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REFLECTIONS ON THE MODERN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT:
1792-1992

I. Introduction

The year 1992 marks the bicentenary of the publication of William Carey's tract, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester, England) in 1792, and the founding that autumn of The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel amongst the Heathen (later known as the Baptist Missionary Society) at Kettering. As a publishing event the appearance of Carey's little book was unremarkable. One of the problems Carey faced when he offered for India the following year was the disposal of unsold copies of his *Enquiry*. Nonetheless, Carey's *Enquiry* soon gained symbolic significance and furnishes a convenient starting point for a movement and an era. By 1825 Protestants had organized some thirty missionary societies in the British Isles, Europe and the United States while Roman Catholics had seen a revival of missionary passion among them.

During the past two centuries the world has had to negotiate change on a scale and at a pace that, even in retrospect, is difficult to comprehend. Two dimensions of that change are growth in population and church membership. In these two centuries world population has grown from some 902 million people to 4.3 billion in 1980 while the number of Christians has risen from an estimated 208 million in 1800 to 1.4 billion in 1980. Stated in percentages, the number of Christians increased from 23 percent in 1800 to 32.8 percent in 1980. Especially telling is the contrast in geographical distribution of the Christian population in 1800 with that of 1980. More than 86 percent of all Christians in 1800 could be classified European. By 1980 half of all Christians were to be found outside the North Atlantic heartland of historical Christendom. Given the rates of growth among the newer churches and the static or declining membership of the North Atlantic churches, it is projected that by the year 2000 sixty percent of all Christians will be in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Such a shift in the center of gravity occurs but rarely; the modern missionary movement, however it may otherwise be evaluated, has been an instrument...
of momentous change. And yet a mere recital of the facts does not begin to lay bare the meaning of such a development.

Here we wish to reflect on what the modern mission movement has meant for world and church. I propose to do that by exploring the following thesis: The modern mission project has been a special focus of the larger confrontation between modernity, the Christian faith and world cultures. This requires that we take account of the secular context in which this movement has taken place and the ecclesiastical soil in which the movement took root.

II. Background to Modern Missions

The whole of the modern period is overshadowed by the Enlightenment, the powerful philosophical movement that emerged toward the end of the seventeenth century in Europe and set the terms for intellectual discourse for the next centuries. The historian Peter Gay has characterized the impact of the Enlightenment as follows:

In the century of the Enlightenment, educated Europeans awoke to a new sense of life. They experienced an expansive sense of power over nature and themselves: the pitiless cycles of epidemics, famines, risky life and early death, devastating war and uneasy peace - the treadmill of human existence - seemed to be yielding at last to the application of critical intelligence.5

This sense of mastery issued in a mission to bring the world within the orbit of this "enlightened" universal rationality. The universe was conceived to be like an orderly machine governed by laws that ensured predictability. These laws could be discovered through experiment and analysis. Matter was increasingly broken down into smaller parts. In contrast to the medieval tradition where authority resided in tradition, the modern outlook took scientific fact to be the source of authority. The modern intellectual outlook was one of radical skepticism toward all except skepticism itself. Science and technology were indispensable; religion was increasingly consigned to the realm of superstition. Technology and science promised unlimited improvement in human welfare. According to this new view, life was divided between the public and the private. The public sphere was governed by rationality and objective facts. The private sphere was controlled by sentiment and subjective values - and this is where religion belonged.