

# Christianity Tilts to the South A New Challenge for Christian Ministry and Theological Education\*

JOHN MBITI†

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

I express my deep gratitude to the Co-ordination Committee of the Senate of Serampore College for inviting me to speak at this great occasion of your Convocation. It is also my joy to visit the United Theological College, Bangalore, which I have known for many years but only by name and whose Principal Dr Russell Chandran has been a dear friend and fellow co-worker in the ecumenical movement for a long time.

The graduation event which we are celebrating today reminds me of the occasion in the Bible, at which king David charged his son Solomon to build the temple in Jerusalem. So the account reads in 1 Chronicles 29 : 1, 2 : "And David the king said to all the assembly, Solomon my son, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced, and the work is great ; for the palace will not be for man but for the Lord God. So I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood ; besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, coloured stones, all sorts of precious stones, and marble."

\* This address was delivered at the Convocation of the Senate of Serampore, held at the United Theological College, Bangalore, on February 5th, 1983.

† Dr. Mbiti, formerly the Director of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, is at present a pastor in Switzerland.

This word of David spoken nearly three thousand years ago has astonishingly close parallels to us on this occasion. Today's parody could read thus : "And the professors said to the Convocation, 'The graduating men and women, whom God alone has chosen, are (with a few exceptions) young and inexperienced, and the work of the ministry is great ; for building the people of God (the Church) will not be for man but for the Lord God. So we have provided for the work of the ministry, so far as we were able, theology for the things theological, biblical studies for the things biblical, history for the things historical, pastoralia for the things pastoral, liturgics for the things liturgical, homiletics for the things homiletical, languages for the things linguistical, besides great quantities of practical work, scholarly wisdom from across the centuries, varieties of indigenous theologies, German theology, ecumenics, interreligious dialogue and much more."

The question, among others, arises as to where we are today in the history of Christianity in which this major task of building the people of God is to take place. I shall look at this question in a global way. You are better equipped to understand its local dimensions.

We are living at a moment of tremendous change, a change without much noise, without outward drama, without front page headlines in the newspapers. The Christian faith was born in Asia and for the first 750 years after Christ, Christianity was statistically a religion of the southern region of the world, with followers in many parts of Asia and Africa. Since about 750 A.D., it shifted its statistical gravity to the northern region where it established strong bases of power scholarship, spirituality and even controversies and a multiplicity of denominations. We shall use the term "southern region" or "south" broadly to include Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania ; and "northern region" or "north" to include Europe and Britain, the Soviet Union and North America.

In 1980, there were some 1,432,700,000 Christians in the world, being approximately 33 per cent of the world's population. Their numbers continue to increase steadily

in the south, while proportionally falling slightly in the north. A statistical balance between north and south was reached in 1981, and since then the scales are clearly tilting in favour of the south. Christianity is moving into the southern spring, if not yet summer. We are the first generation to witness this significant turn of events. Our ministry, the building of God's household of faith, is to be rendered in the dawn of a new epoch in Christendom. This tilting of Christianity to the south has serious implications and we shall look at some of them here briefly.

For the first time in history, Christianity has now become truly universal. There is not a single nation or country in the world today without some members of the body of Christ. The command of our Lord to his followers to be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1 : 8) and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28 : 19) is, for the first time, a reality today. The Church has intercepted the histories of all nations of the world, thus arriving at the truly eschatological moment. There is literally no more new territory to be entered for the first time by the followers of Christ. Jesus Christ is now both Lord of history and Lord of geography, he is Lord of all the nations of the world with their total histories and cultures, their languages and religious aspirations, their problems and anxieties. This geographical outreach of the Church demands from us all a new awareness of its globality and universality.

