
Rethinking the Relationship between Christianity and World Religions, and Exploring Its Implications for Doing Christian Mission in Asia

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This essay explores the relationship between Christianity and other world religions, and considers its implications for doing Christian mission in Asia. It seeks to respond to the question of how Asian Christians are being challenged to formulate their understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. It also reflects upon the implications of this relationship for doing Christian mission in Asia in the midst of the resurgence and renewed vitality of indigenous religions in postcolonial Asia.

On June 14, 1910, delegates representing the mission boards of mainline Protestant churches and mission societies from Europe and North America gathered at the Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland in Edinburgh for a momentous event that came to be memorialized as the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference (“Edinburgh 1910”) (Stanley 2009). From the very beginning, Europeans and North Americans dominated the conference. W. Richey Hogg notes that Edinburgh 1910 reflected “the high tide of Western European optimism and imperialism” that assumed that the imminent Christianization of the world was at hand (Hogg 1980:146). In his landmark study, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Brian Stanley observes that among the 1,215 official delegates, at most 19 were born outside of Europe or North America: 8 Indians, 4 Japanese, 3 Chinese, 1 Korean, 1 Burmese, 1 Turkish, and possibly, 1 African (2009:91–92, 97–98).

The fruits of Edinburgh 1910 were undeniable: both the International Missionary Council (established in 1921) and the World Council of Churches (established 1948) traced their origin and development to Edinburgh 1910. Nevertheless, Edinburgh 1910

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is often perceived as the high point of the global expansion of Eurocentric Christianity throughout the world in the early twentieth century. It brought to fruition more than a century of active Protestant missionary expansion that was driven by an explosive growth in European and North American mission societies operating within the broader socio-political context of European and North American empire building and colonization (Yates 1994:7–31).

While Edinburgh 1910 discussed a range of topics, one specific issue is just as relevant today as it was in 1910, i.e., the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. On this issue, the tenor and direction of Edinburgh 1910 was greatly influenced by the American Methodist layman, John R. Mott, who presided over the conference proceedings and inspired the delegates with his overarching vision of “the Evangelization of the World in this Generation.” Mott himself viewed Edinburgh 1910 as “the most notable gathering in the interest of the worldwide expansion of Christianity ever held, not only in missionary annals, but in all Christian annals” (Hopkins 1979:342). Moreover, Mott harbored the “realistic possibility” of “imminent Christian triumph” over other world religions (Stanley 2009:15). In a similar vein, Stephen Neill quotes the conference delegates as confidently expecting that “as the lordship of Christ came to be recognized, these other religions would disappear in their present form — the time would come when Shiva and Vishnu would have no more worshippers than Zeus and Apollo would have today” (Neill 1990:418). Brian Stanley cites the opening address of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, who confidently asserted that “there be some standing here tonight who shall not taste of death till they see . . . the Kingdom of God come with power” (2009:1).

Notwithstanding the Edinburgh 1910 delegates’ hopeful aspirations, the world’s great religions have not become extinct. On the contrary, they continue to grow and thrive not only in Asia but also in North America and Europe. While Asia may be home to some two-thirds of the world’s population, nevertheless it remains the continent with the smallest Christian population despite two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for anywhere between 4 and 6 percent of the total population of Asia.

Renewed and Revitalized World Religions in Asia

More significantly, Christians continue to represent only a small proportion of the residents of China and India, who collectively comprise about one third of the world’s population. While David Aikman (2003) makes the provocative claim in his book, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* that 20 to 30 percent of the Chinese population would be Christian by the 2030s (Aikman 2003:285), the Research Director of the Beijing Center for Chinese Studies, Jean-Paul Wiest cautions us against making such overoptimistic predictions. Specifically, Wiest points out that China is also in the midst of an impressive Buddhist, Daoist, and Chinese folk religions revival (2007:531). Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank share Wiest’s sentiments, noting that China has the world’s largest Buddhist population, a thriving Daoist community, and an expanding Muslim community that is larger than the total Christian population in China (2009:1). On the issue

of Chinese Muslims, Wiest reminds us that the growing Chinese Muslim population in Gansu and Xinjiang is unlikely to yield up its Islamic faith to become Christians. This is because its Islamic faith is tightly wedded to its non-Han culture and ethnic pride (2007:531).

