“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind”
Thinking Christianly in a Pluralistic World
## Contents

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**Editor:** Walter McConnell walter.mcconnell@omfmail.com  
**Contributing Editor:** Claire McConnell claire.mcconnell@omfmail.com  
**Editorial Office:** int.research@omfmail.com  
**Graphic Design and Printing:** IK Marketing & Productions

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Christianity was born in the multi-cultural, multi-religious world of first-century Rome. The apostles, from the very beginning, had to learn how to think rightly of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah in a world saturated with religion. Not only did they need to explain their faith to Jews, they were also confronted with worshippers of the Greco-Roman pantheon, adherents to the mystery cults, and people for whom Roman Emperor worship reigned supreme. As each group had a different understanding of the relationship between humans and the divine and unique cultic rituals, early Christians shared the good news about Jesus in a melting pot of ideas and practices.

They often found that their explanations about the death and resurrection of Jesus met with hostility. At other times they faced silent rejection. Some listeners decried their equation of Jesus with God as blasphemous. Others couldn’t fathom the idea that there might be only one God or that he could die as a man and come to life again to be their Savior.

Despite the fact that our age has become, in many ways, more secular, Christians still face religious pluralism that forces them to consider how to present the claims of Jesus as the Christ to a world where the message, at the very least, seems strange, where some will find it repugnant, and where no small number will reject it violently.

In such a world, Jesus encourages his disciples to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Engaging people with different worldviews and religious persuasions requires that we sharpen our minds to present the good news in a way that our hearers will understand how it is good news for them. The articles in this issue of Mission Round Table are written to help us do just that.

In our first piece, Peter Rowan challenges us to consider the place of the gospel in “Proclaiming Reconciliation in our Being, Doing, and Telling.” Peacemaking and reconciliation are greatly needed today. In some cases this is blatantly obvious. In others it simmers away out of sight, but not out of mind. Peter’s paper rightly sets reconciliation in the context of biblical teaching and of our eschatological hope and illustrates it with his personal experience.

Our thinking is further sharpened by Les Taylor who explains how being an academic anthropologist has opened doors for him to get to know people from a different cultural and religious setting in a way he would not have otherwise. While not every missionary will become a professional anthropologist, the paper gives ample reasons why everyone who wants to share the love of Jesus should delve more deeply into culture to learn to appreciate and care for others as people. He further shows the benefits gained by being a student and teaching at a university within any society. Who will join him?

As God’s sovereignty covers the earth and nothing happens apart from his Spirit’s presence, many missionaries have recognized that long before they ever set foot in a country God had already been working there. It is in this light that Pascal Bazzell encourages us that if we want to know what God is doing in mission and join him in it, we should recognize his work in the lives of the others with whom we have contact. God’s truth, we are told, can often be found—if only in part—in the other’s religious and cultural background. We should therefore seek to discern how God is working and join him in the journey that leads a person to faith.

Andrea Roldan’s article illuminates the way two Filipino contextual theologians—José de Mesa and Melba Maggay—have engaged their national culture from a Christian point of view. As she demonstrates, there is no one, definitive, Filipino theology that will satisfy everyone. One’s societal, educational, and denominational background greatly impacts one’s understanding of the context and how one responds Christianly. Similar examinations from other societies would be greatly welcome.

In our final paper, David Harley—a former General Director of OMF—examines Romans 9 to 11 to show how the Apostle Paul addresses the topic of Christian witness in a multi-faith society. While Paul respected the religious traditions of others, he was convinced that the gospel is relevant to all, that it should be shared with passion, and that it will transform the lives of those who receive it.

In our multi-cultural, multi-religious world we too need to be shaped by the gospel message, transformed into the image of Christ, and reach out to our world in understanding and with hope that doors will open so that the light of Christ can shine in.
Peter Rowan

Peter is from Northern Ireland and has served with OMF International for over twenty years. He is the author of *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent for Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford: Regnum, 2012), and is currently OMF UK National Director, a role he shares with his wife, Christine.

Introduction: The future of mission and the gospel of reconciliation

Reconciliation and peacemaking are very much on the agenda in East Asia, whether we think of the DPRK and South Korea context, racially fragmented Malaysia, the inter-ethnic/inter-religious violence in Myanmar, the insurgency in South Thailand, the treatment of minorities in China, the continuing impact of Japan’s role in World War Two on its Asian neighbours, the tensions surrounding China’s presence in the South China Sea, or the divisions within and between churches themselves—for instance, between TSPM and unregistered churches in China. Whatever else we might say about the future of mission, it will be a future that continues to require agents of reconciliation for a broken world and fragmented church.

