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Violence in Mission History

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The scope of this article is to highlight the major instances of the exercise of violence to spread the Christian religion, while explaining at the same time the context in which this occurred and how people understood it then. By violence here I understand not only physical violence against persons but also various forms of pressure on people to change their religion. For this purpose it will be convenient to divide mission history into three major periods.

1. First Period (313-500)

1.1. The Data

Arrived in a position of power, Christians often set about destroying idols. For non-Christians, it was a convincing demonstration of the powerlessness of their idols, that they could be destroyed with impunity. Violence was directed chiefly against idols and temples. But occasionally lives were lost in the ensuing riots. The Christians, however, did not imitate their persecutors by attempting, for instance, to decimate their opponents; so that in the 4th century the replacement of the Roman religions was accompanied by comparatively little loss of life. Bishop Martin of Tours “led his monks in preaching,

in destroying temples, and in baptizing” (LATOURETTE, I: 201). It was common practice to build churches or monasteries on the sites of destroyed temples. Benedict built his famous monastery of Cassino (ca. 529) on the site of a temple of Apollo.

1.2. The Outlook

In the thinking of the times, the State was expected to have an official religion. Hence, the emperors took upon themselves the task of ensuring this. The dangers of the Church-State relationship which was developing from the time of Constantine were not realised at the start, but would become clearer with experience.

Though St. John Chrysostom sent a couple of zealous monks to destroy some temples, still he insisted that none should be compelled to the baptismal font under threat of force: the example of Christian living would be the most effective means. St. Augustine was at first opposed to the use of coercive measures against the schismatic Donatists in North Africa, e.g. confiscation of property. Later he changed his opinion, because he realized that many who wanted to be Catholics out of

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conviction did not do so, for fear of displeasing their people, or due to the dead weight of custom, or “because the sense of security rendered them slothful, disdainful, and unconcerned to inquire about Catholic truth”. When pressurized by imperial decrees which threatened earthly loss, they overcame these obstacles, became Catholics and were glad to be so. It is plain how the principles enunciated by St. Augustine might be applied to non-Christians also, especially in view of the theological stand explained below.

The theological position encapsulated in the dictum, “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (no salvation outside the Church) would also have influenced missionary practice. This idea was popularized in the third century by St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in north Africa. He applied it to *Christian* heretics and schismatics. However, towards the close of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the official religion of the empire and the majority of its citizens professed it, its application was extended to non-Christians. These were presumed to be guilty, due to their wilful rejection of what plainly appeared as the truth. This position is evidenced in the writings of Sts. Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom and Augustine, among others (Sullivan: 24-27).

2. Second Period (500-1500)

By 1500 northern and eastern Europe had also become part of ‘Christendom’. In kingdom after kingdom Christianity was declared the State religion; profession of the Christian faith became barely distinguishable from al-

legiance to king and country. Rulers of Christian realms, engaged in expansionist policies, regarded the spread of Christianity as an integral part of their programme. They used Christianity as a tool to further their aims of political domination, cultural assimilation and economic exploitation of neighbouring tribes and principalities. The missionary enterprise was actively fostered by kings who did not hesitate to use material inducements, threats and force to ensure at least outward profession of the State religion. We shall treat first of the Germanic tribes and then of the Slavs.

2.1. *The Germanic tribes (3-11 cent.)*

2.1.1. *The Data*

One can broadly distinguish two types of mission, according to the greater or lesser dependence on imperial support. In the mission under Dagobert, Martel, Pepin, Louis the Pious, and especially Charlemagne, the work of the missionaries was overshadowed by the will of the ruler. The latter used lures, threats and even force to induce acceptance of Christianity. On the other hand, the mission developed in a more spiritual fashion when it was undertaken on the initiative of independent missionaries.

Christian kings and emperors continued to make legal enactments against the non-Christian cults. In 556 Clovis’ son, Childebert I, forbade idols and the non-Christian cult in his kingdom in Spain. In this context, Charlemagne did not hesitate to resort to the sword. His programme consisted of armed conquest, followed by the imposition of Christianity. Thus Widukind, who led

at least two Saxon uprisings, was defeated by Charlemagne and submitted to baptism in 785. In his “Capitulatio” for the Saxons, Charlemagne ordered the death penalty for refusal to receive baptism and for participation in non-Christian sacrifices. But the Saxons equated their religion with their political independence. So, like the Frisians they resisted Christianity as an instrument of Frankish imperialism. This led to a prolonged and brutal war in which many Saxons were slain before the others accepted Frankish rule and Christianity.

