

exactly how mission differed from the ethos and activities of the Peace Corps. Small wonder that, in this same year (1968), R. Pierce Beaver, respected North American theologian of mission, reported that "students are now cold, even hostile, to overseas missions" (quoted in Anderson 1988:112).<sup>10</sup>

In 1968 the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops met in Medellín, an event that provided the setting and stimulus for the emergence of Latin American liberation theology, which finally ended the hegemony of Western mission's cultural and ideological assumptions (cf Gutiérrez 1988:xvii, xx-xv).

Still, recent developments in missionary thinking only really make sense if we see them as being both a reaction to and a result of the evolution of ideas discussed in this section, that is, of the various manifestations of both premillennialism and social Christianity. The Social Gospel, in particular, has been "America's most unique contribution to the great ongoing stream of Christianity" (Hopkins 1940:3), "the first expression of American religious life which is truly born in America itself" (Visser 't Hooft 1928:186). Because North American Protestantism at the time had been contributing the lion's share to the international missionary enterprise, the influence of the Social Gospel reverberated around the world and made itself felt not only in Third-World Christianity, but far beyond.

### *Voluntarism*

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the Enlightenment era is the emergence of *missionary societies*: some denominational, some interdenominational, some nondenominational, and some even anti-denominational. They first appeared on the scene haltingly, extremely apologetic about their existence and very uncertain about their nature and future. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the situation had changed dramatically. New missionary societies exploded on to the scene in all traditional Protestant countries: Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, and the United States. In the 1880s, with the advent of the high imperial era, a second wave of new societies was in evidence; once again the entire Protestant world was involved, but by now it was clear that the United States was edging its way ahead of others, not only in the numbers of missionaries sent abroad but also in the numbers of new societies formed. The end of the Second World War saw yet another wave of missionary enthusiasm and the formation of new societies. Prior to the year 1900, a total of eighty-one mission agencies were founded in North America. During the subsequent four decades, 1900-1939, another 147 were formed. The next decade, 1940-1949, recorded the creation of eighty-three societies, followed by no fewer than 113 new agencies during the decade 1950-1959, 132 in the period 1960-1969 and another 150 in the next ten years (cf Wilson and Siewert 1986:81-314, 593f).

It is not easy to explain this astonishing phenomenon in Protestantism. Most certainly a variety of factors would have to be taken into consideration here, but it can hardly be denied that the spirit of enterprise and initiative spawned by the Enlightenment played an important role first in the genesis of the idea

of missionary societies and then in their amazing proliferation. The fact is that, for more than a century after the Reformation, the mere idea of forming such "voluntary societies" next to the church was anathema in Protestantism. The institutional church, tightly controlled by the clergy, remained the only divine instrument on earth. Voetius spoke for the Reformed tradition when he said that, if there were to be any talk about mission (which there usually was not), only the institutional church – local church council, presbytery, or synod – could act as sending agency (cf Jongeneel 1989:126).

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, a new mood was beginning to develop. The Reformation principle of the right of private judgment in interpreting Scripture was rekindled. An extension of this was that like-minded individuals could band together in order to promote a common cause. A plethora of new societies was the result. Many stood in the religious mainstream and were promoting a great variety of religious and societal concerns: antislavery, prison reform, temperance, sabbath observance, the "reform of manners", and other charitable causes (cf Bradley 1976). An increasing number of new societies, however, championed the cause of foreign missions. Basically, the societies were all organized on the voluntary principle and dependent on their members' contribution of time, energy, and money.

The ideology behind the societies was that of the social and political egalitarianism of the emerging democracies (Gensichen 1975b:50; cf Moorhead 1984:73). Networks of auxiliary associations were organized in outlying districts, sent their contributions to the central office, and were fed with information from there. People of the most modest position and income became donors and prayer supporters of projects many thousands of miles away. Women also came along, to play a leading role in various agencies, "far earlier than they could decently appear in most other walks of life" (Walls 1988:151). Their involvement in mission constituted "the first feminist movement in North America" (cf the subtitle of Beaver 1980), and certainly not only there. They went out, literally to the ends of the earth, no longer just as the wives of missionaries but as missionaries in their own right. At home, women's missionary organizations undergirded the missionary movement with prayer, study, financial support, and dissemination of information. By the year 1900 there were forty-one American women's agencies supporting twelve hundred single women missionaries (cf Anderson 1988:102).

