Church was forced to resist this trend in order to survive.

Bosch (2011) identified a number of mutations affecting human society during this period. First, he observes an unprecedented development of technology having a colossal impact on everyday life. Then, the Christian West slowly became secularized. At the same time, as the de-Christianization of the 'civilized world', other religions claiming to be socially integrated are also emerging in the same geographical area. Many of these non-believers turn out to be far more devoted to their religion than Christians. On the other hand, Christianity is beginning to feel a general sense of guilt due to the excesses of the colonial period, but especially the atrocities of the two world wars. This feeling will lead to a kind of operational inhibition, considerably diminishing the missionary dynamic in the West. The world was suddenly faced with the phenomenon of irreversible segregation between rich and poor, and between Christians and those of other religions. But the centre of gravity of Christianity no longer belonged to Europe. It is relocated to the countries of the East (China, South Korea) or even Africa. These territories become the new launching pads for most mission projects. Another change, somehow related to the 'autonomy' standard of the churches, is visible in the lack of missionary involvement, something once considered essential (Bosch 2011, 24). Also of great impact is the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal movements. Some experts estimate that they now account for about 25% of all practising Christians (Chua et al. 2017, 3). Ormerod, a promoter of 'globalized' cohabitation between Catholicism and Pentecostal movements, states:

In almost every respect, Pentecostalism is at the other pole from the Catholic Church: its short historical heritage, its organizational renunciation of a centralized structure, its informal ecclesiology. But what the two share is their identity as global movements. Almost every book written about or by Pentecostals in recent decades traces the global nature of this movement (Ormerod and Clifton 2009, 26).

The mass success of Pentecostalism is probably due to the adjustment of its strategies to the specificity of globalization trends, a trend that has been felt since the beginning of the 20th century. The openness of many Pentecostal groups to any form of dialogue, even with those of other faiths, however, creates an extremely dangerous theological gap that can endanger the integrity of the Word preached in missionary endeavors. The emphasis on mission and evangelism, coupled with considerable resistance to theological pressures of all kinds, has led to the considerable growth of this denomination, creating a fourth Christian force (alongside Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism).

Mission, Stott observes, no longer signifies that old and exclusively soteriological concern for the enlargement of the Kingdom of God (visible especially in the patristic period and much less so, it is true, in Reformation times). It is now

replaced by the new ecumenical, humanistic, reconciling concern for the harmony of peaceful cooperation between peoples. The problem is that, in the new understanding of mission, it is in fact the world that is preparing to dictate the church's agenda and turn the church into its instrument. Evangelism originally had the strict sense of proclaiming the Gospel to the unsaved, with preaching taking the central place. Today, a redefinition of the Gospel message in terms of its recipients is called for, with a change in preaching methods and the vocabulary used. While social action was initially only one of the instruments of evangelisation, it is now tending to become a partner in it. If in the past the Church was perceived as strict, Stott, in his new missionary perspective after 1974, proposes a serving Church in the same way as her Head, Christ, served (Stott 2008, 32). Dialogue with non-believers was considered in the past as 'dangerous', even bordering on compromise. Dialogue with non-believers was once considered 'dangerous', even bordering on compromise. Now, however, the dialogue seems to be encouraged as a proof of Christian authenticity, humility, integrity and sensitivity. It is as if the Church is sent out to dialogue with the world about whatever the world needs. Someone, however, reminded, "It is not our job to save the world, but to point people to Christ!" Such a proposal, that of an unrestricted dialogue, must, however, be viewed with great reserve.

In attempting to discover the cause of these mutations or transitions, Bauckham has developed an interesting perspective on mission in the modern period, starting from the relationship between the universal and the particular (Bauckham 2003, 83). When it comes to God's will with humanity, Bauckham notes, it is important to understand that God's universal plan with all humanity is revealed in the particular example of Jesus. This particular, when it comes to the gift of salvation, is a multiplied reality, one carried from one individual to another in the direction of the universal, i.e. the Kingdom of God. The blessing of salvation is indeed intended for all people. But it can only be received when it is shared from one person to another, that is, from individual to individual. The plan of evangelization remains a movement from the individual to the general and not vice versa. However, some Christians remain stuck in the individualistic plane (Protestantism), while others have moved irreversibly towards universalism (Orthodoxy and Catholicism).

