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# Evangelical Missiology for the 21st Century: The importance of the Iguassu Missiological Consultation

James Stamoolis

**Keywords:** Missiology, pluralism, post-colonialism, training, managerial mission, suffering, holiness, ecology, millennium;

Foz do Iguassu (Iguassu Falls) straddles the border between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. This magnificent waterfall was the backdrop for an historic consultation held in October 1999 that gathered 160 mission practitioners and scholars from 53 countries to listen to God and to each other. The participants of the Iguassu Missiological Consultation met to discuss the way Christian mission is changing and needs to change at the turn of the millennium.

As Dr. Bill Taylor, the Executive Director of the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission noted, this was the only international consultation on missions to be held in the last two years of the 1900s. Although the missions movement has successfully operated with the understandings and mandates of the later half of the twentieth century, there is an urgent need for a reexamination of the missionary paradigm. New factors, such as the surge of missionary interest in the younger churches, the challenge of non-Christian religions, the pressure of a global economy and the renewed awareness of the spiritual opposition to the gospel, mandated a fresh examination of the task at this critical time.

The Iguassu Consultation affirmed the centrality of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ as the only Saviour of the world. However, while the heart of the message of redemption found only in Christ has not changed, the circumstances under which the cross and the resurrection are proclaimed are different from the twentieth century. The Soviet Union, the major geopolitical force that challenged the West for world domination, has crumbled, making the Commonwealth of Independent States more open to mission. Areas which in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century absorbed a greater portion of the missionary force and are home to a large percentage of the world's population, such as India and China, are now closed to traditional missions. The supposed superiority of the western culture of consumption is evidenced by a world culture based on brand names. But the Christian gospel, for so long associated with the West, is not part of this package and must compete in its traditional areas of strength with other worldviews. In this postmodern situation, the gospel is only one of the possible answers, as Chris Wright so ably demonstrates in his paper, 'Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century'.

The historical moment facing the consultation was similar to the major shift that occurred after World War II with the granting of independence to so many colonial possessions. Ralph Winter usefully tracked this transition in 'The Twenty-five Unbelievable Years, 1945-1969' which appeared as an appendix in the last volume of Kenneth Scott Latourette's masterful *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> This great emancipation of colonized peoples led to increased opportunities for the advance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Advance Through the Storm, Volume 7, A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971).

gospel. In spite of the often-repeated charge that colonialism and Christianity went out to conquer together, the truth is that colonialism was not a friend to missions but hindered the work of the gospel in many ways. The venue of the conference highlighted this fact in a particularly forceful manner.

The Iguassu area is significant because it was the scene of a tragic chapter in mission history. In the eighteenth century Jesuit missionaries settled their converts in Christian villages (*reductions*) to protect them from other hostile tribes and colonists. As part of the consultation, the participants viewed and discussed the movie, *The Mission*<sup>2</sup> that depicts a failed attempt of some Jesuits to protect their Indian converts from the destructive attacks of the colonial powers. Filmed on location, the sweep of the Iguassu waterfalls played a major part in the story. Meeting in the shadow of the great waterfalls on land that had been home to the Guarani people added to participants' understanding of the destruction and enslavement of the Guarani. Dr. Valdir Steuernagel, a Brazilian of German ancestry, provided an introduction to the viewing by explaining the historical and personal context. As a fourth generation descendant of German colonization, he described how he could see the film from the perspectives of both a settler and a native Brazilian. The year 2000 marks the five hundredth anniversary of the colonization of Brazil, yet he reminded the consultation that the same problems and oppression are still the lot of the native peoples of Brazil, pointing out that there were no Indian descendants at the consultation. Indeed there are few native Guarani left in the whole Iguassu area.

While there were many questions raised by the theological basis of the movie, Dr. Steuernagel emphasized the dedication of the missionaries and asked those present to consider the force of their own missionary call. In spite of the mistakes made by the Jesuits, their commitment challenges missionaries today. In this era, it is possible that missionaries will be called upon to face similar ethical dilemmas that will require hard decisions and even martyrdom. This mood of serious engagement, not only with global strategies but also with personal sacrifice, characterized the entire consultation. Gathered together were not armchair thinkers but active participants in God's work worldwide.

The Iguassu Consultation was planned so that the majority of those attending came from the younger sending churches and affirmed the movement of missionary initiative to these churches. The presentations of leaders from new sending churches to the plenary sessions and in the strategy groups meant that the focus was on the real questions facing the missionary movement. The church as a whole can rejoice in the vitality that the younger sending churches bring to the missionary task. Their voices need to be heard for the spiritual welfare of the entire church, including the church in the traditional sending countries. This combination of younger and traditional, of practitioners and missiological educators gave the Iguassu Consultation a ring of authenticity and global perspective.

However, the consultation also reinforced the necessity for better training and preparation for all missionaries, whether they are from the traditional or the newer sending countries. One of the findings of the consultation was that more work needs to be done in the area of training and support for missionaries from the younger sending churches so that the enthusiasm and energy they bring will not be dissipated because of avoidable circumstances. These conclusions follow up on an exceedingly useful 1996

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<sup>2</sup> Starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons, it depicts the work of the Jesuits in settling Indian converts in Christian villages and the subsequent conflict the missionaries had with the colonial authorities. Warner Brothers, Inc. 1986.

working study and survey done by WEF Missions Commission: *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*.<sup>3</sup>

Iguassu did not come to provide answers as much as point to areas that require greater definition. The major results of the consultation were summarized in the conference statement. Through an interactive process the consultation produced the **Iguassu Affirmation** (which is reproduced elsewhere in this issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology*). Working from a rough draft prepared before the consultation using the major papers as a guide, the document went through three major revisions in the five days of the consultation and was finalized in a plenary session on the last day. The four sections outline the missionary challenge, as seen by a cross section of mission practitioners and strategists.

The **Preamble** sets the context of mission thinking and activity and attempts to balance the insights gained from western mission management models with sensitivity to the biblical mandates for leadership. There was both criticism and solid affirmation for the insights of managerial mission thinkers who have broken the task down into comprehensible units. It was impressive to this observer that the harshest criticism of the western quantification models and the strongest affirmations of the insights gained from such quantification both came from Latin America. One brother from Guatemala who is serving as a missionary in Central Europe expressed his appreciation for the managerial models by saying: 'Luis Bush showed us that the task of world evangelization could be done and that we could have a role to play in it'. Iguassu showed clearly that more needs to be done in defining the role of strategic planning.

The second longest section, **Declarations**, contains the doctrinal basis of the **Affirmation** and is Trinitarian in tone and content. Taking a strong position on the authority of Scripture, it acknowledges the centuries of Christian reflection that produced the great credal statements. It affirms the Lordship of Christ over both the church and the universe and his position as the unique revelation of God and the only Saviour of the world. Included with the expected call to proclaim the gospel in every language and cultural context is recognition of the reality of persecution and martyrdom. This theme marked some of the presentations and is seen as a necessary component of any confessional document in this present time. Throughout the Declarations, the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in mission was affirmed. The consultation also issued a strong call for personal and corporate holiness as an essential mark of Christian mission.

The longest section of the **Affirmation, Commitments**, focused on areas that need continuing reflection. It is debatable whether it is correct to single out this section as the most important of the document. However, it is the topics dealt with in the **Commitments** that should form the basis of research and discussion for the next two or three decades. The topics range widely from theological concerns, such as a call for renewed reflection on the Trinitarian basis of mission, to practical topics that deal with the actual practice of a mission organization such as care of missionaries.

Iguassu has produced statements that will require biblical reflection. Some topics, such as 'Church and Mission' or 'Gospel and Culture' are obviously areas that require serious study. But the **Affirmation** also calls for deep engagement with issues of 'Spiritual Conflict', 'Mission Strategies', 'Economics', and 'Ecology'. This is a clarion call for missionaries to deal with cultural and practical issues that are not usually on their agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> Edited by William D. Taylor, (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1997). The study looks at missionaries from fourteen countries: six traditional sending countries and eight from the younger missionary movement. It is an example of the type of research that needs to be undertaken to document the relevant questions facing today's missionary enterprise.

It was recognized by participants that problems which occupy the lives of those outside the faith must have a biblical answer in order to effectively communicate the gospel.<sup>4</sup> Some of the areas follow on from the **Declarations**, indicating the desire to see more fully articulated some of the real concerns of mission. One example is the call to work on a theology of martyrdom. It is clear that the **Declarations** are a call to action and may be one of the most enduring legacies of the Iguassu Consultation.

The final section, entitled **Pledge**, reaffirms the urgency of the task of world evangelisation. Rooted in Trinitarian theology, the **Pledge** is a common commitment to prayer, reflection, and action. Ending with the eschatological vision of [Rev. 7:9](#), the **Iguassu Affirmation** looks forward to the great wedding feast of our Lord and Saviour.

This issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* presents some of these papers, but unfortunately the printed page cannot give the sense of discussion at the consultation. As a participant and co-chair of the affirmation drafting committee, I can affirm the consultation was an honest attempt at defining the key issues in mission. As noted above, it was a working consultation with the final **Iguassu Affirmation** the product of the input from the entire group. The participants were serious about the nature of the task facing the church. There were signs of hope, areas of concern, and a clear sense that the work of mission was dependent on the power and presence of God, as mediated through the Holy Spirit indwelling believers.

Iguassu is now part of mission history, but we pray its legacy may continue to shape the history of the church. Many mission professors present at Iguassu indicated their intention to use **The Iguassu Affirmation** in their classes. It is certainly a seminal document defining the areas of mission at the turn of the millennium.

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## **Iguassu Affirmation**

**World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission  
Foz de Iguassu, Brazil  
October 10–15, 1999**

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<sup>4</sup> It seems to this observer that it is a healthy sign that missions are dealing with the issues that occupy the minds of our hearers. The apostle Paul used a similar approach in dealing with those to whom he would proclaim Christ.

## **PREAMBLE:**

We have convened as 160 mission practitioners, missiologists and church leaders from 53 countries, under the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission in Foz de Iguassu, Brazil on October 10–15, 1999 to:

1. Reflect together on the challenges and opportunities facing world missions at the dawn of the new millennium;
2. Review the different streams of twentieth-century evangelical missiology and practice, especially since the 1974 Lausanne Congress;
3. Continue developing and applying a relevant biblical missiology which reflects the cultural diversity of God's people.

We proclaim the living Christ in a world torn by ethnic conflicts, massive economic disparity, natural disasters and ecological crises. The mission task is both assisted and hindered by technological developments that now reach the remotest corners of the earth. The diverse religious aspirations of people, expressed in multiple religions and spiritual experimentation, challenge the ultimate truth of the Gospel.

In the twentieth-century, missiology witnessed unprecedented development. In recent years, reflection from many parts of the church has helped missions to continue shedding paternalistic tendencies. Today, we continue to explore the relationship between the Gospel and culture, between evangelism and social responsibility and between biblical mandates and the social sciences. We see some international organizations—among them the World Evangelical Fellowship, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and the AD2000 and Beyond Movement—that have begun a promising process of partnership and unity.

Increased efforts at partnership have been catalyzed by an emphasis on methodologies involving measurable goals and numerical growth. Flowing from a commitment to urgent evangelization these methodologies have shown how our task might be accomplished. However these insights must be subject to biblical principles and growth in Christlikeness.

We rejoice in diverse missiological voices emerging around the world, but we confess that we have not taken them all into our theory and practice. Old paradigms still prevail. Participation by and awareness of the global church, as well as mission from people of all nations to people of all nations, are needed for a valid missiology in our time.

Our discussions have invited us to fuller dependence on the Spirit's empowering presence in our life and ministry as we eagerly await the glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the light of these realities, we make the following declarations:

## **DECLARATIONS**

Our faith rests on the absolute authority of the God-breathed Scriptures. We are heirs of the great Christian confessions handed down to us. All three Persons of the Godhead are active in God's redeeming mission. Our missiology centers on the overarching biblical theme of God's creation of the world, the Father's redeeming love for fallen humanity as revealed in the incarnation, substitutionary death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ultimately of the redemption and renewal of the whole creation. The Holy Spirit, promised by our Lord, is our comforter, teacher and source of power. It is the Spirit who calls us into holiness and integrity. The Spirit leads the Church into all truth. The

Spirit is the agent of mission, convicting of sin, righteousness, and judgment. We are Christ's servants, empowered and led by the Spirit, whose goal is to glorify God.

We confess the following themes as truths of special importance in this present age. These themes are clearly attested to in the whole of the Scriptures and speak to the desire of God to provide salvation for all people.

1. **Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church and Lord of the Universe.** Ultimately every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. The lordship of Christ is to be proclaimed to the whole world, inviting all to be free from bondage to sin and the dominion of evil in order to serve the Lord for His glory.
2. **The Lord Jesus Christ is the unique revelation of God and the only Savior of the world.** Salvation is found in Christ alone. God witnesses to Himself in creation and in human conscience, but these witnesses are not complete without the revelation of God in Christ. In the face of competing truth claims, we proclaim with humility that Christ is the only Savior, conscious that sin as well as cultural hindrances often mask Him from those for whom He died.
3. **The good news of the salvation made possible by the work of Jesus Christ must be expressed in all the languages and cultures of the world.** We are commanded to be heralds of the Gospel to every creature so that they can have the opportunity to confess faith in Christ. The message must come to them in a language they can understand and in a form that is appropriate to their circumstances. Believers, led by the Holy Spirit, are encouraged to create culturally appropriate forms of worship and uncover biblical insights that glorify God for the benefit of the whole church.
4. **The Gospel is good news and addresses all human needs.** We emphasize the holistic nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament demonstrate God's concern with the whole person in the whole of society. We acknowledge that material blessings come from God, but prosperity should not be equated with godliness.
5. **Opposition to the spread of the Gospel is foremost a spiritual conflict involving human sin and principalities and powers opposed to the Living God.** This conflict is manifested in different ways, e.g. fear of spirits or indifference to God. We recognize that the defense of the truth of the Gospel is also spiritual warfare. As witnesses of the Gospel, we announce that Jesus Christ has power over all powers and is able to free all who turn to Him in faith. We affirm that in the cross God has won the victory.
6. **Suffering, persecution and martyrdom are present realities for many Christians.** We acknowledge that our obedience in mission involves suffering and recognize that the church is experiencing this. We affirm our privilege and responsibility to pray for those undergoing persecution. We are called to share in their pain, do what we can to relieve their sufferings, and work for human rights and religious freedom.
7. **Economic and political systems deeply affect the spread of God's kingdom.** Human government is appointed by God, but all human institutions act out of fallenness. The Scriptures command that Christians pray for those in authority and work for truth and justice. Appropriate Christian response to political and economic systems requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
8. **God works in a variety of Christian traditions and organizations, for His glory and the salvation of the world.** For too long believers, divided over issues of church organization, order, and doctrine—such as the gifts and ministry of the



Holy Spirit—have failed to recognize each other’s work. We affirm, bless, and pray for authentic Christian witness wherever it is found.

9. **To be effective witnesses of the holy God, we need to demonstrate personal and corporate holiness, love and righteousness.** We repent of hypocrisy and conformity to the world, and call the church to a renewed commitment to holy living. Holiness requires turning from sin, training in righteousness and growing in Christlikeness.

## **COMMITMENTS**

We commit ourselves to continue and deepen our reflection on the following themes, helping one another to enrich our understanding and practice with insight from every corner of the world. Our hearts’ desire is the discipling of the nations through the effective, faithful communication of Christ to every culture and people.

### **1. Trinitarian Foundation of mission**

We commit ourselves to a renewed emphasis on God-centered missiology. This invites a new study of the operation of the Trinity in the redemption of the human race and the whole of creation, as well as to understand the particular roles of Father, Son and Spirit in mission to this fallen world.

### **2. Biblical and Theological Reflection**

We confess that our biblical and theological reflection has sometimes been shallow and inadequate. We also confess that we have frequently been selective in our use of texts rather than being faithful to the whole biblical revelation. We commit ourselves to engage in renewed biblical and theological studies shaped by mission, and to pursue a missiology and practice shaped by God’s Word, brought to life and light by the Holy Spirit.

### **3. Church and Mission**

The Church in mission is central to God’s plan for the world. We commit ourselves to strengthen our ecclesiology in mission, and to encourage the global church to become a truly missionary community in which all Christians are involved in mission. In the face of increasing resistance and opposition from political powers, religious fundamentalism and secularism, we commit ourselves to encourage and challenge the churches to respond with a deeper level of unity and participation in mission.

### **4. Gospel and Culture**

The Gospel is always presented and received within a cultural context. It is therefore essential to clarify the relationship between Gospel and Culture, both in theory and practice, recognizing that there is both good and evil in all cultures. We commit ourselves to continue to demonstrate the relevance of the Christian message to all cultures, and ensure that missionaries learn to wrestle biblically with the relationship between Gospel and culture. We commit ourselves to serious study of how different cultural perspectives may enrich our understanding of the Gospel as well as how all worldviews have to be critiqued and transformed by it.

### **5. Pluralism**

Religious pluralism challenges us to hold firmly to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior even as we work for increased tolerance and understanding among religious

communities. We cannot seek harmony by relativizing the truth claims of religions. Urbanization and radical political change have bred increased interreligious and ethnic violence and hostility. We commit ourselves to be agents of reconciliation. We also commit ourselves to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in faithfulness and loving humility.

## **6. Spiritual Conflict**

We welcome the renewed attention given in recent decades to the biblical theme of spiritual conflict. We rejoice that power and authority is not ours but God's. At the same time we must ensure that the interest in spiritual warfare does not become a substitute for dealing with the root issues of sin, salvation, conversion and the battle for the truth. We commit ourselves to increase our biblical understanding and practice of spiritual conflict while guarding against syncretistic and unbiblical elements.

## **7. Strategy in Mission**

We are grateful for many helpful insights gained from the social sciences. We are concerned that these should be subject to the authority of Scripture. Therefore we call for a healthy critique of mission theories that depend heavily on marketing concepts and missiology by objectives.

## **8. Globalized Missiology**

The insights of every part of the church are needed and challenges encountered in every land must be addressed. Only thus can our missiology develop the richness and texture reflected in the Scriptures and needed for full obedience to our risen Lord. We commit ourselves to give voice to all segments of the global church in developing and implementing our missiology.

## **9. Godly Character**

Biblical holiness is essential for credible Christian witness. We commit ourselves to renewed emphasis on godly living and servanthood, and we urge training institutions, both missionary and ministerial, to include substantive biblical and practical training in Christian character formation.

## **10. the Cross and Suffering**

As our Lord called us to take up our crosses, we remind the church of our Lord's teaching that suffering is a part of authentic Christian life. In an increasingly violent and unjust world with political and economic oppression, we commit to equip ourselves and others to suffer in missionary service and to serve the suffering church. We pursue to articulate a biblical theology of martyrdom.

## **11. Christian Responsibility and the World Economic Order**

In a world increasingly controlled by global economic forces, Christians need to be aware of the corrosive effects of affluence and the destructive effects of poverty. We must be aware of ethnocentrism in our view of economic forces. We commit ourselves to address the realities of world poverty and oppose policies that serve the powerful rather than the powerless. It is the responsibility of the church in each place to affirm the meaning and value of a people, especially where indigenous cultures face extinction. We call all Christians to commit themselves to reflect God's concern for justice and the welfare of all peoples.

## **12. Christian Responsibility and the Ecological Crisis**

The earth is the Lord's and the Gospel is good news for all creation. Christians share in the responsibility God gave to all humanity to care for the earth. We call on all Christians to commit themselves to ecological integrity in practicing responsible stewardship of creation, and we encourage Christians in environmental care and protection initiatives.

## **13. Partnership**

As citizens of the Kingdom of God and members of Christ's body, we commit ourselves to renewed efforts at cooperation because it is our Lord's desire that we be one and that we work in harmony in His service so that the world will believe. We acknowledge that our attempts have not always been as equals. Inadequate theology, especially in respect to the doctrine of the church, and the imbalance of resources has made working together difficult. We pledge to find ways to address this imbalance and to demonstrate to the world that believers in Christ are truly one in their service of Christ.

## **14. Member Care**

Service of the Lord in cross-cultural environments exposes missionaries to many stresses and criticisms. While acknowledging that missionaries also share the limitations of our common humanity and have made errors, we affirm that they deserve love, respect and gratitude. Too often, agencies, churches, and fellow Christians have not followed biblical guidelines in dealing with cross-cultural workers. We commit ourselves to support and nurture our missionary workers for their sakes and for the Gospel witness.

## **PLEDGE**

We, the participants of the Iguassu Missiological Consultation, declare our passion as mission practitioners, missiologists and church leaders for the urgent evangelization of the whole world and the discipling of the nations to the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In all our commitments we depend on the Lord who empowers us by the Holy Spirit to fulfill His mission. As evangelicals, we pledge to sustain our biblical heritage in this ever-changing world. We commit ourselves to participate actively in formulating and practicing evangelical missiology. Indwelt by the Spirit, we purpose to carry the radical good news of the Kingdom of God to all the world. We affirm our commitment to love one another and to pray for one another as we struggle to do His will.

We rejoice in the privilege of being part of God's mission in proclaiming the Gospel of reconciliation and hope. We joyfully look to the Lord's return and passionately yearn to see the realization of the eschatological vision when people from every nation, tribe, and language shall worship the Lamb.

To this end may the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be glorified. Hallelujah!

Amen.

# Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century

Chris Wright

**Keywords:** Pluralism, postmodernity, hermeneutics, Christology, worship, ethics, missiology;

## INTRODUCTION

### A) Clash of Religious Worlds

In January 1999 England reeled under the shocking news that Glen Hoddle, the coach of the England national football team, had been sacked. This was not for failure on the football field (though that would have been justified enough!) but because of remarks he made about the disabled. Hoddle had a Christian religious experience some years ago which led to him being called a 'born-again Christian'. However, more recently he has embraced a form of New Age spirituality under the influence of a spiritual faith-healer, Eileen Drewery. He expressed the view that the disabled are as they are because of their *karma* from previous lives. It was, indirectly, their own fault.<sup>1</sup> This outraged public sentiment in Britain and produced a fascinating clash of cultural and ethical worldviews. Hoddle's view, of course, comes straight from the Hindu roots of much New Age philosophy (though he did not go on to include women as also 'suffering' the results of their *karma*, perhaps fortunately for him, even though that is also part of the re-incarnational Hindu worldview).

Interestingly the response to Hoddle shows up a contradiction in secular pluralism. On the one hand, a 'politically correct' ideology wants to affirm the validity of Hindu and New Age 'alternative' spiritualities and reject allegedly 'absolutist' and 'arrogant' Christian claims. Yet on the other hand, it is also very 'politically correct' to affirm and defend the disabled (or more 'correctly' the 'differently-abled'). What the Hoddle affair shows up is that in the latter case the 'politically correct' attitude itself is the legacy of a Christian worldview which affirms the value of every unique individual human being and denies the debilitating and imprisoning doctrine of *karma*. This contradiction within popular religious and moral belief was not much noticed however.

Pluralism does not foster clear thinking about the inconsistencies it is happy to live with. One version of popular pluralism says, 'It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere'. Another version seems to say, 'It does matter what you believe if it means insulting the weak'. But those who so vociferously adopt the latter would probably not like to be told that such a view is itself strongly indebted to the biblical and Christian worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoddle's words, in an interview with *The Times*, were, '... You have to come back [sic in another lifetime] to learn and face some of the thing you have done, good and bad. There are too many injustices around. You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and half-decent brains. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime. ... It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap'.

This example from recent British life illustrates how popular spirituality and opinions about ethical and social issues are profoundly influenced by a great plurality of religious worldviews, some being new forms of pre-Christian paganism, others being very ancient oriental religious fundamentals re-packaged in western forms.

## B) The Task

My understanding of the task assigned to me in this paper is two-fold:

- i). To survey some of the forms of pluralism that lie behind the pluralities of our world as we enter the new millennium.<sup>2</sup>
- ii). To suggest what will be key tasks for evangelical missiology in relation to them. It is not my brief, as I understand it, to propose what new *mission strategies* may be needed in relation to global pluralities, but rather to focus on what will be the issues needing to be addressed by evangelical *theological* reflection that should undergird our mission activity.

I have chosen three examples of pluralism that I see as particularly challenging to evangelical missiology: **hermeneutical, religious and ethical**.<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for this selection is that these three forms of pluralism directly challenge three of the defining marks of evangelicalism—our concern for the authority of the Bible, for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and for transformed living according to biblical ethical standards. These three are also central to an evangelical understanding of mission, which flows from our understanding of the scriptural mandate, proclaims that Jesus Christ alone is Lord and Saviour, and aims to produce transformed human lives and communities.

I fully realize that this is an inadequate selection—there is a plurality of pluralisms! Even pluralism itself is changing. However, it is hoped that participants reading this sketch will helpfully fill out the gaps in my own presentation, and that other paper writers will address issues that I am well aware of but have not felt able to address in the confines of this paper. This would especially include the plurality of contextualized Christologies, and the missiologies that flow from them. I have also chosen not to discuss the inner plurality to be found within evangelical missiology itself (though I refer briefly to it under ‘Religious Plurality’ below).

