

## Pluralism and Christian Mission: A Review Article

*Robert Ramseyer*

*The Recovery of Mission, Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm*, by Vinoth Ramachandra.

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996. 293 pp. no price, paper.

*God's That Fail, Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission*, by Vinoth Ramachandra.

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997. 226 pp. no price, paper

Pluralism!?! As we come to the closing years of the twentieth century, it is as if many Christians have suddenly become aware of the fact that there are many religious systems in our world, each of which makes perfectly good sense to its adherents, adherents who would appear to be rational, intelligent people. Christians have also come face to face with the fact that very often these followers of “other faith systems” are at least as nice, good, and moral as are the Christians whom we know. What has happened, of course, is that more and more Christians in the churches which have traditionally sent out missionaries now find themselves living close to people from the societies to which those missionaries were sent and have discovered that these people too are nice, rational people. In addition, many people from traditionally Christian countries have spent significant periods of time in other societies and have had to face the fact that these societies can be as pleasant to live in as those found within the traditional Christian world.

What does one do with the realization that people seem to do as well without the Christian faith as with it? Does this mean the end of Christian mission as we have known it? What does it mean today to say that Jesus is Lord? To say that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, the Life?

The answer for many contemporary Christians is the philosophy/theology called pluralism, the idea that at least all of the “major” religious traditions have salvific value for their adherents. This means, of necessity, a reinterpretation of any given religious tradition, since religious systems by their very nature make absolute, exclusive claims. (This is true even of Hinduism which prides itself on being inclusive and accepting of all religious traditions.)

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For Christians this “pluralism” raises a multitude of difficult questions. First and foremost, what do we think of Jesus? Is there any way that Jesus can be the Christ in a pluralist understanding of the world? Closely related to the question of Jesus is the question of grace. It would seem fairly obvious that the pluralist question arose for most Christians initially precisely because deep down inside we do not really believe in grace in any traditional Christian sense. That is, we ask how God could refuse to save good moral people. We ask how could God not save Gandhi rather than how could God not save Hitler or Stalin. We seem to have forgotten that the biblical message is that we are not saved because God looks at how nice we are and says that we ought to be saved, but rather that God looks at how miserable we are and through God’s mercy and grace alone as we see them in Jesus of Nazareth God reaches down to save human beings without regard for our own efforts at self improvement. What does God’s grace as revealed in Jesus Christ mean in a pluralist world? Can grace which seems to say that no religious tradition can save in and of itself be reconciled with the view that all faith traditions have salvific value?

In *The Recovery of Mission* Vinoth Ramachandra, a Sri Lankan Christian and the South Asian regional secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, presents a clear-cut biblical response to pluralist theology. In the process he presents the best statement on Christian mission that I have seen in print anywhere.

Ramachandra begins with a rather detailed discussion of the positions of three well-known pluralist theologians, Stanley Samartha, Raimondo Panikkar, and Aloysius Pieris. This section takes up about one-third of the book (about 100 pages) and, while very well done, could be skipped if the reader is not specifically interested in a detailed discussion of the issues presented by theological pluralism.

In Part Two (about 70 pages) Ramachandra compares and criticizes these three theologians, setting them in a broader theological/philosophical and historical perspective. In the process he makes extensive use of the writings of Lesslie Newbigin with whom he agrees at many points. He does however suggest a number of corrections to Newbigin’s response to modernity. The discussion of modernity is more fully nuanced in *Gods That Fail*.

Part Three (pages 179-284) is a presentation of Ramachandra’s own understanding of the Christian faith and of the place of mission in that faith understanding. These final three chapters, “The Scandal of Jesus,” “A Gospel for the World,” and “Gospel Praxis,” together form a clear and coherent statement on Christian mission which ought to be read by anyone and everyone concerned with Christian mission at the close of the twentieth century. These three chapters could stand alone and would make an excellent small book on the theology and practice of mission. The final chapter, “Gospel Praxis,” is the clearest, most succinct statement on mission that I have ever seen in print. I could wish that it would be read by every Christian around the world.

Ramachandra begins “Gospel Praxis” with the new human community which is formed through the gospel. The key here is that this community is all God’s work, not something which we have constructed. Therefore this community can never be a

source of pride. Pride is always divisive. This community is not rooted in something which we possess, something which divides us from others. “The cross, in other words, humbles every form of human pride. It tells us that it is not the ‘good Christian’ or the ‘sincere Hindu’ or the ‘devout Buddhist’ or the ‘men and women of good will’ who are assured places in the kingdom of God. But, rather, that it is the bad Christian, the bad Hindu, the bad Buddhist—those who know themselves to be moral failures, that they have fallen hopelessly short of the kind of life they know (in their better moments) they should be living—it is these who are closer to the kingdom of God.... From the perspective of the cross, then, it appears that there are only two kinds of human beings: those who, accepting their wretchedness, lift their eyes to God for mercy; and those who, seeking to establish their own identity, spurn God’s mercy and look down on others (cf. Lk. 18:9-14).... This, then, is the logic of the cross: the very act that binds me to God in grace binds me, *simultaneously*, to my neighbour in acceptance.” (p. 267) Christian unity then is by its very nature concerned to protect cultural pluralism precisely because salvation is a matter of divine grace not of human works.

