

World Christianity and Christian Mission: Are They Compatible? Insights from the Asian Churches

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There are two terms in the title of my address that seem to cancel each other out and therefore prompt the question about their theological and pastoral compatibility. If Christianity is already a world religion, is there still the need for mission and evangelism? And if there still is, how should Christian mission be carried out in the context of world Christianity? These two questions are made all the more complex and hence, the answers controversial, by the fact that both 'world Christianity' and 'Christian mission' are today highly contested concepts. To throw some light on these issues I begin with a discussion of what is meant by 'world Christianity' and 'Christian mission.' Next, I highlight some of the ways in which they seem to be mutually conflictive and then attempt to answer, on the basis of the experiences and teachings of the Asian Catholic Churches, the questions of whether Christian mission is still mandatory today, and if so, how it should be done.

'World Christianity': What is so New about It?

In a sense, from its very birth, Christianity has always been portrayed as a world movement with a divine commission to bring the Good News to all peoples, at all times, and in all places. This globality of Christianity is rooted in the universal mission of the Trinitarian God itself. The Christian God is professed to be the creator of the whole universe and God's providence and rule are said to extend beyond Israel to the entire human race and across the whole human history. The risen Christ, despite his embeddedness in a particular moment of Jewish history and in a specific geography, is confessed to be the universal Lord, at whose name "every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:10), and is proclaimed the savior of all, Jews and Gentiles alike. The Holy Spirit, who is the gift of the risen Christ, is "poured out upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17) so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). While Jesus' mission itself was limited to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24) and while during Jesus' lifetime, the apostles were told not to visit pagan territory and not to enter a Samaritan town but to go instead after "the lost sheep of the house

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of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6), after Jesus’ resurrection, when full authority had been given him “both in heaven and on earth,” the apostles were commissioned to “make disciples of all nations” and were assured of Jesus’ presence “until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19-20). As a result of the universal destination and dynamism of God’s action in Christ and the Spirit, Jesus’ disciples will have to be witnesses to him “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Clearly, then, Christianity is by nature a universal or global religion, and in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, catholicity is professed to be one of the four marks of the church. The word ‘Catholic,’ from the Greek adverb *kath’ holon*, or the later adjective *katholikos*, usually translated into Latin as *universalis* or *catholicus*, means “referring to or directed toward the whole, the general, the universal,” as opposed to the partial or the particular. Though never used in the New Testament to describe the church, the term becomes one of its official designations. Hans Küng has helpfully listed the six meanings that have been successively attached to the term ‘catholic’: (1) the whole church, in contrast to the local churches, as in Ignatius of Antioch’s statement “Where the bishop is, there his people should be, just as, where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (*Smyrn.* 8:2); this is the original ecclesiological meaning; (2) the orthodox, doctrinally pure church as opposed to heretical or schismatic or apostate groups; this polemical meaning became popular after the edict of Constantine (312) and that of Theodosius (380); (3) the church spread throughout the whole world (geographical catholicity); (4) the church larger in number than any other (numerical or statistical catholicity); (5) the church that has always existed (temporal or historical catholicity); and (6) the church that is open to all cultures as opposed to ethnically or culturally exclusive (sociological or cultural catholicity).² Of these six meanings, the first, third, fifth, and sixth express the various aspects of Christianity as a world religion. What then makes the notion of ‘world Christianity’ new or even controversial today? Of the many contributing factors I will elaborate on three.

1. A Different History of Christianity: The Myth of Christianity as a Western Religion

There has recently been emerging a new way of interpreting the history of Christianity.³ In popular church historiography, partly as a result of a jaundiced

² See Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 296-300.

³ For an overview of recent works on History of Christianity as a discipline, see Paul V. Kollman, “After Church History? Writing the History of Christianity from a Global Perspective,” *Horizons* 31/2 (2004), 322-42. Kollmann surveys the writings of Justo González, Andrew Walls, Dale Irvin, and Scott Sunquist. Kurt W. Peterson has shown how this new History of Christianity has parallels in American Religious History in his “Internationalizing American Religious History,” *Bulletin/*

reading of Acts, Christianity has been portrayed as a religious movement which, though born in (Southwest) Asia or the Middle East, from its very beginnings, moved to the eastern part of the Roman empire through Asia Minor, and ended in Rome as its final destination, where Paul and Peter completed their apostolic career. From Rome as its epicenter, the Catholic Church sent missionaries first to the other parts of Europe, then to Latin America and Asia in the sixteenth century, and later still, to Africa, with the Protestants joining the missionary enterprise in the nineteenth century and beyond.⁴ In this narrative, the role of the papacy within the church as well as papal entanglements with secular authorities and the vicissitudes of the Reformation occupy the lion's share of church historians' attention. Standard church history texts accord these events a preponderant portion of their pages. As a result, there is a skewed perception that Christianity is a Western religion, especially Roman Catholicism, with its papacy, its centralizing hierarchical structure, its numerous cadres of missionaries, its canon law, its uniform liturgy, and the Vatican State.

