Research Paper Religion

New Wineskins: A Study on Indigenous Christian Missions Theory

Potana Venkateswara Rao | Research Scholar, University of Mysore, Board of Studies, Theology.

ABSTRACT

Christian Mission practice in India has been influenced by different theories and theologies developed by different missiologists and mission practitioners. In fact, Christian mission history informs the reader that the Western missions encountered different cultures and imposed their western culture on Indians. Therefore Christian faith in India has been westernized in its theology, art and mission praxis. Since the Indian Christians have been depending on the west for their theology, financial resources, leadership and administration, Christianity in India is under the hegemony of the western Church. In this context the focus of the paper is on the subject 'Indigenization' with an aim to help the Indian Christians to relate themselves to the culture and context of the Indians.

KEYWORDS Indigenous, Indigenization, Mission/Missions, Three-Self

Indigenization

The protestant missionaries popularized this concept, indigenization, to localize their western initiated and established churches in the nonwestern nations. In fact, "indigenization is a term describing the translatability of the universal Christian faith into the forms and symbols of the particular cultures of the world" (Conn 2001:481). As per Conn's definition Indigenization is a process of translating Christian message to a particular native cultures and people so that the Christian faith would grow in that local context. The local and native expression of Christian faith is the goal of indigenization. This missiological concept has been mostly developed and implemented by the western mission theorists, who try to impose their concept of indigenization in nonwestern lands, so that their established mission work will continue to be under western influence. Indigenization is not translating the western form of Christianity into eastern lands, but it is much more. Under the name of indigenization, the western missions translated their theology, culture, way of worship and liturgy into Eastern lands especially to India.

Two Levels of Indigenization

There are two levels of indigenization that happened in India; one is "institutional indigenization" and the other is "popular indigenization". The missionaries and missions agencies that had come to India initiated only institutional indigenization that gave priority to the expansion of their western type of Christian witness in an Indian form. They neglected the popular indigenization that is related to the indigenous faiths, theology, and cultures (Raj 2005:415). The Indian mission practionars such as Sadhu Sunder Singh, Subbarao, Father Devadas, Bakhtsingh, Dayanand Bharati, etc. had given more importance to the popular indigenization because they related their mission practice to the indigenous people in India. The westerners could not define indigenization in the light of Indian way of worship. Indigenization demands local expressing of worship in which we need to "take into account the pattern in which people worshipped and transform it to abide by the teachings and the life of Christ"(Parmar 2003:159). Therefore, in the context of Indian missions, indigenization should mean to develop indigenous theology that helps the Christians in India to practice the Christian mission with indigenous resources in an Indian way of worship and witness so that the people of India would understand Christian message. The so-called indigenous missions that are emerged in Indian context have neither developed indigenous theology nor understood the Hindu society. Their indigeneity is under question because they are still under the hegemony of the westerns definitions of indigeneity that does not give importance to the indigenous theology and mission praxis.

Three-Self Theory

Henry Venn (1796-1873) advocated "Indigenous Church Principle" which is widely known as "Three-Self" formula (self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating). Venn wanted to see the native mission agencies function on their own without the interference of the western mission societies (Shenk 2006:10). Venn stressed on financial support and his argument is that the mission agency, which does not raise their support from their members, will not be succeeding in their mission work. Venn's view on "self-governing" principle is that the outsiders should not involve in the administration of the local mission; instead, the leadership should be drawn from the local mission society. Venn's intended meaning on "self-governing" principle is that the outsiders need to be replaced by the local leaders and there should be "self-reliance rather than dependence" so that they themselves may manage the administration of the mission (Shenk 1977:467).

His view on "self-propagating" principle is that the local mission should take up the responsibility of witnessing the kingdom of God. He calls it as "self-responsibility" which means the local mission is responsible for witnessing the kingdom values in the society.

Beyerhaus pulverizes "three-self" formula on biblical grounds. He argues that the "three-self" formula brings a kind of pride in indigenous missions and they would get isolated from the established mission society. His view is that "self" is always dangerous and self-reliance cannot be trusted because it is marred by the sin (Beyerhaus 1964:403). His argument is that the indigenous missions should not develop a kind of idealistic theory that affirms self with an intension to take hold of the authority. Beyerhaus' development of thesis is mostly from spiritual aspect, and at the same time, there is a room for contextual realities of the mission field.

Finley examines the self-support theory and argues that financial support to the indigenous mission agencies is legitimate and it is Biblical (Finley 1999:73). He substantiates his argument through the New Testament mission model and he argues that the church at Jerusalem extended financial support to the needy. Further, he adds, "It is fine for European and American missions to raise funds internationally, but if Indian or African missions do so, they are in danger of dependency" (73). The funds that come from indigenous mission societies are not sufficient to meet the total needs of the mission work. In the light of this fact, Finley challenges the western mission societies to support the indigenous missions and he questions the validity of the self-support theory.