This was the Reformation principle of the office of the believer, wedded to the Enlightenment's optimistic view of the world and of humanity: people were able to do something, not only about their own circumstances, but also about the circumstances of others. The increasingly dominant postmillennialism of the period further stirred people into action. The saints saw themselves, through their many goal-oriented communities, as God's co-workers in ushering in God's kingdom (cf Moorhead 1984:73).

It has in recent years become customary to devote an enormous amount of energy to theological discussions about whether missionary societies are legitimate agents of mission. Is mission not rather to be regarded as an expression of the church? Without denying the merit there is in such a discussion I would

like to suggest that, within the framework of the paradigm spawned by the Enlightenment, there was not much to choose between the organized *church* as bearer of mission and the mission *societies*. The point is that, in Western Protestantism, the church was increasingly fractured into a great variety of denominations which, phenomenologically speaking, were not decisively different from missionary and other religious societies. Denominations, too, were organized on the voluntary principle of like-minded individuals banding together. They were, in a sense, para-church organizations.

In those countries where there were established churches the situation only *appeared* to be different. The mere emergence and existence of "free" churches (sometimes called "non-conformist" churches or "dissenters") next to or in opposition to the established church, suggested that, even if there was some pressure on people to stay members of the established church, individuals were free to follow their conscience and join churches of their liking. Where there was no established church—for instance in the United States where all churches were treated equally before the law—a bewildering variety of denominations soon emerged.

It is important to note that the very possibility of a dispensation in which there was no established or state church was a fruit of the Enlightenment; it was only when religious belief was removed from the realm of "fact" to that of "value", about which individuals were free to differ, that a societal system could evolve in which a multiplicity of denominations could exist side by side and have equal rights. Newbigin says:

It is the common observation of sociologists of religion that denominationalism is the religious aspect of secularization. It is the form that religion takes in a culture controlled by the ideology of the Enlightenment. It is the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed (1986:145).

The Enlightenment was not the sole reason for denominationalism. North American denominations, for instance, were "the product of a combination of European churchly traditions, ethnic loyalties, pietism, sectarianism, and American free enterprise" (Marsden 1980:70). It was only natural that in such a climate, "free" churches would thrive. I have mentioned that magisterial Protestantism was at its lowest ebb during the two decades immediately following the American Revolution; by contrast, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists were expanding rapidly in these years (cf Chaney 1977:31). They were the product of a marriage between rationalism and pietism and, as "revivalist" churches, benefited greatly from the Awakenings. None of the many Protestant denominations even dreamt of upholding the medieval idea of the identification of the empirical church with the kingdom of God.

For some five decades after Independence, a remarkable ecumenical spirit prevailed in the United States. The same obtained, by and large, in Great Britain and continental Europe (although the bewildering multiplicity of denominations which characterized the United States was unknown there). This

ecumenicity was certainly to be attributed, to a large degree, to the Awakenings which were, by nature, "ecumenical". These years also saw the blossoming of interdenominational mission societies. Some of the most remarkable of these were the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795), the American Board (1810), and the Basel Mission (1816). The LMS stated its "fundamental principle" in the following terms:

Our design is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church Order and Government . . . but the Glorious Gospel of the blessed God to the Heathen (quoted by Walls 1988:149).

A "denominational" society was, of course, formed three years earlier than the LMS. I am referring to the "Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen", founded under William Carey's leadership in 1792. It is, however, important to note that Carey advanced no theological arguments in favor of a denominational society. His arguments were purely pragmatic: "In the present divided state of Christendom, it would be more likely for good to be done by each denomination engaging separately in the work" (quoted by Walls 1988:148). As a matter of fact, Carey's pragmatic reasons for initiating a denominational society were almost identical to those of the founding fathers of the *nondenominational* LMS three years later.