Today, church historians have grown much more conscious of the fact that the roots of Christianity are sunk deeper in the East than in the West and that its beliefs and practices, which were eventually clothed in Greek, Latin, and Teutonic categories and exported to the so-called mission lands, cannot be fully understood apart from their Asian/Semitic origins. Furthermore, there is a greater awareness of and appreciation for the diversity of early Christianity, so much so that it would be more accurate to speak of Christianities, in the plural, with their enormous variety of languages, cultures, theologies, liturgies, and church practices.⁵

Historical studies of early Christian missions have shown the fallacy of the conventional reading of Acts with its version of the Christian expansion toward Rome and the West. In fact, in the first four centuries, the most successful fields of mission were not Europe but (West) Asia and Africa, with Syria as the center of gravity of Christianity before 500. The most vibrant and influential Christian centers were found not in any city of the western part of the Roman empire but in Asian and African cities such as Damascus and Antioch in Syria (incidentally, it was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first known as 'Christians'), Edessa/Orhay in Oshroene, Dura-Europos in Adiabene, Alexandria in Egypt, Axum in Abyssinia/Ethiopia; and in countries such as Armenia (which is the first Christian nation), India, and in the seventh century,

CSSR 34/2 (September 2005), 40-44.

⁴ Perhaps the best image of this view of Christian history is the way in which the airlines depict their hubs (in this case, Rome), with a thick net of lines crisscrossing the globe to the various destinations of their flights.

⁵ Even the so-called Western Christianity was far from being monolithic. Historian Peter Brown has shown that it contained great linguistic and cultural diversities, e.g., among Noricum, Ireland, Francia, Frisia, Germany, and Rome. See his *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003).

in China. The non-Western character of early Christianity is shown in the fact that of the five ancient patriarchates, only Rome was located in the West, and of the remaining four, three were located in Asia (Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople) and one in Africa (Alexandria).

Doctrinally, the first seven ecumenical councils, from Nicaea I in 325 to Nicaea II in 787, were all held in the East and not in the West, where Trinitarian and Christological dogmas were formulated. The greatest theologians of the early church were also working in Asia, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, Bardaisan, Didymus the Blind, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Cyril of Alexandria, Aphraates, Ephraem the Syrian, John of Damascus, and the list goes on and on. Even those who became influential in the West originally came from Asia, such as Justin and Irenaeus, and Latin theological luminaries such as Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine hailed from North Africa called the Magreb. As for spirituality, monasticism was an invention of the Egyptian Desert Fathers and Mothers.

Furthermore, even the so-called “European” or “Western” Christianity, whose cultural unity was rooted in the Greco-Roman civilization of the Mediterranean world and was greatly facilitated by the use of a common language, namely Latin, was by no means unified. This Greco-Roman civilization was not “European,” nor was it uniform; rather, it was made up of various elements of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and West Asian cultures. In addition, what is eventually referred to as “European civilization” was not the only one claiming to be the inheritor of the Greco-Roman civilization; beside the Holy Roman Empire, two other empires, namely Byzantium and Islam, were also contenders for the same title. “Europa,” first used at the turn of the eighth/ninth century to refer to the geographical area controlled by Charlemagne, emerged as a unified cultural-political unity only in modernity and the age of colonialism, where it served as an identity marker separating it from the colonized continents. Within this Europe, Christianity was never monolithic but pluralistic and multiple. Dale Irvin puts it succinctly: “Even in Europe, there has not been one church, one history, or one historical essence of Christianity.”⁶

If this is the reality of Christianity, then a different narrative of the Christian movement must be fashioned other than the one peddled by standard textbooks of church history of which a version—admittedly somewhat of a caricature—is given above. Fortunately, serious attempts have been made recently in this direction. Besides the pioneering work of church historians such as Walbert Buhlmann, Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh and many others,

⁶ Dale Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning: Rendering Accounts* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 120. For an illuminating “genealogy” of Christian histories (note the plural!) that highlights diversity, multiplicity, and ruptures in Christianity, see *ibid.*, 100-22.

allow me to mention the landmark two-volume work by Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, in collaboration with a team of consultants,⁷ For the first time, students have in their hands an accessible and informative account of Christianity as a world religion constantly evolving in dialogue with different cultures and historical events in all parts of the world, and not just a history of family quarrels among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, and Evangelicals! In addition, the establishment of the New York Theological Seminary Center for World Christianity, with its forthcoming *Journal of World Christianity*, together with centers for the study of non-Western or world Christianity in many other distinguished institutions of higher learning, here in the US and elsewhere, are propitious omens of this radical historiographical revolution in the field of History of Christianity. In sum, to describe the historical developments of Christianity, the most accurate image is not that of the one many-branched vertical tree, with the trunk representing the European *Corpus Christianum* of Christendom, but of rhizomes, that is, plants with subterranean, horizontal root systems, growing below and above ground and moving crab-like in all directions.⁸

