

# Mission in the Context of Universities

- Joy Thomas SVD

It is fashionable today to speak of paradigm shifts. The *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* paradigm before Vatican II gave way to “all religions are ways of salvation” after the great Council. The Second Vatican Council was a very significant event in the history of the Church. Our response to the renewed vision, proposed by the Council, in tune with the changing conditions of the world and the reading the signs of the time, can be described as a paradigm shift in the traditional Christian Mission. Thomas Kuhn introduced the term paradigm shift and showed how almost every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavour is first a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, with old paradigms.

In this sense the presence of a “missionary” in a Secular University in India, that too as Professor to a Chair, could be seen as a consequence of a paradigm shift in the missionary thinking of the Church. The original purpose of our missionary service as recorded in the opening number of the SVD Constitution reads, “Since God wills that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, he sent his Son as redeemer to form the one people of God from all nations through the power of the Spirit. Our missionary service helps gather the scattered children of the Lord and hasten the hour when all will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (101). What is then the meaning and purpose of ‘mission’ in the context of universities?

## **The Vision of St. Arnold Janssen**

The life of St. Arnold Janssen, the founder of the Divine Word Missionaries, gives expression to Jesus' vision: a Kingdom where all peoples and cultures reach the fullness of life in the loving embrace of God. As sons and daughters of the God of love, we recognise ourselves as brothers and sisters in a new reality that challenges us to overcome the obstacles that we encounter in our daily journey towards God's reign of love: racism, fear of other religious ways, lack of social solidarity and unjust structures, and above all lack of faith in God.

Arnold insisted that missionaries be educated in the social sciences so that they could systematically study the cultures and languages of other nations and so be able to appreciate the cultural richness of the people with whom they would work. Our Founder was an educationalist and had a vision for higher education. He not only encouraged the members to specialize in various disciplines but also to be ardent promoters of higher education. The Society of the Divine Word has a fairly well-established tradition of running universities and institutions of higher education. My work draws substance from this legacy.

## **Historic Event**

The University of Mysore is one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the country, established in 1916 by N. Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the Maharaja of Mysore. It is the sixth university established in India and the very first in the State of Karnataka. The

ancient and prestigious University of Mysore took a unique decision to institute a Chair in Christianity in 1979 from an endowment by the diocese of Mysore. The late professor D. S. Amalorpavadass was the first visiting professor of the Christianity Chair.

A full-fledged independent post-graduate department of Christian Studies was established in 1980. The purpose was to promote advanced studies and research in Christianity in the secular, multi-religious, interdisciplinary and pluralistic context of India, with a view to bring Christianity as an academic and scientific discipline. The Study of Christianity in the socio-economic and political setting of Indian reality aims at also promoting national integration, social and religious harmony through research and dialogue into those basics that are common to all religions and ideologies.

The department is the first of its kind in the whole of India. It was a gesture of magnanimity and breadth of vision on the part of the university authorities in the best interests and the high ideals of the highest seat of learning in the country. It is also a measure of the open attitude and secular outlook of the Government of Karnataka. The University follows a liberal policy and maintains its secular character in its academic pursuit.

We have a second full-fledged Department of Christian Studies in Madras University with Fr. Felix Wilfred as professor and head of the Department. Other visiting professors are: Sr. Rosetta, Chair for Christian Studies, University of Calicut, Fr. John Fernandes, Chair in Christianity, Mangalore University and Fr. V.M. Gnanaprakasam SJ, Hon. Professor, Dept. of Christian Studies, M. K. University, Madurai.

### **Vision of the Chair in Christianity**

The vision is that of the goal towards which all men, women and religions and nations tend in historical movement and spiritual pilgrimage: all-round liberation, and self-realisation through God realisation, and building up a just society through a process of humanisation and universal brotherhood and sisterhood. The overall aim of the Chair in Christianity is to promote research, teaching and publication of Christianity as a discipline.

According to the Second Vatican Council and the World Council of Churches, Christians all over India are engaged in assuring a new form of Christian presence to the Indian people. The Chair in Christianity in this context will be the Christian presence of humble service and selfless love at the highest level of the temple of learning, especially in the field of research.

We aim at promoting inter-personal relationship among the members of the academic community. We follow an inter-disciplinary approach, facilitate an inter-departmental collaboration, and do everything in a spirit of inter-religious dialogue. Christianity will be presented not in its western form as often done hitherto, but as rooted in the heart of India expressing itself in Indian religious and cultural traditions and interacting in the actual Indian context.