## C) An Age of Enormous Transition

Finally, by way of introduction, it will be vital that the conference gives full recognition to the transition from modernity to postmodernity that is taking place in a very patchy way around the world, and its implications not only for the practice of Christian mission, but also for the task of missiology. This is not to ignore the fact that in some parts of the world, the transition is still more from pre-modernity into modernity itself. However, it is the case that some forms of pluralism that Christian missiology must address are the product of post-Enlightenment modernity, whereas others are the product of the postmodern reaction to modernity itself. Religious pluralism, for example, actually exhibits a variety of forms that have roots in the intellectual and cultural soil of *both* modernity and

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<sup>2</sup> I will use the term *plurality* to denote the empirical phenomena of social, political, ethnic, religious, etc. variety. *Pluralism* denotes the usually relativistic ideologies that support or respond to those phenomena. Plurality is simply an observable fact of life. Pluralism is a philosophy. I shall try to maintain this distinction.

<sup>3</sup> In the first draft of this paper I had also included ethnic and political pluralism, but I have omitted it now, since some aspects of that phenomenon are discussed in Samuel Escobar’s paper, under ‘globalization and contextualization’.

postmodernity. Missiological response, as we shall see below, must discern and distinguish these different roots when confronting different brands of religious pluralism.

By *modernity* I am referring to the epoch of western civilization that began with the Renaissance, flourished in the wake of the Enlightenment, and has reached its zenith in 19th and 20th century cultures dominated by the triumphs of science and technology. Its primary characteristic has been the exaltation of autonomous human reason and its application to every realm of life. There are many excellent analyses of its characteristics and history.<sup>4</sup> Among the features of modernity that are particularly relevant to the Christian confrontation with various pluralisms are those listed by Andrew Walker: the rise of the nation state; the establishment of functional rationality; the emergence of structural (epistemological) pluralism; the emergence of cultural pluralism; a worldview dominated by science and the idea of progress; the growth of individualism.<sup>5</sup>

By *postmodernity* I am referring to the shift in western intellectual and popular culture that began in the 1960s and 1970s. It is helpful to distinguish the intellectual and the popular forms of postmodernity, and furthermore, in each case to observe that there are negative and positive aspects to it.<sup>6</sup>

Intellectually, through the work of such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, the whole Enlightenment project was exposed as having faulty foundations. The negative or 'deconstructing' acids included the observation that so-called 'objective and factual truth' depends on all kinds of assumptions which are themselves relative and questionable. Foucault pointed out that these hidden assumptions also frequently functioned as an inherent ideology of Euro-centric power and hegemony. Language itself is no longer seen as referential (referring to real objects) but symbolic (a system of signs). The postmodern intellectual world is characterized by relativism, with all attempts at finding meaning doomed to being nothing more than arbitrary and changing social constructions.

Not all intellectual postmodern culture is negative in this way, however. There are those who helpfully explore the *relativity* of all our knowing, without accepting utter *relativism*. The position known as *critical realism* accepts that there is an objective real world out there (physically and historically) which we can know, but insists that we need to be constantly critical of our own capacity to know it with any finality or completeness. All our knowing is embedded in culture, history and community, but that does not *invalidate* it. We may never be able to know fully or perfectly, but that does not mean we cannot know anything. So we need to be humble (shedding Enlightenment arrogance), but not despairing.<sup>7</sup>

In another way also, postmodernity returns to perspectives on human life and history which have been and still are held by substantial sections of the human race who have not

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. P. Sampson, V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.) *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994); A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); A. Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London: SPCK, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Walker, *Telling the Story*, ch. 5

<sup>6</sup> I am dependent in the following section on the helpful outline that explores these distinctions provided by Craig Van Gelder, in an unpublished paper, 'Shaping ministry in a postmodern world: Building bridges with the Gospel to a changed context'.

<sup>7</sup> See S. Best and D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogation* (New York: Guildford Press, 1991), pp. 256–304. A helpful exposition of 'critical realism' in relation to biblical history is provided by the outstanding evangelical New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 31–46.

yet been engulfed by the Enlightenment assumptions of western-style modernity. I quote here from helpful comments made on the first draft of my paper by Miriam Adeney.

Postmodernism has a number of aspects which may have positive dimensions. For example:

- Subject and object cannot be disconnected.
- Fact and value cannot be disconnected.
- History is not necessarily progressing.
- Cultures are not necessarily ranked.
- Truth is experienced in multiple and incomplete ways, including paradox and ambiguity.
- If there is a metanarrative, it is not based on enlightenment categories.

Postmodernism is not really a problem for much of the world who always have seen the sense of the above six perspectives and so are not disturbed by their rise in the postmodern period. It may well be, therefore, that Christian mission in the 21st century will find that some aspects of the postmodern worldview are more compatible with bringing the gospel to certain cultures than the values of modernity which have unfortunately characterized much western mission.

Turning to the popular side of postmodernity: popular culture manifests the same ambiguity of negative and positive forms of postmodernity. Negatively, there is the brutal nihilism of some forms of art and cinema. Life is meaningless—so what? The failure and emptiness of so much of the promise inherent in the mythology of modernity has led to a great deal of pessimism in western life, as well as a very shallow attitude of ‘get what you can from the present: there isn’t much future to look forward to’.

But postmodernity has its positive side in popular culture as well. There are the more vibrant forms of playfulness, collage, irony and symbolism of much contemporary culture. Mix and match, switch images, plunder the past and mix it with the present and future, don’t look for depth but enjoy the surface, life is a carnival to be enjoyed, not a drama to be understood. Furthermore, postmodernity celebrates diversity of culture, whereas modernity pushes for uniformity and homogenization of human life into secular, scientific and materialistic categories.

Again, Miriam Adeney in her comments on the earlier draft of this paper warned against regarding plurality as a bad or bewildering thing. She says,

I like to think of God’s glorious multicultural kaleidoscope. I view cultures as treasure chests of symbols for exuberant expression of the image of God. It’s true that people (as sinners) create patterns of idolatry and exploitation in every culture. Equally, however, people (in God’s image) create patterns of beauty, wisdom, and kindness in every culture.

I fully agree, and would say that postmodernity’s celebration of cultural diversity is a lot closer to the Bible’s own affirmation of ‘every tribe and nation and language’, than the homogenizing anti-culture of modernity.

It is important, then, to be aware of the fact that we live in an age of transition—and it is not neat. People and societies do not go to bed one night ‘modern’ and wake up next day ‘postmodern’. There is an inter-layering between modernity, late or hyper-modernity (the globalized, multinational capitalist world—the ‘McWorld’ phenomenon<sup>8</sup>), and postmodernity. At the same time, of course, large sections of humanity are bound to religious worldviews in which the philosophical issues of modernity and postmodernity

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<sup>8</sup> See Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed versus McWorld: Reinventing Christian Life and Mission for a New Millennium* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1999).

are largely irrelevant, or treated with scathing dismissal as evidence of the poverty of 'western religion'. The challenge to missiology is to know which world we are addressing in any given context, which world the church itself is identified with, and what challenges the gospel presents to each of the interwoven worldviews.<sup>9</sup>

## 1. HERMENEUTICAL PLURALISM

The transition from modernity to postmodernity is producing some fascinating effects in the world of biblical hermeneutics, which have knock-on effects in missiology, since so many missiological issues are essentially hermeneutical in essence. This is especially so for evangelicals because of our commitment to attaining a theology of mission that can be defended as 'biblical'. The problem is, what does it mean to be 'biblical', and who decides when you are, or are not, being 'biblical'?

Enlightenment modernity constrained biblical hermeneutics into the straitjacket of the historical-critical method and a form of 'modern scientific exegesis' that excluded the transcendent from Scripture as sharply as autonomous rationality excluded it from the natural sciences. But, as Brueggemann and others have pointedly made clear, the myth of neutrality, of scientific objectivity, concealed a western hegemony in biblical studies that tended to stifle all other voices or readings.

Postmodernity, with its rejection of all hegemonies and deep suspicion of all claims to 'scientific objectivity', finality and universality, has challenged the critical hermeneutical consensus on Scripture as well, and opened up a world of almost infinite plurality of readings and interpretations. At one level this has had the exhilarating effect of giving a place in the sun to a great variety of contextual readings of the Scripture which are not bound to the historical-critical method. There is value in recognizing the *relativity* of all hermeneutics. A positive benefit of the postmodern shift in biblical studies is that you don't have to submit your interpretation of scripture to a single accrediting agency—the western critical guild of scholarship. On the other hand, the postmodern rejection of any foundation or grounds on which we might affirm a reading of the biblical text to be *right or wrong*, opens up an uncontrolled *relativism*. The plurality of contexts in which the text is read and heard becomes a pluralism of approach that has no limits or controls in relation to the truth of the text. Indeed, such an approach questions whether the very concept of 'the truth of the text' is meaningful. The text can have as many meanings as there are readers and contexts.

I believe 21st century missiology will have to wrestle with a *doctrine of scripture* that moves beyond the way evangelical scholarship has tended to defend the inspiration and authority of the Bible with the concepts and methods of modernity itself, towards a more dynamic understanding of the authority and role of the Bible in a postmodern world. And I think this will be one of the biggest challenges for Christian theology in the 21st century, since there is no mission without the authority of Christ himself, and our access to that authority depends upon the Scriptures. *So, a major missiological task for evangelical theology will be a fresh articulation of the authority of the Bible and its relation to Christ's authorization of our mission.*

Faced with the basic hermeneutical question: 'What does this biblical text mean?' scholars have tended to focus on one of three possible locations for the real source of 'meaning' in texts: 1) the author(s); 2) the text itself; 3) the reader(s). I would like to look

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<sup>9</sup> Helpful discussion of these interwoven phenomena is to be found in Craig Van Gelder, 'Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition', in George H. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 127–133.



at each of these three focal points. First I will very briefly describe each one and evaluate some key strengths and weaknesses. Then I would like in each case to explore not only how they relate to the contemporary plurality of cultures and religions, but also how cultural and religious plurality was actually a major factor in the *ancient biblical context* in which the text emerged and which it addressed.

### A. Author-Centred Focus

This hermeneutical approach, which is common to evangelical as well as more critical interpretation, assumes that the meaning of any biblical text is to be found by going back to **the origins** of the text. **Exegesis** is fundamentally based on recovering the **author's intent**. This then involves the **grammatico-historical method**. By means of textual criticism, lexical and semantic study, words, syntax and grammar, the exegete seeks to answer the question, 'What did this author actually say; and what did the words mean at the time?' A vital step in this process is to 'Set the text in its context', or rather, its **contexts**, which will include canonical, historical, social and cultural contexts. Then, further, all the tools of critical *study, sometimes collectively* described as the historico-critical method, will be employed to explore the origins of the text before us. These include, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism etc. The common aim is to get as close as possible to understanding what the original author(s) of the text meant to communicate through its production, collection and preservation.

There are several obvious strengths in such an approach:

- It seems to be the 'common sense' approach. It assumes that meaning starts in the mind of the author; when somebody speaks or writes they intend to communicate some meaning which they wish to be understood. This approach respects the priority of author-intent.
- It tries to take an objective approach, arguing for some core of stable meaning in each text which is in principle recoverable by the exegete.
- It offers some control over the hermeneutical process by setting limits/boundaries to possible meanings. It enables some adjudication of legitimate and illegitimate interpretations. We may agree that a text could have several possible meanings, but also agree that some meanings are impossible. This does not guarantee 'certainty'—there is always room for disagreement among readers. But there is an assumption that we *can* know enough to get a reasonably close approximation to what the author probably meant to say.
- The importance of paying attention to the authors of biblical texts also lies in their character as witnesses (directly or indirectly) to the story of salvation. It is assumed that biblical texts are referential. That is, they actually refer to real events in the real world—events in which God has acted for our salvation. The world of the biblical authors is the world where things happened that constitute the gospel. The biblical text is like a window to that world. Using the Bible among the religions must therefore mean telling the story which makes it Good News, not merely treating it as a quarry of religious ideas and ideals for comparison, admiration or exchange.
- This last point highlights the futility of the question: 'Is there salvation in other religions?' This overlooks the primary nature of salvation in the Bible, namely as something that God has done in and through the story which the Bible relates. Other religions do not save, not because they are inferior as religions in some way, but because religion itself does not save anybody. God does. Other

religions do not tell the story, this story. This is also why we cannot accept the substitution of the scriptures of other religions for the Old Testament.

But there are also some dangers if we focus exclusively on the search for the original author's intent.

- Obsession with *origins* can obscure the *purpose* of the text. The expression 'modern *scientific* criticism' reveals the fact that the rise of the critical approach to the text went hand in hand with Enlightenment-modernity's preference for explaining everything by finding causes at the expense of teleology (i.e. seeking the purpose of something). Science explains by *reducing* phenomena to their smallest parts, and by seeking *causes* of how things have become what they are. It does not ask 'what is this *for*?' Similarly some critical exegesis of the Bible breaks it up into ever smaller sources, and then explores the origins, history, and structure for the smallest possible units of the text, but does not answer the question, 'Yes, but what is this book as a whole actually *saying*? What is this text *for*? What does it *do*?'
- Author-centred focus treats the text as a **window**, through which we can gain access to the authors' own world. However, exclusive attention to that world ('the world behind the text') can obscure the fact that the purpose of a window is also to let the light shine into the room of the observer—i.e. it can overlook (or exclude) the *revelatory* function of the biblical text. It is not there simply to shed light on the world of ancient Israel or the early church, but to be 'a light to *my* path'. In other words, an evangelical approach to the Bible recognizes that 'author-intent' is not confined to the human author, but must also include the intent of the divine Author whose message addresses every human context through these inspired texts.

In what way, then, does an author-centred focus relate to religious plurality? It is vital to remember that the biblical authors did not speak or write in a vacuum: religious plurality was often a factor in their contexts just as much as ours. Their 'intended meaning' was related to their world. We do not just look for a sealed package of 'original meaning' and *then* seek to apply it to our context of mission in the midst of plurality; we need to recognize that what they meant in their context was itself shaped by the missional engagement of God and God's people with the world around them.

Here are a few examples in which religious plurality is clearly part of the context of the author's world, and needs to be taken into account when interpreting the text in question.

- [Ex. 15](#), the song of Moses. The polemical affirmation of the kingship of Yahweh is made in the context of power encounter with Pharaoh's claim to divinity.
- [Josh. 24:14f](#). 'Choose today. . .', whether Mesopotamian gods of the ancestors, or the gods of Egypt or of Canaan. The monotheistic covenantal choice of Yahweh was made in the context of acknowledged religious plurality which was part of the roots and background of the people of Israel.
- **Hosea**, confronted with the syncretism of Baal cults with Yahwism, takes the offensive by using the sexual nature of the former as a source of language and imagery to portray the 'married' relationship of Yahweh and Israel. By presenting the covenant relationship as a marriage, he can then portray Israel's covenant unfaithfulness as adultery and prostitution. But in doing so, he is exploiting the sexual imagery of the very religious corruption he was attacking.

- [Isa. 40-55](#). The great affirmations of Yahweh's sovereignty over nations, history and 'the gods' are made against the background of the grand claims of Babylonian gods—especially the astral deities ([40:26](#)) and state gods ([46:1-2](#)).
- [Gen. 1](#). Israel's monotheistic understanding of creation is affirmed against contemporary Ancient Near Eastern mythology, polytheism, astrology, etc.
- **John**. Conflict with elements of Judaism that rejected the messianic claims of Jesus and his early followers.
- **Colossians**. Uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus Christ in midst of surrounding mixture of paganism, early Gnosticism, Jewish rituals and mystery cults.
- **Revelation**. Jesus Lord of history, against background of the sinister threat of emperor worship and the state cult of Rome.

So, it seems to me that we will get a closer understanding—a better understanding—of the author's original meaning when we actually take into account the worlds of religious plurality in which they lived, and therefore *feel* the contrast, *feel* the way in which these words are being emphasized. Our use of the Bible in the world of modern religious pluralism will be greatly helped in its missional sharpness if we give more attention to the religious pluralism that was part of the world of the biblical authors themselves.

## B. Text-Centred Focus

This approach believes that meaning is to be found in the text itself, regarded as an **artefact**, that is, a piece of human construction—i.e. like a painting, or piece of music, or sculpture, which can be appreciated for itself, no matter who produced it or why. The text is not so much a window that we *look through* to some world beyond itself, as **a painting** that we *look at*. A painting could even be made to look exactly like a window—giving the illusion of some objective reality outside itself, but still be merely a painting—a work of human artistry. So, as applied to biblical texts, this approach pays little attention to the author and his or her intentions (which we cannot know for certain anyway). The text now has an existence and a meaning of its own, to be appreciated for its own sake as a work of **literary art and craft**.

This approach has developed the use of many helpful tools of **literary** analysis and tends to engage in **close reading** of texts, paying careful attention to all the fine detail of a narrative or poem, in the same way that an art connoisseur will appreciate every brush stroke of a master painter. Literary appreciation of biblical literature will include, for example: *Genre identification*—what kind of literature is this and how is it to be read?

- *Literary conventions*—how do stories, poems, etc. actually work? How do they engage and affect us when we read them?
- *Narrative art*—e.g. setting, plot, characters, suspense, irony, perspective, gapping, patterning, word-play, etc.
- *Poetic art*—e.g. economy of words, imagery, metaphor, parallelism, poetic figures, chiasmus/concentricity, climax, contrast, symbolism, etc.

Literary approaches to the biblical text often bring out all sorts of layers of meaning and significance that have been put in there by the skill and the thought and the art and the craft of the human author to whom God was entrusting the message that was to be conveyed by the medium of literature.

In evaluating this text-focused, literary approach to biblical hermeneutics, we may observe several strengths and values:

- The Bible *is* great literature: it can and should be appreciated at that level. There is no necessary conflict between believing in divine inspiration and appreciating human artistry.
- Literary approaches tend to be more holistic (that is, they tend to treat passages or books as a whole), and yet at the same time pay very close attention to the fine details of the text. This is consonant with an evangelical commitment to verbal inspiration; the choice of words matters.
- It helps us to understand how meaning is carried by the *form* of a text and not just by its *content*. We need to look not only at *what* is written, but also at *how* it has been written.
- Paradoxically also, a text-centred approach respects the author, not so much on the assumption that we can recover the author's intended meaning, but that we can admire the author's artistry.
- Such an approach can go along with the conviction that, strictly speaking (e.g. [2 Tim. 3:16](#)), inspiration is a property of the *texts* of Scripture, not of the authors, or of the pre-canonical sources, etc. Therefore, indirectly, a close literary reading of the biblical texts is a compliment to the divine author as well (on an evangelical understanding).
- It treats the great variety of biblical texts with integrity by genuinely listening to their *plurivocality*—i.e. the internal dialectic of views and perspectives, which often seem in uncomfortable opposition to one another. It resists flattening everything out or squeezing everything into a univocal system. This is a major emphasis in recent postmodern hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup>

But there are also, of course, dangers in a literary approach which focuses exclusively on the text itself without concern for the identity or the world of the author.

Literary study of the text *can* proceed without reference to the historical value of the text. ('Never mind the history, feel the art').

- Literary approaches to the text can sometimes totally **ignore history**. If the fascination with literary art leads us to dismiss the historical question: 'Did it really happen?' then we have problems with the biblical faith which is actually rooted in history. Now we may make allowances for 'narrative liberty'—that is, we may be willing to accept that not every single detail in the way a story has been told mirrors precisely 'what actually happened if you'd been there'. But it is possible for real history to be told as a good story, and for a good story to be grounded in real history. The 'having-happenedness' of the biblical story is very important and should not be lost sight of when we look at the art by which that story was written.
- A purely literary approach can lead to texts being read without reference to their place in the *canon* and therefore in the *story* of Scripture as a whole. One can focus on a text and appreciate its literary qualities and even be moved by it, yet remain untouched by its significance as part of the whole word of God to humanity.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Especially the later work of Brueggemann, who rightly highlights how the Bible itself has counter-pointing voices and traditions (exodus and exile; covenant and judgement; hymn and lament; etc.), which need to be given their full expression, and not explained, excused or excluded. *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 127 (1997), pp. 4–8; and, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

- Unbalanced commitment to unresolved *plurivocality* of the texts (favoured by postmodern interpretation), results in the loss of any real finality or normativity: all we have is a constant oscillation of perspectives. This seems to me an abuse of the plurality of the Bible's texts. It is the opposite danger to the tendency to flatten the whole Bible out into a single monotone message. This is the tendency never to allow the Bible to say anything with finality at all.

Now, what about the religious plurality aspect of *this* focus? It is important to recognize, and I think sometimes evangelical scholarship does *not* adequately recognize, that the biblical texts themselves do use religious language, metaphors and symbolism that are drawn from the plurality of religions that surrounded the authors, yet without sharing the polytheistic worldview that supported such religion.

- **Hosea**, confronted with the syncretism of Baal cults with Yahwism, takes the offensive by using the sexual nature of the former as a source of language and imagery to portray the 'married' relationship of Yahweh and Israel. By presenting the covenant relationship as a marriage, he can then portray Israel's covenant unfaithfulness as adultery and prostitution. But in doing so, he is exploiting the sexual imagery of the very religious corruption he was attacking.
- Some **Psalms** make use of Canaanite mythology (e.g. [Ps. 48:1-3](#) uses the mythological 'city of the great king', which in Baal epics was situated in the far north, to describe the historical city of Yahweh-Jerusalem), and of Canaanite poetic metres (e.g. [Ps. 93](#), which also portrays Yahweh as triumphant over the mighty mythological enemy—the sea).
- [Isaiah 51:9-10](#) and [Ezekiel 29:1-6](#) make use of ancient near Eastern dragon/monster mythology to describe Yahweh's judgement on Egypt, both in the exodus and in the defeat by Babylon.
- [Ezekiel 1](#) uses familiar Ancient Near Eastern religious art and statuary, but transcends it, in portraying the dynamic sovereignty and glory of Yahweh (e.g. four-headed, bull-legged, winged creatures who held up the thrones of gods, or rode on wheeled chariots—well known in Ancient Near Eastern iconography)
- **Paul in Athens**, using Greek poets, yet subverting their religious worldview ([Acts 17:24-31](#)).
- **John's Logos**; a familiar term in Greek philosophy, but John has harnessed it to full-scale Christological and incarnational significance ([In. 1](#))

Such examples raise the age-old missiological question of whether or how far biblical texts can be preached and taught, making use of contemporary religious concepts and symbols in our day. Can we re-contextualize the biblical text from an ancient to a modern religious milieu, without dissolving the text into syncretism? If the Bible itself could utilize a plurality of pagan words, symbols and myths, etc., to communicate its monotheistic and saving message, why should not the church in mission, and in translation, do the same? But what are the limits and controls? Again, the hermeneutical task is fundamentally a missiological one, and pluralism is the operating context at both ends of the task—the biblical text and the modern world.

It needs to be stressed that biblical texts emphatically reject idolatry in all its forms, throughout a very wide span of historical and cultural contexts: Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman idolatry are all condemned in the course of biblical history. In fact, although biblical texts obviously do describe the religious practice of God's own people (i.e. of OT Israel and of the NT church), there is a strong textual tradition that is 'anti-religious'. The Bible undermines the idea that religion itself is the solution to

human problems. More often, (in the prophetic perception), it was the most virulent form of the problem itself. (cf. [Isa. 1](#), [Jer. 7](#), [Amos 5](#), [Hosea 6](#), etc.)

Some biblical texts make remarkable universal claims, in the midst of surrounding religious plurality, in relation to the revelatory and salvific significance of particular key events. E.g. [Deut. 4](#), [Ps. 33](#), [Ps. 24](#), [Isa. 40–55](#), [Jn. 1](#), [Phil. 2](#), [Heb. 1](#), etc. The great claim made for Jesus, for example, in [Philippians 2:10–11](#), was made in its own context, against the worship of Caesar (Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is). But it is made on the basis of quoting a text from [Isaiah 45:22–24](#) which is actually a claim for *Yahweh* in the context of *Babylonian* pluralism, because God says, ‘I have sworn that by me every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that in *Yahweh* alone are righteousness and strength’. So, the [Philippians 2](#) passage is affirming the uniqueness of *Jesus* in the context of *Caesar* worship (religious plurality of the first century) and building it on the foundation of the uniqueness of *Yahweh* in the context of *Babylonian* religious plurality in the sixth century BC. Both texts derive their sharpness and significance from the plurality of the contexts in which, and against which, they were uttered. From a missiological perspective we need to see their monotheistic meaning as sharply defined because of the pluralism that they so vigorously deny.

### C. Reader-Centred Focus

Let us move on finally then, to the third main focus—a reader-centred focus. This is a more recent kind of approach in which people are bringing into the foreground the role of the reader (or readers) in active interpretation of the Bible.

If so far we have looked under ‘author-centred’ at the text as a **window** (through which you have access to the other world—the world of the ancient author), and then, second, under a text-centred approach, we looked at the text as a **painting** (that is, as a product of human art and skill which needs to be appreciated and understood for its own sake), here we are thinking more of **the text as a mirror**. What can be seen in a mirror depends on who is standing in front of it. The ‘contents’ of the mirror, in a sense, reflects who is looking into it or what objects are before it. And so, on this view, the *meaning* in the text is not something, as it were, fixed and final in the text—some sort of objective reality. The meaning of the text actually only arises, only happens, in the act of reading. It is when the reader *reads* that the text *means*, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you. So, meaning is the interaction then between text and reader.