In addition, for many Asian nations that gained independence from their colonial masters in the aftermath of the Second World War, independence and postcolonial consciousness have led to a discovery of national pride, and with it, a massive revival of traditional Asian religions. World religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have been rejuvenated and are now asserting themselves to the point of sending missionaries to Europe and North America and gaining new believers worldwide. India is witnessing the rise of the militant Hindutva religious movement and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), both of which reject secular tolerance in favor of wielding the sword of religious zealotry against what its fundamentalist adherents argue are religious traditions that are foreign and alien to Indian culture. Islam has been on the upsurge, especially in Asia and Africa, making it one of the fastest growing religions in the world.

In East Asia, Buddhism has gained a new vitality as new Buddhist movements that first emerged in the early twentieth century blossomed in the decades after the Second World War. For example, the charismatic Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928) has transformed the Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement from a small Japanese lay sect of Nichiren Buddhism into a rapidly growing global Buddhist organization with more than 12 million members in over 190 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Seager 2006). Established in 1967 by the Taiwanese Buddhist Dharma Master, the Venerable Hsing Yun (b. 1927), the Fo Guang Shan monastic order is the largest Chinese Mahayana Buddhist organization in the world with temples, monasteries, schools, and universities in 173 countries across five continents. The Venerable Hsing Yun is one of the main proponents of Humanistic Buddhism, which seeks to integrate Buddhist spirituality with daily ethical living, as well as work for positive social change in this present world (Chandler 2004). Mention must be made of the well known international Buddhist relief organization, the Tzu Chi Foundation that was established in 1966 by the Buddhist nun and dharma master, the Venerable Cheng Yen (b. 1937), who is often regarded as the Buddhist counterpart to Mother Teresa (Ching 1995).

Looking at this picture of revitalized and flourishing world religions that show no signs of becoming extinct, contrary to the optimistic expectations of the delegates at Edinburgh 1910, one is reminded of the insights of the missiologist David Bosch in his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Specifically, Bosch notes that with the collapse of Western colonialism, Christianity “lost its hegemony” everywhere and “today has to compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies,” such that “there are no longer oceans separating Christians from other religionists.” On this basis, he contends that “we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to *world views which offer this-worldly salvation*, and (2) to *other faiths*” (Bosch 1991:475–477). Bosch’s careful observations and comments are especially relevant to the difficult task of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. As the Vietnamese American theologian,

Peter C. Phan explains, "it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death," and more importantly, "the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out" (Phan 2003:117).

In this essay, I would like to take David Bosch's invitation to re-envision how we do Christian mission today, together with Peter Phan's observations about the challenges that religious pluralism pose to Asian Christianity, as a starting point to rethink the relationship between Christianity and the great religious traditions of Asia, and considering its implications for doing Christian mission in Asia. In particular, in view of the revitalized and resurgent world religions in contemporary Asia, the *fact* and *reality* of the matter is that religious pluralism is here to stay in Asia for the foreseeable future. Hence, this essay seeks to respond to the question of how Asian Christians are being challenged to formulate their understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. It also reflects upon the implications of this relationship for doing Christian mission in Asia in the midst of the resurgence and renewed vitality of indigenous religions in postcolonial Asia.

From "Banana" Theology to "Mango" Theology

In his seminal work entitled *Mangoes or Bananas: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (1999), the Malaysian missiologist and Bishop of the Methodist Church in Malaysia, Hwa Yung asserts that Asian Christians in general and Asian theologians in particular have only superficially engaged with Asian cultures and spiritual worldviews. He points out that Asian Christian theologies are more akin to bananas, yellow on the outside (i.e., superficially Asian) but white on the inside (i.e., Western or European), rather than mangoes that are yellow in the inside when ripe. For him, the mango with its yellow flesh is the quintessential Asian fruit representing an authentic Asian theology that is deeply rooted in the Asian worldview. To break free from being captive to Western theological methods, concerns, and presuppositions, Hwa Yung proposes that an emerging Asian Christian contextual theology ought to be missiological in orientation and shaped by the following fourfold criteria: (1) the ability to address the diverse socio-political Asian contexts in which Asian Christians find themselves; (2) the empowerment they bring to the evangelistic and pastoral tasks of the Asian Churches; (3) the ability to facilitate the inculturation of the Christian gospel in the Asian milieu, and (4) faithfulness to the Christian tradition.