Force was used in Scandinavia too, more especially in Norway. Here some of the princes saw that they could hardly hope to raise the cultural, social and political level of their people without the organization and education which the Church brought. They also wanted to ensure their place within the growing family of Christian rulers. To this end Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway (995-1000), used all means at his disposal. He sent soldiers to pull down non-Christian temples and idols and slew those who opposed him. Some yielded when faced with the choice of battle or baptism. When Alfred the Great defeated the Danish army (878) he required thirty of its leaders to accept baptism. In Normandy the Vikings made a treaty (911) with King Charles the Simple, whereby their settlements in Normandy were legitimized. In return, some of them received baptism.

2.1.2. *The Outlook*

Only a few clergymen or ecclesiastical authorities spoke out fearlessly against the violent measures of the

Christian kings. Among them mention should be made of the Benedictine monk Alcuin. His criticism of the “Capitulatio” had an effect on Charlemagne, to whom he wrote in 796: “...the washing of the body by sacred baptism is of no benefit, if it is not preceded, in a rational being, by assent to the Catholic faith”. These were times in which bishops and priests rode with sword and lance. Latourette remarks wryly: “The age was rough and the Christian leaven could not quickly transform it.” In fact he sees the later Crusades as “part of the effect of the warlike spirit of Europe upon Christianity” (II: 106, 425).

2.2. *The Slavs (7-14 cent.)*

2.2.1. *The Data*

The Slavic peoples inhabited central Europe and the area around the Baltic Sea. Here perhaps much more force was employed than with the Germanic tribes. Repeatedly baptism was imposed at sword’s point. The spiritual nature of baptism as a sacrament of faith receded into the background. As Lattourette observes, the Teutonic or Germanic peoples “sought to use the Church as an agency of conquest and insisted upon baptism as a symbol of the acknowledgement of overlordship and as a step towards assimilation ... Christianity became a tool of an expanding political and economic imperialism” (II: 153, 209). For this purpose they made use of such military Orders as the Teutonic Knights (founded ca. 1198) and the “Brothers of the Sword” (confirmed by Pope Innocent III in 1204). The purpose of the latter was to ‘convert’ the non-Christian Esths and Livs, who held tenaciously to their religion. These un-

tamed Brothers lived by the sword, until the Order was dissolved ca. 1561.

When Charlemagne's son Pepin inflicted a final defeat on the Avars in 796, the survivors declared themselves ready for baptism. The Saxons used much the same methods on the Wends as Charlemagne had employed on their own ancestors, i.e., armed force and the imposition of ecclesiastical organization. When Henry I (d. 936) defeated some Wends he extorted from them a promise to pay him tribute and to become Christians. His son, Otto I ("the Great"), continued his father's policy. Some Saxon nobles, taking as their watchword "the conversion or destruction of the Wends", led a massive crusade against them in 1147. In Hungary grand-duke Geisa was baptized in 986. He compelled some of his subjects, under threat of armed force, to accept baptism; he reduced many prominent Magyars to menial positions when they refused to be baptized. In 987 Emperor Vladimir of Russia accepted the Byzantine form of Christianity for chiefly political reasons. He then made Christianity the State religion, had the idols destroyed and his people conducted in crowds to the Dnieper for baptism. In Bulgaria, King Boris (d. 901) ruthlessly suppressed a revolt of the nobility challenging his decision to impose baptism on all his subjects. Duke Mieczislaw of Poland received baptism in 966 and set about getting his subjects to follow suit. Christianity became the State religion of Poland. Boleslav III of Poland stipulated the acceptance of Christianity among the conditions of his peace treaty with the Pomeranians. In 1249 the Swede Jarl Birger led an expedition

against the Finns and brought the majority of them to an outward acceptance of the Christian faith. The Saxon Cistercian Abbot Berthold organized, with papal authority, a crusade against the Livonians and conquered them in 1198. Thereupon they accepted Christianity, but 'apostatized' and persecuted the Christians when the army withdrew. In general it was only a nominal Christianity which resulted from the use of force in various forms. It took hard work for more than one generation to improve the quality of Christianity.

2.2.2. *The Outlook*

Comparatively few voices were raised in the Christian name to protest the exploitation by Germans of non-German peoples. After the overthrow of the Avars, Pepin arranged for a commission of bishops to meet in Bavaria in 797, under the direction of Arn of Salzburg and Paulinus of Aquileia. They rejected force and hasty mass baptisms. The Scriptural order was: faith and then baptism, not vice-versa. Since the mission was facing "a brute and irrational people" ("gens bruta et irrationalis") who were entering the Church under pressure of defeat, the rites of Christian initiation must be preceded by a catechetical instruction of at least 8 to 15 days. Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne in the same vein. Roger Bacon (d. 1294) said it was better to convert the non-Christians through true knowledge and wisdom than through wars.

Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) taught that physical violence may not be used on non-Christians to make them accept Christianity. However, the rites of non-Christians must in no wise be tolerated

by a Christian ruler, except it be to avoid scandal, or strife, or because through toleration the people would gradually be converted to the Christian faith. He also justified the idea of a military religious order (S.T. II-IIae, Q. 10, art. 8 & 10; Q. 188, art. 3).

He cited the tradition of the Church as the chief reason why non-Christian children, who have not yet reached the use of reason, may not be baptized against their parents' will. If, on attaining the use of reason, the child desires baptism – through persuasion and not under compulsion- he/she may be baptized, even against the parents' will (S.T. II-IIae, Q. 10, art. 8, 11, 12; II, Q. 68, art. 10). He mitigated the concept of “No salvation outside the Church”, by introducing the idea of an implicit desire for baptism. Still the *position of non-Christians in respect of salvation appears precarious and zealous propagators of Christianity might want to use various forms of pressure to get people to join the Church.*

In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII reiterated the doctrine, without making any distinction, that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church (See his Bull, “Unam Sanctam”). This represents the common thinking of Christians during the middle ages. This teaching was given although the Church was aware of vast numbers of non-Christians, not only Muslims, living beyond the confines of Europe and lacking knowledge of the Gospel. In the first half of the 13th century the Mongol hordes had conquered Moscow and Kiev and settled along the lower Volga river; in 1401 they conquered Damascus. Beginning

from 1245 the Pope sent Franciscan and Dominican missions to them and received extensive reports about their people and the extent of their dominions which reached into China. Some of these reports were widely read in Europe. Marco Polo also reported about his travels in India and China between 1273-1292. Yet, two hundred years later, on the eve of the great European expansion into Africa, S. America and Asia, the general council of Florence (1442) reasserted the doctrine of no salvation outside the Church, adding that fasts, almsgiving and other works of piety bear eternal rewards only for those who remain in the Catholic Church.¹ We see how this teaching was understood, in the indulgenced prayer of St. Francis Xavier (d. 1552) for the conversion of the ‘infidels’: “Behold, Lord, to your dishonour hell is being filled with them !”

2.3. Attitude towards Jews

The attitude of Christians towards Jews varied from tolerance to physical violence: persuasion, disputations, polemical writings, compulsory attendance at Christian sermons, forced baptism and frequent persecutions. Mob violence, often instigated by those in high places, repeatedly broke out against the Jews. The Synods of Narbonne (1051), Mainz (1310) and Valencia (1338) demanded the separation of Jews and Christians. The fourth Lateran general council (1215) issued four discriminatory canons on the Jews. Expulsion of Jews from France occurred in 1309 and 1394. Sisebut, king of Visigothic Spain (7th C.), gave all Jews the choice between baptism and exile with confiscation of goods. Archbishop

Isidore of Seville disapproved of the king's violence. The Popes condemned compulsory baptism and were more moderate towards the Jews than was the populace. It was partly out of the desire to achieve religious and cultural unity within the kingdom, that later Spanish kings attempted to convert or expel the Jews and Moors (Muslims).

From 1480 the Inquisition in Spain began proceedings against "Christians" who secretly clung to Judaism. When Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 ordered Jews to be baptized or to leave Spain, a large number chose exile. A similar order was issued in Portugal in 1497. Here the majority of Jews submitted to baptism, but the Inquisition was introduced in the first half of the 16th century.

3. Third Period (1500-1800)

During these three centuries Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox missionary activity accompanied colonial expansion into whole continents. Christianity spread in close conjunction with the commercial, political and military expansion of European powers.

3.1. The Data

When once a people was conquered, they more readily accepted the religion of their new masters. This was especially clear in south America. The civil authorities here often provided armed protection to missionaries and acted on the presumption that the missionary state must be followed by the imposition of their own rule on the (American) Indians. The Nayarit Indians on the west coast of northern Mexico had long resisted both Spanish authority and missionaries. When they

were conquered in the 1720's, Jesuits followed the troops and made many conversions. The same process took place with great rapidity in Colombia when Jimenez de Quesada captured (1536-'8) the table-land of Bogota and Tunja. As with the Dutch in Formosa, an escort of troops often accompanied the missionary, to give him protection when he entered new areas.