Now this approach also reflects the shift from a modernity paradigm of exegesis to a **post-modernity paradigm**. Under modernity the reader, rather like the scientist, was simply the neutral observer of a fixed reality which was external to himself or herself. An objective ‘real meaning’, like ‘the real world’, was assumed to exist, and the task of the interpreter, like the scientist, was merely to uncover it. The more post-modern view is to say, ‘Well, actually, even in science the subjective observer is part of the reality under observation and, indeed, may change it in the act of observing it’. And so the myth of the ‘objective neutral observer’ has been somewhat demoted in newer forms of science and is similarly also being lost in hermeneutics.

The *reader* as subject also is a significant part in the whole process. There is no independent, final, fixed meaning. And of course the readers of the biblical text must include not just ourselves, but the **original readers** to whom it was first addressed, the **later biblical readers** who collected these texts and edited them into books, and built the books into collections, and built the collections into a canon, the whole long chain of **Jewish and Christian readers** down through the centuries since the Bible reached its final form, and finally **modern readers** in multiple global contexts around our world today.



So, a reader-centred focus urges us to take all these ‘readers’ seriously. We need to recognize that the meaning of the texts does relate to and cannot ignore, *who* is doing the reading and *what* they bring to their reading from their own cultural background, presuppositions, assumptions and so on (nobody reads just as a blank sheet—you always read with something else in your mind), and *where* they are reading, that is, what is their position, both geographically (where they live), their culture, their position within the culture (whether at the top or the bottom of it), their social, economic, political interests, and so on. All of those aspects of the readers’ contexts will affect the way in which the meaning is articulated and applied. There is no such thing as ‘contextless, presuppositionless’ exegesis or interpretation.

How do we evaluate this reader-centred approach? As before, there are positive things to be said, first of all.

- There is no doubt, I think, that focusing on the reader has facilitated fresh ways of discovering the relevance of the text in many modern contexts. The reality of **‘contextualised theology’** has now become taken for granted, provided we recognize that we are *all* interpreting contextually, because all of us interpret in a particular context! Western biblical interpretation has no right to assume that all its insights are ‘the standard’, while those from other continents are ‘contextualized’. The West is also a context—and not necessarily a better or a worse context for understanding and interpreting the text of the Scriptures than anywhere else on the planet.
- Recognizing this has led somewhat to **the demise of western hegemony** over exegesis and hermeneutics. We recognize the relativity of all hermeneutics, that we all need one another and that, in fact, for westerners to hear the Bible interpreted and understood and preached by African, Latin, or Asian brothers and sisters in Christ, and *vice versa*, and then to see perspectives that others are bringing, is often a very enriching thing.
- Attention to the context of the reader(s) has unleashed **the power of the biblical text** into contexts of human need, conflict or injustice e.g. in liberationist, feminist, and other ‘advocacy’ hermeneutics. We may not always agree with where such readers want to take us, but we cannot deny the validity of reading the text in and into such contexts and issues. Meaning *is* affected by who you are and what agenda you have. As Anthony Billington once put it, ‘If you are a feminist, pacifist, vegetarian, the text may show up different meanings as *you* read it, than if you are a male-chauvinist, war-mongering, carnivore’.

There are, of course, dangers in an unbalanced emphasis on the role of the reader in determining the meaning of the biblical text.

- A reader-centred approach can degenerate into pure subjectivism if it is not carefully watched. It reverses the priority of author intent as the determinant factor in a text’s meaning. In fact, in some cases, reader response theory goes so far as virtually eliminating the author altogether—‘It doesn’t really matter who said this or what they meant by saying it; what matters is what it means to me. That’s all that really counts.’ So the reader is prioritised over the author and the *authority*, therefore, lies not with the author or with the text but with the reader, the reader’s self—and that, again, is very reflective of a postmodern kind of world view. One has to say that it is not far removed either from some popular forms of evangelical Bible reading, which arrogantly exclude any

tradition of scholarly study of the text and are content only to ask, 'What does this text mean for me?'

- This also means, of course, that you lose any sense of objective or external controls. If there is *no* assumption of some fixed or stable core of meaning in the text itself deriving ultimately from the author's intention, then pluralism rules: there is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' reading, a 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' reading—some may be better than others but it is difficult to know who has the right to say so.

How then is the interpretation of the Bible affected by the religious plurality of contemporary readers? How do the multiple cultural and religious contexts of people reading the Bible today affect how they understand its meaning? This of course is a question as old as the Bible itself. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, long before the New Testament was written, so that culturally and contextually Greek speaking people could read them. A few examples will suffice here, since doubtless the groups in the conference will be aware of many similar situations where the reading of the Scriptures is affected by the cultural and religious pre-understandings of the readers.

- **The Islamic world** The obvious difficulties in the Bible for Muslims: God as Father; Jesus as Son of God; the story of the Conquest, and the treatment of Ishmael. More subtle difficulties: the biblical record of the 'sins of the prophets' e.g., Abraham's lies, Moses' murder, David's adultery. Things which Jews and Christians accept as encouraging evidence of their humanity like ours, for Muslims are further proof that Christians have tampered with the Bible. Positive aspects: the Arab/Islamic appreciation of stories. (Note here the work of Kenneth Baillie.) Hence the power of parables and the helpfulness of parabolic method to circumvent certain theological objections and blindspots.
- **The Hindu world** Some biblical language and imagery very open to misunderstanding within the Hindu worldview including the following: 'born again', avatar/incarnation, 'abide in me'. The apostles could freely use pagan words that had different connotations in the Greek world, in order to re-shape and use them for Christian purposes. E.g. *theos*, *kyrios*, *logos*, *soter*, *mysterion*, etc. But there is the danger of liberal Indian theologies that syncretise biblical categories into the Hindu worldview and then dissolve the vital distinctions.
- **African Independent Churches** Because of reading the whole Bible 'flat', ie. of equal authority, with no regard for historical development in the canon, some African Independent Churches have picked out some very odd and exotic aspects, e.g. of Old Testament ritual, and then not only continued them, but exalted them as 'biblical'. Sometimes, as an indirect result of translation policies, young churches have had only the New Testament for almost a generation before the Old Testament is available. The Old Testament, coming later, is viewed as *superior* (like *secondary* education), so some Old Testament practices are privileged. Furthermore, the long delay in translating the Old Testament means that sometimes the underlying traditional religion worldview has not been challenged or replaced by a fully biblical one encompassing creation, fall, the history of salvation from Israel through Jesus, and the eschatological hope of new creation.

### Scripture and Plurality

The thrust of my argument in this section is that evangelical missiology will have to take as a major task in the next century a fresh articulation of our doctrine of Scripture. In



doing so we shall have to take more account of the plurality (cultural and religious) that is to be found at every level of the hermeneutical process—in the world of the author, in the language, idiom and imagery of the text, and in the contexts of the readers.

## 2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

### A) Features and Roots

It is not the facts, statistics and challenges of the plurality of religions which are the issue here. Obviously it is a task for *practical mission strategy* to address the multiplicity of specific religious contexts in which ambassadors for the Christian gospel must witness. What the *missiologist* must address is the challenge of the philosophy of pluralism which presents itself as a powerful and dominant response to that religious plurality. Pluralism, briefly defined, is the view that

salvation/enlightenment/liberation is said to be a reality in all major religious traditions and no single religion can be considered somehow normative or superior to all others. All religions are in their own way complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to the one divine reality.<sup>11</sup>

Or, elsewhere,

the belief that there is not one, but a number of spheres of saving contact between God and man. God's revealing and redeeming activity has elicited response in a number of culturally conditioned ways throughout history. Each response is partial, incomplete, unique; but they are related to each other in that they represent different culturally focused perceptions of the one ultimate divine reality.<sup>12</sup>

Religious pluralism of the variety that has emerged from the cradle of modernity is primarily an *epistemological* pluralism. That is, it has to do with the question of how we can (or cannot) *know* the truth-value of religious claims. It is based on a key feature of the Enlightenment transformation of western thinking, namely the cleavage or gulf that was inserted into human knowing in the wake of Descartes and Kant in particular. The whole sphere of western life and culture was divided into two hemispheres—public and private. The public world is the world of so-called objective facts, which are discovered by empirical enquiry and by the application of reason by a detached, neutral observer. The private world is the world of subjective beliefs, personal morality, family values, religion, etc.

In this structural dichotomy, one can only really 'know' what is in the public hemisphere, because knowledge has to be based on 'scientific' proof. Only that which can be empirically proved can be taken as true and therefore can be known. Everything else is a matter of opinion, or faith, but cannot be a matter of truth and knowledge. Any appeal to authoritative divine revelation was ruled out as a source of truth and knowledge. Therefore religion, since it could not be 'proved' empirically and rationally, was removed from the arena of public truth and relegated to the zone of private belief.

Western culture thus embraced a dualism. On the one hand, there was a kind of secular monism—a commitment to the sole objective truth of all things scientific and rational. In that 'hemisphere', intolerance ruled: you don't argue with the objective facts of science.

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<sup>11</sup> H.A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1991), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> A. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), p. 78.

On the other hand there developed religious pluralism—the refusal to accept that any single set of religious beliefs could be proven to be solely true. Since religious beliefs cannot be known or proved by the exercise of reason alone, we have to allow for a variety of opinions. It is important to understand that this is an epistemological form of pluralism. It does not assert that there is no such thing as truth at all (that is the more postmodern brand of *ontological* pluralism). Rather it limits the boundaries of what can be known to be true to the realm of materialistic science and applied rationality. Then, by excluding all religious belief from any valid claim to knowable truth, it argues that the only valid stance in relation to conflicting religious beliefs is to allow the possibility of some truth in all of them, and to exercise a tolerant pluralism.

Along with this epistemological pluralism, goes that other fruit of modernity, a consumerist, supermarket approach to everything at the popular level. In a supermarket, you don't look for the breakfast cereal that is 'right' or 'true'. You just choose what you like. The same goes for religion and morality and all the values that go with them. Since they fall into the hemisphere in which objective knowledge is said to be impossible in principle, you just choose what suits you best.

### **B) Missiological Response**

The missiological task in relation to the kind of pluralism that stems from *modernity* roots has to be to attack those roots themselves. That is, we must carry forward the critique of Enlightenment modernity assumptions that have made pluralism the dominant philosophy of western culture, both intellectually and in popular plausibility. Easily the most pioneering voice in this task has been that of Lesslie Newbigin. Along with other participants in the *Gospel and Culture* movement in Britain, he has exposed the fallacies and false trails of modernity's epistemological dichotomy and arrogance.<sup>13</sup>

Newbigin has shown that the task for the church in western societies, where religion has been privatized and marginalized by the dominance of scientism and materialism, is to re-affirm the gospel as 'public truth'. By that he means that Christians must assert their claim that the biblical story of God's redemptive engagement with the world he created is the universal story, that it can be known and affirmed as truth, and that it constitutes a valid starting point for other truth-seeking and knowing. We must reject the narrow, shallow reductionism that tells us we can only 'know' what we can discover with our senses and demonstrate with our rationality. We must get the claims of Christian truth back into the public hemisphere from which modernity banished them.

Furthermore, we must point out more aggressively that even scientific knowing also starts out from some enormous faith commitments. As Newbigin says, all knowing starts from believing something—in the world of science as much as religion. The Enlightenment dichotomies of objective-subjective, public-private, knowledge-faith are built on very shaky foundations.

Ironically, in confronting the falsehoods of modernity, Christian missiology now has an ally in the postmodern critique that has arisen from the contradictions of late modernity itself. *Postmodernity* attacks the presuppositions of modernity, just as many Christians do (though many evangelical Christians, including many mission strategists, still operate within paradigms profoundly shaped by modernity). However, while postmodernity certainly helps us to dispense with the arrogant claim that scientific truth

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<sup>13</sup> Among the most significant writings of Newbigin are: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989); *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: SPCK, 1995). Another key work from the *Gospel and Culture Movement* is Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*.

is the only truth worth knowing or capable of being known at all, it throws up what is probably an even more serious challenge to the Christian worldview. That is, the assertion that there is no ultimate or universal truth to be known about anything at all—science included.

When this postmodern mindset comes to deal with religions, it moves beyond the epistemologically based religious pluralism we have just considered ('we cannot *know* which religion gives us the real truth, so we must allow for something true in all of them, and seek the truth in dialogue together'), to a more *ontological* religious pluralism ('there is no universal truth, in religion or anywhere else; what matters is not what may or may not be universally true, but what is locally or temporarily true for *you*; religion is little different from therapy for the self—if there is such a thing').

It seems to me that evangelical missiology will have to continue to tackle both kinds of religious pluralism—modernity based epistemological pluralism, and postmodern ontological pluralism—well into the next century, since both forms will co-exist during the era of cultural transition we have entered.

### **C) What's Wrong with Pluralism?**

Superficially, pluralism can seem plausible and attractive.<sup>14</sup> After all, it still talks about God and is willing to keep Christ in the picture somewhere, so what more do you need? You are allowed to keep Christ as the focus of your own religion, so long as you make room for the other 'planets' in the religious solar system. Isn't that fair enough? It also seems to relieve us of all that worry about what will happen to those who never hear the gospel of Christ. They have their own religion which puts them in touch with God, so that's all right then too. And most of all, it fits so perfectly with the 'supermarket mentality' that characterizes the modern and postmodern western mind.

However, underneath all these attractive features pluralism has some major implications that set it totally at odds with biblical Christianity and make it actually a particularly dangerous philosophy for Christians to toy with. My dominant criticisms are directed at what it does to our understanding of God, Jesus, and the worship of Christians themselves.<sup>15</sup>

#### **i) Pluralism Reduces God to Abstractions**

John Hick is one of the leading pluralist theologians. He has argued for what he calls 'pluralist theocentrism'—that is, we should no longer put Christ or the church at the centre of the religious universe, but only God. 'God' is like the sun at the centre of the solar system, and Christianity along with all the other religions are like the orbiting planets, all attracted by the gravity of the sun, but each in its own unique orbit. However, one marked feature of this 'Copernican revolution', as Hick called it, is that the *theos* ('god') who is finally left at the centre becomes utterly abstract. Clearly 'he' cannot be identified or

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<sup>14</sup> The following section is substantially an extract from my book, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Jesus* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1997). In it I seek to define and critique the three major Christian responses to the reality of religious plurality—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, and to provide further biblical reflection on the uniqueness of Christ in that context.

<sup>15</sup> I am confining myself here to some fundamental theological issues raised by pluralism. There are many other aspects in which it is open to profound criticism and which are tackled by other scholars. Cf. L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989); H. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); J.A. Kirk, *Loosing the Chains* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992); D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Downers Grove: IVP, Leicester: Apollos), 1996.

named in terms of any particular deity known within the different world faiths, for they are all only partial responses to this mysterious being.

In fact Hick is quite insistent on this. Names like Jahweh, Jesus, Vishnu, Allah, Brahman, etc., are simply human cultural constructs by means of which people within a particular religious community give expression to their experience of the divine. Whatever those believers may think or claim, the names of their gods are not to be identified with the actual divine reality. (It is important to realize that what pluralism does to Christianity it also does to all religions; none of them has access to the ultimate truth about God as God really is). Those names or concepts found in the various religions are like humanly constructed 'masks'<sup>16</sup> by which the divine reality is thought to be encountered by devotees of those religions. But none of them is ultimately true in the way their worshippers claim.

Thus, for example, Hick says about the Jewish view of God: 'The concrete figure of Jahweh is thus not identical with the ultimate divine reality as it is in itself but is an authentic face or mask or *persona* of the Transcendent in relation to one particular human community.' He then goes on to say that this is how he regards the ultimate names of deity in other religions, 'For precisely the same has to be said of the heavenly Father of Christianity, of the Allah of Islam, of Vishnu, of Shiva, and so on.'<sup>17</sup>

So one finds that the 'sun at the centre' is given other 'names' which are in fact not names at all but abstract 'undefinitions'. 'Ultimate Divine Reality' is Hick's favourite. Then you will often read of 'Transcendent Being', or even simply, 'The Real'. And if you ask what this 'Being' is like, you will be told that you cannot know. It is beyond description or knowing as it is in itself. But all the religions have some partial view of it through the 'lens' of their culturally particular religion.

By using this kind of language you can also avoid having to decide whether this divine being is personal or impersonal. This is very convenient, since that is precisely the point of conflict between, say, Hinduism and Christianity, and even within different schools of Hinduism. But the language of the pluralists certainly tends towards an *impersonal* view of deity. There is little of the living warmth of the biblical language of the personal characteristics of God.

Most ordinary people find the abstract concepts of philosophers rather difficult to understand, and even more difficult to believe in for their salvation. As Newbigin has put it so strongly, why should we have to believe that an impersonal, undefinable abstraction has any better claim to be the centre of the religious universe than a known person who stands revealed in recorded history? Why should such an abstract philosophical concept

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<sup>16</sup> Hick uses the term *personae* for this, which originally in Latin referred to the mask that ancient actors wore. Thus, what the worshippers of a particular deity 'see' as they contemplate their particular god is not the divine reality as it really is in itself (the actor), but only the 'mask' as a kind of interface between the hidden divine reality (the actor) and the worshipper (the spectator). This assumes, of course, that although the different religions have manifestly different and grossly contrasting 'masks', it is the same actor behind all of them. Then he goes on to suggest using *impersonae* for the non-personal understandings of the ultimate, as found, for example, in philosophical advaita Hinduism and Buddhism.

<sup>17</sup> J. Hick, 'A Religious Understanding of Religion', in D. Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), *Many Mansions: Interfaith and Religious Intolerance* (London: Bellew, 1992), pp. 122–136 (quotation from pp. 130–131). A fuller explanation of Hick's thinking in this area will be found in his more recent substantial statement of his religious philosophy, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989) especially Part Four, pp. 233–296.

be regarded as a more reliable starting point for discovering the truth and finding salvation than commitment to a personal God in Christ?<sup>18</sup>

## ii) Pluralism diminishes Jesus

### *God or Christ at the centre?*

The pluralists want us to be theocentric (God-centred) but to give up being Christocentric (no longer to have Christ at the centre). The trouble is that it seems impossible to do that and stay within the framework of New Testament faith. There are some scholars, however, who try to drive a wedge between the fact that Jesus preached the kingdom of *God* (i.e. a theocentric proclamation), and the fact that the church preached *Jesus* (thus shifting the focus to a Christocentric proclamation which then became the church's dominant position). However this will not do. Certainly Jesus preached the kingdom of God—a very theocentric thing to do. But the kingdom of God, *as preached by Jesus*, centred on himself—who he was and what he had come to do. In fact it was precisely because he so persistently put himself at the centre of his teaching about God and about God's kingdom that Jesus aroused such hostility.

There was nothing at all scandalous about simply being theocentric in Jewish society! God was at the centre of everybody's religious 'universe' in one way or another. But for a man to claim that scriptures concerning the future work of God were fulfilled in himself, that he had power to forgive sins, that he was Lord over the Sabbath, that he was the Son of Man to whom eternal dominion would be given, and many other such claims was simply blasphemy—and was indeed reckoned to be blasphemous by his contemporaries. That was why they crucified him—not for being theocentric, but for putting himself in that centre where they knew only God should be. Blasphemous it certainly was—unless of course it was true.

In the same way, the first Christians, who were Jews and therefore strict monotheists, already lived in a thoroughly theocentric universe. They were shaped to the core by the central affirmation of Jewish faith, 'Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one LORD and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' ([Deut. 6:5–6](#)). But with considerable struggle and often at great personal cost, they deliberately put their contemporary, the man Jesus of Nazareth, right at the centre of that majestic Old Testament faith. They did so every time they made the crucial affirmation 'Jesus is Lord'.

That did not mean they had given up or diluted their theocentrism. On the contrary, their faith in God at the centre of the religious universe was as strong as ever. But now it was filled out, redefined, and proclaimed in the light of their encounter with God in the person and action of Jesus, the Christ. So Paul could write what is virtually an expansion of the great Jewish creed to include Jesus Christ alongside the Creator God: For us there is only one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live ([1 Cor. 8:6](#)).

The New Testament writings are a constant reflection of the struggle by which the God-centred faith of the Old Testament was seen to be Christ-centred in reality. This was not a perversion, nor an exaggeration born out of human hero-worship. It was the calm conviction that Jesus of Nazareth, in the light of his life, death and resurrection, was indeed the centre and key to the whole redemptive work of God, past, present and future. He was

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<sup>18</sup> See, L. Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 165–167.

at the centre of their theocentric religious universe because he was Immanuel, no less than *God with us*.

### *A Relativized Jesus?*

Following from the above point, it seems to me that the pluralist view cannot be reconciled with authentic Christianity, because to relativize Jesus Christ is to deny him. By 'relativizing Jesus' I mean regarding him as only one among many great religious figures through whom we can know about God and find salvation. It means regarding him as one of the orbiting planets of world religions, not as the one and only absolute source of life and light as, for example, [John 1](#) presents him.

However, if the New Testament is taken even as a reasonably reliable source, then it is unquestionable that Jesus made some astounding and absolute claims for himself. It is equally clear that his immediate followers in the early Christian church made similar claims concerning him, both explicitly in their preaching, and implicitly in their worship and prayer through his name. So since biblical and historical Christianity makes such affirmations about Jesus, it follows that whatever kind of 'Christianity' is put into orbit around the 'sun of ultimate divine reality', it is not the 'Christianity' of Christ and his apostles.

### *Jesus Only for Christians?*

Now pluralists will reply that Jesus still remains central *for Christians* and that nothing need change that. As such, they say, Jesus is the distinctive Christian gift to the inter-religious dialogue. But, we are told, we should come to the dialogue table only when we have renounced those absolute claims to the uniqueness or finality of Christ. For those claims are regarded by pluralists as arrogant and intolerant and therefore out of place in genuine dialogue. Jesus may be decisive and authoritative for those who have chosen to follow him (Christians), but he need not be imposed on others as unique or universal.

Thus Race says, 'Jesus is "decisive", not because he is the focus of all the light everywhere revealed in the world, but for the vision he has brought in one cultural setting. . . . Jesus would still remain central for the Christian faith.'<sup>19</sup> In other words, the great New Testament affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' is reduced to meaning, 'Jesus is Lord for us because we have chosen to regard him as such; his Lordship is relative to our acceptance of him'. It no longer means, 'Jesus is objectively and absolutely the universal Lord to whom alone we submit and to whom ultimately all creatures in heaven and earth will bow.'

### *A Deluded Jesus or a Deluded Church?*

But even supposing we were to go along with the pluralist at this point and accept that Jesus is unique only in the sense that he is relatively special for Christians but not the supreme Lord of all, we then have to ask what kind of 'gift to inter-faith dialogue' this relativized Jesus actually is. If Jesus Christ was not God incarnate, if he was not the final revelation of God and the completion of God's saving work for humanity, if he is not the risen and reigning Lord, then we are faced with two possibilities.

On the one hand, Jesus himself was mistaken in the claims he made concerning himself, in which case he was either sadly deluded or an arrogant boaster. Certainly, if his enormous claims were actually false, he would not be a worthy religious figure whom we could bring to the dialogue table with any confidence. We would need to apologize, not evangelize.

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<sup>19</sup> Race: *Pluralism*, p. 136

On the other hand, the church from its earliest period (including the generation of Jesus' own contemporaries who were the first witnesses to him) has grossly misunderstood him, inflated his claims, and exaggerated his importance. The pluralist requires us to accept that the church throughout its history (until its rescue by late twentieth century pluralist enlightenment) has propagated, lived by, and based all its hope upon, a massive self-deluded untruth. A deluded Jesus or a deluded church, or both. This seems to be the unavoidable implication of the pluralists' insistence on relativizing Jesus.

The dismal results of this view are quickly clear. A.G. Hunter, for example, argues that Jesus was in fact not more than human, but was elevated to divine status only by the church and installed in the trinity only at the Council of Chalcedon. Somehow Hunter simply *knows* that it was 'psychologically and religiously impossible for Jesus [to have claimed divinity] and it is historically false to say that he did'.<sup>20</sup> When you can be so confidently and dogmatically negative about the 'historical' Jesus, you have to be equally negative and uncertain about what value he has for faith: 'What emerges', Hunter concludes, 'is that though we are agreed that Jesus is at the heart of our faith as Christians, it is hard to find any clear consensus as to the precise delineation of his importance.'<sup>21</sup>

If such paralyzed agnosticism is all we are left with, is it worth contributing to religious dialogue at all? Is that what representatives of other world faiths want to hear from us? If, as pluralists say, we have to relativize Jesus before we can come to the dialogue, then we had better not come at all. All we have to bring with any integrity would be a repentant confession that we belong to a worldwide faith which throughout the whole of its history has had an illusion and a falsehood at its fundamental heart and core.

### III) Pluralism Renders Christian Worship Idolatrous

Religious pluralists say that Jesus cannot stand at the centre of the religious universe. He cannot be equated or identified with the God (however described) at the centre. We must not look at Jesus 'from above', so to speak, as God incarnate, but rather see him as essentially one of us (which he was of course) and do our 'Christology from below'.

There are many shades of opinion among scholars who prefer this approach, but in the end what it means is that, whatever else Jesus may have been, he was ultimately not more than human. Certainly he was not God incarnate in any ontological sense. He may have been a vehicle or agent of God's activity for revelation and salvation, but only as a man. That is, he may have been one of those exceptionally special human beings through whom the rest of us can come to a deeper and clearer understanding of God, but the language about him being 'of God, with God or from God' is simply the understandable exaggeration that gives voice to faith and adoration and gratitude.