My aim in this paper is threefold: (1) Set out in basic form the biblical foundations for reconciliation and peacemaking. (2) Connect those foundations with missiological issues in the East Asian context. (3) Provide material that will assist us to reflect on the shape of our future missional engagement.

1. The place of reconciliation in the Biblical drama

From a purely statistical point of view, the word group usage of “reconciliation” does not appear very often in the Bible. However, the concept of reconciliation “is the thread that gives coherence and momentum to God’s relationship with the whole of creation.” The briefest of sketches will suffice to show that the theme of reconciliation is woven throughout the Bible.

- The first and last books of the Bible frame the story of reconciliation between God and his creation (Gen 3:14–17; Rev 21:3–4; 22:1–2). At the heart of God’s mission is the healing of the relationships broken in Eden. The promise of restoration begins with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. The covenantal promise to Abraham is the origin of the gospel and the first indication in Scripture of God’s missional purpose that through the election of one man all peoples on earth will be blessed. As a promise it pointed forward to the great ingathering of the nations into the people of God—a vision found in other OT passages (Isa 19:23–25; Jer 12:15–16) and declared by Paul to the Galatians to be a reality, made possible now through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:8).

- The full scope of this blessing is captured in the biblical term *shalom*, defined negatively as the cessation and absence “of chaos, conflict, oppression, and broken relations” and positively as “the establishment...of wholeness, reconciliation, goodness, justice, and the flourishing of creation.” The peace the gospel brings encompasses our relationships with God, with one another, and with the whole created environment (Isa 11:6–9).

- In Revelation we find the reconciled multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9), and in 21:3 the promise that “They will be his people, and God himself will be
with them and be their God” in a “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65:17). A liberated creation (Rom 8:21) is, with the “healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2), part of God’s reconciling to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col 1:20).

Although the Apostle Paul is the only NT writer to use reconciliation in a theological sense to describe the cross, the theme of reconciliation is found throughout the NT and especially in the ministry of Jesus. It is important to recognize that Paul builds on what Jesus himself said and did.

For instance, the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32) and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:1–14) both center on divine-human reconciliation. In Matthew 5:23–24, Jesus teaches that the need for reconciliation is so important that only when it has been made can a gift be offered at the altar: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.” Jesus’ teaching and example on interpersonal relationships were foundational for Paul:

As for Paul’s teaching about barriers being broken down between human beings, this is anticipated in Jesus’ own conduct, in mixing, for example, with socially marginalized groups, including tax collectors and women, but also in his teaching about love for enemies and Samaritans.5

2. The place of reconciliation in Paul’s theology and mission

If we look at the bare bones of word usage, the verb katallασσo is used six times by Paul (Rom 5:10; 1 Cor 7:11; 2 Cor 5:18, 19, 20). Only one of these (1 Cor 7:11) is used in the context of an interpersonal relationship between husband and wife) while the other occurrences refer to humanity’s relationship with God. The noun katalλαγη occurs four times (Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18, 19), and the verb apokatallασσo is found in just three places (Eph 2:16; Col 1:20, 22), being unique to Paul.5

A more complete study on the place of reconciliation in Paul would require a closer examination of these verses and their contexts. For the purpose of this paper we simply note that although the usage of the “reconciliation” word group is quite limited in the NT, word usage is not necessarily a reliable guide to theological importance. So while it may not appear that often in the Bible as a whole, there are good grounds for saying that reconciliation is central to Christianity, goes to the heart of Paul’s theology and to the heart of the gospel itself, and offers a powerful paradigm for mission. The limitations of space prohibit me from substantiating these claims but I have done so elsewhere6 and can point to other works which see reconciliation as the “organising principle”7 for describing the salvation of God, or as the “controlling metaphor”8 for the way Paul expresses the gospel.

3. The peaceful fruit of reconciliation

In the letters of Paul, the doctrine points in two directions simultaneously. We are led to the heart of the gospel itself, discovering through the image of reconciliation what the gospel is and has achieved. At the same time, we are pointed to the everyday realities of life and relationships and to how the doctrine transforms the reconciled into new people and communities of reconciling agents.