Conversions to Russian Orthodoxy followed soon upon the conquest of the Irtysh valley. Filofei Leszczynski (1650-1727), the tireless Metropolitan of Siberia, travelled along the Irtysh and the Ob accompanied by soldiers and priests; he baptized many Ostyaks and Voguls (Finnish tribes).

In this era there were only rare instances of baptism being imposed at the point of the sword, as when Ivan IV ("the Terrible") took the city of Polotzk in 1563. He ordered that all the Jews be baptized or drowned in the Dvina. The common practice was rather to bring social and economic pressure to bear on the non-Christians. Idols and temples were destroyed on a large scale all over the colonies.

In Spanish and Portuguese colonies, non-Christians were compelled to listen to missionary preaching. In the Goa islands there was already a movement towards Christianity, particularly among the poorer classes, when the Portuguese banned the public celebration of Hindu rites and feasts, under pain of a life-sentence to the galleys and loss of all one's possessions. There were other ordinances, backed by severe penalties, which placed Hindus in a disadvantageous position. In Sri Lanka the

Dutch are said to have imposed fines on those who refused to accept baptism.

3.2. *The Outlook*

All acted according to the accepted principle of the times, “*cuius regio eius religio*”, that is, the people are expected to follow the religion of their ruler. The spirit of the times is expressed in a letter (1567) of Pope St. Pius V to the Portuguese Viceroy of India and his Council: “As more and more gentiles accept the Christian faith, so the king’s glorious name will become more glorious, his rule in these parts will be more firmly established, he will acquire greater power to subjugate uncultured nations with divine assistance and join them to the Portuguese empire” (Saldanha: 119). The Spanish colonizers argued that the unbelief of the South American Indians was a just enough reason to make war on them and *enslave* them. This argument was rejected by the Dominican de Vitoria (1493-1546), although he and some other great theologians of the time, like Domingo Soto, O.P. (1524-1560) and the Jesuit F. Suarez (1548-1619) taught that Christian States had the right to use force in order to make non-Christian peoples receive and *hear missionaries*. But they rejected forced baptisms, of the type effected by Ivan the Terrible referred to above. Pope Alexander VII also spoke against the use of inducements and force (1658) (*Collectanea S. Congregationis de Propaganda fide*, 1907, n. 129, xv, t.1, p 40). The Protestant John Calvin (1509-1564) taught that those who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel message are predestined to eternal damnation.

4. Fourth Phase (1800-)

From the 19th century the Protestant Churches engaged in evangelisation in a big way, while the Roman Catholic Church continued its missionary activity.

4.1. *The Data*

Notwithstanding the instance of the French missions cited below, it still remains true that Christian missions as a whole were less under the control of European governments and received less direct assistance from them than during any other period since the fourth century. At the most, the colonial powers provided freedom to propagate one’s faith. Forced baptisms are practically non-existent in this period. A rare exception is the attempt of Czar Nicholas I (1825-1855) to compel all Jews in State service to be baptized, in order to assimilate them to the Russians.

France found in French Roman Catholic missions a convenient tool for the furtherance of its political and colonial aims in the Near East, in China, Indo-China and the Pacific islands. The missions were also considered an instrument for the dissemination of French culture. Often French gun-boats wrung out of native rulers toleration for Roman Catholicism, freedom to found missions and propagate Christianity. They established a protectorate in China, by which the French authorities had the right to intervene where Christian missions were persecuted. In this they were followed by Germany and Italy. The Vicars Apostolic of China, meeting in Rome for the First Vatican General Council (1870), addressed a note of thanks to Napoleon III for the

blessing of the French protectorate. But thoughtful Chinese found suspicious the interest of the protectorate-powers in spreading Christianity, which they persecuted in their own countries. The occupation of Vietnam began by the request (1858) of a Vicar Apostolic for French protection. The murder of missionaries was often made the excuse for war and actual colonization. In a vicious circle this led to further persecutions, and hence further colonization. In this way, France gradually extended its dominion over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

4.2. *The Outlook*

The thinking in the previous epoch left its impress on this period too. In condemning ‘indifferentism’ Pope Leo XII (1824) defined it as the opinion that “one can embrace and adopt without any danger to salvation any sect that attracts one according to one’s own private judgment and opinion” (ND 1006). In an encyclical letter (1832) Gregory XVI described as a “wrong opinion (that) one can attain the eternal salvation of one’s soul by any profession of faith, provided one’s moral conduct conforms to the norms of right and good” (ND 1007). Pius IX (1854) termed it an error to “think that there is good hope for the eternal salvation of all those who do not in any way belong to the Church of Christ ... and that the way of eternal salvation can be found in any religion whatever” (ND 1009; 1013/15-17). This official document is also the first one to introduce the concept of “invincible ignorance”; as such it prepares the way for the document of the Holy Office (1949) in the Leonard

Feeney case. The Letter clarified that to gain salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality as a member of the Church. Still the Holy Office quoted Pope Pius XII, that those who are not members of the Catholic Church “cannot be secure about their salvation”; he also censured those who maintain that “people can be saved equally well in any religion” (ND 855 -856).