On the one hand, it is true that Hwa Yung himself does not provide his own constructive Asian theology beyond challenging existing liberal and evangelical Asian theologians for their dependence on Western theological methods. On the other hand, his call to cultivate a "mango" theology and his fourfold criteria for developing an authentic Asian theology are useful starting points for our present discussion of defining an Asian Christianity that takes seriously the vitality and deep sapiential insights of Asian religious traditions, while remaining faithful to its foundational roots in the Christian gospel.

If Asian Christians were to reflect on the social context of their daily life experiences as Hwa Yung suggests, they would realize that, with the exception of the Philippines or East Timor, they are not living in a world where Christianity is the dominant force that influences and shapes culture, ethics, politics, and society. Rather,

they realize that the other religions define and dominate the social landscape in their homelands, with Christians being the *pusillus grex* amidst the overwhelming number of other religious practitioners. Indeed, Asian Christians have the daily experiences of being very much at home in the pluralistic religious Asian milieu, having been born into, and living amid this religious diversity and plurality. Moreover, many Asian Christians themselves come from a "mixed" religious background, with extended family members as followers of a variety of religious traditions. They live and interact on a daily basis with their family members, relatives, friends, and neighbors from other religious traditions, sharing with them the joys and sufferings, as well as blessings and misfortunes of daily living.

While many European and North American theologians and church leaders wax lyrical about the practice and achievements of interfaith dialogue in Europe and North America, where the great religions of the world are often viewed as the minority yet exotic "Other" vis-à-vis the dominant position of Christianity, Asian Christians live permanently amid the practitioners of these great religions. And while theologians and church leaders in Europe and North America may invite representatives of these other religions to meet occasionally for dialogue and conversation, Asian Christians engage in a daily dialogue of life witness with these fellow Asian neighbors who are followers of the great religious traditions of Asia.

At the same time, one must also acknowledge that the social context of Asian Christians' interaction with their fellow Asians who are adherents of other religious traditions is not always harmonious and peaceful. While Asia is often spoken of as the birthplace of the great religions of the world, including Christianity, many of these world religions are experiencing a resurgence of pride and exclusivist chauvinism in many parts of Asia. Ironically, without diversity and plurality, there is no room for the Christian gospel in Asia amid the dominance of the great Asian religions.

Thus, Asian Christians also have firsthand experiences of fanatics and fundamentalists who reject the long history of religious diversity and plurality in Asia, seeking to impose their vision as normative through coercion and violence. The forced conversions of Christians in many parts of Asia, the simmering Christian-Muslim conflicts in Indonesia and Christian-Hindu conflicts in India, the controversy over the use of the term "Allah" for God by Malaysian Christians, and restrictions placed on Christians' freedom of association are imprinted in the consciousness of these Asian Christians. Asian Christians know only too well that unless they defend religious diversity and pluralism against exclusivist religious chauvinism, there will be no room at all for Christianity in a continent dominated by the great religions of the world.

If we accept Hwa Yung's contention that Asian Christians, for the sake of their faith, ought to take their Asianness seriously, then Asian Christians would have to acknowledge that the Asian context of religious pluralism is not a dilemma to be eradicated, but a distinctive characteristic of being Asian and Christian. In particular, because Asian Christianity would not dominate Asia to the exclusion and extinction of other religions in the manner of medieval Christendom in Europe, it has to become truly immersed and rooted in the Asian milieu for its survival and growth. Hence, religious diversity and pluralism is essential to the survival and growth of Asian Christianity as a minority faith tradition in a continent dominated by other great

religious traditions. This calls for a distinctively Asian approach to the proclamation of the gospel that is sensitive to such religious diversity and plurality.

Mission “Among” the Nations (*Missio Inter Gentes*)

In *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Catholic missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder state that the rebirth and renewal of mission is shaped by three interrelated models: (1) “mission as participation in the mission of the Triune God” (*Missio Dei*), (2) “mission as liberating service for the reign of God,” and (3) “mission as proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal savior” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:281–398). More importantly, Bevans and Schroeder explain that taken individually, each model has its strengths and flaws. In their opinion, “only a synthesis of all three will provide the firmest foundation for the model of mission,” which they define as “prophetic dialogue” (2004:348–395).

