

One New Book for the Preacher

Joanna M. Adams

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

THE COMMON TASK: A THEOLOGY OF MISSION by M. Thomas Thangaraj.
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. 167 pages

In a recent issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 2000), Andrew Walls, professor emeritus at the University of Edinburgh and now visiting professor at Princeton Seminary, writes:

The most striking feature of Christianity at the end of the second millennium is that it is predominantly a non-western religion. On all present indications, the numbers of inhabitants of Europe and North America who profess the faith are declining, as they have been for some time, while the churches of the other continents continue to grow. Already more than half of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Caribbean America, and the Pacific. If present trends continue, at some point in the twenty-first century, the figure could be two-thirds.

The reality of this striking phenomenon raises many questions about the content, context, and direction of Christian mission. When the increasing religious plurality of the world is folded into the mix, we are left with a situation in which traditional approaches to mission on the part of the western church will be, at best, inadequate and outdated and, at worst, a counterforce to the evangelical purposes of God. This is, at least, what Thomas Thangaraj would maintain if his provocative book, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission*, is an accurate indicator of his thoughts.

Thangaraj, the D.W. and Ruth Brooks Associate Professor of World Religion at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, is among the most insightful theologians writing today on the subject of Christian mission. He claims that the new context is marked not only by profound changes but also by the increasing awareness that Christians do not have a monopoly on concern for the transformation of individuals and the societal institutions of which they are a part. His central thesis, in fact, is that the time has come for Christians to make common cause with those of other faiths in discovering what he calls "the mission of humanity: those obligations to one another and to the world that all humans share."

Does Thangaraj mean to suggest that all religions are the same, or that Christians, in pursuing the goal of common ground, should lay aside the unique claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Not in the least. Indeed, it is the peculiar claim that lies at the heart of Christianity that offers the only authentic methodology for Christian mission. In a particularly compelling treatment of Jesus' statement in John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father except through me," Thangaraj writes, "The thrust . . . is not to make exclusive claims for the Christian faith as such. Rather it is to assert the centrality of what the cross of Christ signifies for the life of a Christian or Christian community. There is no other way to God; there is no other truth. And there is nothing more life-

giving than self-sacrifice and suffering for the sake of others.” Thus, he suggests a cruciform model for mission and calls the church of the twenty-first century to be less concerned about maintaining positions of status and influence and more joyfully committed to making visible the self-giving love of God.

The freshness and intellectual liveliness for which Thangaraj is known as a teacher and lecturer are equally evident in his writing. Fact is followed by anecdote, which in turn, is followed by fascinating analysis. For example, *The Common Task* begins with an analysis of the dramatic changes that have occurred both in the church and in the world since the World Missionary Conference that met in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910. Of the twelve hundred delegates to that gathering, which was considered one of the most significant meetings in the history of the Protestant missionary movement in three centuries, “all but seventeen were European or North American . . . Fewer than two hundred were women. The ethos that dominated the World Mission Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was one of confidence and optimism. The leadership of the conference came largely from those actively involved in the work of the Student Volunteer Fellowship. The Fellowship’s motto was ‘the evangelization of the world in our own lifetime.’”

Thangaraj then describes the profoundly different situation in which the church finds itself today. Those differences include the gradual separation of European and American colonialism from the missionary task of the Christian church, a growing realization that human progress is shadowed by sin, the rise of postmodern thought that deconstructs the “grand narrative” that has been so central to the whole mission enterprise, and an increasing vitality on the part of other world religions. To illustrate the last point, Thangaraj notes that his adopted city of Atlanta, Georgia (He is originally from South India, where his ancestors were converted to Christianity by European missionaries), “now has, in addition to a plethora of Christian denominations, nearly 40,000 Muslims, 20,000 Hindus, 500 Bahais, and more than 10,000 Buddhists living within the metropolitan area.” Even if one desired to do so, there would be no way to avoid religious plurality in the times in which we live. How, then, can we talk to one another and work together to make the world more human, not only for ourselves or for those who are most like ourselves, but for the whole richly diverse human family, which is, after all, the family of God?

Whatever the final answer to the question, the path to the answer will not be found by retreating into “the good old days” of setting out to save the world for Christ. Thangaraj maintains that the process must begin with a new starting place for constructing a theology of mission. That starting place could be “a conversation on the idea of *missio humanitatis* with both Christians and people of other religious and secular persuasions.” This conversation would be grounded in the concept of taking responsibility with others in “a mode of solidarity” and in “a spirit of mutuality.” In this setting, we who are Christians can then bring into the mix our distinctive Christian perspective, which understands the mission of God as being to transform the world into a community marked by justice and peace, a mission accomplished through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One of the most illuminating aspects of the book is Thangaraj’s historical analysis of the numerous models for mission that have characterized the church’s mission at various times in the past. He categorizes these models for mission as Kerygmatic Presence; Martyrdom; Monasticism; Conversion of the Heathen; Expansion, Mis-

sionary Societies; Education; and Joint Action for Justice and Peace. His treatment of these eight different approaches to mission serves not only to remind us that no one model is normative but also reveals the shortcomings, indeed the “destructive distortions,” that can emerge from even the most well-intentioned motives.

Certainly the most controversial chapter in *The Common Task* is the one in which Thangaraj outlines a new approach for biblical interpretation. He makes no claims as a biblical scholar but writes as a theologian in search of a fresh biblical vision out of which to understand the mission of the church in these unprecedented times. He takes a new look at the story of creation and comes to see God’s creation of the universe as God’s first missionary activity. “God’s creativity goes forth in bringing life into existence, sustaining an overall context for that existence and enabling it to flourish and fill the earth.” Almost immediately, God acts to share God’s mission with the human creatures God creates. Thus, the Bible gives us an understanding of mission that has the creation and enhancement of life as its essence. Further, this mission, God’s mission, is meant to be shared with God’s people. The mission of Jesus, Son of God, further reveals that mission and suffering are intrinsically related, and so it will always be for those who understand their mission as Jesus’ mission. Jesus’ suffering was not, of course, suffering for its own sake, but for the sake of life and in opposition to every force that would thwart or destroy the life God intended for the whole created order and its inhabitants from the very beginning.

Collaboration and *Dialogue* are the tools Thangaraj commends to the Christian church for the building of a new theology of mission in a new context. He challenges the church to rethink where it locates its understanding of mission and suggests that the traditional emphasis on an apostolic approach might now need to be balanced by a stronger sense of catholicity. Since Christ is already everywhere, Christ does not have to be taken anywhere. Since in Christ “all things hold together . . . and all things have been created through him and for him,” and Christ is the center of all things, Christ’s life-transforming, liberating spirit is not confined to one geographical area or to one Christian communion. The church is everywhere. The mission of God is everywhere.

Christians are called to be in the world in the way and manner of Christ. Our motivation is less obligation than it is adoration, as it was with Isaiah, who, when he had been overwhelmed by the mystery and holiness of God, could not help exclaiming in response to God’s question of who would represent God, “Here I am; send me!” Our hope is not in our own great mission plans but in God’s great plan to make the heavens and the earth full of love, righteousness, and peace. The energy and vision for the mission of the church in the twenty-first century will come from the same place it has always come from, and that is the Spirit of God. Thangaraj puts it like this: “The Holy Spirit, as it were, stands at the eschaton and draws the whole universe toward God and God’s own reign.”

I can think of no more important question for the church at the beginning of a new century than, What ought our mission to be and how shall we go about it? I cannot imagine a more provocative book on these most crucial matters than the one Thomas Thangaraj has written. Wherever you are on the theological spectrum, you will encounter ideas that will make you think again and think again, which is exactly what a seminal book ought to do.