Many who take this view would agree that Jesus was unique in some sense: for example, in the depth of his own relationship with God and the extent to which he mediated God to others including ourselves. But they would see this as a uniqueness of degree, not of essence. God may have been very specially present and active through Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus was not (and therefore is not) God. He cannot stand at the centre of the religious universe but, even in his uniqueness as defined, he must go into orbit around the centre along with other great religious figures who all have their own unique features also.

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<sup>20</sup> A.G. Hunter: *Christianity and Other Faiths in Britain* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Idem. p. 76.

The more I reflect on this view, the more surprised I am at how reluctant its advocates seem to be to draw the ultimate conclusion from it, which seems quite inescapable. And that is, that Christianity is, and always has been, the worst form of idolatry ever practised on earth.<sup>22</sup> The most serious charge which Jews and Muslims<sup>23</sup> have levelled against Christians all through the centuries would actually be true: we have elevated a human being to the place of God and have worshipped him there. For that is what we do, and have been doing ever since the book of Acts.

We ascribe to Jesus honour and glory that belongs only to God; we call on his name in prayer as God; we call him Lord and refuse to acknowledge any other; we claim that through Jesus and Jesus alone God has acted to save humanity and there is no other way; we apply to him the most solemn scriptures that Israel used concerning Yahweh; we sing to him songs of worship and praise that were originally sung to Yahweh, and have made up bookfuls of our own. All this we have done for two thousand years but with no justification at all, if the pluralists are right. For, no matter how remarkable he was, no matter what God did in and through him, if Jesus was not more than a man, then the whole Christian faith and all the generations of Christian worship have been a monstrous idolatry.

### **The Uniqueness of Christ**

So we arrive at the end of the pluralists' road. At best, 'Christ' becomes so universal as to be of no real value except as a symbol. At worst, he is exposed as an idol for those who worship him, and as dispensable by those who don't.

The discussion above has been limited to the internal Christian debate about the plurality of religions, and has not even begun to focus on the challenges presented by the great world religions themselves to Christian mission and missiology. Each of them would need a separate paper since the contexts they represent are unique. Obviously Christian missiological response to each of the great faiths will remain a major challenge in the

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<sup>22</sup> Some pluralists are indeed prepared to say that the worship of Christ is actually idolatry, though they carefully re-define idolatry in a positive light, and tend to be very dismissive of how the Bible talks of it. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, in a carefully argued re-assessment of what, on a pluralist understanding, actually constitutes idolatry, says that it should be used negatively only when describing religious positions which regard themselves as ultimate and then negate the value of others. On such grounds, 'For Christians to think that Christianity is true, final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry' if by that they mean to deny that God has also inspired Islam, Hinduism, etc.' He goes on to ask whether 'the figure of Christ served as . . . an idol through the centuries for Christians?' and essentially answers that it has, but there is nothing wrong with that since the best meaning of idols in all religions is something earthly or material in itself which becomes the channel of transcendence. See W. Cantwell Smith, 'Idolatry in Comparative Perspective', in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, pp. 53–68; and cf. also the comments of Tom F. Driver, in the same volume, 'I think it necessary to say that the idolization of Christ—let us call it "christodolatry"—is not only possible but in fact frequent. Indeed I would go further and say that there is even such a thing as an idolatrous devotion to God' (pp. 214–215). I prefer still to maintain a biblical understanding of the category of idolatry as meaning the action of giving ultimate and divine status to anything or anyone that is not in reality the living God—meaning the God as revealed in the Bible, not the characterless abstract 'Transcendent' of the pluralist hypothesis. On this understanding, the worship of anything or anyone other than God as revealed in Christ is idolatry, but the worship of Christ himself as not merely the one through whom we can 'see' God, but ontologically God-in-humanity, is assuredly *not*.

<sup>23</sup> Muslims are well aware of the implications of the pluralist developments in Christian theology. A friend from Singapore has told me that *The Myth of God Incarnate* is required reading for Muslim missionaries. I was told by Indian Christian missionaries in India that even in remote rural villages Muslims can counter the Christian gospel with the riposte that even bishops in the Church of England now believe what Muslims have always believed—that Jesus was not really God and did not really rise again.



coming century. But evangelical missiology will have to continue to confront that brand of Christian pluralism which undermines the uniqueness of Christ and subverts the challenge of the gospel from within.

### 3. ETHICAL PLURALISM

#### A) Features and Roots

We live in a world of ethical plurality and confusion. Even in the west it seems a long way, historically and culturally, from the apparent 'self-evident truths' of the American Declaration of Independence, which included basic statements about human equality, and proclaimed ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Universal statements of ethical rights and duties, such as the various United Nations declarations on human rights command less respect, in spite of continued lip service and the moralizing of western politicians.

On the one hand such universal declarations are challenged by countries and cultures whose moral views come from a radically different religious worldview from the broadly Christianized context out of which the UN Declaration of Human rights, for example, arose. Islamic states have protested at being judged by moral standards which they see as not founded in the principles of Islam. Especially since the very nations which 'preach' them at Islamic countries are guilty of manifest hypocrisy in their own moral failures.

Similarly, in India, militant Hinduism sees no ethical hindrance to its exclusion of lower caste and non-caste Indians from social participation or political rights; the caste system, allied to the religious philosophy of karma and re-incarnation provides plenty of ethical justification for the *status quo*. This philosophy which turns up in the west as somewhat outlandish, but malice-free, views on the lips of Glen Hoddle, is the religious worldview that undergirds the oppression currently resurgent in the largest democracy on earth.

On the other hand, universal moral declarations are under challenge in the cultures which produced them in the first place—within the west itself. In the postmodern, post-imperial climate, any claim regarding universally valid morality is rejected as cloaked imperialism. To say that something is an absolute human right or duty is simply to impose our cultural values on others. If there is no transcendent authority behind morality, then we have no right to choose one set of values that appeal to us and insist that the rest of the world abide by them.

This is a problem faced not just by Christians. Some western secular companies with a concern for business ethics are conscious of the following dilemma (which I read in a secular business magazine on an international flight): when you are operating in a non-western country where accepted practices clash with your own ethical standards (e.g. as regards human rights violations in working conditions, etc.), do you adopt the view, 'When in Rome do as the Romans do', and call it 'cultural sensitivity and respect for others' (in which case you will have a struggle with your own integrity and conscience), or do you make a fuss and insist on certain ethical standards as a precondition of doing business at all (in which case you may be accused of neo-colonial imposition of western cultural values, or even worse, of missionary arrogance and intolerance!).

Again, the roots of ethical pluralism can be traced both to modernity and to the postmodern reaction. We recall that that Enlightenment modernity introduced structural dualism—the division of life into public and private hemispheres. This had the effect of consigning ethics as well as religion to the hemisphere of privatized belief, as distinct from public knowledge. Even if some moral absolute did exist (as Kant continued to assert with his 'categorical imperative'), it could not be *known* by the only mechanism capable of

knowing anything—autonomous *reason*. It could only be *recognized and responded to* through the *will*.

But what if human wills differ? Morality becomes merely a fragile matter of social consensus, for as long as it lasts. And if the consensus of will breaks down, then morality will be determined, for good or ill, by the most powerful will, or the more sinister ‘will to power’ that Nietzsche envisaged. Since ‘God is dead’, then there is no transcendent, revealed and authoritative basis for ethics. In such a climate, ethics fragments into private value preferences, or succumbs to the tyranny of ‘might is right’.

Part of modernity’s attractiveness, however, was its optimism. The myth of inevitable progress that would follow on scientific advance led generations to believe that somehow things were getting better and better. Human beings could eventually achieve sufficient ethical consensus to engineer a future that would be both good and happy. The trouble was that autonomous reason seemed capable of generating widely conflicting ethical visions, depending, it seems, on what scientific approach one regarded as primary, or to be more precise, what particular scientific reductionism governed one’s view of the fundamental essence of humanity. What is the essential nature of human life?

Different life sciences and social sciences came up with different answers—all of them partially true, but inadequate as full explanations of what it is to be human. These answers then became the basis for similarly inadequate ethical theories. Thus, biology produced a version of ethics based on evolution. This itself bifurcated into a positive form which enthused about our ability to control our own evolution as a human species for good, and a more cynical form which asserted that if survival of the fittest is the game, then be among the fittest and if possible engineer the genetic or genocidal non-survival of the least fit. Biology also produced the behaviourist ethic of the human zoo: ethics is nothing more than socialized and rationalized animal instincts.

Psychology reduced ethics to health or sickness of the mind and replaced repentance with therapy. Sociology reduced ethics to a function of social interaction; Marxism, to economic determinism, and so on. Such ethical reductionisms stem from modernity’s insistence on analysing and describing *human* life by means of the same kind of allegedly neutral scientific tools as were applied to the rest of the *material* universe. They then tried to come up with some account of the ‘laws’ governing human behaviour that would be as universal as the laws of physics, chemistry or biology which appeared to govern the universe.

The postmodern reaction has been to reject the idea of any absolute and final explanation of human reality, of any universal moral framework that can be epistemologically grounded in some objective or scientific ‘truth’. Not only is there no transcendent authority to provide ethical universals (a denial common to modernity and postmodernity), neither is there any universal truth to be found in modernity’s pursuit of scientific objectivity—in the human and social sciences any more than in the physical sciences. Modernity rejected transcendent authority but tried to preserve some universal moral criteria. Postmodernity rejects both transcendent authority *and* the possibility or even desirability of universal moral grounds. So no ethical stance can be deemed final and universal on the basis of any allegedly scientific description of the human being. Historical and cultural relativism pervades human ethics as much as human religion.

As we noticed in the earlier discussion of postmodernity, there is a negative and a positive aspect of this feature of ethics in a postmodern context. On the one hand, there is a cynical nihilism at the more intellectual end of the postmodern cultural spectrum: if no culture has the ‘right’ answer to ethical questions, then why bother wrestling with the questions at all? All that counts in the end is the will to power. It seems sometimes that ethics, not just power, comes out of the barrel of a gun. Or, if we are too refined to impose

our will by might, there is always manipulation by propaganda, persuasion and image-messaging. Never mind the ethics, watch the spin.

On the other hand, there is the more cheerful celebration of plurality that comes at the popular end of postmodern culture: let's not only respect, but enjoy, the wide divergences of values that are to be found in today's multicultural society. Western 'soap operas' often tackle ethical issues in their story lines. The most popular British 'soap', *Eastenders*, in recent years has included racism, homosexuality, AIDS prejudice, adultery, incest, wife-battery, alcoholism, child abduction and murder. But the dominant impression in responding to many of these situations, especially the sexual ones, is a non-judgemental individualism ('you just do what is right for you; nobody can tell you otherwise'). The trouble is that 'multiculturalism', as espoused, for example, in Australia and Canada, generates an ethic of political correctness which can be oppressive in its hidden absolutisms. It also has no means of dealing with (or even actually recognizing) the kind of paradoxical clash of values illustrated by the Hoddle case above. As another British commentator has said, 'We're all ethical pluralists now . . . until we meet a paedophile.'

### **B) Missiological Response**

The Christian missiological response to ethical pluralism needs to start from the same place as for religious pluralism—namely identifying and attacking the roots. We must follow the same agenda of critiquing Enlightenment modernity's relegation of ethics to the hemisphere of privatized belief as Newbigin has so effectively done for religion. This has two effects. First of all, we must firmly challenge the epistemological arrogance that claims to outlaw all ethical matters from the realm of genuine knowledge, on the grounds that only scientific 'facts' can be regarded as objectively true. This 'reality filter' needs to be exposed as the deception it really is. Secondly, those ethical stances that are based on the variety of scientific reductionisms in relation to human life also need to be challenged—whether biological evolutionism or behaviourism, psychology, sociology, economics or more recently, geneticism as preached by Richard Dawkins. Whenever we are told that human ethics is 'nothing but . . .', we should be on the alert and expose the poverty of all attempts to reduce human life to partial and materialistic explanations.

In fact, I would urge that evangelical mission theology must address afresh the question of our doctrine of humanity. At the heart of so much of the fragmentation in human societies today lies the loss of human identity, or the struggle (often violent) for identity to be recognized or recovered. Where is it to be found? Modernity located human identity in the autonomous rational self. Postmodernity dethrones reason, and goes on to decentre and dissolve the self. What is there left that is distinctly human, or are we left with only the kaleidoscopic relativities of cultures and histories? Culture and history enrich human life and identity, but on Christian understanding they do not constitute or exclusively define it.

I believe that 21st century evangelical missiology must address the question of *what it means to be human*, and seek to give a genuinely biblical answer. As we observed in the section on religious pluralism, the 20th century battle over Christology and soteriology will doubtless continue. But if God became incarnate in Jesus in order to save humanity, what was it that he became in becoming truly human, and what is it that is saved through his death and resurrection?

Returning to ethical pluralism, postmodernity will certainly help us to challenge the dominance of scientific reductionism, but unfortunately it also presents an even more dangerous kind of relativism at the ontological level. How should we respond to the postmodern assertion that there are simply *no foundations* for any common human morality? Must we accept that uncontrolled ethical variety is inevitable because of the

plurality of cultures and perspectives and that there is no possibility of any 'standing ground' outside all cultures from which anyone can have the right to adjudicate ethically between them?

A very interesting attempt to address this problem from within the religious pluralist camp has come from Paul Knitter.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing the strength of the 'anti-foundationalist' case, as expressed in the last paragraph, Knitter asks if there is any way that the different religions can overcome the impasse of utter relativism, any way in which they can find some 'common ground' (even though the term is out of favour). He believes it is important to do so because of the dangers of succumbing too easily to postmodern relativism. He pin-points two dangers: first, full-blown relativism gives you no grounds to criticize even your own culture, let alone others, and produces an 'ethical toothlessness brought about by the lack of any basis on which to validly and coherently resist what appears to be intolerable in other cultural-linguistic systems'. Secondly, it offers no basis for moral resistance to naked power:

In arguing that we must simply rejoice in plurality without ever allowing the possibility that some truth claims may prove to have intrinsic or universal validity, postmoderns allow the warning of Michael Foucault to become reality: the verdict on differing truth claims will be decided not on any mutually reached judgments (since they are impossible) but on the basis of who has the economic or military power . . . The criteria will be determined . . . by those who have the dollars or the guns.<sup>25</sup>

Knitter's answer to the dilemma is to suggest that rather than looking in vain for common *ground* at the start of the dialogue, the different religions should get stuck into making a common *response* to human problems. Then, hopefully, in the process and praxis of making that response, some patches of common ground may emerge between them. He then identifies what he regards as the two most urgent problems facing the world: *human poverty*—'the millions who because they are deprived of such basic needs as food, drinking water, shelter and medical care are prevented from living a human life'; and *ecological damage*—'the victimized planet earth which, as its life-giving and sustaining gifts of air, water, and soil are devastated and drained, becomes the domain of ever more human victims'. He goes on, 'I am suggesting that the reality of suffering due to oppression and victimization—both human and ecological—calls for a common response that can become a common ground for crosscultural and interreligious understanding.'<sup>26</sup>

Knitter seems almost embarrassed by the glimpse of an ethical universal lurking in such a proposal. So he backs off it somewhat: 'One must be careful of speaking of an ethical imperative to confront such issues, since morality is so culture-bound. And yet, it does seem evident that today followers of almost all the religious paths—from eastern to western to so-called primal spiritualities—are recognizing that their own spiritual traditions require them to respond to the reality of human and planetary oppression.' But do they? It is seriously questionable, I would argue, whether most religions would take the same view of human and planetary suffering as Knitter does, and even more questionable that 'within all religious traditions there seems to be a "soteriocentric core" of concern for human well-being *in this world*'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Knitter, 'Common Ground or Common Response? Seeking Foundations for Interreligious Discourse', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2 (1992), pp. 111–122.

<sup>25</sup> Knitter, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Knitter, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>27</sup> Knitter, *op. cit.*, p. 119 (*italics added*).

So the weakness of Knitter's proposal is that it wants to find common ground while simultaneously denying that any ground can be, or has been, provided by a transcendent or trans-cultural source—such as the biblical revelation. Yet the issues he chooses to see as primary, and the response he sees as needing to be made to them, are actually only ethical issues and responses within certain worldviews (such as Christianity). Even identifying the issues to which we call for a response requires standing on *some* ground.

Missiologically, however, in my view, we can turn Knitter's weakness into a strength. We can certainly agree with his identification of two major evils in today's world—poverty and ecological destruction. And we can certainly also challenge and invite the wider non-Christian human community to address them. However, in doing so, we ought to make prominently clear the *Christian* 'ground' on which we do so. That means telling the story which in the Christian worldview both *explains* the problems in terms of humanity's rebellion against God and consequent fracture of all relationships including that with the planet itself, and also *proclaims* the redemptive action that God himself initiated in the history of Israel and the saving work of Christ. Indeed we can go further than a liberationist response because the full biblical story illuminates wider aspects and deeper roots of the problems than the presenting symptoms themselves. At the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit it was said that the intense 'green' concern for ecological action was 'an ethic in search of a religion'. Yet the Christian voice was muted, leaving the 'religion' to be provided by the New Age movement.

Human and planetary oppression are major examples, but they are only part of the total spectrum of ethical issues that societies will face in the new millennium. The missiological challenge to our ethics must be:

- that we seek to show how a *biblically* grounded ethic is valid in theory and works in practice;
- that we also tell the story which that ethic is grounded in and without which it is empty moralism;
- that we ensure that the telling of that story preserves the central focus of Jesus Christ.

We need, in other words, a *missiologically framed and motivated ethical engagement with the world*. Such is the plea of Andrew Walker as he urges Christians to remember and re-tell the story of the biblical gospel, which modernity has marginalized by its epistemological arrogance and which postmodernity threatens to swamp by the way it relativizes and equalizes all narratives.

Christian activism is not a question of creating a programme for government: it is about standing up in the public square to be counted. Do the public know what the Christian story has to say about moral behaviour? Have we taken the time to tell the story often enough so that people can see that from it flow economic and social consequences? Lesslie Newbigin appears to be right about Christian witness. It is because we have grown timid, lost faith in the gospel, or even forgotten it, that we do not rush forward for our voices to be heard amidst the clamour of competing interests. We must avoid the vain temptation to build another Christendom; but equally we must not shirk our duty to stir the conscience of our nations for as long as they last.<sup>28</sup>

### Practical Challenge

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<sup>28</sup> A. Walker, *Telling the Story*, p. 170

Finally, the missiological challenge of ethical pluralism is, of course, practical. If we proclaim that the Christian ethical vision is distinctive and that it is grounded in the true story of God, the universe, human history and salvation through Christ—are we able to demonstrate that it is so? The church, as Newbigin again so effectively argued, must be the ‘plausibility structure’ for the gospel and the ethic that flows from it.

## **CONCLUDING CHALLENGES**

What are the major issues for our missiological reflection and work? Here are some suggested questions arising out of each of the main sections above.

### **Hermeneutical Pluralism**

1. How can a missiologically framed re-shaping of the evangelical doctrine of Scripture better equip us to discern, articulate and apply the authority of the Bible in the cultural plurality of the 21st century, and especially in a world increasingly affected by postmodernity?
2. How can we make room for the multiplicity of readers’ contexts in the global hermeneutical community, and especially climb down off the pedestal of western dominance, *without*:
  - surrendering to subjectivism, relativism and the loss of any commitment to a stable core meaning in biblical texts?
  - substituting the authority of readers’ contexts for the authority of the biblical text itself?

### **Religious Pluralism**

3. Are there ways in which evangelical Christians can harness the energy of postmodernity in its critique of Enlightenment modernity’s arrogance—*without* submitting to the ontological relativism that comes with postmodernity?
4. Are there positive and gospel friendly categories/symbols/perspectives within postmodern consciousness that can be harnessed in order to re-conceptualize and communicate the uniqueness of Jesus in the midst of religious plurality and in polemical engagement with religious pluralism?

### **Ethical Pluralism**

5. What will a missiological approach to ethics look like? How can we demonstrate (intellectually and existentially) that the Christian ethic is actually ‘best’ because it most closely relates to the ‘way things are’, according to the biblical story and revelation?
6. Is it our Christian task in the 21st century with its postmodern perspectives to work out fresh ways to enshrine and advocate our understanding of biblical ethics, rather than simply repeating the classical formulations of western universal declarations?
7. What is a more biblical understanding of *humanity*, which can go beyond the reductionisms of modernity, but avoid the narcissism of postmodernity? What theological understanding of human/ethnic identity can provide a missiology that then generates appropriate missional responses to the fragmentation, anger, and despair that seems likely to afflict increasing numbers of human communities in the next century?

### **And Finally . . .**

8. In training people adequately for mission in the 21st century, we shall be handling young adults who are themselves culturally and probably intellectually shaped by *postmodernity*, yet whose education and worldview has largely been shaped by the paradigms of *modernity*, and whose future ministry may well be in cultures that are as yet effectively *pre-modern*. How can we prepare them adequately to understand the cultural identity crisis they themselves are living through, as well as the one they are heading into? 21st century missionaries will need to be the Christian and cultural equivalent of Olympic triple-jumpers.

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# Spiritual Warfare and Worldview

Paul G. Hiebert

**Keywords:** Theology, spiritual warfare, power encounter, culture, context, missiology, complementarity, supernatural, dualism, worldview;

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the gospel as power in the lives of people, and in spiritual warfare between God and Satan (Anderson 1990, Arnold 1997, Kraft 1992, Moreau 1997, Powilson 1995, Wagner 1991, to name a few). This comes as an important corrective to the earlier emphasis in many western churches on the gospel as merely truth, and on evil as primarily human weakness. Both truth and power are central themes in the gospel and should be in the lives of God's people. But much literature on spiritual warfare has been written by missionaries who are forced to question their western denial of this-worldly spirit realities through encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession, and who base their studies in experience, and look for biblical texts to justify their views. These studies generally lack solid, comprehensive theological reflection on the subject.

The second is by biblical scholars who seek to formulate a theological framework for understanding spiritual warfare, but who lack a deep understanding of the bewildering array of beliefs in spirit realities found in religions around the world. Consequently, it is hard to apply their findings in the specific contexts in which ministry occurs. We need a way to build bridges between the biblical teaching and the particularity of different cultures. We hold that Scripture is divine revelation and the source of definitive

understandings of truth. We take for granted here that Satan and his hosts are very real, and that there is a spiritual battle going on. We also affirm that the battle has already been won and that Christ is establishing his reign on earth through his angels, the church and his followers.

## DOING THEOLOGY

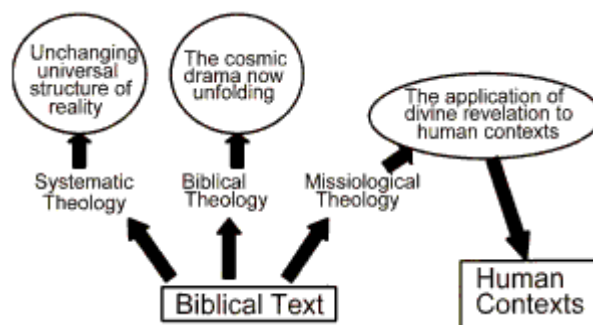
How can we reflect theologically on spiritual warfare? Before answering this, we need to clarify what we mean by 'theology'. I am assuming here that Scripture is divine revelation given us by God, not our human search for God. Theology, then, is our attempts to understand that revelation in our historical and cultural contexts (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Nature of Theology

It is important therefore, that we study Scripture carefully so that our theologies are biblically informed. We must remember, however, that all our theologies are shaped by the times and cultures in which we live. Even the languages we use are shaped by our worldviews. We must remember, too, that there are great gulfs between biblical times and our times, between universal theories and the particulars of everyday life, and between synchronic theologies which examine the unchanging structure of reality and diachronic theologies that study cosmic history. It is important in any theological reflection to work towards bridging these differences.

There are several ways to do theology, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses (figure 2). We will examine some of these briefly.



**Figure 2.** Types of Theology

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY



Traditionally, in the West, by theology we mean systematic theology. This emerged in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Greek algorithmic logic through the universities of the Middle East and Spain (Finger 1985, 18–21).<sup>1</sup> At first, it was seen as the ‘queen of the science’, but over time it became one discipline among others in theological education—alongside biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, history, missions and other disciplines (Young 1998, 78–79). The central question systematic theology seeks to answer is: ‘What are the unchanging universals of reality?’ It assumes that there are basic, unchanging realities, and if these are known, we can understand the nature of reality (appendix 3). It also assumes that truth is ahistorical and acultural, and is true for everyone everywhere. It uses the algorithmic logic and rhetoric of Greek philosophy which are propositional in nature, and rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.<sup>2</sup> Its goal is to construct a single systematic understanding of universal truth that is comprehensive, logically consistent and conceptually coherent. To arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cognition from feelings and values because the latter are thought to introduce subjectivity into the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental categories and structure implicit in Scripture. It gives us a standard against which to judge our own beliefs, and helps us develop a biblical worldview, both of which are essential for any contemporary reflection on spiritual warfare. Systematic theology also has its limitations. Because it sees ultimate reality in structural, synchronic terms, it cannot adequately deal with change and the cosmic story revealed in Scripture. Because it focuses on universals, it does not tell us how to deal with the particular beliefs and practices found in different cultures.<sup>3</sup> Because it seeks to be exhaustive, it leaves little room for mystery in our understanding of reality. Finally, because it is based on precise algorithmic logic, it has little place for wisdom, or for ambiguity and paradox.<sup>4</sup>

Systematic theology plays a vital role in helping us develop a biblical worldview, but it has not been the motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lombard founded systematic theology when he sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent and synthetically consistent account of all the major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate the rational credibility of Christian faith (Finger 1985, 19). Lombard’s *Scntences*, written in the 1140s, provided the form of much of later Medieval and Reformation Theology. For a historical summary of its emergence see Fuller 1997 and G. R. Evans, A. E. McGrath and A.D. Gallway 1986, particularly pp. 62–173.