2. A Different History of Missions: Local Christianities

A similar historiographical revolution has been simmering in the field of history of Christian missions as well. Again, to caricature somewhat, popular history of Christian missions has focused for the most part on what the Western churches—the “sending churches”—have done for the mission churches, which are the “receiving churches,” in the so-called mission lands. In commercial terms, the emphasis is laid on the “exporters” rather than on the “importers,” and on the exported merchandise rather than on how the imported merchandise is bought and put to use by the locals. In this historiography, the major bulk of the histories of Christian missions is devoted to narrating the accomplishments as well as—albeit less often—the failures of individual missionaries, religious orders, missionary societies, and mission boards. The emphasis is on how well these agents and agencies have fulfilled the twin goal of missions, namely, saving souls and planting the church. The measure of success for the first goal is the number of conversions and baptisms, and that of the second is the establishment, or more precisely, the faithful replication, of the ecclesiastical structures of the exporting churches. A mission church is

⁷ Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001). For the historiography underlying this work, see Dale Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning*. Irvin argues for *histories* which would take into account the multiple origins, the diverse developments, and the significant ruptures of the Christian tradition within a wider family of traditions.

⁸ For the notion of rhizome as the metaphor for historical developments, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-25.

judged mature when it becomes a perfect clone of the sending church. In the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, a church is considered to have outgrown its status of a mission church when it is erected into a diocese with the bishop as the local ordinary and not merely as an apostolic vicar, and hence with the establishment of all the canonical structures identical with those of, let's say, an European diocese.

While not neglecting the narrative of the achievements and failures of foreign missionaries and mission agencies, contemporary historians of missions are less interested in the senders/exporters and the forms of the exported Christianity than in the importers and their appropriation and transformation of the received product. Here, as in the field of History of Christianity, the works of Stephen Neill, Kenneth S. Latourette, Enrique Dussell, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, and many others are trailblazing. Neill argues that missions history should not be an extension of Western church history but a record of how indigenous Christianity comes into being and develops in its own context.⁹ In his monumental study of the expansion of Christianity, Latourette studies the effects of Christianity on its surroundings and of the surroundings on Christianity.¹⁰ Enrique Dussel's historical project investigates indigenous forms of Christianity in Latin America.¹¹ Walls has investigated at length the process of the transmission of the Christian faith through the missionary enterprise. While recognizing the colonial impulse inherent in modern missions, he has shown how the local churches, far from being passive receivers of the Christian message or victims of ecclesiastical colonialism, were self-conscious and active transformers of the Christianity exported to them from the West and have shaped, and at times even subverted it, to meet their own cultural and spiritual needs.¹²

Sanneh has explored the ways in which Christianity, a cross-cultural movement and an infinitely translatable phenomenon, was diversified as it moved from continent to continent, country to country, and culture to culture. In contrast to Islam, which remains entrenched in its birthplace of Mecca and Medina and retains the exclusive authority of Koranic Arabic, Christianity, Sanneh points out, from its very beginnings, ceased to worship in the language of its founder and recorded his words and deeds in *koine* Greek. For Sanneh,

⁹ See Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); *A History of Christianity in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

¹⁰ See Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper, 1937-1945).

¹¹ See Enrique D. Dussel, ed., *The Church in Latin America, 1492-1992* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992) and *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)*, trans. and rev. Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

¹² See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

translation, then as now, is the privileged medium whereby Christianity is interpreted and appropriated to fit the local culture. Sanneh distinguishes between “global Christianity” and “world Christianity” and notes that there has been in missions study a shift from the former to the latter. By “global Christianity” he means the kind of Christianity that is a reduplication of Western churches in mission lands—the exported Christianity, as described above— and by “world Christianity” he means

the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel. In these societies Christianity was received and expressed through the cultures, customs, and traditions of the people affected. World Christianity is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame.¹³

By shifting the attention from the exporters to the receivers, scholars in missions study have unearthed exciting new data and opened up new areas of research such as the role of women in missionary work, which had been neglected, at least in Roman Catholic circles, since the preponderant functions in the church were restricted to males. Similarly, greater attention is given to the contributions of the laity to missions, which have also been ignored, since only missions by the religious and the clergy were deemed worthy of telling. Furthermore, greater explorations are done into the manifold contributions of Christianity to the local cultures in diverse areas such as linguistics, anthropology, history, philosophy and religious thought, literature, music and songs, dance, the plastic arts, architecture, and even economics and politics. What emerges is a more balanced and richer picture of Christian missions, not in order to refute the charges of colonialism and imperialism of which Western Christianity has been at times guilty, but to place Christian missions in the wider context of cultural preservation and transmission. Finally, and most importantly, in *History of Christianity* as well as in *History of Missions*, it is incontrovertible that Christianity is neither a Western religion nor a monolithic entity. Rather there have always been *Christianities*, even in Roman Catholicism, which, of all denominations, has most strongly and persistently promoted uniformity and centralization, fortunately to no avail.¹⁴