In 1980, out of the world's 7,010 languages, 1,811 of them had the Bible in part or in full translated into them. 85 per cent of these translations are in the southern region (e.g., 29 per cent in Africa, 25 per cent in Asia). The actual preaching of the Gospel is being done in an even larger number of languages. This means that the articulation of the Christian faith is now a global task. It is no longer the monopoly of Latin, Greek, German, English and Russian. Christian theology is now opened up to the global public and more so in the south. Consequently it must bear the imprint of these languages of mankind, since each word into which the Scriptures are

translated or in which the Gospel is proclaimed carries the weight of meaning and background attached to the culture of the people who speak it. Hitherto theology had become locked up in libraries and archives in the north and anyone who wished to do theology was obliged to learn at least one of these traditional languages of the north. Now the time has come to do theology in hundreds of these other languages—the languages spoken in the rice fields of Thailand and Taiwan, or in the fishing canoes of Fiji and the Maldives, or in the desert sands of Saudi Arabia and Mali, or in the thick jungles of Brazil and Zaire. With the tilting of Christianity to the south, the language of theology should be the language of the ministry, and it should bear the features and authority of the first Pentecost. The listeners should be able to say : “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2 : 11).

Until the decade of the 1960s, the north dominated theological thought and ideas and had done so for more than a millennium. Its professors roared and thundered with great might, full of wisdom and profundity. This monopoly reached a dead-end with the so-called “death of God theology” (which I would call a—theology), ten to twenty years ago. Since then there is greater theological excitement and creativity in the south than in the north. The method of doing theology is rather different in the south where theology is lived first and then written down later, starting out of practical ministry and moving into reflection. It is lived in the cries of the people, in the songs of the people, in the reading and hearing of God’s word in their own languages.

The south is also a region of the great religions of the world. So, Christian theology here cannot have a monopoly of the microphone. There are other religious voices and it must come to terms with them in a more intensive way than it had done in the north over the last one thousand years. Here it rubs shoulders with Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and tribal religions, with all their traditions and spirituality. In the north, Christianity had more or less lost the challenge of spiritual competition

and has enjoyed spiritual supremacy and triumphalism. But in the southern region, its ministry has to take a clearly defined servant-position in society, sometimes with little or no power, in order to make its credibility heard. Among other things, Christian ministry will increasingly have to cooperate with, and even seek the assistance of the "ministries" of other religions in the search for solution to the threats of human survival—threats of nuclear holocaust, pollution, misuse of natural resources, structures of injustice, etc. Although Christians account for one third of the human population, the key to human survival does not lie only in their pockets. There are also other valuable dimensions to the religious plurality in the south that can be explored, such as spiritual fellowship and exchange, mutual support and consolation, and undertaking open co-operation in community projects. These possibilities, among others, call for basic re-examination of our understanding of the Christian ministry.

Perhaps to complicate the world situation further, our century has seen a substantial growth of a category of people who count themselves as having "no religion." These amount to 16 per cent of the world population. Is there a form of ministry which the Church can render to them as well, or must they be regarded as religious outcasts?

It is estimated today that over 600,000,000 Christians in 79 countries in the north and the south live under "limited political restrictions ... state interference and obstruction, state hostility and prohibition, or state suppression and eradication." Their inadequate freedom and even suffering is a constant reminder to us that the struggle against the forces of evil continues in the world of today as it was at the time of Jesus himself. Suffering and martyrdom in the name of Christ have been an integral feature of Church history from its very beginning. The climate in the southern region cannot be expected to be always favourable to Christianity any more than it has been in the north. The south has produced many martyrs this century and no doubt will produce more in

years to come. The challenge is whether we Christians of the south can evolve a kind of ecumenical sharing of suffering and hope, a fellowship of pilgrims of suffering and hope. The south knows all too well, as does also the north, the depths of suffering. How can we bring these experiences to have a bearing in our theology and ministry? How shall we communicate what it means to study theology with an empty stomach, while our counterparts in the north study it with stomachs bulging from big meals or layers of fatness? Theology in the south is also the voice of agony and laughter, of being and striving to be.

We are called upon in the south to consider the sources of doing theology, the sources on which we base our ministry. So far in the north these sources have been largely the Bible and tradition of the Church. With the tilting of Christianity to the south, we have to take into account additional sources without which our theology and ministry would be alienated from the people we serve. In addition to the Bible and Church tradition, we have the riches of our religions, our cultures and histories, as well as the experiences of the Church in its day-to-day life. These sources will colour our theological reflection and the rendering of our ministry in a given area. They are living issues from human situations, reflections, and practice. In its final communique the Asian Theological Conference at Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, in January 1979 said that "theology to be authentically Asian, must be immersed in our historico-cultural situation and grow out of it," in addition to the Bible which is "an important source in the 'doing of theology.'" Less than two years before, in December 1977, the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians in Accra, Ghana, said very similar things, and enumerated five sources including the Bible and Christian heritage, African anthropology, African Religion, Independent Churches and other realities.