<sup>2</sup> An algorithm is a formal logical process which, if carried out correctly, produces the right answer. Algorithmic logic is sometimes called ‘machine’ logic because it is the basis on which calculators and computers work, and can be done faster and more accurately by these than by humans. For an introduction to fuzzy categories and fuzzy logic see Hiebert 1994, 107–136).

<sup>3</sup> Today nonwestern theologians are developing theologies based on other systems of logic. For example, in many African philosophies meaning is not gained by understanding a logical progression, but by grasping the dynamic relationship of the parts to the whole. Indian philosophies are based on fuzzy sets and fuzzy logic—terms used for precise logic based on nonCantorian sets.

<sup>4</sup> The discovery of different systems of logic such as nonEuclidian geometries, nonCantorian (fuzzy) algebra and concrete-functional logic, raises the question whether systematic theologies can be constructed on these as well. The problem is not new. Origen and others used allegory, analogy and other tropological methods in developing their theological frameworks. Tropological methods are essential in studying poetical, wisdom, parabolic and apocalyptic passages in Scripture. An excessive trust in algorithmic logic also overlooks that fact that all human reasoning is touched by our fallen state, and that Paul warns us against putting too much trust in it ([1 Cor. 1:20–25](#)).

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

A second approach to the study of Scripture is biblical theology (appendix 3). Reacting to the scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. He saw theology as a practical science, and stressed experience, the illumination of the Spirit, and a return to the study of the Bible as text (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 170–71). His central question was: ‘What did the biblical passages mean at the time and to those writing them, and what lessons can we learn from this for us today?’

Biblical theology examines the narrative nature of Scripture. It assumes that the heart of revelation is historical in character—that there is a real world with a real history of change over time which is ‘going somewhere’, and which has meaning because it has a beginning, a plot and culminates in God’s eternal reign. It argues that this view of truth as cosmic story is fundamental to the Hebrew worldview, and to an understanding of Scripture.

Biblical theology uses the methods of historiography. It uses the temporal logic of antecedent and consequent causality, and accepts teleological explanations in which God and humans act on the basis of intentions. Biblical theology is important because it gives meaning to life by helping us see the cosmic story in which human history and our own biographies are embedded. It helps us understand the cosmic battle between God and Satan—between righteousness and evil.

Biblical theology has its limits. It focuses on diachronic meaning, leaving the unchanging structure of reality in our peripheral vision. It focuses on past biblical history, not on present events. It also looks at the universal story, not the particular lives of individuals and communities outside the biblical narrative. Consequently, it does not directly offer us applications of biblical truth to the problems we face in specific cultures and persons today. Biblical theology is important because it, too, helps us develop a biblical worldview, but it has not been the motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

## MISSIONOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

To deal with the contemporary, particular problems we face in missions, we need a third way of doing theology—a way of thinking biblically about our lives here and now.<sup>5</sup> Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago that mission ‘is the mother of theology’. Missionaries,

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<sup>5</sup> We can also speak of Tropological theology. Tropological theology is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental and iconic nature of truth. The central question is: ‘How can we comprehend complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic and human reason?’ Theologies of this nature use tropes such as metaphors, types, myths, parables and icons to communicate transcendent truth, and are able to deal with the fuzziness and ambiguities of concrete human life. They use the logic of analogy which recognizes 1) that in some ways two entities, A and B, are alike, 2) that in some ways A and B are different (areas in which the analogy does not hold), and 3) that there are areas in which it is not clear whether there is a similarity or not. It is this area of uncertainty that generates new insights as the mind explores the power and limits of the analogy.

Tropological theology is doxological. It is not an abstract reflection on the nature of truth for the sake of truth itself. It sees theological reflection as an essential element of worship. Christopher Hall writes (1998, 67), ‘For the [early church] fathers, the Bible was to be studied, pondered and exegeted within the context of prayer, worship, reverence and holiness’. It is also tied to the character of the exegete. For example, among the Russian Orthodox, the spiritual leader must be ‘knowledgeable in the Holy Scriptures, just, capable of teaching his pupils, full of truly unhypocritical love for all, meek, humble, patient and free from anger and all other passions—greed, vainglory, glutton . . .’ (Oleksa 1987, 14). In other words, one cannot trust a brilliant scholar if he or she is arrogant, unfaithful, impatient or deceitful.

by the very nature of their task, must do theological reflection to make the message of Scripture understood and relevant to people in the particularities of their lives. David notes, 'Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (1991, 124)'.

What is missiological theology? Clearly, it draws on systematic and biblical theologies to understand Scripture, but it must build the bridge that brings these truths into the sociocultural and historical contexts in which the missionary serves. (appendix 3). Its central question is: 'What does God's Word say to humans in this particular situation?' Evangelical mission theologians affirm that the gospel is universal truth for all. They also recognize that all humans live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. Eugene Peterson writes,

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it's always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it's always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you've done; who I am and what I've done (1997, 185).

The task of the mission theologian is to communicate and apply the gospel to people living today so that it transforms them and their cultures into what God wants them to be. Missiological theology seeks to bridge the gulf between biblical revelation given millennia ago and human contexts today.<sup>6</sup>

The method of analysis used in missiological theology is to use the biblical worldview developed through systematic and biblical theologies, and to apply the findings through the method of precedent cases, the method used in the British and American legal systems.<sup>7</sup> For example, in dealing with polygamy, mission theologians examine cases of marriage in the Bible, such as Adam, Abraham and David, and draw on the instructions given by Moses and Paul to develop biblical principles of marriage. They then study the contemporary case they are addressing, and seek to apply the biblical principles to the situation, taking into account the present context and the many principles that may apply to the case.

Missiological theology involves four steps. The first is *phenomenology*—to study current ministry cases and biblical parallels to find precedents in Scripture. Mission theologians must seek to understand the cultural context as the people they serve understand it.<sup>8</sup> They must also examine their own worldviews—the assumptions and logic which they bring with them—to see how these colour their analysis. Here the methods developed by the social science to exegete human realities can be of help.

The second step in missiological theology is *ontology*—to examine both the people's and the theologian's understandings of the particular situation in the light of biblical revelation. This is closely tied to the third step, namely an *evaluation* of the present situation in the light of biblical teachings and a decision on what should be done.

The final step in missiological theology is *missiology*—helping people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. It recognizes that all humans live in and

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<sup>6</sup> The process of 'critical contextualization' is discussed in more detail in Hiebert 1994, 75–92.

<sup>7</sup> This stands in contrast to the French system of law that examines cases in the light of the Napoleonic Code, and not in terms of precedent cases that help to interpret and nuance the application of law in the present setting.

<sup>8</sup> This is referred to as an 'emic' analysis, which stands in contrast to 'etic' analysis which uses the categories and logic of the analyst which are based on a comparative study of many cultures and societies.

are shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts, and that they can begin an ongoing process of transformation only by starting with their existing systems of thought. We cannot expect people to simply abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. This transformation must also involve whole communities as well as individuals.

## **COMPLEMENTARITY**

Systematic, biblical and missiological theologies are complementary. Just as an architect makes different blueprints for the same building—structural, electrical, and plumbing, so theologians need to look at reality from different perspectives and through different lenses. We need systematic theology to help us understand the questions, assumptions, categories and logic found in Scripture regarding the structure of reality. We need biblical theology to help us understand the cosmic story unfolding in Scripture, the ‘mystery’ now revealed to us. We need missiological theology to communicate the transforming gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves.

## **HUMAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

Applying this model of missiological theology to the current debates regarding ‘spiritual warfare’, we must begin by examining what the people we serve believe about spirits and spiritual battles. Stories of battles between good and evil, and of power encounters between good gods and evil demons are found in all religions. In Hinduism, Rama battles Ravana, in Buddhism Buddha fights Mara, in Islam Allah wars against Shaitan, and in traditional religions tribal gods fight one another for conquest.

It is not possible here to examine the specific views of spiritual warfare found in the many cultures around the world.<sup>9</sup> That is the task of each missionary as he/she ministers in specific human contexts. Our task, rather, is to examine our own worldviews to see how these shape our reading of Scripture. If we are not aware of our own worldviews, we are in danger of reading the understandings of war and warfare of our culture into Scripture and of distorting its message. We will briefly examine three worldviews underlying the current debate in the West regarding the nature of spiritual warfare to see how they have shaped the current debate regarding spiritual warfare.

## **MODERN SUPERNATURAL/NATURAL DUALISM**

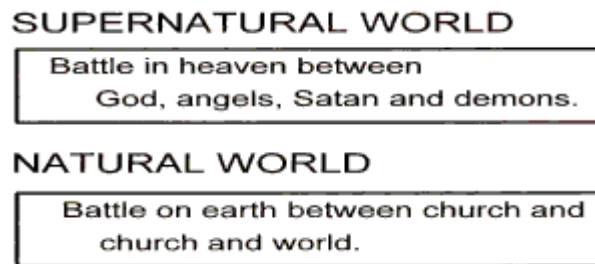
The worldview of the West has been shaped since the sixteenth century by the Cartesian dualism that divides the cosmos into two realities—the supernatural world of God, angels and demons, and the natural material world of humans, animals, plants and matter. This has led to two views of spiritual warfare. First, as secularism spread, the reality of the supernatural world was denied. In this materialist worldview the only reality is the natural world which can best be studied by science. For modern secular people, there is no spiritual warfare because there are no gods, angels or demons. There is only war in nature between humans, communities and nations. Some Christians accept this denial of spiritual realities, and demythologize the Scriptures to make it fit modern secular scientific beliefs. Angels, demons, miracles and other supernatural realities are explained

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in an Indian village a missionary must be aware of the battles of the Hindu gods such as Krishna, Rama and Narasimha. They must also examine the nature and activities of *rakshasas*, *dayams*, *bhutams*, *ammas*, *ghoshams* and other earth-bound spirit beings that the people believe inhabit the village, which are not a part of formal Hinduism.

away in scientific terms. The battle, they claim, is between good and evil in human social systems. The church is called to fight against poverty, injustice, oppression, and other evils which are due to oppressive, exploitative human systems of government, business and religion.

The second view of spiritual warfare emerging out of this dualism is that God, angels and demons are involved in a cosmic battle in the heavens, but the everyday events on earth are best explained and controlled by science and technology (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Modern View of Spiritual Warfare

People pray to God for their salvation, but turn to modern medicine for healing, and psychology for deliverance from so called demon possession, because demons, if they exist, exist in the heavens, not on earth. Western missionaries influenced by this dualism denied the realities of witchcraft, spirit possession, evil eye and magic in the cultures where they served. Consequently they failed to provide biblical answers to the people's fears of earthly spirits and powers, and to deal with the reality of Satan's work on earth.

## TRIBAL RELIGIONS

For most tribal peoples ancestors, earthly spirits, witchcraft and magic are very real. The people see the earth and sky as full of beings (gods, earthly divinities, ancestors, ghosts, evil shades, humans, animals and nature spirits) that relate, deceive, bully and battle one another for power and personal gain. These beings are neither totally good nor totally evil. They help those who serve or placate them. They harm those who oppose their wishes or who neglect them or refuse to honour them. Humans must placate them to avoid terrible disasters.

Spiritual warfare in animistic societies is seen as an ongoing battle between different alliances of beings (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Tribal View of Spiritual Encounters

For the most part these alliances are based on ethnicity and territory. The battle is not primarily between 'good' and 'evil', but between 'us' and 'them'. The gods, spirits, ancestors and people of one village or tribe are in constant battle with those of surrounding villages and tribes. When the men of one group defeat those of another, they attribute their success to the power of their gods and spirits. When they are defeated, they

blame this on the weakness of their gods and spirits. We see this in the Old Testament in way the Arameans viewed their battles with the Israelites ([1 Kings 20:23–30](#)).

Land plays an important role in tribal views of spiritual warfare. Gods, spirits and ancestors reside in specific territories or objects, and protect their people who reside on their lands. Their powers do not extend to other areas. When people go on distant trips, they are no longer under the protection of their gods. When a community is defeated, the people are expected to change their allegiance to the stronger god and serve him. Conversions to new gods often follow dramatic ‘power encounters’.

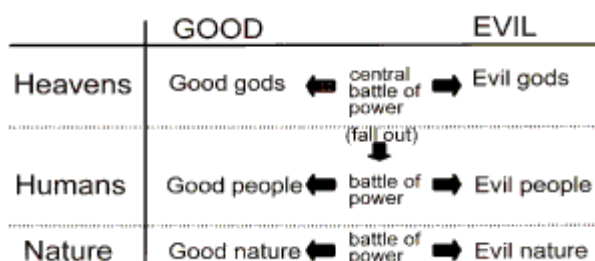
Some Christians interpret the biblical data on spiritual warfare, using the traditional tribal themes of territory and power encounter (Peretti 1988, and Wagner 1991). Satan is viewed as having authority over the earth, an authority he exercises through delegation to his demonic hierarchy. As Chuck Lowe points out (1998), this view of territorial spirits has little biblical justification. The belief in spirits who rule territories and control people implies that these people are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods, and that once they are delivered they will be ready to convert to Christ in mass. This sells human sinfulness short. Even if demons are driven out, humans call them back and renew their individual and corporate rebellion against God.

Belief in evil spirits now ruling geographic territories also denies the work of the Cross. Whatever delegated authority Satan had at the time of creation was taken away after the resurrection when Christ declared, ‘And now all authority has been given unto me ([Mt. 28:16](#))’. Satan now has no authority over the earth, only the authority given him by his demonic and human followers.

## COSMIC DUALISM

A third worldview of spiritual warfare is based on a cosmic dualism (figure 5).

This is found in Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and Hinduism, and in cultures shaped by the Indo-European worldview, including those in the West. In it mighty gods battle for control of the universe: one seeking to establish a kingdom of righteousness and order, and the other an evil empire. The outcome is uncertain for both sides are equally strong, and the battle is unending for when good or evil are defeated they rise to fight again. All reality is divided into two camps: good gods and bad ones, good nations and evil ones. Ultimately the division is not between cosmic good and evil—good gods and nations often do evil in order to win the battle, and evil gods and nations do good. The real division is between ‘our side’ and ‘the enemy’. If we win, we can establish the kingdom, and by definition it will be good. If the others win, they will establish what we see as an evil empire.



**Figure 5.** The Myth of Cosmic Dualism

Central to this worldview is the myth of redemptive violence. Order can be established only when one side defeats the other in spiritual warfare. In other words, violence is necessary to bring about a better society (Larson 1974, Lincoln 1986. Puhvel 1970, Wink

1992). To win, therefore, is everything. The focus, therefore, is on the battle. The myths tell of the battles between the gods, and their effect on humans. Conflicts and competition are intrinsic to the world, and lead to evolution (biology), progress (civilization), development (economic), and prowess (sports).

Morality in the Indo-European battle is based on notions of 'fairness' and 'equal opportunity', not on some moral absolutes. To be fair, the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. The outcome must be uncertain. It is 'unfair' to pit a professional ball team against a team of amateurs. Equal opportunity means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. If the evil side uses illegal and wicked means, the good side is justified in using them. In movies, the policeman cannot shoot first. When the criminal draws his gun, however, the policeman can shoot him without a trial. In the end, both the good and the bad sides use violence, deceit, and intimidation to win the battle. In this worldview, chaos is the greatest evil, and violence can be used to restore order.

Indo-European religious beliefs have largely died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1992), the Indo-European worldview continues to dominate modern western thought. It is the basis for the theories of evolution and capitalism, and is the dominant theme in western entertainment and sports. People pay to see the football battle, and go home at the end claiming victory or making excuses for the loss. The story ends when the detective unmasks the villain, the cowboys defeat the Indians, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leah thwart the Evil Empire, and Superman destroys the enemies of humankind. Victory in the Indo-European myth is never final, however, nor is evil fully defeated. Every week Bluto grabs Olive Oil. Every week Popeye tries to rescue her. Every week Bluto beats up Popeye. Every week Popeye gets his spinach and defeats Bluto. Bluto never learns to leave Olive Oil alone. Popeye never learns to take his spinach before he attacks Bluto. Evil always rises again to challenge the good, so good must constantly be on guard against future attacks.

Many current Christian interpretations of spiritual warfare are based on an Indo-European worldview which sees it as a cosmic battle between God and his angels, and Satan and his demons for the control of people and lands. The battle is fought in the heavens, but it ranges over sky and earth. The central question is one of power—can God defeat Satan? Because the outcome is in doubt, intense prayer is necessary to enable God and his angels to gain victory over the demonic powers. Humans are victims of this struggle. Even those who turn to Christ are subject to bodily attacks by Satan.

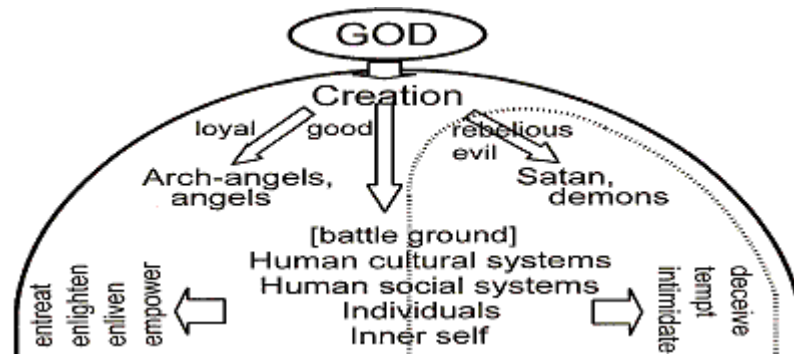
## **BIBLICAL VIEWS OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE**

Warfare is an important metaphor in Scripture and we must take it seriously. Eugene Peterson writes,

There is a spiritual war in progress, an all-out moral battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in continuous and energetic battle against all of it. God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is contested (1997, 122–123).

The question is, what is the nature of this battle in biblical terms? One thing is clear, the biblical images of spiritual warfare are radically different from those in the materialistic, dualistic, animistic and Indo-European myths (figure 6).





**Figure 6.** Biblical View of Spiritual Warfare

For example, in the Old Testament the surrounding nations saw Israel's defeats as evidence that their gods were more powerful, but the Old Testament writers are clear—Israel's defeats are not at the hand of pagan gods, but are the judgement of Yahweh for their sins ([Judg. 4:1-2](#); [6:1](#); [10:7](#); [1 Sam. 28:17-19](#); [1 Kings 16:2-3](#); [2 Kings 17:7-23](#)). Similarly, the battle between God and Satan is not one of power ([Job 1:1-12](#), [Jud. 9:23-24](#)). The whole world belongs to God. The gods of the pagans are, in fact, no gods. They are merely human-made images fashioned from wood and stone ([Is. 44:46](#)). Satan is a fallen angel created by God.

In the New Testament the focus shifts to a more spiritual view of battle. The Gospels clearly demonstrate the existence of demons, or unclean spirits, who oppress people. The exorcists of Jesus' day used techniques such as shoving a smelly root up the possessed person's nose to drive the spirit away, or by invoking a higher spirit through magical incantations (Keener 1993). Jesus, in contrast, simply drove the demons out on the basis of his own authority ([Mk. 1:21-27](#); [9:14-32](#)). He was not simply some mighty sorcerer who learned to manipulate the spirits through more powerful magic. He is the sovereign God of the universe exerting his will and authority over Satan and his helpers.

## THE NATURE OF THE BATTLE

The Bible is clear: there is a cosmic battle between God and Satan ([Eph. 6:12](#)). There is, however, no doubt about its outcome. The dualism of God and Satan, good and evil, is not eternal and coexistent. In the beginning was God, eternal, righteous, loving and good. Satan, sin and sinners appear in creation. Moreover, God's creation is an ongoing process. The very existence of Satan and sinners, and the power they use in their rebellion is given them by God, and is a testimony to his mercy and love. Finally, whatever the battle, it was won at Calvary.

If the cosmic struggle between God and Satan is not one of power, what is it about? It is the establishment of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. It is for human hearts and godly societies. God in his mercy is inviting sinners to repent and turn to him.

Two parables help us understand the nature of the warfare we face. The first is that of the wayward son (Bailey 1998). The father lavishes his love on his son, but the son rebels and turns against his father. The father is not interested in punishing his son, but in winning him back, so the father reaches out in unconditional love. The son wants to provoke the father into hating him, and thereby to justify his rebellion, but the father takes all the evil his son heaps on him and continues to love. When the son repents, he is restored back fully into the family ([Lk. 15:21-24](#)). Similarly, God loves his rebellious creations, and longs to save them. If he were to do less, he would be less than perfect love. In this battle for human allegiances, humans are not passive victims. They are active co-



conspirators with Satan and his host in rebellion against God, and God urges them to turn to him for salvation.

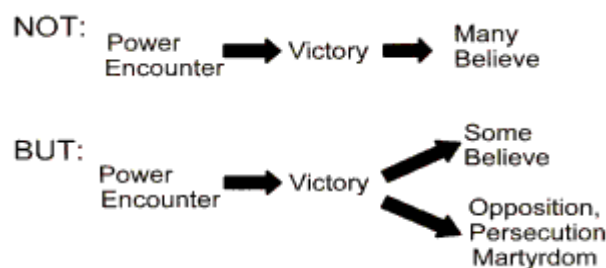
The second parable is that of the rebellious vassals or stewards ([Mt. 21:33–44](#)). At first, the stewards are faithful, and their appointment gives them legitimate authority over part of the kingdom. Later they rebel and persecute the righteous. In Indo-European mythology the king simply defeats the rebels by might and destroys them. In the biblical worldview the king first seeks reconciliation, so he sends his servants. When they are mistreated, he sends his son. Even then the king does not remove the rebellious servants arbitrarily. He shows their unfitness to rule by sending his son, who is found guilty and put to death by the servants. The case is appealed to the king who finds the lower court evil and removes the rebellious servants from power. The central question in Scripture is not power but authority.

## THE WEAPONS OF WARFARE

Scripture makes it clear that the weapons of spiritual warfare are different for God and for Satan. Satan blinds the minds of humans to the truth through lies and deception. He tempts them with the pleasures of sin by appealing to their old nature. He intimidates them with fear by sending misfortunes. He accuses them of their sins. Above all, he invites them to worship themselves as gods ([Gen. 3:1–7](#), [2 Tim. 3:2](#)). God uses the weapons of truth to enlighten the mind, righteousness to combat sin, and peace and *shalom* to counter temptation. Above all, he invites all into the kingdom of God in which Christ reigns in perfect love and justice. Satan and his followers [demonic and human] devise cultures and societies of rebellion that blind human minds. They seek to control those who turn themselves over to the rebellion, to keep sinners from converting, and to cause the saved to fall. Human rebellion is both individual and corporate. God and his followers [angelic and human] create the church as a counter-cultural community where Christ is recognized and worshipped as Lord, and where truth, love and righteousness reign. In the battle, God, his angels and his saints minister to protect and guide his people ([2 Kings 6:17](#); [Gen. 24:7](#); [31:11–12](#); [Dan. 8:15–16](#); [9:20–23](#); [Mt. 1:20](#)).

## POWER ENCOUNTERS

At the heart of much of the current debate regarding spiritual warfare is the concept of ‘power encounter’. Often this is seen in Indo-European terms (figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Power Encounter in Scripture

Proponents see such encounters as opportunities to demonstrate the might of God through dramatic healings, casting out of demons and divine protection, and assume that when people see God’s miraculous interventions, they will believe. Scripture and church history show that demonstrations of God’s power often lead some to believe, but they also excite the enemy to greater opposition leading to persecution and death. We see this in

the book of Acts where victories are followed by persecution, imprisonment and death (appendix 1). Above all we see it in John where Jesus confronts the religious and political establishments and is crucified (appendix 2). In biblical spiritual warfare, the Cross is the ultimate and final victory ([1 Cor. 1:18-25](#)). If our understanding of spiritual warfare cannot explain this, we need to reexamine it. On the cross Satan used his full might to destroy Christ, or to provoke him to use his divinity wrongly. Either would have meant defeat for Christ—the first because Satan would have overcome him and the second because it would have destroyed God’s plan of salvation through the use of unrighteous means.

The cross as victory makes no sense in the Indo-European or tribal worldviews. In Indo-European worldview (figure 8), the Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors, called down his angelic hosts waiting ready in heaven, and come down from the cross in triumph to establish his kingdom. In Scripture the cross is the demonstration of victory through weakness. At the cross Satan stands judged because he put Christ, God incarnate as perfect man, to death. On the cross Jesus bore the sins of the world and triumphed over all the powers of evil. His obedience unto death ‘rendered powerless him who had the power of death that is the devil’ ([Heb. 2:14](#)). The cross was Satan’s undoing ([Col. 2:15](#)), but Satan’s defeat was not an end in itself. Rather it removes the obstacles to God’s purpose of creating people fit for his kingdom ([Gen. 12:1](#); [Ex. 19:3ff](#); [1 Peter 2:9](#)). The cross is the victory of righteousness over evil, of love over hate, of God’s way over Satan’s way. If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not see the cross as the final triumph, it is wrong.