¹³ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22. See also his *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983); *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989); and *Piety & Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

¹⁴ Kollman notes three new developments in church history or history of Christianity: giving a more comprehensive account of the entire Christian story from an explicitly global perspective; a fuller retrieval of the past of Christianity; and treating new themes by placing Christianity in the

3. Christianity Going South: The Future of World Christianity

Not only does Christianity now appear vastly pluralistic and diverse but also its future seems to lie not in the West but rather in the non-Western parts of the globe, as recent demographic changes have indicated.¹⁵ This massive shift of the Christian population from the north (Europe and North America) to the south (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), a fact long known among missiologists, was recently brought to the attention of the larger public by Philip Jenkins in his *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.¹⁶ In a crisp summary of current statistics, Jenkins stresses the increasingly global character of Christianity:

Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American. According to the respected *World Christian Encyclopedia*, some 2 billion Christians are alive today, about one-third of the planetary total. The largest single bloc, some 560 million people, is still found in Europe. Latin America, though, is already close behind with 480 million. Africa has 360 million, and 313 million Asians profess Christianity. North America claims about 260 million believers. If we extrapolate these figures to the year 2025, and assume no great gains or losses through conversion, then there would be around 2.6 billion Christians, of whom 633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555 million, would have slipped to third place. Africa and Latin America would be in competition for the title of most Christian continent. About this date, too, another significant milestone should occur, namely that these two continents will together account for half of the Christians on the planet. By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase "a White Christian" may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as "a Swedish Buddhist."¹⁷

While one may disagree, as I have, with Jenkins's prognosis that "Southern Christianity" represents a return to a conservative pre-Tridentine Christendom,¹⁸ there is no gainsaying the fact this demographic shift presents at least two formidable challenges. First, how should the churches of the northern hemisphere and those of the southern hemisphere relate to each other? While the latter used to be called the "younger churches" or "daughter

wider context of the history of religions. See his "After Church History?" essay already cited.

¹⁵ See David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁸ See Peter C. Phan, "A New Christianity, But What Kind?" *Mission Studies* 22/1 (2005), 59-83.

churches” with respect to the former, on which they depended for material support as well as personnel, this is no longer the case.

This reversal of relationships was dramatically illustrated recently in Anglicanism. More than half of seventy-seven millions Anglicans live in Africa, South America, and Asia. There are more Anglicans in Kenya (about three million) than there are Episcopalians in the U.S. (2.2 million), In Uganda, church membership is nine million, and in Nigeria, it is twenty million. What is more significant is that whereas in the Church of England, which is the mother church, membership is much in decline and practice is barely lukewarm, church life is booming and faith is vibrant in the African churches. Furthermore, though the Archbishop of Canterbury is officially the spiritual head of the world’s Anglicans, the most powerful figure in Anglicanism is arguably Archbishop Peter Akinola, primate of the Church of Nigeria.

This shift of power in church politics was demonstrated recently in the controversy caused by the ordination of an openly gay man, Gene Robinson, as Bishop of New Hampshire. Archbishop Akinola and his allies have forced the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan William, to establish a church inquiry into the crisis and the ensuing report, known as the Windsor Report, urged the Episcopal Church of the United States to express “regret” over the consecration of Gene Robinson and to refrain from further consecration of gay bishops.¹⁹ Whether the Anglicanism will be split by this controversy, there is little doubt that Christianity of the South is no longer taking what is done by Christianity of the North for granted, much less as the norm, and is not shy to force its own doctrines and practices on their Northern, wealthier colleagues.

The second, no less difficult, challenge of the demographic shift in Christian population concerns the church’s evangelizing mission. If the membership of the church of the South will be more numerous than that of the church of the North, and if the faith life in the former is more vibrant than that in the latter, then who should evangelize whom? Who are the exporters and who are the importers? Furthermore, if Christianity of the South is different in *kind* from that of the North, how should evangelism be carried out? To these questions I now turn.

Christian Mission: What is so Controversial about It?

Anyone with a passable knowledge of Christian missions need no lengthy explanation of why they have been in the doldrums, at least in the last fifty years, if by missions is meant the evangelizing enterprise carried out by Western expatriates in foreign lands. External reasons for this eclipse are many and varied, chief among which is the precipitous decline in the number of religious missionaries since the 1960s, a phenomenon nowhere more evident than in the

¹⁹ For a report of this controversy, see Peter Boyer, “A Church Asunder,” *The New Yorker* (April 17, 2006), 53-65.

Roman Catholic Church. More important than external contributing factors are however internal ones, which have to do with the changing theologies of mission itself. It is the very nature of the church's mission that was under scrutiny and its theology was undergoing a total overhaul.