Indigenous Missions in India

In the context of Indian missions, three self-theory emerged due to the political and identity factors. Identity is one of the major factors in Indian missions because Indian Christian missions are dominated by Western Church. The spirit of nationalism empowered Indian Christians to think about their own identity. Indigenous Christian movements such as Calcutta Christo Samaj (1887), National Church of Madras (1886), Lucknow Christian Association (1892) and Poona Christians Association were formed as a result of Nationalism in India (Lalchhuanliana 1973:73). Individual charismatic Indian Christian leaders like V.S. Azariah visualized indigenous missions that practice three-self theory because Indian church was under the bondage of the western missions. The western missionaries and mission agencies treated Indian mission leaders as subordinate infants, which is one of the major reasons for the emergence of indigenous three-self theory in India. Even though this theory is developed by westerns from their perspective, it has some hope for the Indian mission leaders to gain identity by the implementation of these principles. Therefore, indigenous mission leaders like Azariah dreamt of implementing these principles in our Indian mission context. Azariah lamented the racial discrimination of the West. He exposed the superficial pseudo relationship between the so-called missionaries and native workers in his address at the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910. He complained that Indian missionaries were not treated as equals with the Western missionaries and in fact, they were considered as "children" (Azariah 1910:308). The western missionaries maintained their own status and ethnic diversity in their relationship with the Indian mission workers. In order to free from the western monopoly in Indian missions Indian Christians moved towards implementation of three-self theory.

The Fourth-Self

The question of Fourth-Self came in to main discussion of mission during 1970s. Self-theologizing is the issue in Fourth-Self. Indian Christians need an indigenous theology that is relevant to the indigenous people. Indigenous missions in India try to develop their own indigenous theology that is relevant to the Indian contexts without diluting the biblical theology. People like Sadhu Sunder Singh opposed western theological jargons and he used simple illustrations in his communication to explain the Truth. In fact, he "talked of the Gospel as only acceptable to Indians if offered in an Indian cup" (Marbaniang 2011:226). Roger Hedlund argues that there is no universal theology as such. Theology shapes and develops in a local context. In the Indian context, the real struggle is to develop the Christology that can be understood by Indians. Sadhu sunder Singh developed a Christocentric approach to relate with the Indians. Father Devadas, the founder of Bible Missions in Andhra Pradesh, developed a Christocentric indigenous theology which is relevant to Indian context. Miracles, dreams, healing and foretelling are a part of Indian theology. In order to be relevant to the Indian theological factors, indigenous Christian missions emerged with a theology that is relevant to the Indian context. Devadas was a lay preacher in Lutheran mission in costal Andhra Pradesh. His indigenous mission approach that emphasized on healings, miracles and dreams compelled him to go away from the mainline Lutheran missions, because his mission practice was not accepted. The western Christianity always suspicious about Indian indigenous theology that is relevant to the culture and the context.

Conclusion & Missiological Implications

There are few missiological implications that can be derived from this indigenous missions theory. Firstly, the "three-self" theory advanced in the context of European missionaries' active participation in mission work. Venn's context is different and his times are different. It might be the need of the hour for three-self theory to evoke the indigenous missions to compete with the western church but it may not be relevant to the present day context, because globalization brought people, cultures, and nations together as one village. Secondly, self-dependence is always dangerous because the local church needs assistance from the developed church for its growth and maturity. Therefore the western church should continue to help without imposing their western theology and mission praxis. Thirdly the over emphasis on "three-self" theory brought negative results in the post independent Indian missions. For instance, the western mission agencies handed over huge mission compounds, hospitals, established churches, schools and other resources to the hands of local Indian leaders hoping that they could manage well and multiply the properties, but the Indian indigenous leaders have sold out most of the mission properties. Self-governing and self-propagation may not be successful if there is no accountability and partnership with the established church. The Western church should allow the Eastern church to grow from its indigenous culture and the context.

REFERENCES

1. Azariah, V .S (1910). The Problem of Co-Operation between Foreign and Native Workers. In The History and Records of the Conference, Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings. New York, Chicago and Toronto: World Missionary Conference. | 2. Beyerhaus, Peter (1964). Three Selves Formula : Is It Built on Biblical Foundations? International Review of Mission 53(212): 393–407. | 3. Conn, Harvey M (2001). Indigenization. Scott W Sunquist, ed. A Dictionary of Asian Christianity. Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans. | 4. Finley, Bob (1999). Send Dollars Dn Sense : Why Giving Is Often Better than Going. Christianity Today 43(11): 73–75. | 5. Lalchhuanliana (1973). A Study of Indian Christians' Involvement in the Political Developments in India from 1885-1947. An unpublished M.Th thesis, Senate of Serampore College, UTC, Bangalore. | 6. Marbaniang, Domenic (2011). Beyond the Shadows and Other Essays. Domenic Marbaniang. | 7. Parmar, S. K (2003). Worship and Witness - Need for Indigenization. Bangalore: TBT. |. 8. Raj, J. Selva (2005). Two Models of Indigenization in South Asian Catholicism. Vidyajyothi: Journal of Theological Reflection 6(69): 415–430. | 9. Shenk, Wilbert R. (1977). Henry Venn's Instructions to Missionaries. Missiology 5(4): 467–485. | 10. Shenk, Wilbert (2006). Henry Venn-Missionary Statesman: Missionary Statesman. Wipf and Stock Publishers.