INDO-EUROPEAN	BIBLICAL
- battle between equals	- rebellious creation
- seek to defeat, control	- seek to win
- hate the enemy	- love enemy, hate evil
- use power of force	- use power of truth, love
- use means of the enemy	- use only righteous means
- inflict pain	- bear pain
SWORD	CROSS

**Figure 8.** Indo-European and Biblical Views of Warfare

The biblical heroes in spiritual warfare are given in the hall of fame in Hebrews. Some overthrew kingdoms, escaped death by the sword, put whole armies to flight and received their loved ones back from death ([Heb. 11:33-35](#)). Even greater are the victors who were tortured, mocked, whipped, chained, oppressed, mistreated and martyred ([Heb. 11:36-38](#)). They were ‘too good for this world’. In all these cases, victory lies not in defeating the enemy, but in standing firm in faith and bearing witness to Christ, no matter what the outcome.

Christians and churches are in desperate need of showing God’s power in transformed lives and in a Christlike confrontation of evil wherever they find it, whether demonic, systemic or personal. Here we face two dangers. On the one hand, we may avoid bold demonstrations of power for fear these may become magic. The church then is poor in the manifestations of God’s might. On the other hand, in our zeal to demonstrate God’s power we can run after the sensational and be tempted to use power for our own glory. Neither miracles nor the Cross can be taken out of the gospel without distorting it.

## THE COMING KINGDOM

Finally, a biblical view of spiritual warfare points to the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of God throughout the whole universe. When we focus too much on the current battle, we lose sight of the cosmic picture in which the real story is not the battle, but the eternal reign of Christ. That vision transformed the early church, and it should be our focus in ministry today.

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## Appendix 1

### Power Encounters in Acts

#### Chapter

2. Pentecost: power of the Holy Spirit—ridicule, some believe
3. Peter heals a crippled man—put in jail, some believe
5. Ananias and Sapphira die from God's judgement—great fear in the church [God judges evil in believers and the church as well as evil of Satan]
5. The apostles heal many—they are put in prison
6. Stephen performs signs and wonders—he is killed, and persecution spreads
11. Growth of the church—persecution, death of James
13. Paul confronts Elymas—proconsul believes
14. Paul and Barnabas do signs and wonders—some believe, Paul stoned
16. Paul and Silas cast out a demon—they are beaten and put in jail
17. Paul preaches the gospel—some scoff, others believe
21. Paul preaches and defends himself—he is jailed and sent to Rome

## Appendix 2

### Power encounters in John Jesus Confronts the Powers of Jerusalem and Rome

#### Chapter

1. **Birth:** his birth as a king challenges Herod and earthly kingdoms.
2. **Overturms the tables:** challenges the corrupt religious order which turned the court of evangelism into a market place
3. **Nicodemus:** challenges the ignorance of a leader of the religious establishment.
4. **Samaritan woman:** violates Jewish religious exclusivism.
5. **Heals on the Sabbath:** confronts the legalism of the establishment.
6. **Feeds the five thousand:** shows up the failure of establishment to care for the people.
7. **Feast of Booths:** confronts the religious leaders and their unbelief.
8. **Preaches:** challenges the merciless interpretation of the law.
9. **Heals:** shows the powerlessness of the religious establishment.
10. **Confronts the Pharisees:** challenges their teachings.

11. **Raises the dead:** shows the powerlessness of the religious leaders.  
 12. **Triumphal Entry:** challenges the leaders' understanding of God's kingdom.  
 13–19. **Jewish and Roman Leaders Conspire and Kill Jesus.**  
 20–21. **Jesus rises from the dead:** defeats Satan and the political/religious establishments, establishes his kingdom.

## Appendix 3

### A Comparison of Evangelical Systematic, Biblical and Missiological Theologies

	SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY	BIBLICAL THEOLOGY	MISSIOLOGICAL THEOLOGY
<b>SOURCE:</b>	The Bible is divine revelation	The Bible is divine revelation	The Bible is divine revelation
<b>KEY QUESTION:</b>	What are the eternal, unchanging realities?	What is the cosmic story?	What does Scripture say to this particular human situation?
<b>METHOD:</b>	Abstract logic	analogical Historiography	Precedent teachings and cases
<b>RESULTS</b>	Helps develop synchronic understandings of biblical worldview	Helps develop diachronic understandings of biblical worldview	Helps develop missional vision and motivation based on a biblical worldview
<b>LIMITATIONS:</b>	Difficulty in bridging from: –structure to story –universal particular –explanation mystery Not missiological in nature	Difficulty in bridging from: –story to structure –universal particular to Not missiological nature	Difficult in bridging from: –today to cosmic time to structure –now to cosmic time in and story

# The Christian Stake in the Arts: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture

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**Keywords:** Religious experience, proclamation, orthodoxy, interpretation, pedagogy, theological education, missiology;

## I THE SIGNS OF LIFE

The flamboyant and provocative German Jesuit, Friedhelm Mennekes, Pastor of St. Peters Church, located in the great contemporary art city of Cologne, emphatically states:

Art doesn't need the church, it has a spirituality and aura all its own. But the church cannot exist without art because it is perhaps the most significant part of the world from which the church can receive the impulses necessary for its survival<sup>1</sup>

A more subdued, but equally impassioned voice is that of Keith Walker, Residentiary Canon at Chichester Cathedral in England, a long-standing promoter and patron of the arts, especially of the visual arts in the Anglican Church, who says,

It will be for the Church to develop its mission in a cultural domain from which it has been for too long estranged. Part of that mission will be to receive wisdom from the artist and another part will be for the art establishment to relinquish some of its inhibitions and recover an ancient and glorious association. Most of all it will enable glory to be born into a world where glory is obscured.<sup>2</sup>

From the Academy, rather than the Church, come the words of the distinguished American art historian, the late Frederick Hartt, who writes in the introduction to his widely used history of western art text:

The religious art of the past generally offers us the most persuasive access to religious ideas. So effective can be religious art that many agnostic scholars find themselves unconsciously dealing with religious images as reverently as if they were believers.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, Hartt finds the need to extend his comments about the links between art and religion, relating how frequently artists, mystified as to where their ideas come from, attribute a divine or creative power beyond themselves as their source. He also points out how God is often represented as an artist or an architect, 'tracing with a gigantic compass a system and an order upon the earth, which was previously "without form and void"'. And, conversely, he reminds us that at certain times some artists, such as Raphael and Michelangelo have been called 'divine' and recognized virtually as saints. (Incidentally, only one artist that I know of, that is, Fra Angelico, has ever been officially canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.)

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<sup>1</sup> Goodrow, Gérard, 'The "Rock Priest",' *Art News* 91/10 (December 1992), p. 44

<sup>2</sup> Walker, Keith, *Images or Idols?: The Place of Sacred Art in Churches Today* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1996), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Hartt, Frederick, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (4th Ed.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989), pp. 27-28

Lastly, Hartt attests to the power of art to evoke experience and states that are akin to religious experience. A notable example of this happening is the record left by Dostoyevsky's wife who tells of the effect Holbein's Deposition in the Basel Kunstmuseum had on him.

He stood for twenty minutes before the picture without moving. On his agitated face was the frightened expression I often noticed on it during the first moments of his epileptic fits. He had no fit at the time, but he could never forget the sensation he had experienced in the Basel museum in 1867: the figure of Christ taken from the cross, whose body already showed signs of decomposition, haunted him like a terrible nightmare. In his notes to *The Idiot* and in the novel itself he returns again and again to the theme.<sup>4</sup>

A multitude of issues arise from the quotations and comments made above. What are the necessary impulses for the survival of the church that Mennekes asserts art or the arts have something to do with? How does this relate to the broader concerns of faith, our construal and contextual understanding of culture, and engagement beyond the framework of the institutional church? Can the church truly overcome its indifference to the arts or its suspicion of artists sufficiently not only to believe that there are artists of all kinds (visual, musical, performing, literary) who have some wisdom to offer her, but to embrace them as well, as Walker would wish? Or can the church overcome the mistrust and pejorative image of an abusive power of the past that much of the art world holds about the church and the Christian faith. If it is true that, as Hartt states, the 'religious art of the past generally offers us the most persuasive access to religious ideas' why is it that the western church has been so reluctant to employ this powerful agent missionally in recent time? Why has the 'trench', as it is often called, between the church and the arts become deeper and wider?

Has the near total verbalization of the faith actually impaired the power of the church to speak? It is commonly held that we live at a time when the visual is paramount and a significant means of expressing truth while the verbal, with its great commitment to logic, is not being accorded the value which it has long had. This trend is disturbing for many Christian thinkers and perhaps this anxiety is nowhere more passionately expressed and articulately resisted than by Jacques Ellul in his book, *La Parole humiliée* (1981).

## II ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AND MISSIONAL STRATEGY

But is it necessary to be reactive? In her fascinating essay on 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', Patristic scholar, Sister Charles Murray, suggests the need to go back in order to go forward. In other words, we need to know more fully and adequately the sources and resources of the Christian tradition so that we can go forth with expanded sympathies and wider horizons into contemporary culture.

[I]n the early church it was possible to think theologically without cutting oneself off from other ranges of thought and imagination which in our day no longer have contact with theology . . . there is indeed a way out of the modern impasse because it already exists in the tradition.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Magarshack, David, *Introduction to and translation of 'The Idiot' by Fyodor Dostoyevsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 7. Dostoyevsky's translation of this experience into his own literary art can be found in the novel, pt. 3, ch. 6, pp. 418–420.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, Sister Charles, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 288.

Three important studies can give us a starting point to help us focus and ground our discussion as to why the arts are strategic for a rounded and nuanced understanding of culture and how they can open the way for effective mission. The first is the essay by Sister Charles Murray mentioned above; the second is Thomas Mathews' book, *The Clash of Gods* (1993), which is a skilful reinterpretation of early Christian art by a scholar who is both an art historian and a theologian. The third work, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (1985), is by theologian Margaret R. Miles. A rigorous exploration all of these studies shows that the interplay between theology and art is not something marginal in the history of Christianity as one might assume from looking at the contemporary theological curriculum and discourse, but key to the way the church has situated herself contextually and carried out her mission. Although all of the above deal primarily with visual art, the cases they make can be extended and applied to the other arts.

All three of these writers dispel the illusion that the study of doctrinal and theological texts and creeds is sufficient for an adequate understanding of Christian thought and history, and by extension, the history of mission. Art, indeed, can be viewed as a document of the proclamation and growth of the gospel in the world.

This is not to deny the importance of verbal texts or to claim that images are the sole key to cultural or historical understanding. Often there may be a complementarity between or even repetition in the two. Miles points out that the tension, or even contradiction, between texts and non-verbal forms can heighten our understanding of the communities they emerge from.<sup>6</sup> Clinging solely to texts, however, is reductive and unnecessarily limits appreciation and understanding for the wider piety and practice of the church and may deprive us of fresh ways of conceiving mission. Habitual educational conditioning leading to ingrained resistance to looking beyond verbal texts perpetuates a narrow view of what constitutes the conditions of the church's context. As Miles repeatedly points out, written texts are usually the product of the most unrepresentative members of the community of faith, a minority who have been literate and articulate; and, of that group, the overwhelming majority would be male.

The one-sided inclination toward texts in the study of theology overlooks the fact that the ancient church cared very much about the visual interpretation of faith and that in some sense she fed upon the sensibilities of artists to inform her in ways that depart from the conventions of written texts. Murray contends that, 'In 842 when the church proclaimed the Triumph of Orthodoxy it was talking about art as the visual interpretation of dogma.'<sup>7</sup>

Murray goes on to argue from a wealth of evidence 'that artistic expression of doctrines seems to have been the only unifying theological force in the early church.'<sup>8</sup> For example, theological disputants, such as Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) and his opponent, Theodosius bishop of Caesarea, could argue about doctrine, but when they concluded their disputation both of them kissed the Gospel Book and Holy Icons, the visible expressions of the ultimate source of truth. Theologians could differ over doctrinal positions, but they all practised the pieties induced by art. That art provided a unifying,

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<sup>6</sup> Miles, Margaret R, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 290.



rather than a divisive experience in the ancient church is a far cry from the worship wars of today that divide congregations over musical styles!<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to the conventional but misinformed view that the early church, on the basis of the second commandment and her Jewish heritage, was opposed to visual imagery, scholars such as Murray, Mathews, Miles, Paul Corby Finney, and others have convincingly shown, on the basis of wide and searching reading of early Christian documents as well as archaeological and artistic evidence from early in the third century (catacombs and Dura-Europos), that this is not the case; rather, there were significant continuities between the early church and post-Constantinian period rather than an abrupt flourishing of art after the Peace of the Church (Edict of Milan, AD 313) and that this view does not run into any serious trouble until the Iconoclastic Controversy (c. 724–842).<sup>10</sup> However, here things become even more interesting, because the resolution of the contention was to make the veneration of the Holy Icons the very touchstone of Orthodoxy, the presiding notion of the early church.

An example of how refreshing and fruitful for our understanding a consideration of visual images as historical evidence together with written documents can be is Miles's discussion of the flourishing of Christian art in fourth-century Roman churches.<sup>11</sup> By starting with visual evidence that was accessible to the entire believing community and the pagan world surrounding it, instead of focusing primarily or exclusively on the great theological debates sustained by the ecclesiastically and politically few, Miles provides a wider context in which theological struggles took place and thus brings us closer, one suspects, to the lived experience of these early Christians and their missionally motivated enthusiasm to make known their faith by visual means through the building of churches across the entire Roman empire.

Miles cites Eusebius' emotionally charged, rather than architecturally descriptive, admiration of the cathedral at Tyre in Book X of his *Ecclesiastical History*: 'The cathedral is a marvel of beauty, utterly breathtaking.'<sup>12</sup> Through Eusebius' extravagant statement that 'the evidence of our eyes makes instruction through the ears unnecessary', one glimpses the powerful apologetic the visual could create and the attraction it could have for an increasingly diverse populations of converts.

On the face of it, it is truly astounding that between the third and sixth centuries the entire ancient pantheon of gods and goddesses and mythological heroes should be replaced by the central image of Jesus Christ and the saints, and that, furthermore, this would continue to constitute the core of the visual vocabulary of Europe until nearly the end of the seventeenth century. How did this extraordinary transformation of religious affiliation and culture take place?

Thomas Mathews' learned and masterful telling of this tale in his book *The Clash of Gods* should not be left for only art historians to read. Although subtitled 'A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art', which it certainly is, it is far more than that. It deserves to be read by theologians, historians of Christianity and religion, missiologists,

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<sup>9</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', pp. 290–291.

<sup>10</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development'; Mathews, Thomas F., *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Miles, *Image as Insight*; Dillenberger, John, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities* (New York, Crossroad, 1986); Finney, Paul Corby, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Miles, *Image as Insight*, pp. 41–62.

<sup>12</sup> Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 49.

and anyone else who is concerned about understanding the contextualization and spread of the Christian faith and its impact on culture.

One can give only a thumbnail sketch here of Mathews' work. Probably this is best done in two parts: first by stating what he refutes and second by indicating what he contends.

Mathews finds seriously flawed the received interpretation of the imagery of early Christian art as an adaptation of imperial formulas and attributes. The art historians who in the 1930s proposed this interpretation were wrong. They could only imagine from their assumptions that Christ could acquire the lofty dignity that was his due by his image having been assimilated into the person and role of the Roman emperor. Of the thousands of representations of Christ in early Christian art, Mathews can find only two examples of what might be taken for his wearing imperial garments. Early Christians, Mathews contends, were not so impressed with the emperor as to clothe their new God in his likeness, which was actually likely to make him into an object of mockery (cf. [Mt 27:28](#); [Mk 15:20](#)).

One can add that this older, mistaken interpretation has been so widespread that one can read it even in the writings of someone like Lesslie Newbigin. When he looks at Christian art, he sees only 'in successive portraits of Jesus the self-portrait of the age—the Byzantine picture of Jesus as the supreme Emperor, the Pantocrator.'<sup>13</sup> Remarks like this also point up how little the whole history of the arts in the church has been understood and appropriated for cultural analysis and mission by missiologists.

Through careful observation of a vast array of visual data, ranging from ancient tableware to the catacombs and glittering mosaics, wide knowledge of patristic documents, and considerable familiarity with contemporary biblical scholarship, Mathews works his way to an interpretation of early Christian art that has much to instruct us about the strategy and contextualization of the early gospel message. Far from assimilating the image of Christ to the emperor's person the early Christians took on almost systematically the whole pantheon of gods, showing facet by facet through visual attribute and argument, that Christ was the fulfilment of all that the ancient world aspired to through its panoply of deities.

Once Christ had taken the throne of Jupiter, the father of the gods, Jupiter had not so much as a stool on which to sit. His statues were melted down, and he never again appeared on the coins of the realm. Similarly, once Christ took the mild, caring look of Asclepius and appeared everywhere working the miracles that the healing god had claimed, the shrines of Asclepius were abandoned. Taking the youthful beauty of a Dionysius or an Apollo, Christ charmed their coteries into his own shrines and churches. At the same time, chameleon-like he assumed a multiplicity of powerful roles unimagined for the gods of antiquity. For all their reverence toward the philosophers, the Greeks had never invented a philosopher-god; the miracle-working Christ effectively supplanted the magicians of antiquity. Emblazoned in countless church apses, he was the omega, the end of the journey, the processional goal of all Christian life and worship. Simultaneously Child and Old Man, he was Lord of all eternity. The imagery that was formed for the new God drew upon a variety of potent sources—the gods, the philosophers, the magicians of antiquity. Its dependence on the Gospel, however, was curiously oblique. Scripture had left no account of the physical appearance of Christ, and in any event its claims for Christ far exceeded all visual symbols. How was the artist to deal with Christ's own self-portrait: 'Before Abraham was, I am', ([Jn 8:59](#)) or 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' ([Jn 14:9](#)), or 'I am the alpha and the omega' ([Rev 1:8](#))? But, rising to the challenge, painters, sculptors, and mosaic workers invented without inhibition. The narratives of the Gospel

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<sup>13</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 141.

they rewrote with freedom to forge images of memorable impact. By representing as many facets of his person as possible they tried to encompass somehow the totality of the unimaginable mystery.<sup>14</sup>

Sister Charles Murray sustains the view that artistic idiom continued to be a missional force in the church's engagement with her culture and her understanding of her own doctrine.

Apart from the scriptures, which are judged to contain the historical facts, history shows that the artistic idiom has remained the most stable vehicle for the transmission of orthodoxy since its inception. History, in this area, has been a medium of growth and not a source of embarrassment; and art has prevented . . . abstract principles concerning Christ from supplanting his person. It has facilitated the transposition of doctrine from static and objective categories to those of a more dynamic character, and it has made easy the transfer of orthodoxy from one area and milieu and from one age to another in the continuity of the community.<sup>15</sup>

The verbal expression of dogma is geared to precision and thus by necessity is restrictive. As Murray points out:

[O]rthodoxy appears in this idiom as essentially a matter of constraint. [However] Art . . . is allusive, and therefore very free and flexible. . . . it can convey the truth inclusively, and so is much more suited to the expression of orthodoxy as truth rather than orthodoxy as *formula*. . . . Because the faith was recognized to be more than the literal, and art caters for the more than literal, the church, by adopting its use, was in this respect recognizing the cognitive role of the imagination in knowing God.<sup>16</sup>

Murray is not content to leave her observations in the realm of detached research. She invites the church to embrace the artistic medium once again for the sake of its own health and survival. If art has been effective in the past, does it not have the power to be so again?

If one believes, with the Cappadocians, that the role of religious imagery is essentially to communicate and teach, to remind and provoke thought and emotion, then art is left . . . the necessary degree of autonomy it requires to continue as a religious vehicle. It will be thus left open to the techniques, methods and mentalities of the time and place in which the church is situated. The imagination will again be engaged by the best effective means and the role of the artist will become crucial as the one who translates the faith into a visual representation. On the principle of ancient theology, therefore, the role of the artist is crucial to the church, his [or her] talent and creativity are of great significance . . . and except for some very general restraints he [or she] is free to illustrate the scripture as he [or she] sees fit.<sup>17</sup>

A positive appreciation of artistic and musical idioms as they have befriended the church historically deepens and widens possibilities and horizons for contemporary missional understanding and engagement. But, as a first step, can we be persuaded that we need to be emancipated from our peculiarly enculturated enchantment with the exclusivity of verbal texts in order to renew our thinking? Do we unwittingly promote the

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<sup>14</sup> Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>15</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 292.

<sup>17</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 304.

displacement of God by maintaining one kind of discourse whose implied anthropology is that human beings are creatures merely of thought and not of feelings and will?

Loosening ourselves from clinging solely to verbal texts does not mean rejecting reason for one single second or, of course, dismissing the Holy Scriptures. But it does mean interrogating the adequacy of abstract verbal discourse and techniques to do justice by way of explanation or representation to either the Christian faith or the human condition and to consider seriously whether other modes of meaning may be more compelling and satisfying to the mind and heart of human beings.

The arts have enabled the community of faith to communicate, reflect on, and indwell the salvation story and they continue to enable us to do that.

### III THE NEGLECT OF THE ARTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES

Between the historical practice and understanding of the arts in and by the church sketched above and the contemporary practice and understanding we encounter a huge gap and discrepancy. The rarity of courses dealing with the arts in theological education, their absence from any central place in theological curriculum, and the slight treatment that they are accorded in theological and missiological literature (in contrast to the whole range of the social sciences and, to a lesser degree, the challenges of modern science) tend to preclude any clear conception of the arts' strategic importance for the mission and mandate of the church being transmitted to those who are being educated for ministry (lay and clergy) in and through her to the world. It is as though we tied one of our hands behind our back. Or perhaps it is more like turning our back on a somewhat inscrutable, but loyal and creative helpful friend. Some of that turning could very well be because we have been seduced into the embrace of technology, which as yet we have no firm knowledge of, as being a true companion for the journey.

In 1879 an artistically sensitive and idealistic young man of 26 with a passion to serve God and his fellow human beings who was in training for mission finally got fed up with the lack of boldness and creativity in his educational experience. This is what he said:

I must tell you that with evangelists it is the same as with artists. There is an old academic school, often detestable, tyrannical, the accumulation of horrors, men who wear a cuirass, a steel armour, of prejudices and conventions; when these people are in charge of affairs, they dispose of positions and by a system of red tape they try to keep their protégés in their places and exclude the other man.<sup>18</sup>

Not long afterwards this young man's mission board recognized that he had served sacrificially, but they considered that he was unsuited for mission work. Frankly, they felt he did not speak well enough. Their official statement of his dismissal runs like this:

Undoubtedly it would be unreasonable to demand extraordinary talents. But it is evident that the absence of certain qualities may render the exercise of an evangelist's principal function wholly impossible. Unfortunately this is the case with Mr. van Gogh. Therefore, the probationary period—some months—having expired, it has been necessary to abandon the idea of retaining him any longer.<sup>19</sup>

Although this came as a blow, this did not prevent Vincent Van Gogh from remaining where he had been working with the poor in the industrial region of the Borinage for a

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<sup>18</sup> Edwards, Cliff, *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), pp. 35–36.

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, *Van Gogh and God*, p. 36.

time and then wandering for nearly a year as he struggled to find his own personal calling as well as a way out of the morass of reductive materialistic thinking. The story of his life has been far too isolated and romanticized. He was not alone.

We cannot go into the whole story here of the considerable number of Van Gogh's contemporaries who also intensely felt the serious spiritual malaise of the times as well as the inadequacies of institutional Christianity to help them and who went on to become the pioneers of what we now call 'modern art'. One way of conceiving the whole phenomenon of 'modern art', especially abstraction, is to see it as essentially a spiritual quest. Since the mid-1970s there has been an ever-expanding art critical and art historical literature on this.<sup>20</sup>

They had a great hunger to unify not only their understanding, but their actual experience of nature, art, science, and religion which had become nearly hopelessly unravelled from each other. This was no mere intellectual problem or game for them, but an agonizing situation with high existential stakes. The insanity of a Nietzsche or Van Gogh (incidentally, both sons of the manse) can be looked at in some ways as a 'pure' response to the situation. We, on the other hand, in our progressively schooled detachment have probably become habituated and inured to this fragmented condition. What amounted to the spiritual dismemberment of a culture and its people was experienced by many, particularly some writers and artists, on the personal level, with pain and perplexity, anguish and affliction.

He was not alone in his suffering. Although temperamentally poles apart, Van Gogh and his friend, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), were united spiritually in their apprehension of the times and that caused them to share an affinity of affliction. Both of them were quite biblically literate. A response to this fusion of spirit is manifest in Gauguin's *Cup in the Form of a Head* made early in 1889.

No photographic reproduction can convey the startling experience of viewing this work firsthand. Out of olive green, grey, and red glazed stoneware suggesting familial ceramic relationship in form and technique to a traditional toby mug, Peruvian pot, and Japanese Takatori vessel, Gauguin's self-portrait as a severed head dripping with blood, eyes closed and ear-less emerges. This macabre image, fired at a very high temperature literally and figuratively, fuses life, myth, and history into an unforgettable emblem of a ravaged human being.

In a little over a month after finding Van Gogh lying unconscious and covered with blood in his room in Arles on Christmas Eve in 1888, Gauguin created this work. We can only imagine that it was from horror and pity mingled with grief that he turned to the primal medium of clay, the dust of the earth, to make this piece with its moving residual memory that 'we have this treasure in earthen vessels' ([2 Cor 4:7](#)). It inaugurates a period of special preoccupation with death and life and a focus on his own self-portrait that frequently becomes associated with Christ in Gauguin's creativity. (e.g., *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ*, 1889).

