My Pilgrimage in Mission

Olav Guttorm Myklebust

I have, in retrospect, sometimes thought that “beyondness” has been a distinctive feature of my life. I was born and grew up in Bergen, Norway—for 900 years an important center of seafaring and contact with foreign countries. My earliest memory is of a huge crowd of people gathered to celebrate the opening of the Bergen-Oslo railway. At school my favorite subject was geography, more especially that part of it that dealt with the non-Western continents. The encounter, through reading and traveling, with peoples and cultures other than my own, has always fascinated me.

However, the decisive factor in the shaping of my life was a beyondness of a different kind. I refer to the expanding horizons essential elements of the Christian life, but also to interpret that and the breadth of the continents.” My parents were committed Christians and sincere friends of mission. As a young woman my mother had wished to become a missionary. On my twenty-first birthday my father presented me with a copy of that monumental work of research, World Christian Atlas, to the study of which I immediately addressed myself. No less than to my parents owe I to my wife a debt of special gratitude. The quality of her Christian life and devotion has immensely enriched my pilgrimage in mission.

I am a disciple of no one but a debtor to many. As a young student my Christian thinking was largely influenced by those distinguished churchmen Bishop Peter Hognestad of Bergen and Professor Olaf Moe of the Free Faculty of Theology, Oslo. Both of them were convinced Lutherans. Both of them were also pioneers of the ecumenical movement in Norway. Bishop Evind Berggrav, likewise, made a deep impact on my life.

It has been my good fortune to have met and been inspired by not a few of the great missionary leaders and scholars of this century. When I was still at an early age, John R. Mott captured my mind. His vision of one world in Christ, his mastery of the facts and problems related to the task of the church in all six continents, his wide sympathy, resolute will, and intellectual integrity decidedly affected the course of my life.

J. H. Oldham, too, I greatly admired. This remarkable personality—missionary statesman, ecumenical architect, and pioneer in the field of Christian social ethics—exerted upon my generation an influence that it would be difficult to overestimate. Oldham was a fearless and farsighted thinker. In the Christian mission, in the words of his celebrated dictum, “we must dare in order to know.” As editor of the International Review of Missions (of which already in my youth I became an enthusiastic reader), and through his books (of which Christianity and the Race Problem should be specifically mentioned), Oldham greatly helped to open my eyes to the magnitude and complexity of the problems with which the Christian world mission is wrestling, and, equally important, to understand that these problems can be solved only through sustained intellectual labor and by taking wide and comprehensive views.

Other missionary thinkers upon whom I look back with profound gratitude are, to mention only the names of some of those who are no longer amongst us, J. Merle Davis, Walter Freytag, Norman Goodall, Hendrik Kraemer, Kenneth Scott Latourette, Stephen Neill, D. T. Niles, and Max Warren.

Participation in international conferences, organized by the International Missionary Council (IMC), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Lutheran World Federation respectively, effectively contributed to my life being confined within no narrow horizons. I saw my own church from a new perspective and in a truer proportion, and I learned the important lesson that there is no form of Christian experience which alone is valid. My most vivid memories are of the IMC conference in 1926 at Le Zoute, Belgium (which I attended as a press correspondent) on the subject of “The Relation of Christian Missions to the New Forces That Are Reshaping Africa” (to quote the title of J. H. Oldham’s admirable address on that occasion); the IMC conference in 1947 at Whitby, Ontario, Canada, the first postwar gathering and the first to interpret the Christian mission in terms of “partners in obedience”; and the meetings of the WCC Division on World Mission and Evangelism in 1962 in Paris, the first to be held after the “integration,” and in 1965 at Enugu, Nigeria, where the subject of the Christian response to the African revolution received special attention.

To the universities, colleges, and institutes in Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, and South Africa at which I was able, for extensive periods, to pursue studies in missiology, ecumenics, and education, I owe a varied debt to which I would pay my tribute.

However, the unique, and also the most creative, experience of my life was the eight years I had the privilege of serving at Umpumulo Institution, Natal, South Africa—at that time a mission-owned, government-aided training college for African teachers. The intellectual achievements of the students as well as the genuineness of their Christian belief impressed me deeply. To know Africans is to respect and love them. Their heritage of social relationships, their infectious humor, their faculty for friendship, and their capacity for suffering (in a country dominated by the tragedy of racial separation) have forever put me in their debt. In particular, I learned to appreciate, in the words of Kenneth Kaunda, the African “gift for man enjoying the fellowship of man simply because he is a man.” During my Umpumulo years

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there was born in me a conviction, increasingly strengthened by subsequent experiences, that the African as an African has an enormous contribution to make to the welfare and future of the world community.

II

My teaching, research, and writing have, directly or indirectly, centered about the issue of the place of the Christian world mission in (1) the study of theology, (2) the work of the church.

