

Foundations for Mission: Mission Language, Theology and Praxis from the British and Irish Perspective

On 4 May 2011, the Henry Martyn Centre, the missiological institute at the University of Cambridge (www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk), hosted a lecture that informed its participants about the outcomes of a survey which aim was to explore what theological foundations for mission there are in British and Irish churches. The lecture was delivered by Janice Price, Canon of the Church of England and one of the surveyors. In spite of the fact that the survey focused exclusively on the situation in Great Britain and Ireland, its findings are very interesting – and, indeed, in many aspects even alarming – also for a broader Christian fellowship, including Czech and Slovak churches. After all, one of the impulses for undertaking the study was the topic “Foundations for Mission”, put forth as one of the eight main topics of the world missionary conference Edinburgh 2010.

The research group, consisting of ordained ministers of various denominations from Great Britain and Ireland (the organization *Churches Together in Britain and Ireland* [CTBI]), set itself a particular, three-fold task: to explore (1) how a Trinitarian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit relates to the theory and practice of mission; (2) how the confession that God has a missionary identity influences Christian witness; and (3) how a discernment of the Trinitarian God’s inner relationships and love influences ecclesiology, community life, and society. The preliminary hypothesis was that whatever British and Irish churches and missionary institutions publicly proclaim with regard to their theology of mission does not necessary have to match up with their mission practice.

The research was done in three stages. In the stage one, websites of mission organizations were analyzed with a special focus on the language to be found there (semiotic analysis), i.e. the research focused on what individual agencies or churches say about their mission and how they perceive it. In the stage two, respondents were supposed to participate in a survey containing questions about theological statements concerning mission. The respondents were representatives of both national churches and mission agencies (of both Evangelical and Ecumenical orientation) who were expected to answer the questions precisely as the representatives of respective institutions, and not as private persons. In addition to the national perspective a local context was also taken into account due to the fact that the survey was done in selected churches in Nottinghamshire (a local “case study”). Conversely, a more academic context was considered thanks to the participation of respondents from the membership of the British and Irish Association of Mission Studies (BIAMS). Finally, in the stage three, detailed and in-depth interviews were done with the representatives of selected organizations and churches; their aim was to specify respondents’ answers from the survey in relation to praxis.

In her lecture, Janice Price sought to introduce the findings of the website analyses with regard to other parts of the study as well. According to her, the findings can be divided into three groups – language, theology and praxis. In the area of language it must first of all be emphasized that most of the analyzed websites (and, by implication, their operators, i.e. churches or mission organizations) tend towards relational, inclusive language. The words such as reconciliation, sharing, support, transformation or fellowship occur frequently. To the contrary, separating language is clearly rejected; for example, sin – if mentioned at all – is usually interpreted and presented as wrong-doing. The surveyors found out that theology as such has been excluded from the language used on the analyzed websites. Even though there were occasional references to Jesus and God, there were no references to the Trinity whatsoever! The term of God’s kingdom / Kingdom was mentioned infrequently and if so, then on Roman-Catholic websites only. Further differences between Roman-Catholic and Protestant organizations respectively became apparent, for instance, in their distinct

understandings of community; while Roman-Catholics regard community as a subject of evangelism, Protestants tend to perceive community as its object.

Particularly in the light of current lively discussions which are taking place with regard to the issue whether it is appropriate to keep on talking about mission / missiology or whether this problematic term should be replaced by a more acceptable concept of intercultural theology, I as non-British was very curious to find out that among British and Irish churches “mission” remains to be a preferred, even promoted and assented term. This continuous use of the term “mission” is even more surprising considering the fact that Britain is *the* example of imperial power connected with European colonialism and it is precisely from the circles of postcolonial critics that voices calling for an embargo on this “politically incorrect” concept echo most strongly. A reason for the continuing acceptability of mission in the British circles is perhaps to be found, *inter alia*, in a fact that this word is commonly used also in non-Christian contexts; in English, mission is a synonym for such words as task, purpose, duty or aim.

However, discomforts and ambiguities appeared when respondents were asked to clarify what mission is or what it ought to be. This uncertainty was probably most obvious in the struggle with defining priorities of mission. Is it commitment to justice? Or proclamation? Or perhaps selfless service for humankind? Further doubts could have been observed in the struggle to formulate how mission actually happens. A point in case was a sharp contrast between the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals and their divergent understandings of the relationship between mission and justice. For the latter the very service in the name of justice is mission, while the former prefer the position that social justice is not yet mission, but only creates a platform for proclamation of the gospel.