In a letter to Vincent he wrote:

There is a Road to Calvary that all we artists must lead and it is this, perhaps that keeps us going. It is that which keeps us alive and we die when there is nothing more to feed it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Fuller, Peter, *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985); Fuller, Peter, *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988); Tuchman, Maurice, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. (New York: Abbeville Press 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Gasque, Laurel. 1990 'The Religious Sensibility of Paul Gauguin'. *Radix*. 16–19 (1990), p. 18.

By the late 1890s it becomes clear that Gauguin detested the church. He actually tried to donate his painting *Jacob and the Angel* [1888] (National Gallery, Edinburgh) to the church at Pont-Aven and then to another church at nearby Nizon. (His offer was flatly rejected in both cases and aroused considerable suspicion.) He abhorred the bourgeois morality of the clergy, which he felt harmed people and had little to do with genuine Christianity. His vehemence toward the church is savagely expressed in an unpublished document entitled 'L'Esprit Moderne et Le Catholicisme' (1896–1897). The text of this document confirms Gauguin's biblical literacy. It shows him to be very positive toward Christ, but exegetically confused by his own life and the challenges of the methods of modern science and thought.

After the eighteenth century artists did not stop being theologically interpretative or implicitly providing documents of the history of Christianity. What stopped, however, was the mutually, if not perfect, respectful and constructive relationship between the arts and the church. One is tempted to ask, whether, wittingly or unwittingly, the co-opting of incipient modernity by theologians that came to be translated into a *wissenschaftlich* and utilitarian conception of theological education had something to do with this.

Eventually antagonism between the arts and learning itself arose. While it is an overstatement to say that the arts ceased to be a part of learning, they could barely stand on an equal academic footing with theoretical philosophical speculation and applied scientific knowledge by the time J.S. Bach died in 1750. After that, even a lofty intellect like Goethe (1749–1832), could not be taken seriously when he spoke 'outside his field', because he was presumed to be importing unreliable methods, viz., artistic approaches, into science. (One thinks of the *Farbenlehre*, in particular.)

The conflict between J. S. Bach (1685–1750) and the early pioneer of modern biblical criticism, Johann August Ernesti (1707–1781), who became the rector of Thomasschule where Bach taught, illustrates the problem. The problem here is not so much between the church and art, for Bach was committed to both; but, rather, between the arts or an artistic frame of mind and the type of rationalism that was to become the dominant mode of academic thinking, shaping future ministers of the church, and which, in turn, led to the estrangement between the church and the arts.

Although the disagreement between Bach and Ernesti began about the relatively trivial issue of who had authority to hire and fire student prefects, underlying it were much more important issues of knowing, interpretation, and pedagogy. Bach intensely felt that the young rector's misguided ideas about education, not to mention his lack of musical judgement, were undermining what we would call the mission statement of the school which was 'to guide the students through the euphony of music to the contemplation of the divine'.<sup>22</sup>

It seems the school had been structured to integrate the scholastic/ theological and musical with about one-fifth of the time devoted to theology and one-fifth to music. Ernesti, who was later appointed to the faculty of theology at Leipzig, was a hyper-academic committed to pure scholarship and the single unequivocal meaning of texts. It has been said that his book *Institutio Interpretis* (1761) was 'one of the first respectable efforts to reduce the principles of interpretation to a science'.<sup>23</sup> He was not inclined to the art of music at all. In fact, he thought it was frivolous and a waste of time and sought to

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<sup>22</sup> Minear, Paul S, 'J. S. Bach and J. A. Ernesti: A Case Study in Exegetical and Theological Conflict' in John Deschner *et al.*, eds. *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 131–155, at p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> Minear, 'J. S. Bach and J. A. Ernesti', p. 136.

reduce its place in the curriculum so that more time could be devoted to ‘academic’ subjects.<sup>24</sup>

The contrast between the cantor’s and the rector’s method of interpretation of texts represents two distinctive ways of looking at Scripture. Ernesti idealized looking at texts, especially biblical texts, with cool detachment in relation to other ancient texts. Bach, however, believed in a warm personal engagement of texts (biblical as well as secular), using every possible musical means he was capable of to exegete the multivalent meaning of the single text in a way that moved the hearer completely. Bach was not attempting to over-ride the rational intellect—his *Musical Offering* dedicated to the quintessential Enlightenment monarch, Frederick the Great, and *The Art of the Fugue* show him to be a master of mathematical clarity. What Bach does through the art of music is deliver the text to the core of the hearer’s being so that it can be experienced.

As David Lyle Jeffrey helps us to see:

Scripture contains, then, beside its evident vocabulary, two syntaxes of disclosure. One is historical, *tempus*, by which we understand the sequence of statement and event. The other is in the imagination (*ymagionem*) creating or perceiving a spiritual *duratio* by which we gather in the reflections of memory on the one hand and the projections of intention and dream on the other, turning them together toward interpretation and meaning. It is in the realm of this second ‘syntax’ that we apprehend the form of Scripture, which also becomes the form of its present conversation in our experience in the here and now.<sup>25</sup>

In Ernesti, we see an opting exclusively for the former ‘syntax of disclosure’ in its absorption with history. In Bach we see preoccupation with the latter in its appropriation of imagination to apprehend the text both across and beyond time.

Today, we in the church are heirs of both Bach and Ernesti. But lamentably their legacies to us are still in conflict with each other in theological education, only perpetuating further the alienation between learning and the arts and, hence, between the church and the arts.

In our seminaries and faculties of theology how often do we find a course such as ‘The Ministry of Vincent van Gogh’ as was taught by the late Henri Nouwen at Yale Divinity School several times? Why should the theology and exegesis of J. S. Bach not be incorporated into courses on biblical studies or theology? Would it do any harm? Might it not even improve critical skills by seeing things from a different perspective, even in what we might call a different light? Could the creation of such courses or the integration of the arts into the existing theological curriculum not help revitalize our engagement with western culture and help situate the ambiguous place that mission itself has in the current theological curriculum?<sup>26</sup> Over-specialization is destroying the function of teaching in education. We need more people who are confident employing a solid interdisciplinary approach and who care about the whole life of the church, not only research.

There are courses given here and there and at least a dozen programmes in the arts in theological institutions across North America, but this is less than ten percent of the

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<sup>24</sup> David, Hans T. and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), pp. 137–149; Minear, ‘J. S. Bach and J. A. Ernesti’; Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Bach Among the Theologians*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 29–41.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey, David Lyle, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk, J. Andrew, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997).

Association of Theological Schools-accredited bodies. Keith Walker has investigated Anglican theological colleges in Britain and found that there are very few courses or even interest by administrators and lecturers in giving clergy instruction in integrating the arts into their vocation, although it often involves them in being custodians of architectural masterpieces. The situation among Roman Catholics is much the same in the UK.<sup>27</sup> On the Continent programmes or institutes exist here and there. An important one is the Institut für Kirchenbau und kirchliche Kunst der Gegenwart at Marburg University, directed by Horst Schwebel, who also has an appointment as Professor of Applied Theology.<sup>28</sup>

Encouragingly, scattered signs of hope such as the new 'Theology Through the Arts' project initiated by Jeremy Begbie at the University of Cambridge or the creation of a newly endowed chair for the history of art at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, are on the horizon. However, if the arts represent some of the most compelling expressions of the Christian faith and a potent ally for mission, as has been argued in this paper, why is it so little being done?

The standard response is : (a) the curriculum is full and bulging already; there is no room to add additional courses; and (b) we do not have enough money. (The experience of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley contradicts objection (b); after the MDiv, the theology and the arts programme generates the greatest amount of tuition revenue, as I learned from a recent conversation with John Dillenberger. Not only do such programmes attract students, they also attract donors who might otherwise not support theological education.) Naturally few chief administrators want themselves or their colleagues to appear to be cultural Philistines. Still, one suspects that at the core of those who hold authority in our institutions for what is considered serious scholarship and of strategic importance intellectually, the arts have about as much significance and esteem in their eyes as they had in Ernesti's!

When one stands back and looks from a missional perspective two questions immediately crop up: (1) Who is talking about the issues of art and faith in the theological context? (2) What is the place of mission in this discussion?

As to the first question, interestingly, the relatively small group concerned about the role of the arts in theological education represents a broad spectrum of theological opinion, at least in North America. And this suggests that we have here a legitimate and critical concern for the church and not just an issue stemming narrowly from one theological perspective or position.<sup>29</sup>

The second question regarding mission seems hardly alive! A lot of the discussion revolves around local congregational life and the raising of the awareness in local congregations about the importance of the artistic dimension in worship and church buildings, but little of it seems involved directly with ministry or proclamation near or far. This, of course, is not to say that indirectly cultural engagement with a wider community and society at large is not implied. It is only to say that it is difficult to discern any direct signs or explicit statements of how or even if the arts have relevance for a missional engagement beyond the church itself.

In a survey of arguments for the arts in theological education and how they relate to the nature and purpose of theological education, Barbara Wheeler, the president of Auburn Theological Seminary, delineates four ways the case for the arts has been made.

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, *Images or Idols?* pp. 99–101.

<sup>28</sup> Schwebel, Horst and Andreas Martin, eds., *Bilder und ihre Macht: Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und christlicher Religion* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> *Theological Education*, 1994 'Sacred Imagination: The Art and Theological Education', XXXI/1, (Autumn).



The arguments run like this: (1) the arts are useful and they improve the way theological educators do their work; (2) the arts are important because they are the principal way some people and groups have expressed their religious and theological ideas; (3) the arts are important because they are a pervasive part of religious practice; (4) the arts are a medium for doing theology. As Wheeler goes on to show, all of these arguments connect and align themselves with positions taken recently for reforming and improving theological education in general.<sup>30</sup>

None of the arguments mentioned above is radical. Wheeler points out that while a lot of careful reflection has been going on there has not been a bold proposal as yet. She herself goes on to raise a bold question:

Is it possible that art, or education in the arts, might in some way provide a new shaping metaphor for what theological education should be? ... I cannot even begin to imagine what a full-blown proposal with a notion of art at the center (in place of science and techne, the notions that currently dominate thinking about theological education) might look like. But I do have the sense that ... there remains something more provocative and daring to be said about how the arts might infuse theological education with the power and coherence that so many of us are now convinced it has lost.<sup>31</sup>

Could any of us imagine the chief executive officer of our institution seriously considering that the reigning paradigm undergirding it might be in need of radical readjustment and that the arts might help it serve better the purposes for its existence? To truly open up this discussion it is not enough for a small group year after year to talk with each other and to a handful of theological administrators. Nor is it sufficient to give the most powerful arguments in the world for the integration of the arts into the theological curriculum, when there is a fundamental disease and insecurity about the arts in the first place! Leaders of our institutions must first of all be convinced of their necessity.

Frankly, the arts are threatening. After three centuries of valorizing certainty and control and the reductive literalism this has often led to, the ambiguity (not to be confused with vagueness as often happens) of the arts with their suggestive and metaphorical quality is hard to get used to and can be deeply disturbing. The arts play with our expectations when we want predictability for our work. They seem impractical in a pragmatic world. In short, because we are not convinced of their fundamental importance and necessity for our theory or practice, they remain orphans of the academy and the church and institutionalized scepticism and doubt about them abound.

David Lodge, in his novel, *Nice Work*, gives us an amusing glimpse of this when Morris Zapp, the irrepressible cigar-puffing, world-class, tenured English professor at Euphoric State University, is asked by a nervous young lecturer who the other candidate is for a position she is considering interviewing for at his illustrious institution. 'Who's the other candidate?' asks Robyn Penrose. Zapp answers, 'Don't worry about her. She's not a serious scholar. Just a writer.'<sup>32</sup>

It is the contention of this paper that until our educational institutions give clear evidence of recognizing that they are built, not just on the accomplishments of technical scholarship, but on the achievements of original literature and art that scholarship so

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<sup>30</sup> Wheeler, Barbara G., 'Arguments and Allies: The Yale Consultations and Recent Writings about Theological Education', *Theological Education*, XXXI/1 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 29–35.

<sup>31</sup> Wheeler, 'Arguments and Allies', p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Lodge, David, *Nice Work* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 358.

often parasitically lives off of, will we be able to open the way for the arts to aid us by highly sophisticated means to interpret accurately our culture and to be authentic and apt instruments for ministry and mission through the freedom we allow them to have.

The arts involve risk. But, perhaps it is just the risk we need to take to do something beneficial. If in the academy the obsession with certainty and control have hindered and marginalized the arts, it has been no less the case in the church. Clinging to certainty and control have often strangled and constricted an understanding of goodness itself and confounded it with mere caution or safety. Even as Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is not merely 'good', but also 'dangerous', so too, are the arts. But if Aslan [Christ] is worth taking a risk on, the arts just might be so as well.

Earlier we quoted Sister Charles Murray as saying:

Because the faith was recognized to be more than the literal, and art caters for the more than literal, the church, by adopting its use, was in this respect recognizing the cognitive role of the imagination in knowing God.<sup>33</sup>

It may just be that at the point of epistemological quandary in which we find ourselves today the arts have a special role to play in helping us out of our impasse. A sign that this may be true is the growing and enhanced awareness of the role that imagination plays in religious understanding and knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

#### IV WHY THE ARTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The arts, which have been very important for the expansion, vitality, and worship of the church historically, have come to be neglected for a number of reasons that we have tried to point out. We have also targeted theological education as strategically important in recovering and expanding the role the arts play in the ministry and mission of the church.

Because 'the arts' are an abstraction and not easily subject to a simple definition or application, they sometimes seem to evaporate before we have grasped some firm sense of their function and import. Actual encounter with art itself is always concrete and particular: 'Gretchen am Spinnrad', 'If I Had a Rocket Launcher', 'Jesus de Montréal', 'Prologue to the Gospel of John', 'Guernica', 'Centre Pompidou', 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'. Just talking about 'the arts' can never convey their uniqueness or their flavour, for example, of being popular, folk, or so-called high art or their necessity for our humanity. Their particularity may very well be the main reason that we usually find the arts pleasurable.

Pleasure, however, to the serious minded can often seem suspect and more akin to a luxury than a necessity of life. And, all too frequently, this is the stigma that is attached to 'the arts'. We must remember that people made art in concentration camps; some have called this spiritual resistance.<sup>35</sup> Or, that songs have been profound means of striving for and expressing peace and social justice.

Thus in summary let us review some of the reasons for the Christian stake in the arts before we turn to some programmatic suggestions for enlivening mission through them.

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<sup>33</sup> Murray, 'Artistic Idiom and Doctrinal Development', p. 292

<sup>34</sup> McIntyre, John, *Faith Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987); Bryant, David J., *Faith and the Play of Imagination* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989); Green, Garrett, *Imaging God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps 1940-1945* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

Not a few churches are dead or dying. The arts are a sign of life and bring ‘the living dead’ to life, a huge well of creativity. Without the arts, the church is likely to make little impact on the surrounding culture. The bulk of this paper has been an attempt to show that the impact on the shaping of western culture that the church has made has come in great measure through the arts. This is not something we should relegate to the past. The arts still are essential for fully-orbed missional engagement today.

**First** of all, we need to be reminded that the Bible is a work of art, in its constitutive parts, and as a whole.<sup>36</sup> The practices of scientific analysis have led frequently to viewing it as a compendium of disparate documents. Viewed aesthetically the Bible can be seen as an organic and compelling whole. Its inexhaustibility as a source of meaning is sustained by its artistic structures and the imaginativeness of its disclosure; ‘its form is more comprehensive than any given time and space can limit.’<sup>37</sup>

This is affirmed in our day when in the process of translating the gospels a classicist like E.V. Rieu can become a believer.

Were we to devote to their comprehension [the scriptures] a little of the selfless enthusiasm that is expended on the riddle of our physical surroundings, we should cease to say that Christianity is coming to an end—we might even feel that it had just begun.<sup>38</sup>

It is also affirmed when we learn that the one thing that the majority of Americans who engage in voluntarism or philanthropy have in common is that most of them have heard the story of The Good Samaritan.<sup>39</sup> (The artistic allusiveness of the Bible elicits participation and action.

**Second**, It is very hard to hide the arts. They are almost by nature public and thus are much less susceptible to being ghettoised. A recent conference of Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) in Montreal taking up the theme, ‘The City, Art, and Faith’, received extensive secular media coverage from all segments of the press. The thoughts of one commentator are worth sharing:

I haven’t thought about Christian art till a recent avalanche of signs made me. ... [including] a press release announcing next week’s Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) conference. I knew I was being directed to something. (And while I’m more familiar with Barthian signs than biblical ones, I can divine intervention when I see it.) Quick summation of my take on contemporary Christian art: Old ladies with blue hair fashioning paeans to the Holy Trinity with popsicle sticks. Maybe, if the hand of God slips in, there might be a little mural work. In the midst of my musing, the little voice that points out my glaring hypocrisies spoke up: ‘Listen. You like art that reflects the concerns of the artist’s life—like politics or identity issues, right? Why is it inconceivable that work reflecting the concerns of a Christian life could be as significant any other art?’ True enough. It’s significant how I am so quick to dismiss anything with the halo of Christianity around it. The Christian faith is one of the few targets that even the most (small-L) liberal types have no qualms taking aim at. And

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<sup>36</sup> Veith, Gene Edward, Jr., *State of the Arts: From Bazalel to Mapplethorpe* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991); Walker, Keith, *Images or Idols?*; Jeffrey, David Lyle, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> Walker, *Images or Idols?* p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Wuthnow, Robert, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 19.

for Christian artists the alienation can be two-fold, as some people within the church view artists as bizarre bohemians.<sup>40</sup>

This is an example of a real missional engagement with the surrounding culture the arts can have by nature of their public accessibility if they are released beyond an ecclesiastical ghetto and provided they exhibit excellence and authenticity. In this instance, it is fascinating to see a person who considers herself secular implicitly taking up the cause of 'oppressed artists' in the church. But perhaps the apostrophes should not be taken off oppressed artists. Do we, in fact, oppress those who give us the greatest access to speaking forth with the fullness of life?

**Third**, the arts have value as unique vehicles for expressing and communicating spiritual meaning and content within the church. They help congregations to become more winsome and attractive communities, which look beyond themselves to the concerns and needs in the surrounding culture. Whether expressly valued or not, the arts are everywhere in the church: architecture, music, literature, the choreography of liturgy. The arts articulate the faith for the inarticulate and speak to the need we all have for coherence between what we think and what we feel. Spiritually, liturgically, pedagogically, and evangelistically the arts serve the church in inestimable ways.

**Fourth**, the arts engender ecumenicity. The arts are probably one of the best ecumenical stories of the twentieth century. As noted above, the advocates for the arts in theological education do not represent one or two sectors of the church, but come from the full spectrum of liberal to conservative theology. An organization such as Christians in the Visual Arts in its membership of 1300 runs the whole denominational gamut from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant to almost every free church tradition imaginable (CIVA 1997 *Membership Directory*). The unanimity that this diversity expresses is a powerful witness to the fact of the content of the faith being more than propositional statement of truth.

## V SOME PROGRAMMATIC SUGGESTIONS

The following programmatic suggestions deal broadly with four areas: theological education, local congregations, Christian organizations, and public education and policy.

The arts are slowly finding a place in theological education. Outstanding programmes are found at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. Both institutions also have exhibition spaces that enhance significantly their presence in their wider cultural communities. But there are also other places where the arts are having a growing influence such as at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena and Regent College in Vancouver. (Both Fuller and Regent have arts festivals. Regent College's Lookout Art Gallery, established over a decade ago, is a regular part of the Vancouver art scene.) An increasing number of doctoral dissertations have been written in the area of theology and the arts (88 between January 1982 and December 1987, 111 between January 1988 and December 1992, 138 between January 1993 and March 1997 according to *Dissertations Abstracts*), although not all are being done in schools of theology or departments of religious studies.

The best programmes integrate the arts into the theological curriculum rather than simply adding them on as extras or as illustrations. The practice of Wesley Theological Seminary, due to the pioneering effort of artist/theologian, Catherine Kapikian, is exemplary in this regard.

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<sup>40</sup> Childerhose, Buffy, 1997. 'Culture Swab', column, *HOUR*. 5/23 (June 5-11, 1997), p 56.

Arts in the curriculum need not be expensive or elaborate to begin with. They may, in fact, turn out to be sources of new funding. Students should be taught about the role of art in mission, art as a document of the history of Christianity, art in worship, art in world religions, art in popular culture and cultural interpretation, and the role of art in communication.

The first art that all clergy and lay leaders should be introduced to is music. Although music makes up a considerable part of every worship service, rarely do clergy come prepared to the ministry with even a course in the history of hymnody, although they probably most frequently become the persons who choose what is sung. It is almost like not giving them a course in homiletics when much of what they do is preach! All should be rooted in an understanding of the history of music in the Christian church, especially hymnody, as much as in the history of the church and its theology and clergy should be encouraged to use the same critical faculties that they use in studying these subjects and the Scriptures when they choose music for a worship service. In all genres of music from classical hymnody to contemporary song, discernment for excellence should be encouraged. Church musicians, on the other hand, should be encouraged to become biblically and theologically literate. No matter how soothing musical sentimentality may feel for the moment, it will do no long term good for mission.

Next should come the visual arts. They are generally the most resisted of the arts, especially by protestant Christians. Yet, nearly all churches build buildings in which to meet and from which to serve, and these buildings bear their own witness, for good and ill. Students also need to be able to develop visual literacy so as to be able both to interpret and to persuade our contemporary society.

Next should be the performing arts. Lastly, literature, which is text-based as is 99 percent of seminary teaching in general, should be introduced into the curriculum. When powerfully evangelistic figures like G.K. Chesterton or C.S. Lewis are lionized let us make sure students realize they are not just towering intellects, but also very gifted artists, whose work might possibly not even be acknowledged or as effective if they were not artists!

The opportunity for those studying theology to have hands-on experience of trying to create art or find practical strategies for using the arts and encouraging others to use them in ministry should not be discouraged. An artist-in-residence programme could provide collegial diversity and stimulus to more traditional faculty and practical instruction for students wanting hands-on artistic experience. Also, the arts and the literature and publications relating to theology and the arts could serve from time to time as the topic for faculty development seminars and retreats.

Both educational institutions and local congregations have the possibilities of hosting arts festivals, exhibitions, concerts, performances, and conferences that both extend themselves and serve the wider community as well as inviting the public into the church precincts in an intriguing non-defensive way. Although it is a difficult and often touchy business, frequently involving a great deal of bureaucracy and church politics, there is also the matter of patronizing the arts, actually commissioning works—musical, visual, performance. Many artists of considerable stature would be most pleased to have a church commission. Sadly, the church does not have a good record of commissioning work from even her most talented sons and daughters in this past century. More often initiative comes from visionary individuals rather than congregational will.<sup>41</sup> Yet commissioning a

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<sup>41</sup> Walker, *Images or Idols?*; Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities*; Cook, John W. 1994. 'A Willem de Kooning Triptych', *Theological Education*, XXXI/1, (Autumn).

work of art for a church, is one of the most genuine and challenging ways of connecting with and trying to engage those in our cultural context.

However, before grandiose projects are undertaken, an illuminating first step might be for a congregation to compile an artistic profile of its community by identifying artists, musicians, performers, and those who are developing or would like to develop artistic ability. It might be quite surprising to see how much giftedness there is in our midst if we look for it! These people need to be included on building, worship, and mission committees and they also need special encouragement to think both biblically and theologically, not only artistically, about what they do. An atmosphere of openness and mutual trust needs to be encouraged. Artists must also sense that ministers and interested lay persons welcome what they have to offer. Churches can also have 'artists-in-residence' programmes or support an artist-as-missionary to work and be a presence in the secular art scene.

A multitude of Christian arts organizations, some small and some fairly large, exist. They range from theatre companies and dance groups to organizations for writers, performers, musicians, composers, visual artists, and crafts people. The single best source in identifying these organizations is *The International Directory of Christian Arts Organizations* published by Christians in the Arts Networking (CAN) (1994). The most recent edition of the CAN directory lists over 600 organizations in 25 countries categorized according to 12 artistic disciplines. The directory also includes an educational section listing degrees and programmes being offered in the arts, mostly but not exclusively, by institutions belonging to the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities. This is an excellent resource for churches and educational institutions.

If 'art is the John the Baptist of the heart, preparing its affections for Christ', as Jacques Maritain once remarked, it may well mean that the church needs to be an advocate for the arts in the arena of public education and policy, joining voices outside to make common cause in the way it has for civil and human rights and now, increasingly, is in the area of environmental concerns. What would a generation be like that had an adequate schooling in the arts as well as science and technology? Would it have enlarged sympathetic capacities because feeling as well as thinking was being educated? Would it possibly be more flexible and open to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ?

The arts have a capacity to create and subvert culture, and sometimes, through their power and fascination, there is danger of substituting them for religion. Christians must once again become practised in them for without the arts the church is likely to make little impact on the surrounding society or culture. Hence, there is an urgent need for a renewal of the arts in the Church today.