3. The paradigm shift in Christian mission

The next paradigm that has become increasingly visible over the last 60 years is postmodernism. Some scholars already see humanity as firmly anchored in this new perspective. But in order to highlight the shift from modernism to postmodernism, one must first consider the starting point. Bosch identifies five essential missiological 'answers' that the Enlightenment offers from its old rationalist perspective: 1) Christianity propagated itself in the way of a unique religious experience, 2) As something strictly related to personal experience, 3) As something more rational

than scientific 4) As a law that addresses all of humanity, and 5) As an element that liberates humanity from any other kind of religious addition (Bosch 2011, 302). It was these aspects that shaped the modern paradigm proposing both philosophy and missionary praxis.

Contrasting the postmodern paradigm with that of modernism, Bosch suggests that it would be necessary to give new confidence to reason (which is disavowed in postmodernism), but not in a reductionist sense, as the Enlightenment did. The Enlightenment had eliminated 'religious reason', those patterns of reason which, in premodernism, were linked to the religious component of the human being. Reality had to include again the religious reason, which for Huntington for example, lies at the foundation of all civilization (Huntington 2011, 77). Moreover, it seems that postmodernism does not impose or reveal any existing tension between science and religion. Such a circumstance, Bosch believes, would even be attractive to the entire Christian community. Veith, almost as enthusiastically, writes: "Some Christians may believe that, with the end of modernism, the postmodern era could mean a revival of classical Christianity. They see postmodernism in very vivid colours. Although I am somewhat of the same opinion, I also see a new secular ideology replacing the modernist perspective. Like modernism, postmodernism is equally hostile to Christianity, but for different reasons" (Veith 1994, XI).

Another long-criticised aspect is the attempt to objectify the world. Man has come to treat everything as an object and to place himself affectively (as subject) outside that object. This philosophical approach has profound implications in shaping the missiological ways of today's world. The paradigm shift has also meant a shift from a historicist perspective (in modernism) to an eschatological one (in postmodernism). This obviously also affects the theological horizon. The seductive, yet illusory, image of progress, proclaimed with such conviction in the Enlightenment, has led to the fabrication of a philosophy of colonialist expansion. Initially, the aim of missionary societies was to respond in a timely manner to the needs of the people in the area of missionary operations. Later, in the last years of the 20th century, these societies began to create 'development projects'. It was clear that missionary objectives were suddenly beginning to differ from those that were initially purely charitable. Now the idea of 'rural reconstruction', 'industrial development', etc. was being pursued. Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants alike were joining in such projects. But the effect is not as expected. Rich countries, Bosch admits, have become richer, while poor countries have become poorer. Enlightenment objectivism has succeeded - says Polanyi - in totally falsifying the pre-modern conception of truth (Bosch 2011, 308). A solution to this impasse, in the postmodern context, would be to create a new kind of truth, not the objective one, but a 'personal' one. The commitment to personal knowledge is placed above objective knowledge, being a type of knowledge without accurately capturing the subject to be known. This form of 'cognitive engagement' might impose a particular 'truth' as valid, just because people choose it to be so.