In the theological curriculum of the 1920s, not only in Norway but almost everywhere, the subject of “mission” was conspicuous by its absence. Preparing, as I did, for missionary service in Africa I was permitted by the Free Faculty of Theology, Oslo, through a special arrangement, to add to the course in church history a course on the history of Christian missions in that continent. To secure for myself a thorough knowledge of the subject I spent a full term in 1927 at the University of Berlin, with Professor Julius Richter, the great missiologist of his day and a recognized authority on Africa. The German “Missionswissenschaft” gave me generously of his learning and encouraged me in my studies. His lectures, however, were somewhat disappointing. Richter’s genius was the capacity for absorbing, collecting, and presenting facts rather than the attempt to analyze, to compare, and to place the events in their true context. His Geschichte der evangelischen Mission in Afrika, a work of more than 800 pages, is an impressive achievement but lacking in cohesion and perspective (and to some extent also in objective approach). Richter’s treatise Weltmission und theologische Arbeit, on the other hand, I found stimulating and rewarding. It influenced me in no small measure my thinking on that great subject.

In 1939, in response to a call by my alma mater, I took up work as the first academic teacher for mission in Norway, and in 1946 I was given the title of “professor.” As such I applied myself to the task of investigating, from an international and ecumenical perspective, the history of missiology, and its status in the mid-twentieth century, in Protestant Christendom. The result was the two-volume work, published in 1955 and 1957, The Study of Missions in Theological Education. The scheme, I admit, was an ambitious one, and of its value I am not the right person to judge. As an attempt, the first of its kind, to set forth in their full range the facts relating to the development of teaching and research in mission as an academic concern, the work undoubtedly had its weaknesses. It should be borne in mind, however, that the historical survey was to have been followed by an inquiry into the theoretical or systematic aspects of the subject, namely, a vindication of the claims of missiology to be treated as a subject in its own right, and a presentation of its principles, methods, divisions, and relationship to the other disciplines of the theological curriculum. Unfortunately, I was not able to accept Professor R. Pierce Beaver’s invitation to spend a full year at the Federated Theological Faculty, University of Chicago, to work exclusively on this project, because of other commitments. However, a full discussion of the question of the “autonomous status” of mission studies appeared in the symposium of essays in honor of Walter Freytag, entitled Basilea.

As a teacher of theology in general, and as a missiologist in particular, I feel intensely that the radically new situation in which the church finds itself in the latter half of this century demands a rethinking of the traditional system of theological education. If the work of mission is to be supported, to use Hendrik Kraemer’s great phrase, “with the real intelligence of real faith,” it is imperative that mission should be recognized as an important dimension of theology, and, conversely, that theology should be taught in the context of mission. In this process the churches of Africa and Asia, through their new insights and perspectives, have a unique contribution to make.

So much for the interdependence of mission and theology. Of the relevance of the church for mission, and vice versa, I have been no less convinced. In Norway (overwhelmingly a Lutheran country), and on the continent of Europe generally, missionary work has traditionally been the concern of independent and unofficial organizations. This pattern, which still prevails, is in part accounted for by the fact of establishment. A state church, not unnaturally, is apt to interpret its task in national rather than worldwide terms. Missionary efforts, as a consequence, are developed as something additional to the normal work of the church. For many years I looked upon the mission “society” as the agency for fulfilling the Great Commission. Scotland, however, taught me “the best way of all.” In that country, one for which through a long life I have had a great regard, I found a church that, from the beginning and on theological grounds, had discharged its missionary obligation as part of its regular activities. The work of mission, it was insisted, is not a voluntary affair but the inalienable duty of the entire church.

This conception, of course, is not peculiar to Scotland. It is one of the authentic marks of the Reformed or Presbyterian form of Christian life and work. Also, it exists, irrespective of denominational affiliation, in a number of countries, notably the United States of America. Nevertheless, it was through the reading of D. Mackichan’s book The Missionary Ideal in the Scottish Churches and, in a very special sense, by pursuing studies in New College, Edinburgh, on Alexander Duff, the founder and first holder of the first chair of missions in Protestant Christendom (instituted in that renowned seat of learning), that it became crystal clear to me that the church in its essence is the mission, or, to put it differently (or rather not differently), that mission is the very purpose for which the church was brought into being.

As an outcome of, and as a complement to, the work at the academic level (strictly so called) there was established in Oslo the Egede Institute. The name reflects the wish, through this foundation, to honor the name of Hans Egede, the first Norwegian missionary in modern times. The institute, which is an ecumenical venture, is devoted to the collection of resources and the promotion of study and research, with the publication of the journal Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon as one of its primary functions. The Egede Institute, as conceived and planned, was to be but one of a series of institutes of a similar nature, spread throughout the world and working together for the advancement of their common task. My long-cherished dream of “an international institute of scientific missionary research,” I am sorry to say, never came true. However, one phase of the institute project, namely, the formation of a worldwide association of missiologists (and others engaged in the scholarly study of the Christian mission), did materialize. The story of that idea, how it originated and how it came to fruition in the International Association for Mission Studies, has been told in Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies, no. 5 (vol. III-I), and there is, therefore, no need of enlarging upon it here.

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