How should Asian Christians take up the challenge posed by Bevans and Schroeder to do “prophetic dialogue” in Asia? In response, I would like to propose that we rethink the task of doing Christian mission in Asia as mission “among” the nations (*missio inter gentes*) instead of the classical paradigm of mission “to” the nations (*missio ad gentes*). The Editor Emeritus of Orbis Books and presently Research Professor of Missiology at New York Theological Seminary, William R. Burrows (2001) first proposed the term “*missio inter gentes*” (mission among the nations) in his response to the Indian Jesuit missiologist, Michael Amaladoss’ paper, “Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia” (2001), which was presented to the Catholic Theological Society of America at its annual convention in 2001. According to Burrows, “Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio inter gentes* than *missio ad gentes*” (Burrows 2001:15, emphasis added). To support this paradigm shift, he puts forward the following five propositions (Ibid.:15–20):

1. Asian Christians are in a process that can be imaged best as one of translating the Gospel or incarnating Christ in Asia in the gentle, loving, persuasive power of the Spirit.
2. Many Asian Christians understand the religious traditions of Asia not as demonic or evil but as vehicles of God’s salvific encounter with their followers.
3. Countering the perception that Christianity is imported from Europe and North America, and not properly “Asian” remains the single most critical thing on the Christian agenda in Asia. If the accusation of “foreign import” cannot be overcome in Asia, Christianity has a doubtful future.
4. The mission among the nations (*missio inter gentes*) paradigm recognizes the task of the Christian mission in a plural religious context to be one of proclaiming and making the world ready for God’s Kingdom. It views the ultimate reconciliation of the world’s contradictions as *eschatological*, one that will bring about not a unity among *religions* but a unity among *believing persons*. In the context of the religious diversity and plurality of Asia, this paradigm acknowledges that the religious unity of humankind will be an *eschatological* accomplishment — one in which the Spirit is active in other religious Ways.
5. The mission among the nations (*missio inter gentes*) paradigm proposes a new kind of missionary activity that sees other world religions not as Christianity’s rivals or enemies that have to be overcome, but as potential allies, *collaborating* and *working together* against the real, *mutual* enemies of all forms of evil, attachment to wealth, power, selfishness, exploitation, as well as the social, cultural, and political structures that support them.

Taking Burrows' profound insights one step further, I would like to submit that the paradigm of mission *among* the nations (*missio inter gentes*) may be understood in two different ways, i.e., (1) it redefines the relationship between churches, and (2) it acknowledges the reality that religious pluralism is here to stay for the foreseeable future and proposes a new paradigm for Christianity to relate to these religions.

Redefining the Relationship between Churches

First, this paradigm *redefines* the relationship between the traditional churches of Europe and North America on the one part, and the emerging churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America on the other part. The missiologist Andrew Walls points out that the "centre of gravity of the Christian world" has shifted away from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific (2002:85). As he writes: "Christianity began the twentieth century as a Western religion, and indeed, *the* Western religion; it ended the century as a non-Western religion, on track to become progressively more so" (2002:64). Philip Jenkins concurs, arguing in his provocative work, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, that as a result of significant demographic shifts, the future of Christianity lies not in the North, i.e., Europe and North America, but in the South, i.e., Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where two thirds of all Protestant Christians live today (2007:45). He also notes that the Christianity of the South is far more vibrant, thriving, and growing, compared to the Christianity of the North.

More significantly, the majority of this growth is largely the result of the hard work of indigenous missionaries and church leaders. For example, self-initiated Chinese efforts have led to an impressive growth of Chinese Christians, with the majority of converts belonging to newly emerging independent house churches that are primarily Pentecostal or Charismatic in orientation (Aikman 2003, Lambert 1999). Clearly, Christianity's fate in China is no longer tied to European or North American churches. It is slowly but surely becoming a Chinese religion in the same manner as Chinese Buddhism, which evolved from a foreign religion to become a Chinese religion.