4. Christian mission in postmodernism

The intention to redefine the mission is relatively new. Until the Jerusalem conference in 1928, the Church had not been concerned with the global mission effort. Then followed meetings in which terms were chosen which could most clearly define the Church's mission (*kerygma, koinonia, diakonia, martyria, leitourgia*, etc.) were discussed in turn. It became clear that changes would occur in the context and premises of mission. The changes required recontextualisation in the context of mission theology. As Schreier recognized: 'religion... can provide the *telos* that a global system misses, a coherent and ordered vision' (Ormerod and Clifton 2009, 14). Here are some of these changes: a) The shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the West of the industrialized world (Europe and America) to the global South (Africa and the Far East). Christianity, it is true, had never been an eminently 'Euro-Western' religion, but its sphere of influence had been somewhat fixed in Europe and North America for much of history. But this was to change after 1950, so that today the Christian majority is no longer to be found in Western countries, but rather somewhere in Africa. Tennent recalls that Christianity Today magazine noted years ago that 85% of the members of Yale University's Campus Crusade for Christ were Asian, while the university's Buddhist meditation program was exclusively white. It was also said that there are more Anglican believers in Nigeria than in all the Anglican churches in Europe and America combined. There are more evangelicals in Nepal than in Spain. At the same time, India is sending over 41,000 cross-cultural missionaries around the world (Tennent 2010, 26). b) Changing the character of local church mission to multinational and multi-denominational. Thousands and thousands of missionaries are being sent to other parts of the world from southern countries as part of a multi-denominational effort. c) Changing the character of the mission field. Expansion of the world's urban territory. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities, with urbanization on the rise. Mission philosophy needs to be readapted from one aimed at the rural (going all the way to the aboriginal) to one suited to the urban population. d) The unprecedented connectivity of today's population. The Internet and mobile telephony, new technologies that continue to develop, are having an increasing impact accelerating the trend of globalization. e) Changing demographic balance. Unprecedented migratory movements are still taking place. It is estimated that more than 230 million people were living outside their own countries at the end of the 1990s. In recent years, huge masses of people have been moving from the East and Africa to Europe.

All this general imagery of the new paradigm of mission requires, as is only natural, a missiological reorientation of the Church. Here are some proposals that are put forward in the hope of 'accommodating' Christian mission to the current face of the mission field: i) New missionary strategies will have to take into account the complexities of today's global urban environment. Missionary 'techniques' will

be very different from those of William Carey or Hudson Taylor. Mission in the neighbourhood of the contemporary urban megapolis will not resemble mission in the rural steppe of past centuries. ii) Mission strategies and structures will need to reflect the global nature of the Church. Partnerships will be ways to better meet the challenges presented by historical patterns of power manifestation and resource distribution. Ormerod, writes: "Christianity is not a spectator of globalization, but one of its agents, one of the forces that have expanded the possibilities for interconnection between people, the spread of social or political ideas and cultural links" (Ormerod and Clifton 2009, 9).

Perhaps a fierce rejection of globalization per se is not exactly the wisest choice. Rather, what is expected of the Church and its media exponents is a well-founded critique of the way in which politics, economics and technology - as instruments of globalization - are in danger of providing the premises for injustice, poverty and environmental destruction. iii) Local churches need to see themselves as centres of mission, rather than seeing mission as something that happens elsewhere, in a space outside the church. iv) The church needs to get used to sharing the Word anywhere and in any conditions. New innovative ways of helping and equipping those who mission in different places are needed. v) Mission must cease to be the 'job' of a few 'specialists'. Mission objectives must concern all believers, whether in the local church or in the diaspora. Mission agencies will be forced to take all these scenarios into account.

But what can be the harmful effects of the new 'globalizing' paradigms of mission on local religious communities? (Rotaru 2014, 532-541) One of Bosch's assumptions about the new models of mission was that of a missionary ecumenism, an inter-ethnic and multi-denominational partnership. Usually - the case history of recent history attests - ecumenical consensus has not led to anything doctrinally good. Concessions made in the face of traditional mega-cults have caused greater inconvenience than those advantages of conclusion. Yet evangelical Christianity has its own response to the current global needs of humanity. That unity of purpose of humanity is also one of the eschatological tasks of the Church. Ormerod, states that 'within this community, diversity is not abolished, but is placed in that space of communal faith' (Ormerod and Clifton 2009, 13). The emphasis on 'diversity', even if it seems justified in that space defined by the exhortation 'forbear one another' has much wider repercussions, because it involves the framing of new missionary strategies. Moreover, the view that the old paradigm of mission is outdated, in the sense of anachronistic, seems to be embraced by a growing number of theologians, and not necessarily of all shades (Antone 2008). Moreover, there are those like Hans Ucko, a priest in the Church of Sweden and a member of the World Council of Churches, who believe that the term 'mission' should even be deleted from the Christian vocabulary, it brings with it a negative charge in the direction of missionary complicity with colonialism. Such an association, says Ucko, only makes inter-ethnic dialogue more difficult (Antone 2008).