There was something businesslike, something distinctly modern, about the launching of the new societies, whether denominational or not. Carey took his analogy neither from Scripture nor from theological tradition, but from the contemporary commercial world—the organization of an overseas trading company, which carefully studied all the relevant information, selected its stock, ships and crews, and was willing to brave dangerous seas and unfriendly climates in order to achieve its objective. Carey proposed that, in similar fashion, a company of serious Christians might be formed with the objective of evangelizing distant peoples. It should be an "instrumental" society, that is, a society established with a clearly defined purpose along explicitly formulated lines. So, the organizing of such a society was something like floating a mercantile company (cf Walls 1988:145f).

The new societies, even those which were consciously denominational, such as Carey's Baptist Society and the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society (founded in 1799), had nothing exclusivist or confessionalist about them. The CMS, for instance, experienced no difficulty in recognizing the validity of the office of missionaries not ordained in an Episcopal church (cf van den Berg 1956:159f). In fact, most of its first missionaries were German Lutherans.

By the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the "ecumenical" climate was, however, on the decline. In an attempt to counteract the influence of rationalism and liberalism, confessionalism was revived. The SPG became more doctrinaire and rejected any form of missionary cooperation with other societies, even with fellow-Anglicans in the low-church CMS. Writing about North America, Niebuhr says that the denominations

confused themselves with their cause and began to promote themselves, identifying the kingdom of Christ with the practices and doctrines prev-

alent in the group . . . The missionary enterprise, home and foreign, was divided along denominational lines; every religious society became intent upon promoting its own peculiar type of work in religious education, in the evangelization of the youth, in the printing and distribution of religious literature . . . The more attention was concentrated upon the church the greater became the tendency toward schism (1959:177f).

Likewise, in Germany, Lutheran confessionalism (revivified, *inter alia*, by the third-centenary celebrations in 1830 of the adoption the Augsburg Confession) contributed to a new consciousness among Lutherans of being different from other Protestants. This manifested itself also in the foreign missionary enterprise (a development traced carefully and in great detail by Aagaard 1967). Several societies that were consciously transconfessional had been operating from the German-speaking world during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the most important of these being the Basel, Rhenish, and North-German Mission Societies (cf Aagaard 1967:182-306, 401-473). They were, however, not permitted to continue operating unchallenged. Tensions between Reformed and Lutheran supporters of the Basel Mission precipitated the formation, in 1836, of an exclusively Lutheran missionary society, later known as the Leipzig Mission (Aagaard 1967:357-381). Similar developments were soon to follow in other parts of Germany (:526-705).

Events in North America were only marginally different from those in Great Britain and Germany. After 1850 various churches "became markedly less willing to leave foreign missions to pandenominational or nondenominational associations" (Hutchison 1987:95) and began to sponsor denominational mission projects. Eventually even the nondenominational American Board, for a half-century the largest of all American societies (Hutchison 1987:45), became "denominational"; it evolved into the missionary arm of Congregationalism. In Britain the same happened to the LMS, and under similar circumstances.

During the heyday of nondenominational mission societies, mission had been understood predominantly as *conversio gentium*—the conversion of individual persons. It was only natural that in the subsequent defensive reaction of denominationalism to the relativizing tendencies of the Enlightenment, mission would again, as was the case in the medieval Catholic paradigm, be defined as *plantatio ecclesiae*, church planting. The nondenominational societies, heavily influenced by the Evangelical Awakenings, had been preaching "a Gospel without a Church" (S.C. Carpenter, quoted by van den Berg 1956:159; cf Scherer 1987:75); this was now regarded as inadequate and amends had to be made. The remedy was the planting of distinctly *confessional* churches on the "mission field". The new slogan was the establishment of "self-governing", "self-supporting", and "self-propagating" (or "self-extending") younger churches. The two main personalities in this regard were the general secretaries of the two largest Protestant missionary societies of the mid-nineteenth century, Rufus Anderson of the American Board and Henry Venn of the British CMS.