This development has important implications. What this means is that the classical missiological framework of the traditional *sending* churches in Europe and North America and emerging *receiving* churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is no longer relevant in view of these developments in the emerging global Christianity. The paradigm of mission among the nations (*missio inter gentes*) responds to the challenges of global Christianity by redefining the relationship among all of these churches to be one of *koinonia*, interdependence, solidarity, and collaboration as equal partners. No longer does one accept uncritically the paternalism of the traditional hierarchical missionary structure, which sees the "mature" churches of Europe and North America as offering missionary leadership and sending foreign missionaries to the exotic mission lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Neill 1990:362, 380–448; Anderson 1974). In short, instead of hierarchy and dependence, the mission *among* the nations (*missio inter gentes*) paradigm recognizes and fosters mutuality, interdependence, solidarity, and collaboration among the various churches without regard as to geographical locations or supposed maturity levels. It eschews the artificial dichotomy or division of labor between "mission sending" nations and "mission receiving" nations. Instead, it suggests that a new mission theology for today's global, interconnected world is

rooted in interdependence and solidarity, whereby all nations are both senders and recipients at the same time, engaging in mutual collaboration to promote the liberative and life-giving Good News of Jesus Christ.

Amos Yong and his Pneumatological Theology of Interreligious Hospitality

Second, and more fundamentally, the paradigm of mission among the nations recognizes the *fact* and *reality* that religious pluralism is here to stay in Asia for the foreseeable future. This calls for a new way of relating to other world religions. Malaysian-born Chinese-American Pentecostal theologian, Amos Yong proposes a new way for Christianity to relate to other world religions in his pneumatological theology of interreligious hospitality, which he articulated in his plenary paper presented to the American Society of Missiology in June 2006, entitled "The Spirit of Hospitality: Pentecostal Perspectives toward a Performative Theology of Interreligious Encounter." Yong seeks to address Christianity's relationship with other religions in a world of religious pluralism. While Yong's main focus is Asian Pentecostal Christianity's response to the workings of the Holy Spirit outside of institutional Christianity, I would like to submit that his insights have broader implications for all Christians in general, and Asian Christians in particular. Specifically, Yong argues for the *retrieval* of the forgotten universalism of the Luke-Acts narratives of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit "on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). He then proceeds to construct a Pentecostal theology of religions that is rooted in the following threefold theological framework. First, Yong explains that Luke-Acts presents a universal vision of the church and the kingdom of God that goes beyond the Jewish self-understanding of a faith centered in Jerusalem. Second, he asserts that given "the interconnections between language and culture, the Pentecost narrative both celebrates the divine affirmation of many tongues, and announces the divine embrace of the many cultures of the world." Third, he argues that the "interrelatedness between language, culture, and religion" leads to the constructive theological argument that "the Pentecost narrative can be understood to hold forth the possibility of the redemption of the diversity of religions." At the same time, he also acknowledges that "languages, cultures, and the religions need to be discerned, and their demonic elements need to be confronted and purified so that if there is any truth, goodness, or beauty in them, such may be redeemed" (2007:58–59).

Among other things, Yong uses the Parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate his point that religious diversity and plurality is part of God's universal plan of salvation. After pointing out that "Jewish attitudes toward Samaritans in the first century parallel in many ways conservative Christian and Pentecostal attitudes toward those in other faiths," he observes that this parable challenges conventional assumption by presenting Jews as having to learn how to embody God's love for the neighbor from the Samaritans, who are the "religious others." He suggests that not only can Christians learn from the "religious others," but also that God might choose to be revealed through other religions in unexpected ways (2007:60). In particular, Yong wonders aloud:

[D]o Jews need to love their neighbors in order to inherit eternal life, even if such neighbors were despised as their enemies? Put in our context, do Christians not need to love their neighbors of other faiths in order to be saved? If so, don't Christians need

those in other faiths for our own salvation as much as if not more than those in other faiths need Christians to bear witness to the gospel for their salvation? (2007:61)

Moving on, Yong constructs what he calls a pneumatological theology of inter-religious hospitality (2007:65) that is rooted in *mutuality* and *reciprocity* between Christianity and other religions. He explains that while Christians cannot be responsible for the actions of others, they can and should take responsibility for their own attitudes and actions in a world where religious believers are becoming more hostile and antagonistic toward those who are different from them. In his own words:

Pentecostals and all Christians can and should bear witness to Jesus the Christ in word and in deed, while listening to, observing, and receiving from the hospitality shown them by those in other faiths. The result may be either mutual transformation of an unexpected kind, perhaps akin to the transformation experienced by Peter as a result of his encounter with Cornelius, or perhaps even our very salvation, such as described in the parable of one whose life was received as a gift through the hand of the good Samaritan. (2007:66)