There is no need to present here an overview of the theology of mission. David Bosch's classic book *Transforming Mission* offers five paradigms of mission in the history of the church, each inspired by a particular biblical text.²⁰ In addition to the New Testament models, there are, in Bosch's account, the Orthodox paradigm with John 3:16 ("God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"); the Roman Catholic paradigm with Luke 14:23 ("Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full'"); the Protestant Reformation with Romans 1:16-17 ("I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'"); the Enlightenment paradigm with Matthew 28:18-20 (The Jesus came to them and said: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Sprit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'"); and, finally, with the unraveling of the Enlightenment ideals, what Bosch calls the "emergent paradigm."

This last paradigm is of special interest to us here, since it is that which is occurring in contemporary Christianity and which is being much debated. Bosch argues that in this emergent paradigm of mission, (1) the source of mission is the *missio Dei*; (2) the goals of mission are salvation and the promotion of justice (3) the activities of mission are evangelism and contextualization (including liberation and inculturation); (4) the bearer of mission is the whole church; (5) the limits of mission are the nature of mission as witness and the time span in which it must be carried out, namely, between the first coming of Christ and his second coming; and (6) missiology is an integral part of all theology, or perhaps more interestingly, a gadfly in the house of theology or a thorn in the theologian's flesh.

A more recent magnum opus on the theology of mission, *Constants in Contexts: A Theology of Mission for Today*, by Stephen Bevans and Roger

²⁰ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991). For a synthesis of this book, see Stan Nussbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005). For an evaluation of Bosch, see Willem Saayman and Klippias Kritzinger, eds., *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch's Work Considered* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

Schroeder, provides another overview of mission theology.²¹ After showing how there are six constant theological themes, namely, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture, which are developed in various ways in different socio-political, religious, and institutional contexts, the authors outline the four phases of Christian missions and theology of mission in the twentieth century: certainty, ferment, crisis and rebirth.²²

Certainty characterized the first half of the century in which mission was vigorously carried out with the twin goal of saving souls and planting the church. It came to an end in the wake of the Second World War, the collapse of colonialism, the rise of national independence, the vigorous renaissance of many world religions, the beginning of the Cold War, and the turmoil of the 1960s.

A period of fermentation was ushered in with a radical rethinking of the theology and practice of mission, initiated by the Second Vatican Council among Roman Catholics and by the integration of the International Missionary Conference within the World Council of Churches. In 1963, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism spoke of “mission on six continents”; the “age of missions” ended and the “age of mission” began.

Soon, however, a crisis erupted, occasioned by a radical questioning of the very necessity and nature of mission. Among Roman Catholics, the breath of fresh air which Pope John XIII had said he wanted to bring to the church turned out to be a hurricane creating widespread convulsion, not least in the area of mission. Among Protestants, a call for a moratorium on missions was sounded in the late 1960s, and the division between liberals and conservatives was exacerbated by the withdrawal of Evangelicals from the World Council of Churches and the founding of the Lausanne Movement in 1974.

Fortunately, the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a rebirth of the missionary movement. Among Roman Catholics, a series of papal encyclicals—from Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975 to John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990—and the documents of various national and regional episcopal conferences elaborated, on the foundations of Vatican II (in particular its Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*), new directions in the theology and practice of missions. With its assembly in Nairobi in 1975, the World Council of Churches outlined its theology of mission. Two documents ensued and are of great importance for mission theology: *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (1979) and *Ecumenical Affirmation: Mission and Evangelism* (1982). On their part, Evangelicals presented their theology of mission in the so-called *Manila Manifesto*, produced by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

²¹ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

²² See *ibid.*, 239-80.

in 1989. The Orthodox Church, too, added its contribution to the missionary renewal through the Orthodox Advisory Commission which was established within the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1973. Finally, the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in all its dizzying varieties, particularly in Africa (in connection with the African Initiated Churches), Latin America (especially in Chile, Central America and Brazil), and in Asia (especially in the Philippines, India, and China) adds a tremendous impetus to evangelization. The Evangelical model of mission, which emphasizes a literal reading of the Scripture, baptism in the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit (especially speaking in tongues), exorcisms, miraculous healing, rapid church growth, lay responsibility, development of indigenous ecclesial structures, and self-support and self-propagation find deep resonance with and widespread reception by people of the Two-Thirds world.