The religious ‘indifferentism’ which the Church condemned must be understood in its European philosophical context, which tended to deny all divine revelation or at least to refuse any finality to God’s revelation in Christ. However, the statements were open to grave misunderstanding. They also led to wrong conclusions, as when Pius IX (1864) listed the following in his ‘Syllabus’ of condemned errors: “In our age it is no longer advisable that the Catholic religion be the only State religion, excluding all other cults. Therefore it is praiseworthy that in some Catholic regions the law has allowed people immigrating there to exercise publicly their own cult” (ND 1013/77-78). Two decades later in an encyclical letter Leo XIII reiterated the point, that “the Church does not consider it licit that various forms of worship of God should have the same rights as the true religion” (ND 1014).

The general council of Vatican II (1962- 1965) moved decisively to preserve missionary activity from past ambiguities. The Council reminds missionaries that “they must depend on the power of God, who very often reveals the might of the gospel through the

weakness of its witnesses ... They should use means and helps proper to the gospel. In many respects these differ from the supports of the earthly city ... the Church does not lodge her hope in privileges conferred by civil authority” (GS 76). Furthermore, “The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the faith, or alluring or enticing people by unworthy techniques. By the same token, she also strongly insists on a person’s right not to be deterred from the faith by unjust vexations on the part of others” (AG 13). Accordingly “no one is to be hindered from acting in conformity with conscience, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others”. And this right to religious freedom “must be recognized in the constitutional law governing society in such a way that it becomes a civil right” (DH 2). The Council also asserted the possibility of salvation for those who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel or the Church (LG 16; AG 7). Nevertheless the teachings of past centuries continue to weigh heavily on the Church. For in 2000 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that whereas Catholics are in an exalted condition, non-Christians are “in a gravely deficient situation”. Their prayers and rituals are nothing more than “occasions or pedagogical helps” to be open to God (Declaration “Dominus Jesus”, Nn. 21-22).

5. Concluding Reflections

The first great obstacle to inter-religious dialogue and to dealing in a spirit of equality with people of other religious persuasions was denial of the possibility of salvation for them. This obstacle

may be said to have been overcome, however grudgingly. Still, the Church espouses certain theological positions which could be supportive of the very ways of proceeding which Vatican II sought to repudiate. This is the second great obstacle to dialogue and it persists today. It is the insistence that the Church possesses the fullness of revelation and truth (John Paul II, “Redemptoris Missio”, Nn. 5, 55, 56).² G. Soares-Prabhu (183) describes how, “Such exclusivism leads inevitably to attitudes of superiority towards people outside the Church ...; to a stereotyping that perceives them as spiritually inferior; and eventually to actions that treat them as less than human.” Hence, notwithstanding the protestations of humility and commitment to religious freedom, “what is to prevent the Christian champions of religious freedom today, becoming (like the Christians under Constantine) the religious persecutors of tomorrow” – given the right combination of circumstances ? Today it is easier for the Church to speak the language of religious freedom, since she is no longer in a position of power, even in Europe. And in the former colonies, Christians are often a persecuted minority. With some reason “Missio”, the Institute of Missiology in Aachen contends that the above mentioned Declaration, “Dominus Jesus”, may not foster that peace among religions without which there can be no peace in the world (*Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, 2001, no. 1, 121-124).

This essay has, hopefully, shown how powerful sociological and political factors can influence the patterns of evangelisation, while the evangelizers

and evangelized themselves may often be unaware of these influences. This highlights the importance of a deeper knowledge of the context of evangelization, through the help of the human sciences. Social analysis, which would include political and economic factors, is a valuable asset for the evangelizer.

Endnotes

1. For the reasons stated here I cannot agree with Sullivan's thesis, that the Church was unaware of the reality of vast numbers of people living beyond all Christian influence.
2. Vatican II adopts a more nuanced position, distinguishing between Christ and the Church. Whereas Christ exists as the "fullness of all revelation" (DV 2), "the Church constantly moves forward towards the fullness of divine truth" (DV 8).

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