Perhaps the most striking finding from the area of theology was that that among missiologists generally accepted concept of *missio Dei* proved to be a weak and insignificant driver. It found greater acceptance among the respondents from BIAMS only. As already indicated above, in the field of mission theology seems to be an indecent word. To Price’s mind, the results of the research imply that churches and mission agencies feel certain discomfort towards associating theology with mission. Possible reasons for this condition could be either an attempt to be as close as possible to non-church people for whom the theological discourse is very often unintelligible, or missionaries’ own insecurity in theological work and disability to reflect theologically upon mission topics and challenges.

From the perspective of what has been discussed above it can therefore come as no big surprise that among the three presently most common models of mission (1. *missio Dei*, 2. liberating service, 3. proclamation) *missio Dei* remains far behind, while proclamation finds it way up to the top.

Matthew 28:19 turned out to be the most important primary biblical driver. There was limited occurrence of texts as Luke 4:18-19 and John 10, and once even Matthew 26:28-30. On the other hand, there were almost no references to Epistolic texts as biblical drivers. With regard to the frequent occurrence of Matthew 28 as the primary biblical driver, in a discussion following after the lecture there appeared an interesting insight that this text can potentially turn attention of Christ’s disciples away from missionary work in their own local context as it calls them to go forth “to the nations”.

The lecturer also pointed out an interesting fact that many respondents had a problem whether to indicate in their answers how mission actually “is” or how it “ought to be”. To put it differently, the publicly proclaimed mission language does not match up with the reality of mission. Naturally, this finding further underscores inconsistency between mission praxis and missiology as its theological reflection.

Having pointed out a gap between what one says / teaches and what one actually does with regard to mission, we are now encountering the third group of findings which concerns

praxis. With respect to the outcome of the research that theory (i.e. theology) is not brought to the fore in the mission of British and Irish churches, a statement by the researchers that the websites do not demonstrate praxis either comes as a shock. Besides, tensions were observed in many cases not only between ordained ministers and “ordinary” Christians, but also in national leadership.

At the end of her lecture Janice Price outlined some of the conclusions of the authors of the study or their suggestions for possible solutions. First, the surveyors claim that websites have hidden potential which has probably not been fully realized yet. Secondly, mission theology need to be rooted in experience and particular stories. In other words, there emerges a need to contextualize what mission is in experience. And finally, the authors advocate a holistic understanding of mission which would not prefer individual models but rather try to integrate them.

In the discussion following after the talk a few interesting themes emerged. For example, one of the questions concerned the very *raison d'être* of mission agencies. On the one hand, one can argue that they are a result of complacency of the church vis-à-vis its missionary task. Special missionary organizations are then perceived as an emergency solution in a situation when the church failed to do its duty. On the other hand, however, one can make an equally strong case that biblical writings (particularly those of Paul) advocate the model of especially selected and authorized missionaries who have their distinct “business” to do. That is why first and foremost New Testament scholars often hesitate to accept the idea that every Christian should be a missionary. This is a very crucial and profound topic which will probably remain open forever, thus being a continuous inspiration and challenge for our theological and missiological thinking.

Other questions touched upon the details of the research. For example, it came as an interesting insight that although there is certainly a major difference between the respective contexts of Great Britain and Ireland, the results pointed out substantial similarities in the understanding and practice of mission among churches and organizations in these two countries. Equally thought-provoking was also a conclusion that even though differences between individual confessions and denominations are, to the respondents’ minds, foundational, they do not necessarily consider them to be foundational for mission. This point naturally leads one to think what purpose denominational Christianity has today in the missiological perspective.

Despite the fact that Janice Price’s lecture – as well as the whole study – focused on the context of Great Britain and Ireland, its findings are extremely challenging and inspiring also for a wider Christian *oikumene*. It would undoubtedly be worthy to undertake a similar research also in the Czech and Slovak context.

For more information about the study see the CTBI website <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/495/>. The complete study has been published as: Anne Richards *et al.*, *Foundations for Mission: A Study of Language, Theology and Praxis from the UK and Ireland Perspective*. London: CTBI 2010.

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