Rebirth is no guarantee of survival, much less vigorous growth. The current revival of church mission and missiology is no exception. There are tensions if not conflicts among the theologies and practices of mission, not only among various Christian denominations but also within each church, tensions that may be part of the growing pains but also can make churches work at cross purposes and therefore can destroy the church mission itself. Bevans and Schroeder have identified three contemporary models of mission which contain the various elements of David Bosch's "emergent paradigm." The first, which is proposed by Vatican II and the Orthodox Church, regards mission as participation in the mission of Triune God. The second, which is found in Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the documents of the World Council of Churches, emphasizes mission as liberating service of the reign of God. The third, which is embodied in John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* and the documents of the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, proposes mission as the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the unique and universal Savior. Each of these three models, Bevans and Schroeder carefully note, has positive and negative features, and, according to them, "only a *synthesis* of all three will provide the firmest foundation for the model of mission" for the twenty-first century. This synthesis they call "prophetic dialogue."²³ The last part of this essay explores how the experiences and teachings of the Asian Catholic Churches can help develop this model of mission as "prophetic dialogue" and provide an answer to the two questions with which we started, namely, whether world Christianity has rendered Christian mission obsolete and how mission is to be undertaken today.

World Christianity and Church Mission: Toward a Synthesis

By Asia is meant today the continent containing countries of South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, the Philippines,

²³ For their elaboration of this model of mission, see *ibid.*, 348-95.

Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam); and Northeast Asia (China [including Hong Kong and Macau], Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Siberia, Taiwan, and Tibet). There are also Central Asia and Southwest Asia (the Near and Middle East), but in many ways they do not share the cultural and religious heritage of the other parts of Asia.²⁴

More than any other continent, Asia is characterized by diversity and pluralism. This characteristic is a function of the geography of Asia, the world's largest and most varied land mass; its teeming people, who constitute two-thirds of the world population; its immense array of languages, ethnic groups, cultures, and religions; the extreme differences in its economic and social realities represented by some of the richest and the poorest countries on Earth; its opposite political systems, comprising the largest democratic and the largest communist States in the world.

With regard to Asian Christianity, one of the bitter ironies of history is that though born in (West) Asia, Christianity returned to its birthplace as a foreign religion and is still widely regarded as such by Asians. More tragically, setting aside the arrival of East Syrian (Nestorian) monks and of the first Catholic missionaries to China, the former in the seventh century and the latter in the thirteenth century, Asian Christianity, except in Korea and Thailand, was irreparably tainted by its association with Western colonialism. Indeed, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, in its conquest of Asia, not a single Western power—Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, Britain, and the United States of America—did not enlist the help of missionaries, whose work in turn was provided with financial and political support. The history of Christian missions in Asia is a mixture of light and shadow, selfless service and imperialistic domination, evangelical humility and cultural chauvinism. It is imperative to acknowledge, honestly and frankly, both the magnificent achievements and the abject failures of Christianity in Asia; only thus can helpful ways be found to answer the two questions posed above.

A latecomer to the Asian scene in comparison with other religions, Christianity is, like Asia itself, is characterized by diversity and pluralism. Practically, all Christian churches and denominations are present there today,

²⁴ Indeed, the Catholic episcopal conferences of these countries are members, either full or associate, of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. The FABC was founded in 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila, Philippines. Its statutes, approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* in 1972, were amended several times and were also approved again each time by the Holy See. For the documents of the FABC and its various institutes, see Gaudencio Rosales & C. G. Arévalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991* (New York/Quezon City, Manila: Orbis Books/Claretian Publications, 1992); Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996* (Quezon City, Manila: Claretian Publications, 1997); and Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002* (Quezon City, Manila: Claretian Publications, 2002). These will be cited as *For All Peoples*, followed by their years of publication in parentheses.

with a long history of rivalry and collaboration, separation and union: Roman Catholics, Orthodox, various mainline Protestant denominations, Anglicans, Pentecostals and Evangelicals, and numerous indigenous Christian churches and groups.²⁵ Of these churches, the largest is Roman Catholicism and within the Catholic Church itself, there are ancient and at times competing “rites,” or more accurately, vastly different theological, liturgical, and canonical traditions.

With regard to the teaching on and practice of mission in Asian Catholicism, it is inevitable that they are shaped by the socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious contexts of Asia as a whole and by the demographic situation of Christianity in particular.²⁶ Concerning the latter, it has often been pointed out, often with a sigh of regret, that after more than five centuries of active mission, Christians make up only three percent of the Asian population, a not-too-encouraging figure for those interested in the number game and the bottom line. Despite the recent breathless reports about “how Christianity is transforming China and changing the global balance of power,” to use the subtitle of David Aikman’s book,²⁷ and the current rapprochement between the Vatican and Beijing, the prospect of a mass conversion of the Chinese to Christianity, if past history is any guide, is more a fantasy than realistic prognosis. The same thing must be said about India, which together with China, constitutes almost one-third of the world population. Thus, in spite of Pope John Paul II’s conviction that “the character, spiritual fire and zeal” of Asian Catholics will “assuredly make Asia the land of a bountiful harvest in the coming millennium,”²⁸ a sober analysis will quell such enthusiasm. In other words, the thesis of the southward movement of world Christianity requires

²⁵ For a comprehensive survey of Asian Christianity, see Scott W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992) and *A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. II: 1500-1900* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005).