### **Revival of the Chair in Christianity**

The Chair in Christianity, which was left vacant for 10 long years since the death of Dr. D. S. Amalorpavadass, was revived at a colourful function on 11<sup>th</sup> March

2002. Announcing the revival of the Mysore Diocesan Chair in Christianity, in his circular dt. 2/3/02, Bishop Joseph Roy wrote to all Christian institutions, University Syndicate members, select University officials, academicians, scholars and other select invitees, “This is to bring you the good news that the Syndicate of the University of Mysore approved recently the proposal of reviving the Mysore Diocesan Chair in Christianity. As a follow up, the Vice-Chancellor has selected Fr. Joy Thomas SVD from the panel of three names submitted by me in accordance with the statutes of Memorandum of Understanding between the Diocese of Mysore and the University and appointed him Visiting Professor of the Chair in Christianity.” The university has recognised the Visiting Professor also as a Guide for guiding research candidates to Ph. D. Degree in Christianity.

### **Outreach Programmes of the Chair in Christianity**

1. My first step was “*ad intra*”. All teachers, who think that they could contribute something meaningful in terms of strengthening our value system to overcome the current crises, were invited for a Formation Seminar on “Peace and Value Education”. About 200 persons participated in it from our teaching fraternity in and around Mysore. In their Eight-point Recommendations, one reads, “Provide periodic training and orientation programmes for teachers in Peace and Value Education as well as in Yoga, Meditation and Spiritual Exercises.” So more seminars in this line are planned, especially for younger teachers.

2. The Chair in Christianity is a collaborative venture between the University and Mysore Diocese in particular and the Indian Church in general. I believe that this can be possible only through consultation, teamwork and networking. With this in mind a get-together of all major superiors, directors and rectors was organised. More than eighty priests, religious and lay people participated in it and pledged their support to the Chair. It was a good opportunity to reflect on ways of utilising the services available from the Chair and the DOS in Christianity.

3. At the initiative of the Chair in Christianity a core-group, of representatives of a few departments, was formed for the purpose of planning an Orientation Programme for Freshers of different Disciplines, students joining the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of every academic year in the University of Mysore. The thrust of this Orientation Programme is to usher in team building, learning together and interactive fellowships among university students. The last two programmes have encouraged a better rapport among the teaching fraternity and have also generated inter-disciplinary interests and pursuits. This was achieved through a Panel Sharing of professors on the themes: Values Behind Semester System, Making Use of Library Facilities and Information Technology and Challenges Beyond Post-graduation - A Perspective. It was followed by a Feedback Session, in which the response from the Students was commendable.

6. A get-together of all the past and present students and teachers of the DOS in Christianity, together with the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar of the University, and the Bishop of Mysore was organised after the revival of the Chair in Christianity. It was an

occasion for an informal evaluation of the performance of the Department of Studies and the Chair in Christianity, and to look for new avenues in their performance and service.

7. Besides all these programmes at the University, we organise a *Sarva Dharma Sammelan* with the cooperation of Swami Gnanajothi at Anjali Ashram, as part of the celebration of Christmas. As Swamiji put it well, “when followers of different religious traditions come together for a celebration, there is a special joy that leads us towards a deeper fellowship.”

### Future Programmes of the Chair in Christianity

1. **Special Lectures** are planned every month. We have soon two lectures by Fr. Felix Wilfred on “Beyond Religion and Rituals: A Comparative Religious Perspective for a New Social Order” and “Value-based Approaches to the Formation of the Human Person”.

2. **A Regional Seminar:** In collaboration with Teresian College for Women in Mysore, a Regional Seminar on “Women in India: Issues and Concerns” is planned. The aim is to promote understanding between communities, while offering insights into the problems and difficulties that women confront on a day to day basis at the personal level, in the area of policy making and in the domain of public life. The objective of this seminar is to establish a basis for networking and collaboration among individuals, researchers, academicians, groups, organisations and institutions, and to identify feasible models for development.

3. **A National Conference:** A prestigious project of the Chair is the National Conference on “Religion, Ethics and Globalisation in a Pluralistic World”, which is planned in collaboration with DOS in Christianity and other like-minded departments in the beginning of the next academic year. This conference will seek to clarify, how we experience the power of the Word of God in the world over and India in particular today, in spite of the social, political and economic discrimination, religious intolerance and violence. It is an inter-university search to respond to the challenge of the Spirit of God in the secular fabric of nations, in the context of global challenges.

3. **Inter-disciplinary Studies:** We are also working on the scope of networking with a few other departments to explore the possibility of inter-disciplinary studies.

### **Conclusion**

The Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus leads to freedom, fellowship and justice. Mission for me, as the Visiting Professor of the Chair in Christianity in a secular context, is to initiate the emergence of such a community of free people living in a non-exploitative society that the Kingdom of God summons us. That is in continuity with the vision of Jesus, which summons us to a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of unfreedom erected by mammon, where men and women accept each other, across all barriers of class, caste, race and culture, as the children of the one Father in heaven.