If we take Romans 5:1–11 as our base we can sketch the broad contours of reconciliation in Paul’s theology.9 First, reconciliation is necessary because of the alienating effects of sin (Rom 5:6–11). The impact of sin on the mind and understanding was made clear in Genesis 6:5, and the fact that it affects not only the heart of the individual but social and political structures as well (cf. Amos 2:4–8; 5:7–15; Rev 13:1–7). Second, reconciliation is initiated by God (Rom 5:8). It is through God’s gracious initiative that he himself takes steps to remove the cause of his wrath against us and restore us to fellowship with him. Third, reconciliation is accomplished through the cross (Rom 5:10). The Ephesians are told that their fellowship with God and the reconciling of Jew and Gentile are made possible “through the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13–16). The fourth aspect of Paul’s theology of reconciliation, in Rom 5:1–11, is how it results in peace. Given the theme of our article, this deserves a sub-section of its own.

The classic verse stating that reconciliation results in peace is Romans 5:1—“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Peace and reconciliation with God, peace and reconciliation with fellow humans, and peace and reconciliation with God’s suffering creation are all part of the comprehensive salvation accomplished through the cross of Christ. While Romans 5:1–11 is concerned with peace and reconciliation with God, elsewhere Paul includes the reconciling of peoples (Eph 2:11–22), and the ultimate reconciling of all things (Col 1:19–20, cf. Rom 8:19–21). So reconciliation has vertical, horizontal, and cosmic dimensions.

In relation to Jews and Gentiles, Paul’s “two-fold gospel reality” is that “all, both Jews and Gentiles, are recipients of God’s saving righteousness manifest in Jesus Christ” and this “peace-making breakthrough…peace with God through Christ and peace between former enemies” is reflected in most of Paul’s letters.10

The theme of peace in Ephesians 2 has clear allusions to Isaiah. Two texts in particular provide the foundation for Paul’s argument. Isaiah 52:7—“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news”—is the background to Ephesians 2:17—“He [Christ] came and preached peace to you.” Further, Isaiah 27:19—“Peace, peace, to those far and near… And I will heal them”—ties in with the rest of Ephesians 2:17—“He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” It is the cross of Christ that creates the new people of God that Paul writes about in Ephesians. Those far away—Gentiles—and those near—Jews—have been brought together in the peace of Christ. Isaiah’s duplication of “Peace, peace” (Isa 57:19) “means peace in its full reality and nothing but peace,” and the promise of healing (Isa 57:19) is the “complete wholeness that peace
implies.” God’s purpose—to “create one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility”—is not simply a by-product of the gospel but part of the message itself.

However, the working out of the horizontal peaceful fruit of reconciliation has not always been a strength of evangelical witness. This can have a profound effect on our missional endeavours because if our positive response to the invitation to be reconciled to God is not accompanied by the transformation of relationships with the “other” in a divided society, we are left with a truncated gospel and a compromised witness.

In both NT studies and missiology the theme of peace has until recently received insufficient focus. William Swartley draws attention to this in the title of his book, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*. Elsewhere Swartley notes six dimensions of peace in the NT:

- as reconciliation between humans and God
- as reconciliation among humans
- as the new creation and alternative community to the Pax Romana
- as sociopolitical reality
- as present and future cosmic harmony and
- as inner tranquility in the midst of adversity

This paper concentrates on the first three, but peace in relation to the present suffering creation, or, as Swartley puts it, peace, “as present and future cosmic harmony” and the implications of this for the church’s mission, should not be overlooked and we will discuss its importance in the following section.

4. Proclaiming reconciliation in our being, doing, and telling

Paul, following the example of Christ, embodied the ministry of reconciliation. We see this demonstrated in practical and costly ways in Paul’s own life. Take for instance his letter to Philemon where he stands between a slave and his owner and allows the cross to shape his ministry of reconciliation in that situation. In a Christ-like way, Paul is prepared to “stand in the place of risk and pain, with arms outstretched towards the slave and his owner…stand at one of the pressure points of the human race from that day until very recently.” This is what being “entrusted with the gospel of reconciliation” can look like in practice.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though Christ were making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:19–20), he is speaking of a proclamation responsibility given to the whole church. We will look at this proclamation through the three inter-connected dimensions of being, doing, and telling.