These sources interact daily in the world of the southern region. The value we put to them varies according to different situations. But they encompass the

realities of human life. So they force it upon us, theologians and ministers of the Gospel, to put adequate meaning to the Christian concepts which we have inherited. In its long and strong presence in the north, Christianity has evolved ways of interpreting the Scriptures and articulating Christian doctrines, ways of practising spirituality and doing theology. These have had their value, and served their purpose, within their contexts. But we are discovering more and more, that not all these Christian riches of the north can adequately serve the people of God in the southern region, and new meanings will have to be attached to many of the traditional concepts of Christianity. The fact that 85 per cent of the translations of the Bible (in full or in part) are now found in the south indicates that the Scriptures are being read and scrutinized in a new light; for each of these languages is a vehicle of interpreting the biblical revelation within the framework of its range of understanding. As ministers of God, we are catalysts in this process, we encourage it, we sharpen its focus, we even venture to hold its steering wheel and give it direction. This we will do in all kinds of weather—in situations of weakness, where our voice has to be whispered; in situations where Christians are in a small minority, as is the case in most of Asia (except the Philippines, and less so in Lebanon and South Korea); or in situations where suddenly there is a Christian majority in the population, as in the southern two-thirds of Africa, much of the Pacific and Latin America.

While this tilting of Christendom from the north to the south is a phenomenal event, it must not be seen as cause for triumphalism. It is the work of God, an intervention of God in the history of the world, using human beings to accomplish his purpose. We appreciate two main contributions in this process. One is the contribution of the modern missionary movement which began in the north two hundred years ago. The other is the devout work of local Christians in the southern region in spreading the Gospel. So the statistics give only part of an otherwise complex picture which is still in the process of taking shape.

We must recognize that the north will continue to be powerful even if statistics shift to the south, because of its accumulation of wealth and knowledge, technology and political power. But in the global body of Christ, there should be no separation between the south and the north. Rather, we see this tilting as an opening of the way for deeper relationship and fellowship within the body of Christ, even if at times these may be expressed only in creative tensions. As a dream, the tilting of Christendom to the south will result in the Christians of the whole world learning to share the same history, with all the riches of their cultures and local diversities. This global vision, to which we contribute each in a small way in our ministry, is well expressed in a prayer-poem by the former President Léopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, himself a devout Roman Catholic Christian. It is a prayer-poem with universal applicability :

O bless this people, Lord, who seek their own face  
under the mask and can hardly recognize it...  
O bless this people that breaks its bond...  
And with them, all the peoples of North and South,  
of East and West,  
who sweat blood and sufferings,  
and see, in the midst of these millions of waves  
the sea swell of the heads of my people  
and grant to them warm hands that they may clasp  
the earth in a girdle of brotherly hands,  
beneath the rainbow of Thy peace. Amen.

So, we are privileged to be the first generation of a new epoch in Christian history. But this statistical tilting of Christianity to the south is an explosive phenomenon, the outreach of whose energies is beyond our imagination. The Church of the new era will not remain the same, its theology will not remain the same, its reading and interpreting of the Scriptures will not remain the same...and much more. Change has fallen upon us, with all its global dimensions, and all parts of Christendom have to adjust themselves to this change—in their theological education, in their ministry, in their concepts

of what the Church is. We rejoice at this great working of God in our day. At the same time, we must tremble, as ministers, at the thought of being called at this juncture of history to build the global people of God into a body that befits the difficult challenges and great opportunities that lie ahead. May God give you, young Solomons (as well as the older Solomons), enough grace and wisdom to be servants worthy of his calling, Amen.

*N.B.:* Statistics cited in this address are taken from *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, edited by David B. Barrett, Oxford University Press, Nairobi, Oxford, New York, 1982.