The last word here will go to the artist and educator, the late great, Robertson Davies. In his novel, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, the character, Geraint Powell, commonly recognized as being based in major measure on Davies' good friend, the renowned theatrical producer/director, Tyrone Guthrie, gives a defence of art, especially music, to the ultra-conservative pietistic parents of a greatly gifted daughter who oppose her committing herself to being a composer. Here is what Geraint says to them and to us:

I grew up a Calvinistic Methodist ... look at me, deep into the world of art, and theatre and music, and the fatherhood and splendour of God is present to me every hour of my life, and infuses everything I do. Does God speak only with a single tongue? ... does His mighty love not reach out to those who have not yet come to the full belief, to the life of total faith? May he not speak even in the theatre, in the opera house, to those who have fled from Him into a world they think frivolous and abandoned to pleasure? Oh, my friends, you are blessed in knowing the fullness of God's revealed Word. You have not encountered, as I have, the 'God who knows how to speak to the fallen and the reprobate through the

language of art; you have not met with the Cunning of God by which he reaches out to His children who shut their ears to His true voice. Our God is stern with those like yourselves whom He has marked from birth as His own, but He is gentle and subtle with those who have strayed into worldly paths. He speaks with many voices, and one of the most winning is the voice of music.<sup>42</sup>

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## Book Reviews

### WHAT IS MISSION? THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

by J. Andrew Kirk

London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999, Pb 304 pages

ISBN 0-232-52326-6

*Reviewed by John Roxborough*

*School of Ministry, Knox College, Dunedin*

Andrew Kirk has produced what deserves to become a standard introductory missiological text. He writes with deceptively simple clarity given the depth of thought behind what he is saying. His perspective is rooted in the Evangelical tradition at the same time as it draws on other Christian traditions and seeks to be fair to those he differs from. *What is Mission?* is a courteous apologetic, but it stands as an evangelistic book in its own right and should meet a need among students generally.

Acknowledgement is given to the massive contribution of David Bosch to mission studies, and the book is partly justified in terms of the gaps Bosch left for others to fill, but this is much more than a companion to Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (Orbis, 1991). The foundational section of *What is Mission?* is important in laying out areas of consensus in mission studies, and in providing a refreshing summary of the life and teaching of Jesus in relation to the things that Jesus' followers could be expected to go on doing. The chapter 'Announcing the Good News' is a coherent statement on evangelism which leads into discussion of cultures, justice, other religions, peace issues, the environment, and questions of partnership in mission.

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<sup>42</sup> Davies, Robertson, 'The Lyre of Orpheus' in *The Cornish Trilogy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 1000-1001.

Andrew Kirk is familiar with a broad range of ecumenical and Roman Catholic scholarship as well as the history of missiological thinking, and those resources can be traced through the notes. The sense of engagement with the questions of contemporary students is furthered by discussion exercises at the end of each chapter. This book embodies its own teaching and I hope it will be widely used.

## **THE COMMON TASK: A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN MISSION**

by M. Thomas Thangaraj

Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999. 167 pages. Paper

ISBN 0-687-00144-7

## **RELATING TO PEOPLE OF OTHER RELIGIONS**

by M. Thomas Thangaraj

Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, c1992. 112 pages. Paper.

ISBN 0-687-05139-8

*Reviewed by Henry Rowold*

*Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, MO, USA*

Faced with the assignment of teaching a course on the theology of mission (at Candler School of Theology in Emory University), but convinced of 'the bankruptcy of the traditional views of Christian mission', Thangaraj felt the need to reassess and to reformulate a theology of Christian mission for our post-modern age. Hence *The Common Task*.

His introductory chapter is a helpful entry point, namely juxtaposing the spirit and agenda of the World Missionary Congress of 1910 (Edinburgh) with a very different spirit and agenda today: pluralistic, post-modern, plagued by a series of systemic crises. The cautionary conclusions he draws are that 1) since 'mission' is no longer the private property of Christians (many businesses and agencies have 'mission statements'), and 2) since the post-modern mentality does not tolerate meta-narratives, 3) the Christian approach to mission must be done locally, even anecdotally, and must be done in concert with a wide variety of people outside Christian boundaries (theists, religionists, secularists).

Thangaraj proposes a new starting point, where people from that wide variety of backgrounds can share common ground and commitment, namely a *missio humanitatis*, which presumes ideals of responsibility, solidarity, and mutuality that can be affirmed and worked toward by people of all religious convictions—hence the title of the book. The author's next step after affirming those ideals is to relate them to God and to the Christian life. Almost seamlessly, those ideals are expanded to become cruciform responsibility, liberative solidarity, and eschatological mutuality, which in turn he identifies as the *missio ecclesiae*. From this platform, he reassesses the tasks of evangelism (including church growth), conversion, and transformation, and defines them as steps toward a person's holistic and long-term growth to faith and discipleship. Beyond these, Thangaraj commends the art of dialogue, the discipline of living openly with people of other religious traditions, at four different levels: life, action (shared programmes), theological exchange, religious experience. Upon this understanding, Thangaraj re-reads mission paradigms through Christian history, and re-applies the Scriptural testimony.

The task Thangaraj has taken on, namely to re-think Christian mission, is both a critical and an ambitious one. Not surprisingly, he brings much insight and much thought-provoking reflection to the task. His own Indian background, together with his filtering of missiological issues through a cultural situation where Christians are the minority,



provide an ongoing reality-check. Given his desire for a radically different starting point and his conviction that traditional views of Christian mission are 'bankrupt', however, Thangaraj is aware that he is staking out a path not all will follow with equal enthusiasm: 'What I have proposed so far may sound problematic.' Though some may include in things 'problematic' his running affinity for liberation categories, what struck this reviewer as most in need of continued conversation is his rooting mission in a shared *missio humanitatis*, rather than in the *missio dei*. While that is an interesting proposal for exploring dialogue, is it a firm enough foundation for dealing with the divine impulse and outreach for the world? Thangaraj's concern to establish a commonality of the mission task is reflected also in his closing comments (p. 152) where he defines mission as 'an invitation to join hands with others in building a world of justice, peace, and ecological health'. As a corrective to triumphalistic, spiritualistic expressions of mission, his concern has validity. As an expression of the 'theology of Christian mission', however, his proposal seems to this reviewer to flatten mission to overly horizontal and social categories.

The second book, *Relating to People of Other Religions*, is actually an earlier work, probably a preliminary form of some of the thoughts incorporated and refined in *The Common Task*. It is also a less ambitious piece, simpler, much more anecdotal, and written for a much wider audience, as reflected in the study guide at the end.

As in the former book, Thangaraj begins by demonstrating the complexities and reality of a pluralistic society. Rather than deny or resist that, however, he seeks to demonstrate 'God's preference for plurality' from Scripture: creation, prophetic eschatological vision, Jesus' dealings with people and his 'relativizing forms and places' of religion. From that context, he examines Christian views toward other religions. With adept creativity, he devises six options: 1) we know and they know not; 2) we perhaps know; they perhaps know; who knows? 3) what we have is good for us; what they have is good for them; 4) we know in full; they know in part; 5) we know and know that we know; they know and know not that they know; 6) we and they together need to know more. After examining each, strengths and weaknesses, Thangaraj opts for the last, not in order to blunt the Christian witness, but to reinforce the scriptural charge ([1 Peter 3:15-16](#)) that as we are 'always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you', we 'do it with gentleness and reverence'. Though dialogical mission may seem an oxymoron to some, Thangaraj writes winsomely and invitingly, and there is much to learn from him.

The task of formulating and refining the theology of Christian mission is critical. As a catalyst in this process, Thangaraj has served the church well. His challenges and cautions are valid and important: that our vision for mission be as inclusive as the lordship of God; that mission be planned and implemented in ways sensitive to the yearnings and contexts of non-Christian neighbours; that mission be integral and never condescending or manipulative. Of particular value also is his reflection on the Christian mission as an Indian theologian, which in turn serves to invite Christian theologians from all nationalities and denominational backgrounds to join and to refine 'the common task', which both includes formulating a Christian theology, and moves beyond mere formulation to the task which such theology serves, namely the mission itself.

## **DIE APOSTELSTRASSE: EINE AUSSERGEWÖHNLICHE VISION UND IHR VERWIRKLICHUNG**

by Andreas Baumann

Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 1999

Biblical Archaeology and History, Vol. 8. Pb 180 pp. Bibliog,  
index, illus ISBN 3-7655-9430-X

*Reviewed by Richard V. Pierard*  
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This master's thesis, carried out at the Korntal centre of Columbia Biblical Seminary, is the fascinating story of a bold venture in the nineteenth century to spread the gospel message in Egypt, then the Upper Nile, and even into distant Ethiopia, or Abyssinia as it was commonly called then. There had been several attempts at Protestant missionary work in Egypt, but at mid-century little existed in the way of fruitful ministry. Around this time a visionary mission organizer in Switzerland, Christian Friedrich Spittler (1782–1867), came up with the idea of establishing a chain of mission stations reaching from the Mediterranean to Ethiopia. A co-founder of the Basel Missionary Society in 1815, he created the 'Pilgrim Mission' at St. Chrischona near Basel in 1840. It was basically a school that prepared laypeople who were journeymen craftsmen to be self-supporting missionaries.

The inspiration for Spittler's 'Apostolic Highway' or 'Apostles' Road' into the heart of Africa was an unsuccessful effort by a Basel missionary to create a chain of stations staffed by teachers and artisans linking the German colonies in southern Russia with the West. Also contributing to his thinking was Church Missionary Society worker Johann Ludwig Krapf's (1810–81) proposal in 1850 to set up a chain of stations in Africa from Mombasa in the east to Gabon in the west that would tie together the fledgling mission operations and provide a barrier to Islamic expansion. What actually made the idea feasible were the opening of Palestine to western contacts and the creation of the joint English-Prussian 'Protestant Bishopric in Jerusalem' in 1841. Appointed to the post in 1846 was Samuel Gobat (1799–1879), a German who had served with the CMS in Egypt, and Spittler proposed to him in 1852 that Pilgrim Mission journeymen resume the Galla work in Ethiopia that the CMS had given up a few years earlier. With English financial help the four Chrischona workers went to Ethiopia in 1855–56.

The following year Spittler mentioned the Apostle's Highway idea to the Pilgrim Mission board and fleshed it out in 1858–59. They would establish twelve stations, to be named after nine of the disciples plus Mark, Luke, and Paul. Baumann shows convincingly that, contrary to the assertions of later writers, Spittler devised the scheme after the Ethiopian work had begun. The first workers left the Pilgrim Mission's base in Jerusalem in 1860 and founded the first post in Cairo (St. Mark), where they engaged in education, literature distribution, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Then short-lived stations were opened near the Ethiopian border at Matammah in Nubia (St. Paul, 1864–68) and Khartoum (St. Thomas, 1864–71). These were basically commercial enterprises and most of the missionaries died from tropical diseases. In 1865 St. Matthew was founded in Alexandria, which was a school for European children and after ten years was handed over to the local German congregation. With the help of a rich Englishman, Robert Arthington, a station named St. Peter was opened in Aswan in 1866, but after two years it was given to the American Presbyterians. The other seven were merely names on the map, projected but never developed.

The Apostle's Highway enterprise collapsed after the British punitive expedition in Ethiopia in 1868. This discredited mission work there and all missionaries had to leave. In addition, the deaths of so many workers and the economic situation in the Nile Valley made the stations unviable, while the Coptic Christians turned against the venture, wealthy backers in England and Switzerland lost interest in it, and Spittler's death in 1867 deprived it of its prime advocate. His successor, Carl Heinrich Rappard (1837–1909), could not revive interest in it.

Still the Nile venture had long-range significance. It directly influenced the mission work of the Dutch pastor H. W. Witteveen (1815–84), Karl Kumm (1874–1938) and the

Sudan Pioneer Mission, and faith mission boards, such as the African Inland Mission, Sudan United Mission, and Christian and Missionary Alliance, which adopted the chain of stations idea. The Pilgrim Mission also changed its approach. Henceforth, its trainees would serve under other mission societies rather than in separate Chrischona mission enterprises.

The book is richly illustrated (unfortunately the date of C. H. Rappard's photo on page 77 is incorrect) with contemporary pictures, sketches, and letters. Baumann bases his work firmly on primary materials from the St. Chrischona and Basel State Archives, the flavour of which he gives in a lengthy appendix. He is also conversant with the relevant secondary literature. He gives us a clear picture of this episode in missionary history and deepens our understanding of mission work in northeastern Africa.

## **REENVISIONING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: EXPLORING A MISSIONAL ALTERNATIVE TO CURRENT MODELS**

by Robert Banks

Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999.

xii + 268 pp, Index, Pb

ISBN: 0-8028-4620-3

*Reviewed by Robert W. Ferris*

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Banks opens his book with an insightful review of a dialogue on the nature and role of theological education which has spanned nearly two decades. He then turns to an examination of biblical precedents, proposes an alternative 'missional' model, and explores the implications of this model for seminary faculty, students, institutional culture, and curricula. The result is a profound challenge to seminary 'business as usual'. Far from a simple three-step program of remediation, Banks' calls for a total reenvisioning of theological education.

To comprehend the dialogue on the nature and role of theological education, Banks abandons Kelsey's rubric of 'Athens and Berlin' in favour of a more straight-forward classification. 'Classical', 'vocational', and 'dialectical' proposals are reviewed, as well as 'confessional' models proposed by Schnier (Roman Catholic) and Muller (Reformed). Over against the theological and philosophical foundations of these proposals, Banks calls for reflection on biblical precedents, from which he develops his 'missional' vision for theological education.

'Missional' theological education 'is wholly or partly field based, and . . . involves some measure of doing what is being studied' (p 142). 'Theological education is primarily though not exclusively concerned with actual *service*—informed and transforming—of the *kingdom* and therefore primarily focuses on acquiring cognitive, spiritual-moral, and practical *obedience*' (p. 144, emphasis his).

Banks derives two principal observations from his review of biblical models: 1) teaching occurred in the context of ministry; and 2) teachers related to learners in different 'levels of association'. He identifies three concentric groups of learners, from intimate, to committed, to casual. The first observation is the foundation stone of his proposal for a 'missional' model. The second reappears at the end of the book as he differentiates the roles of contemporary residential, extension, and distance learning modes.

Banks' attention to models leads him to take a broad view of the biblical data. His review of the teaching office in the Old and New Testaments focuses on the schools of the prophets, on Jesus and the Twelve, and on Paul and his apostolic band. The teaching

function of the Old Testament priesthood is ignored, as is the role of the scribe (cf. Ezra). Key passages on the role of the teacher in the New Testament (e.g., [Mt. 23:1-12](#); [Ac. 20:18-31](#); [1 Tim. 4:11-16](#)) receive only passing comment or are overlooked.

Despite his impressive use of literature, there is at least one source Banks missed which could have enlightened his discussion of biblical precedents. William Barclay's out-of-print work, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World* (first published in Britain as *Train Up a Child*), affords a more thorough description of education in Old Testament Israel. Barclay also highlights the significant impact of the exile on Jewish education and the central role of the synagogue school in 1st Century Palestine, both of which eluded Banks. If anything, incorporating these data would add weight to Banks' case, however, since they demonstrate that his 'missional' model was intentionally chosen and did not result from ignorance of a more developed schooling approach.

Banks understands that 'reconceiving teaching as a missional practice' is central to the renewal of theological education. He calls for a shift from presentational to conversational models of teaching and learning (pp. 179 f.). Citing Parker Palmer, Banks notes, 'We do not just *present* the truth, we must *represent* it to others. We do not just relate the truth in the hope that others might comprehend it, we relate to them in a way that helps them begin to be apprehended by it' (p. 174, emphasis his).

Banks affirms the importance of academic scholarship, yet he recognizes that academic preoccupations cannot define the ethos or orientation of theological education. 'High-level research certainly has its place, but it has to be *put in its place*, alongside other essential components of the intellectual and educational task. The focus of such research should primarily or mostly serve not *the academy* but the *church or world* in some intentional way' (p. 237 f, emphasis his).

Banks is cognizant of the radical nature of his ideas and thus the professional and institutional resistance they must expect. Although he knows reform cannot be achieved piecemeal, he offers limited proposals which individual faculty members can implement in anticipation of radical renewal. Nevertheless, these are intended only as 'internal "half-way houses",' to be supplemented by 'external "way-stations" ' (p 184), on the way to thorough-going reenvisioning of theological education.

In the end, there is no doubt that Banks intends to embrace fully the implications of his 'missional' model. One wonders, however, if he truly understands the power of the genie he has uncorked. His final proposal retains the structure of a residential campus, with a curriculum of 'courses' designed and offered by a faculty.

Does Banks recognize that the schooling model itself lies at the heart of the problem? As he effectively demonstrates, the biblical pattern is one of a teacher, intimately familiar with the scriptures, who is actively engaged in ministry. Teaching occurs as God's truth is applied and communicated in life and ministry settings. The 'curriculum' is less a course of studies than a living and reflective transfer of the teacher's values, commitments, and understandings. Curricular directions are set more by issues arising in the context of ministry than by 'the structure of knowledge' or by the teacher's perception of what learners need to know.

This is a serious piece of scholarship. The book reflects familiarity with a broad literature; it is a pity the publisher did not include a list of works cited, since it could have formed a reading list for others. Such a list also would remedy Banks' sometimes maddening propensity to provide only partial citations. As it is, his sources lie buried in extensive footnotes, sometimes consuming two-thirds or more of a page.

Banks glides easily across a broad field of theological perspectives, from liberal post-moderns to feminists to liberationists to evangelicals and charismatics, gleaning insights which he incorporates into his reenvisioning. Although an Australian, Banks writes for

North American theological educators generally and evangelicals in particular. In the process, however, he raises an evangelical voice in the current debate, where the voices of liberal protestant theologians have been dominant.

Western theological educators will find this book profoundly challenging. Some may prefer to ignore it. I challenge academic deans to distribute copies of Banks' book to the members of their faculty and to schedule a two-day retreat just to engage Part Three. (Parts One and Two can serve as background reading.) Wrestling with the implications of Part Four well could extend over an entire year of faculty dialogues. Such a programme of engagement, however, may be more threatening than some faculties are prepared to face.

The message of Banks' book for church leaders and theological educators in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eurasia, is that western schooling models may enjoy colonial and neo-colonial prestige, but they lack biblical foundation. This is not bad news! It means that equipping for ministry in these regions need not be strangled by a western schooling model inappropriate to their cultures and economies. Not only is the church free to experiment with nonformal and informal modes of ministry training, there is solid biblical precedent for doing so.

## **MAKE THE OLD TESTAMENT LIVE, FROM CURRICULUM TO CLASSROOM**

Edited by Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham  
Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.

218 pp.

ISBN 0-8028-4427-8

*Reviewed by Tim Meadowcroft,  
Bible College of New Zealand*

This book is a collection of thirteen essays collected by Richard Hess and Gordon Wenham, both of whom contribute a chapter to the book. The material is aimed at those who are involved in teaching the Old Testament at tertiary level. All the contributors are accomplished practitioners, and Hess and Wenham themselves are well established figures in the world of evangelical theological education.

The essays are divided into three sections. Three essays at the start consider more theoretical questions. Hess argues for the Old Testament's place in the curriculum while Craig Bartholomew considers the nature of Old Testament study required in what he calls a 'post-liberal' age. The third theoretical essay is an eloquent plea from James McKeown for the teaching of Old Testament Theology. McKeown completes his chapter with a proposed course outline.

The middle section addresses a range of geographical, religious and institutional contexts with ideas for more effective teaching of the Old Testament. To exemplify the scope, Robert Hubbard considers the American Seminary, Wenham the British Religious Studies context, Ida Glaser the context of Islam, and M. Daniel Carroll R. the Two-Thirds World and particularly Latin America. This section of the book is packed with practical advice, and in that respect lives up to the subtitle 'From Curriculum to Classroom'. Hugh Williamson's chapter on supervising PhD students addresses a narrower audience than the others, but is a gem. It should be compulsory reading for all research supervisors and their students.

A final section contains an essay by David Baker on the more specialist field of teaching Biblical Hebrew, and a response to all the contributors from Clive Lawless, an education specialist with Britain's Open University. Lawless is able to provide a valuable integrative focus on the diverse contributions.

The whole is completed by a twenty-five page annotated bibliography compiled by Hess and Carroll. While such an exercise inevitably evokes disagreement from colleagues on the items selected or the judgements expressed, for somebody engaged in the perpetual struggle to keep abreast of the discipline of Old Testament studies, this volume is worth the money for the bibliography alone.

There are no weak chapters in this book, and there are several exceptional ones. For me, Hess's experience on both sides of the Atlantic provides a good overview of the importance of Old Testament studies with a nice balance of the visionary and the pragmatic. Wenham's account of capturing the attention of students in a Religious Studies environment is an inspiration for my classroom practice. McKeown's appeal for Old Testament Theology has enabled me to put words to my own instincts, confronted as I am by the twin challenges of the demise of the Biblical Theology movement and an evangelical institutional response of concentration on exegetical method. Lawless provides some theoretical hooks for pedagogical strategies. And I have already referred to Williamson's essay.

This collection will appeal to all who teach the Old Testament and long to see it live in both the hearts and minds of their students. It assumes an evangelical audience, but its value is not dependent on that perspective. Most of its contents also are applicable to Biblical Studies generally, if not to other theological disciplines. If there is a criticism it is that, despite the chapters by Glaser and Carroll, the focus is very much on the western tradition and especially the Atlantic axis. But no book can do everything, and this is one that I commend warmly for what it does do.

## **FAITH AND REASON: SEARCHING FOR A RATIONAL FAITH**

by Ronald H. Nash

Michigan: Zondervan, 1988,

ISBN 0-310-29401-0 295 pages

*Reviewed by Greg Restall*

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Ronald Nash is a Christian philosopher of quite some repute, and he has produced a wise, sensible introduction to Christian philosophy. *Faith and Reason* is written to fulfil two closely related aims. Firstly, to introduce readers to the main issues in the philosophy of religion, and secondly, to serve as a manual for apologetics, by proposing (and defending) distinctively Christian answers to those questions. By and large, it fulfils both of these requirements, though it has some shortcomings.

Nash covers the ground one would expect to see in a work like this: the arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, and issues about miracles. However, there are some distinctive approaches too. The book starts off with a chapter on world-views. For Nash, rational inquiry is not so much about testing individual beliefs against evidence, but rather the testing of entire world-views. There is clearly something to this. At least since Quine (who does not receive a mention) philosophers have been generally convinced that it is one's entire web of belief that bears the brunt of testing against evidence. However, Nash's discussion seems rather strained when he comes to the issue of how one goes about choosing a world-view. It seems that for Nash, you weigh up evidence of both the inner and outer worlds (which seems to be both your psychology, your 'intimality' or what it is to be you, together with the way you see the world) to see whether a world-view makes sense of this data. If it does, then that is good. If it doesn't, then you discard it, and take up a better one. But world-views are not the kind of thing you can take on or drop at

will. It would have been helpful had there been more discussion of *how* a reasoner should best deal with the situation when her or his world-view is manifestly inadequate.

The distinctives of the book do not end there. From the introductory chapter on world-views, we move to a chapter on rationality. This reflects the current trend in western philosophy to give a priority to epistemology (the study of how we can know, or what it is to have knowledge) over metaphysics (the study of what is). Nash gives a capable overview of current work in Reformed Epistemology, championed by Plantinga and Wolterstorff. He argues that foundationalism (the view that all rational belief must be somehow grounded in some kind of basis) is misguided, and that we are entitled to belief even when it has no basis in evidence. This is then applied to religious belief.

These are the main distinctives of Nash's book, compared with other introductions to the philosophy of religion from a Christian perspective. For the rest, Nash delivers a generally orthodox work. In his treatment of the arguments for and against the existence of God, he rightly points out that the notion of a good argument is person-relative. What is convincing for me may not convince you. And he neatly shows that while none of the standard theistic arguments is going to convince everybody, they can still be helpful, and even, for some, convincing.

Nash seems on a less firm footing when he discusses the problem of evil. He neatly shows that the mere existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God, following Plantinga's work. The argument is less convincing when he tries to show that the amount of evil we have in this world is not evidence against God's existence. Nash tries to show that considerations of soul making (we wouldn't be fully mature people if there weren't suffering), free will (we are responsible for much of the suffering ourselves) and natural law (pain is inevitable in a law-governed universe such as ours) when taken together are enough to show that the existence of evil in the quantities we see has an explanation.

This is the least satisfying part of the book for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is not convincing. It does seem that the Christian view of paradise is a counterexample. In the fully redeemed universe, there will be no more pain, yet we will have free will (at least, as much free will as we have now), we will be maturing, and the universe will be law-governed just as it is at the moment. Yet pain and evil need not feature. Anyone who attempts to argue this line must at least show how these two cases are genuinely different. Secondly, Nash doesn't give an explicitly Christian argument. It seems clear that any Christian discussion of the place of evil in the world must look at the cross of Jesus, for there we have the most evil act in the world, and yet, from it God brought the greatest blessings the world has seen. If such a great evil has a place in God's creation, what does this mean for other evils? It would be good to see more Christian philosophers developing a truly Christian theodicy, using the resources we have available to us as Christians.

There is much more of worth in Nash's book, and I recommend it to anyone who wants to have an overview of Christian philosophy of religion from a distinctly Reformed Evangelical approach. As I have argued, it is not the last word in these topics, and it is not the only good Christian book on this topic. But Nash has provided a small bibliography, and some of the other introductory works there, especially the books by C. Stephen Evans, can help balance or fill out some of his points. So, *Reason and Faith* is a helpful way to start your journey into issues in the philosophy of religion, but I wouldn't recommend that you finish there.

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