As far as Yong is concerned, the “religious others” are more than simply the objects of conversion by Asian Christians. Rather, these “religious others” are the guests, friends, and neighbors of Asian Christians, with both sides extending mutual friendship and reciprocal hospitality. Yong further insists that his pneumatological theology of interreligious encounter

not only allows but also obliges us to cultivate different dispositions toward those in other faiths than those traditionally promoted; not only allows but also requires that we look for dialogical situations and opportunities involving religious others; not only allows but also necessitates our establishing friendships and opening our homes for table fellowship with those of other faiths. (2007:66)

Thus, Yong’s vision of a pneumatological theology of interreligious hospitality that welcomes believers of other religions in a spirit of friendship and neighborliness exemplifies the ideals of the mission *among the nations* (*missio inter gentes*) paradigm, i.e., Asian Christians living and working together with followers of other religions in a shared spirit of hospitality and solidarity for the betterment of their communities. He also reminds us of the importance of the quintessential Asian trait of *dialogue*, which has the potential to bring about opportunities for two or more parties, with their different worldviews, to enter into each other’s horizons, thereby creating deeper levels of understanding and friendship. In the context of postcolonial Asia, dialogue is often a good, non-confrontational way to redress the damage that has been perpetrated by centuries of colonial domination and exploitation.

Putting the Paradigm of Mission among the Nations into Practice

How would the paradigm of mission among the nations work in practice? To answer this question, we turn to Hwa Yung’s essay, “Islam in South East Asia and Christian Mission” (2003). Although Hwa Yung does not use the term “mission among the nations” (*missio inter gentes*) in this essay, nonetheless he provides tantalizing insights on how this paradigm would work in practice in an environment marked by

fear and distrust between the two communities of faith. According to him, Christian-Muslim relations are marked by two overarching issues. First, in view of the “more than a thousand years of problematic Christian-Muslim relations, together with the recent events of September 11 and the American responses in Afghanistan and Iraq, Christians need to revisit the question of how they wish to resolve tensions with Muslims and live in peace with them.” Second, Christians have to find a way to live out their missionary calling to bring the love and salvation of Christ to all peoples in general, and Muslims in particular, notwithstanding their hostility toward Christians (2003:220).

In response, Hwa Yung begins by saying that Asian Christians have to address both issues together, taking seriously “the respective integrity of each faith, both of which are overtly missionary” (2003:220). He then proposes a way forward as follows:

The call to live at peace with all is inherent in the gospel (Romans 12:18). It is therefore our Christian duty to do all that is possible to work towards peace, harmony and true mutuality in our relations with Muslims. Dialogue, mutual understanding and bridges of friendships must therefore be pursued, both at the personal level and at the communal and international levels. (2003:221)

Although Hwa Yung insists that Christians have to remain faithful to their missionary calling, he is also cognizant of the fact that debates and intellectual arguments will never resolve the conflicting truth claims between both faiths. Hence, he thinks that the way forward is “the way of the heart.” As he explains:

This does not mean that we merely forget about all differences in truth claims and just let hearts connect. Rather, it would mean that the Muslim heart must be touched by the heart of God through Christian love, humble service, suffering, and if necessary, martyrdom. (2003:222)

Clearly, what Hwa Yung is advocating in the foregoing paragraph reinforces what the mission among the nations (*missio inter gentes*) paradigm is all about. Mission is not simply a unidirectional proclamation of the truth claims of the Christian gospel against the truth claims of other religions. As Hwa Yung rightly points out, this traditional approach to mission would inevitably lead to violence and bloodshed among the followers of both religious communities. Rather, mission entails the holistic life witness of the gospel by Asian Christians that seeks to break down barriers of hostility and division among Muslims and Christians, as well as build mutual trust and friendship in a spirit of hospitality. Indeed, the “way of the heart” that Hwa Yung speaks of, which entails “Christian love, humble service, suffering, and if necessary, martyrdom” summarizes succinctly the vision and ideals of the paradigm of mission among the nations.