One should immediately add, however, that the intentions of the two men were noble. Great strides toward church independency were indeed made in

this period, not least because they were putting greater trust in the integrity of their black and brown converts than most of their contemporaries did. It should also not be forgotten that both men—but Anderson, the Congregationalist, more clearly than Venn, the Anglican—were imbued with the rising mid-nineteenth-century spirit of democracy (Hutchison 1987:77).

In spite of the admirable ideals of Anderson and Venn, things did not turn out as expected, in part because their plans were often subverted by their own missionaries. Yet, quite apart from this, one has to say that there was something incongruous about the heavy emphasis on church planting as the goal of missions. The medieval missionary policy of *plantatio ecclesiae* had still operated on the assumption that, one day, all the world would be put under the sway of the church. By the middle of the nineteenth century such an ideal was no longer deemed possible, at least not in Protestant circles. It was subconsciously assumed that the secularizing and rationalizing impact of the Enlightenment could not be undone. So the Protestant variant of *plantatio ecclesiae* was the carving out of small, exclusive “territories” of Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, and the like. The “advance of the gospel” was measured by counting tangible things such as the number of baptisms, confessions, and communions, and the opening of new mission stations or outposts.

The church had, in a sense, ceased to point to God or to the future; instead, it was pointing to itself. Mission was the road from the institutional church to the church that still had to be instituted. It was the activity of professional agents of organized societies operating on the “horizontal” plane. The relationship of these churches to society and to the wider ecumenical and eschatological horizons was largely ignored. What Scherer says about the Lutheran missions of the time could, by and large, also be said of the projects of other confessional groupings,

The kingdom of God was reduced to a strategy by which Lutheran mission agencies planted Lutheran churches around the world. Questions were seldom asked at this time about the relationship of these churches to the kingdom of God. Their very existence appeared to be its own justification, and no further discussion of mission goals was required (1987:77).

By the end of the nineteenth century the pendulum once again swung toward societal mission and a more ecumenical spirit. This was, at the same time, a reaffirmation of the principle of voluntarism. A plethora of new voluntarist missionary agencies have been formed in the course of the last hundred years or so. But precisely as expression of the spirit of voluntarism, they have also been illustrations of the modern Western mood of activism, do-goodism, and manifest destiny. The eager young missionary recruits’ “crusading spirit”, says Anderson (1988:98), was fuelled by “duty, compassion, confidence, optimism, evangelical revivalism, and premillennialist urgency”.

Many of the newer type of Protestant missionary agencies belong to the category usually referred to as “faith missions”. The pioneer and prototype of all these societies, and still the most famous, was the China Inland Mission,



founded in 1865 by J. Hudson Taylor. The new societies represented an adaptation of the late eighteenth-century voluntary society, rather than a totally new departure (Walls 1988:154). Here the eschatological motif dominated. An urgent appeal was made to young men and women to sacrifice themselves without reservation so as to save the millions of China and other distant countries before the last judgment.

At the same time the new societies represented a radicalization of the voluntary principle. People were challenged to go without any financial guarantees, simply trusting that the Lord of mission would provide. In the eyes of some they were heroes of the faith; in the eyes of others they were fools; in their own eyes they were but "fools for Christ's sake". No time was left for timorous or carefully prepared advances into pagan territory, nor for the laborious building up of "autonomous" churches on the "mission field". The gospel had to be proclaimed to all with the greatest speed, and for this there could never be enough missionaries. It also meant that there was neither time nor need for drawn-out preparation for missionary service. Many who went out had very little education or training, although the recruits also included well-educated persons such as C. T. Studd and the other members of the famous "Cambridge Seven".