²⁶ The bibliography on mission in Asian Catholicism is immense. Among the recent publications, see Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); *In Our Own Tongues* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); *Being Religious Interracially* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005); Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002); John Mansfield Prior, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century in Asia: Two Sketches, Three Flash-Backs and an Enigma,” in Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, eds., *Mission for the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: Chicago Center for Global Ministries, 2001), 68-109; Jacob Kavunkal, “A Missionary Vision for Asia in the Twenty-first Century,” *ibid.*, 162-75; Leo Kleden, “*Missio ad Gentes*: An Asian Way of Mission Today,” *ibid.*, 176-94; Sung-Hae Kim, “An East Asian Understanding of Mission and the Future of the Christian Presence,” in Robert Schreiter, ed., *Mission in the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 1-20; Michael Amaladoss, “Identity and Harmony: Challenges to Mission in South Asia,” *ibid.*, 25-39.

²⁷ See David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub., 2003). See also his *The Beijing Factor* (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2005).

²⁸ *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 4. See Phan, *The Asian Synod*, p. 289.

severe pruning, at least with regard to Asia.²⁹ In answer to our first question, then, the emergence of world Christianity does not invalidate the necessity of Christian mission at all.

The issue then turns on how Christian mission should be carried out in Asia with its three characteristics of extreme poverty, cultural diversity, and religious pluralism. To answer this question, the Asian Catholic bishops invoke two basic concepts: a new way of being church and a new mode of doing mission. In terms of ecclesiology, the church is defined primarily as a “communion of communities.” Hence, this Asian way of being church places the highest priority on communion and collegiality at all the levels of church life and activities. At the vertical level, communion is realized with the trinitarian God whose *perichoresis* the church is commissioned to reflect in history. On the horizontal level, communion is achieved with other local churches, and within each local church, communion is realized through collegiality, by which all members, especially lay women and men, are truly and effectively empowered to use of their gifts to make the church an authentically local church. In particular, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) highlights the absolute necessity of making the laity, especially women, the principal agents of mission if the church is to become the church not *in* but *of* Asia.

As for the new mode of mission and the way to become the local church, the FABC prescribes dialogue. It is important to note that dialogue is understood here not as a separate activity, e.g., ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, but as the *modality* in which everything is to be done by and in the church in Asia. Hence, dialogue is not a substitution for proclamation or evangelization, as Asian theologians have sometimes been accused of doing; rather, it is the way and indeed the most effective way in which the proclamation of the Good News is done in Asia.

The reason for this dialogical modality is the presence in Asia of the many living religions and rich cultures, among whom Christians are, as mentioned earlier, but a tiny minority and therefore must, even on the purely human level, enter into dialogue with other believers, in an attitude of respect and friendship, for survival. But, more than pragmatic considerations, there is the theological doctrine today, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, that, as John Paul II says, “the Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.”³⁰ In light of this divine presence in people’s cultures

²⁹ This lack of conversion to Christianity does not reflect negatively on the nature of the Christian message but is the result of the dynamics of religious conversion itself. See Peter C. Phan, “Conversion and Discipleship as Goals of the Church’s Mission,” in *In Our Own Tongues*, 45-61.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* [RM], no. 28. For the English translation of RM, see William Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 3-55.

and religions, and not just in individuals, and in view of the socio-historical nature of human existence, it is possible to say, as some Asian theologians have done, that the followers of other religions are saved not in spite of them but in and through them, though it is always God who saves, and Christians will add, in and through Jesus.³¹ At least in this restricted sense, then, religions are “ways of salvation.”³²

Given this religious pluralism, it is only natural that dialogue is the preferred mode of evangelization. As Michael Amaladoss puts it: “As soon as one no longer sees the relationship of Christianity to other religions as presence/absence or superior/inferior or full/partial, dialogue becomes the context in which proclamation has to take place. For even when proclaiming the Good News with assurance, one should do it with great respect for the freedom of God who is acting, the freedom of the other who is responding and the Church’s own limitations as a witness. It is quite proper then that the Asian Bishops characterized evangelization itself as a dialogue with various Asian realities – cultures, religions and the poor.”³³

It is important to note also that dialogue as a mode of being church in Asia does not refer primarily to the intellectual exchange among experts of various religions, as is often done in the West. Rather, it involves a fourfold presence:

- a. The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians

³¹ The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, in its response to the *Lineamenta* in preparation for the Special Synod of Bishops for Asia (1998), writes: “... Salvation is seen as being channeled to them [followers of non-Christian religions] not in spite of but through and in their socio-cultural and religious traditions. We cannot, then, deny a priori a salvific role for these non-Christian religions.” (See Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod*, 22).