Under “Gospel Integrity” in this final chapter Ramachandra takes up the obvious truth, one that is seldom dealt with so clearly, that “the manner in which we witness to the gospel must be consistent with its content.” (p. 270) This means that Christian witness must begin with genuine respect for the other person. “Whoever boasts of being ‘tolerant’ towards other beliefs while, at the same time, asserting either that such beliefs are fundamentally no different to any other sets of beliefs or that, even if they were, they do not make any decisive difference to a person’s life now or ever, is simply emptying the word tolerance of any moral value. At worst, it is simply a narcissistic endorsement of one’s own worldview. Conceptual and ethical relativists, religious pluralists and the ‘politically correct’ ideologues of the post-modern world have never experienced the pain involved in an act of genuine tolerance. To believe that my neighbour is wrong in her beliefs and that as long as she clings to her beliefs she will suffer eternal ruin, and yet at the same time to defend and protect her freedom to hold those beliefs...this, surely, is the real meaning of tolerance. But Christian respect goes beyond social tolerance to servanthood. My fellow human being, of whatever persuasion, has a claim on my life simply by virtue of being human.” (p. 271) Anything less than this full respect becomes a kind of intellectual snobbery, condescension toward those poor folk who take their faith seriously. Respect means that we really listen, trying to see things from the other’s point of view, really trying to understand.

With respect comes genuine humility, including humility about what we can know and what we do not know. The gospel after all is about grace, not human attainment. “It is as arrogant to suppress revealed truth as it is to elevate speculation to the status of truth. Questions such as the final destiny of people who, through no fault of their own, have never had a chance to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, can safely be left in the hands of a God who the gospel reveals to be both just and gracious in his dealings with humankind.... All we can say, humbly yet boldly, is that if anyone *is* saved it will not be through any religion or human attainment, but solely through the

objective, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whether consciously appropriated or not.” (p. 274)

Our model for all that mission means is of course Jesus. We are then committed to communicating the gospel in an incarnational way, remembering especially that Jesus’ claim to absolute truth and authority was expressed in the form of lowly sacrificial service. (p.275) Ramachandra points out that although Jesus never taught techniques or methodologies of mission, he did leave two mission principles—loving and dying. Loving means that the gospel is communicated through Christian communities in which love is shown. “It is the growing unity of the disciple-community, drawing together people of all cultural and social backgrounds, which will convince skeptics not only that Christ is the supreme locus of divine revelation but that Christians have been caught up into the eternal love of the Father for his unique Son.” (p.276) Suffering and dying also mark Christ’s church. “And, may we not envisage the possibility that as Western Christians learn to disentangle the gospel of Christ from the assumptions, values and practices of pagan Western society, they too will experience the social ostracism and suffering that the gospel brings, so that the evangelization of Europe and North America will have begun afresh?” (p. 278)

In the final section of this last chapter “Gospel Radicalness” Ramachandra makes extensive use of Alan Kreider’s essay “Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom” published in *Vox Evangelica* vol. XXIV (1994). Here we are shown how the early Christians in their worship and life together embodied a new way of living and being, a radical alternative to the world around them. While this brought ostracism and suffering, it was also attractive to many.

In his 1997 book *Gods That Fail* Ramachandra deals more fully with idols, those things in our world today to which people attach themselves as alternatives to God’s grace as shown to us in Jesus Christ. He then makes specific suggestions as to what these “idols” mean for Christian mission, Christian mission as we have seen it outlined in *The Recovery of Mission*. This is clear in the conclusion to *Gods That Fail*. “Today the cross of the risen Jesus can, once again, be a liberating gospel only if it is proclaimed in humility, penitent confession and non-manipulative love. The church must live out the Good News in its proclamation. In other words, the announcement that Jesus is the true and living way to the Father (e.g. Jn. 4:6) can be made only by people who walk the way that Jesus walked.” (pp. 220-221)

Ramachandra closes *The Recovery of Mission* with “Through humble conversation with the early Christians the challenges of interaction with the worldviews and ideologies of our world at the end of the twentieth century, and to bear witness to Jesus Christ with integrity and radicalness.” (p.282)

*The Recovery of Mission*, especially Part Three, is essential reading for anyone concerned with what mission means in our world today. I would suggest reading *The Recovery of Mission* first and then turning to *Gods That Fail* for specific responses to many of the intellectual currents flowing almost everywhere today. Ramachandra presents a clear, concise, coherent, evangelical (if you will, Mennonite) basis for faithful witness/discipleship here and now.

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