The weaknesses of the faith mission movement are obvious: the romantic notion of the freedom of the individual to make his or her own choices, an almost convulsive preoccupation with saving people's souls before Judgment Day, a limited knowledge of the cultures and religions of the people to whom the missionaries went, virtually no interest in the societal dimension of the Christian gospel, almost exclusive dependence on the charismatic personality of the founder, a very low view of the church, etc. The movement also had its strengths, however, particularly in the pristine form it took in Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission. The "home base" of the mission agency would no longer be in London, Berlin, Basel, or New York, but in China, India, or Thailand. The missionaries were not to live on "mission stations", isolated from the population, but in the very midst of the people they were trying to reach, eating the food they ate and wearing the clothes they wore. The emphasis was not on doctrinal distinctives and confessional divisions but on the simple gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Some of the elements listed above, both negative and positive, became the common heritage of the modern evangelical missionary movement. There is still, among many Christians, an impatience with the cumbersome machinery of the institutional church, which tends to thwart any new initiatives. Many young people are leaving the "mainline" churches and offering their services to any one of an incredible variety of evangelical mission agencies. Today's evangelical world is full of itinerant evangelists, of magazines and Bible schools and fellowships of churches. But here, too, we notice the same curious ambiguity we identified earlier with respect to the phenomenon of denomination-ism. On the one hand, evangelical groups reveal an amazing tolerance toward each other and a rejection of any doctrinal rigidity or inflexibility in favor of the free, creative adventure of serving God together. On the other hand, an

equally astonishing bigotry is sometimes the order of the day, coupled with an emphasis on the exclusiveness of a given group because of its doctrinal distinctives. The "voluntary principle" appears to have an inherent predisposition to either tolerance of others or the absolutization of one's own views.

Wherever the "voluntary principle" became constitutive in Protestant missions—in nondenominational or denominational societies, in well-organized and well-prepared projects or in faith missions, in ecumenical or evangelical circles—the operative presuppositions were those of Western democracy and the free-enterprise system. It proceeded from the assumption that the missionary traffic would move in one direction only, from the West to the East or the South. It spawned an enterprise in which the one party would do all the giving and the other all the receiving. This was so because the one group was, in its own eyes, evidently privileged and the other, equally evidently, disadvantaged.

### *Missionary Fervor, Optimism, and Pragmatism*

In spite of the fact that missionary circles in the West, on the whole, reacted rather negatively to the Enlightenment, there can be no doubt that this movement unleashed an enormous amount of Christian energy which was, in part, channelled into overseas missionary efforts. More than in any preceding period Christians of this era believed that the future of the world and of God's cause depended on *them*.

In this respect the Enlightenment era represented a significant shift away from two other developments—the one cultural, the other ecclesiastical—that preceded it. I am referring to the Renaissance and to Protestant orthodoxy, both of which were oriented backward rather than forward. The Enlightenment's orientation, by contrast, was decidedly forward and optimistic. Under its influence, the churches tended to view God as benevolent Creator, humans as intrinsically capable of moral improvement, and the kingdom of God as the crown of the steady progression of Christianity.

The idea of progress became prominent in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth it extended into all walks of life and all disciplines. It reached its zenith in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (cf Küng 1987:17f). Protestant missions could not escape its optimism and its orientation toward the future. It found its classical expression in Kenneth Scott Latourette's famous seven-volume *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, which exercised a profound influence in missionary circles, especially in the English-speaking world. Latourette portrayed seven major periods of Christian expansion since the first century. The pattern of expansion, he suggested, had been like seven successive waves of an incoming tide. The crest of each wave was higher than the crest that had preceded it, and the trough of each wave receded less than the one before it. Changing the metaphor slightly, Latourette wrote that, throughout its history, Christianity "has gone forward by major pulsations. Each advance has carried it further than the one before it. Of the alternating recessions, each has been briefer and less marked than the one which preceded it" (Latourette [1945] 1971:494).

Latourette penned down these words in 1944, toward the end of World War