Mission among the Nations in the Face of Religious Exclusivism

At the same time, one has to consider the question of whether the thrust of the mission among the nations paradigm is feasible and realistic in view of the challenges posed by religious fundamentalists and exclusivists in many parts of Asia. For example, the communal violence against Christians by Hindutva fundamentalists in Orissa, India raises questions of whether Christians should turn the other cheek when

faced with agitations and violence. Beginning with the coldblooded murder of the Australian Evangelical missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons Philip and Timothy, who were burnt alive in their station wagon in 1999, and culminating in the violence and mayhem against Dalit Christians in Orissa by Hindutva agitators in the aftermath of the assassination of the Hindu fundamentalist Swami Laxmananada Saraswati by Maoist insurgents on August 24, 2008, it is legitimate to ask whether the mission among the nations approach smacks of naïveté in the face of vitriol, hate, and exclusivism that are being spewed by right wing Hindutva militant groups, e.g., the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Sangh Parivar and Bajrang Dal.

The Statement of the Executive Body of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) in response to the Orissa violence against Indian Christians is unequivocal that a tit-for-tat response will only worsen things. One cannot fight religious exclusivism with religious exclusivism. One disarms religious exclusivism with Christian love. "No matter how great the threat that may confront us, we cannot renounce the heritage of love and justice that Jesus left us," because "when Jesus went about healing the sick, associating with outcasts and assisting the poor, those works were not allurements but the concrete realization of God's plan for humankind: to build a society founded on love, justice and social harmony" (CBCI 2008:816).

In a similar vein, the Catholic Archbishop of Delhi, Vincent Concessao points out that inflammatory missionary tracts that disparage and denigrate Hinduism are counter-productive because "they give fanatics a battering ram to crush Indian Christianity at large" (cited in Gonsalves 2008:806). Commenting on the increasing tension between Hindus and Christians in his paper entitled "The Quest for Identity and the Call for Dialogue: Prophetic Imperatives of the Mission of the Church in India," the Indian theologian Sebastian Madathummuriyil puts forward the case for the Indian Church to "re-examine the Church's imperialistic objectives of mission that reflects exclusivist and totalitarian tendencies," as well as to rediscover its identity, "paying heed to the challenges posed by religious, cultural, ideological, and linguistic pluralism" (cited in Boodoo 2010:118). In particular, Madathummuriyil thinks that as a minority community in India, the Indian Church is well positioned to be a prophetic voice for peace and harmony among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in India against the backdrop of the Hindutva ideology of homogeneity of religion, culture, and language. As he explains:

To be a prophetic Church in the Indian context, then, would imply, on the one hand, forfeiting traditional strategies of mission and, on the other hand, enhancing measures for regaining trust and confidence of both Hindus and Muslims through dialogue in an age of widespread anti-Christian sentiments. (cited in Boodoo 2010:118)

Conclusion

While Asian Christians accept the necessity of mission in the Asian milieu, they also realize that this does *not* mean that they are called to conquer the postcolonial Asian world in the name of a triumphant Christ, or build a triumphalistic Christendom on Asian soil. Instead, Asian Christians are called to mission by giving of themselves and bringing the life and hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world beset with challenges and problems. In a continent that is being torn apart by violence

and conflicts in the name of exclusivist religious fanaticism, Asian Christians are challenged to go beyond the superficiality of quantitative church growth in favor of a qualitative *prophetic* approach that seeks to critique, transform, and heal the brokenness in Asian cultures and Asian realities.

Hence, Asian Christians are called to work for the redemption of humanity in Asia not by pouring oil on the fires of religious conflict and violence and engaging in competitive proselytism and one-upmanship against the practitioners of other religions. Rather, they witness to the redemptive power of the gospel by the example of their daily living in companionship and solidarity with their neighbors, working, struggling, and suffering as fellow humans on a common quest for the meaning of life. Hence, both life witness and dialogue are the two sides of the coin that define the relationship between the Christian gospel and other religious traditions in the Asian landscape of religious diversity and pluralism, enabling Asian Christians to share the Good News with their fellow Asians. Moreover, Asian Christians acknowledge and rejoice in the diversity and plurality of religions that lies at the heart of what it means to be Asian and Christian. In the final analysis, to be truly Asian and at home in the Asian milieu, Asian Christians are challenged to embrace the religious diversity and plurality of postcolonial Asia, while at the same time prophetically challenging and purifying its oppressive and life-denying elements in the name of the Christian gospel.

Note

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