S. Wesley Ariarajah, a Sri Lankan ecumenist, put forward the following four proposals for changing the missionary paradigm in order to make mission more credible and relevant for the 21st century: 1) From an exclusive to an inclusive understanding of mission. In the modernist paradigm, mission was understood as the Church's ministry of bringing God to unbelievers. This missionary model is also called 'Noah's ark'. The Church, like Noah's ark, contains the elect who are set apart to be saved. Then the saved will come out of the ark and try to save others outside the ark. The model is a limiting one, Ariarajah says, and avoids contact or partnership with others outside. Or, this can be interpreted as Christians being hostile to those of other religions. Alternatively, Ariarajah proposes an *inclusive* understanding of mission. This would mean that Christians mission for a God already present and active in the world, their role being to bring the world to God. In conclusion, mission is not the monopoly of Christians. They participate on the mission field alongside others. It is obvious, however, that the Church runs the risk of mixing the Gospel message with other discourses that are foreign and possibly antagonistic to Scripture. 2) From conversion to healing. Both situations define the main objective of the mission. In pre-modernism and modernism, conversion was the main objective of mission. Now this objective is denounced as limiting and even narrow. It is often anathematised under the heading of proselytism. In the new paradigm, conversion is seen as a new orientation of man towards God and his neighbour, but without recourse to religious perceptions or denominational labels. The aim of mission becomes to reconcile, heal and unify. It actually has the meaning of righting all social and economic wrongs. The risk of such a tendency is to turn mission into a form of socio-political activism. The mission would focus on charitable aspects and not necessarily on soteriological ones. The great drawback of such a perspective is that it positions the Church as a provider of 'worldly' services instead of preserving its character as the Body of Christ or the embassy of the Kingdom of God. 3) From majority to minority. Ariarajah believes that the traditional meaning of conversion would imply the colonialist, imperialist desire to bring more and more members into the Church in order to 'be stronger by quantity'. Somehow, the power of the Church is visualized by the number of those who belong to it through membership. But, says the new paradigm, the aim should not be to bring everyone into the Church, to be the majority. On the contrary, one can remain a minority, a 'remnant' (Romans 9:26-28). The power of salvation (Matthew 5:13) lies not in quantity, say such missiologists, but in quality. The conclusion is that we should no longer fight for an increasing number of converts, but insist on the witness of love and justice. Again, such a perspective distorts the missionary praxis: that of facilitating the attainment of salvation. The new paradigm sees mission as a therapy to be used only if one feels the need and only for a certain time. 4) From doctrinal topics to deep spiritual concerns. In the past, the main background of the proclamation of the Gospel message was apologetic. The intention was to demonstrate that the Christian religion is superior to all others and the only true

one. Now, says Ariarajah, such strategies will have no future. But missionaryism, devoid of a certain doctrine of mission, becomes simply a social-political program. The need for salvation is subtly replaced by the need for solidarity. But you cannot enter the Kingdom by being only 'in solidarity' with Christ, without having been changed by him.

5. Conclusions

The Church of contemporary times faces great challenges. If it does not do mission, it will slowly die. Huntington argues that, "in the long run Mohammed will win. Between 1900-2000 Christianity grew from 26.9% to 29.9% of the total population. Islam grew from 12.4% to 19.2%. Islam is likely to reach 30% by 2025" (Huntington 2012, 86). If it does mission in terms of the new paradigms, it will ultimately suffer the same fate... Even if it seems anachronistic, the only remedy is for the Church to remain in its old paradigm of mission (Rotaru 2012,5). This does not always, it is true, fit into the already outlined frameworks of globalization, but it respects the ontological prescriptions that guarantee Christ's Church its continued perpetuation (Matthew 28:19,20). The theology of mission must be articulated in a perfectly balanced way within the general whole of Christian theology, the fundamental pillars of which are: the theology of God, the theology of man and the theology of the order of created things. The question is, says Richard Bauckham: Can the biblical narrative, where the guarantee of truth is offered only by the correct reference to the Word of God, stand up to postmodern narratives? What might lead to the formulation of an answer, Bauckham argues, is that biblical metanarrative has always been in opposition to the world's metanarrative. The character of biblical metanarrative has always been one of counter-narrative. As long as Christians retain this adversarialness, it will be possible to talk about Christian mission (Rotaru 2017, 57-76), and by implication, the Church of Christ.

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