³² The Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Jesus*, no. 22 (August 6, 2000) warns that “it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological Kingdom of God.” The operative words here are “complementary” and “substantially equivalent.” Obviously, it is theologically possible to hold that non-Christian religions are “ways of salvation” without holding the view implied in those two expressions. Furthermore, it does not seem necessary to affirm, as the Declaration does, that “if it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (no. 22) since (1) what is ultimately important, from the point of view of salvation, is that the person receives divine grace, no matter where and how, and (2) it does not do the Christians much good to have “the fullness of the means of salvation” and not in fact make effective use of them. As Augustine has observed, there are those who are in the church but do not belong to the church, and those who are outside of the church but do belong to it. At any rate, such expressions as used by the Declaration are nowhere found in Vatican II.

³³ Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 59.

and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.³⁴

As for concrete forms of dialogue, the FABC suggests that this dialogue takes place in three areas: dialogue with the Asian poor, their cultures, and their religions, in response to Asian massive poverty, cultural variety, and religious diversity respectively.³⁵ In other words, the three essential tasks of the Asian churches are liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.³⁶ It is vital to note that for the FABC, these are not three distinct and separate activities of the church; rather they are three intertwined dimensions of the church's one mission of evangelization.³⁷ As the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly puts it concisely: "These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act 'integrally.' As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do."³⁸

A new way of being church and the triple dialogue—this is shorthand for a complex and ongoing theology and praxis of mission in Asia. The originality of the FABC's teaching on mission does not lie in revolutionary theses. In fact, it contains most if not all the main missiological teachings of the Catholic Church as a whole, which Robert Schreiter summarizes in four headings: "(1) mission is first and foremost the work of God; (2) the trinitarian character of the mission of God; (3) the centrality of dialogue; and (4) the multiple aspects

³⁴ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42 (19 May, 1991). The English text is available in William Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue*, 93-118. See also *For All Peoples* (1997), 21-26.

³⁵ See *For All Peoples of Asia* (1992), 14-16; 22-23; 34-35; 107; 135; 141-43; 281-82; 307-12; 328-34; 344; *For All Peoples of Asia* (1997), 196-203.

³⁶ As Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz, then Secretary General of the FABC, said at the Seventh Plenary Assembly: "The triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with peoples of other religions, envisioned by FABC as a mode of evangelization, viz., human liberation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue." See *A Renewed Church in Asia: Pastoral Directions for a New Decade*. FABC Papers, no. 95 (FABC: 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong, 2000), 17.

³⁷ For reflections on the connection between evangelization and liberation according to the FABC, see Peter C. Phan, "Human Development and Evangelization: The First to the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences," *Studia Missionalia* 47 (1998), 205-27.

³⁸ *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*, 8.

of evangelization.”³⁹ What is new about the FABC’s approach is that it fashions its theology and praxis of mission not on an *a priori* reading of the Bible and church documents but on a reading of the so-called “facts on the ground” in the light of the gospel and Tradition. This method impels the Asian bishops to understand and undertake mission as “prophetic dialogue” with its threefold component of peace and justice, inculturation, and interfaith dialogue.

Above all, this theology of church mission entails a new missionary spirituality.⁴⁰ Antonio M. Pernia, Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, suggests that it is composed on three elements: powerlessness, contemplation, and stewardship. Powerlessness, because, given the minority status of Christianity in Asia and the heritage of colonization and exploitation to which Christianity was at times an accomplice, missionaries must approach mission from a position of powerlessness and humility. Contemplation, because, given the Asian emphasis on prayer and contemplation, missionaries’ approach must not be marked by frenetic activity but by contemplative presence among God’s people. Stewardship, because, given the fact that Christianity still remains very much a foreign religion in Asia, missionaries ought not share the Christian faith as if they owned it, dictating thereby the terms by which it must be understood, lived, and celebrated, but ought to share their faith as a gift from God of which they are not owners but stewards.⁴¹

This kind of missionary spirituality might appear inappropriate and defeatist for those for whom the measure of success of Christian mission is the number of conversions and the expansion of the sphere of church influence. But it has a tremendous advantage for the mission in world Christianity because, as Leo Kleden points out, it offers a golden opportunity for missionaries “to follow the example of the first disciples of Jesus who were sent empty handed but who were inspired by the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Lord.”⁴²

³⁹ Robert Schreiter, “Mission for the Twenty-first Century: A Catholic Perspective,” in S. Bevans and R. Schroeder, eds., *Mission for the Twenty-first Century*, 33.

⁴⁰ See Peter C. Phan, “Crossing the Borders: A Spirituality for Mission in Our Times,” in *In Our Own Tongues*, 130-50.

⁴¹ See Antonio Pernia, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century: an SVD Perspective,” in S. Bevans and R. Schroeder, eds., *Mission for the Twenty-first Century*, 19.

⁴² Leo Kleden, “*Missio and Gentes: An Asian Way of Mission Today*,” in S. Bevans and R. Schroeder, *Mission for the Twenty-first Century*, 188.