4.1. Reconciliation: Proclaimed by being communities of reconciliation

In his letters Paul envisages communities that embody the message of reconciliation to the wider world. In the midst of the brokenness and suffering of the world, the church exists as a community of reconciliation, pointing back to the unique reconciling work of God in Christ on the cross, and pointing forward, by its work and witness, to the ultimate reconciliation of “all things.” This cosmic dimension (Col 1:20; Eph 1:10) is a major component of Paul’s doctrine of reconciliation. One crucial element of the eschatological fulfillment of this cosmic dimension is already present and visible in how the people of God have been redefined and enlarged to include both Jews and Gentiles: “The mystery of cosmic reconciliation finds a preliminary historical proof in the reality of Jews and Greeks gathered round the Lord’s table.” This is what Andrew Walls describes as “The Ephesian Moment” when “two races and two cultures historically separated by the meal table now met at table to share the knowledge of Christ.” This new humanity bore witness to a new identity given in Christ.

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was thrilled to see Gentiles believing the gospel and living under the Lordship of Christ. But what takes center stage in Ephesians is the fact that in the gospel Jew and Gentile believers are now one people—God’s new humanity. This creation of a new humanity is essentially about identity being recreated in Christ. And this was not a one-off historical event but a model for the way Christian mission is to understand itself: “that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known” (Eph 3:10). Therefore, what Paul saw in the context of Jew and Gentile, the church is to expect to see in various contexts of division.

This “Ephesian Moment” is not about the erasing of cultural or ethnic identities. Biblical reconciliation affirms cultural pluralism. Reconciliation is not about uniformity. However, cultural identities, though important, are not primary. Vinoth Ramachandra puts it like this:
This was a significant reason for Paul to write his letter to the Romans. Paul wants to involve the Roman congregations in his mission to the “barbarians” in Spain and his letter lays out the theological foundations for that mission, together with the hope that when he gets to Rome the Christians there will be ready to cooperate with him. But a prior necessity to their cooperation with Paul was their cooperation with each other. Robert Jewett sets the context:

In the competitive environment of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, the desire to surpass others and to achieve honor had invaded the arena of religion, perverting it into a means of achieving superiority. This situation is presented as paradigmatic, because the Roman house and tenement churches are behaving in a similar manner toward each other, and if given the opportunity, will certainly extend this competitive zeal into the mission to Spain, where it would have equally fatal consequences.

The reconciling of these house and tenement churches is part of why Paul writes this letter. In chapters 13–14 Paul points out the gospel obligation “to love Christians beyond one’s small circle of the house or tenement church.” Paul is addressing a situation where “mutual welcome of members and leaders from other Christian groups was a significant problem in the church” and the resolving of this problem was crucial if the mission to Spain was to succeed. The letter builds to its climax in chapter 15, which includes, along with reference to Paul’s travel plans and mission strategy, a note about the offering for the poor in the Jerusalem church. More than a passing comment, this is a deliberate attempt by Paul to address the issue of unity and to connect it with world mission. In Romans 15:23–33, Paul writes of his empire-wide missionary vision, a vision that extends across the Mediterranean, east and west, encompasses all of God’s people both Jew and Gentile, and seeks to promote unity and peace among churches that were at both ends of the ethnic and religious divide. Paul is saying to the divided Roman congregations, “Look, your unity with one another as you come from all sorts of different backgrounds and ethnicities, and your love for and solidarity with believers across the wider Body of Christ, is crucial to your mission and mine!”

4.2. Reconciliation: Proclaimed by doing ministries of reconciliation

What we see at work within the early Christian communities in terms of their being communities of peace and reconciliation, is also expressed outwardly. They were not only communities of centripetal peace but of centrifugal peace—pursuing peace and rejecting retaliation.

What shape does this centrifugally focused reconciliation and peacemaking ministry take in relation to those outside the church? Gorman gathers the various strands of Paul’s teaching on this into four areas:

1. Peacemaking means embodying the same virtues in the world as in the church; there can be no ethical dualism of “churchly” and “worldly” activity; centripetal and centrifugal activity cohere.

2. Peacemaking means renouncing retaliation for evil, even the kind of extreme evil (persecution) experienced by contemporary believers as their faithfulness connects them to the experiences of the prophets, Jesus, Paul, and the Thessalonians.

3. Peacemaking means seeking the common good, especially by attending to the needs of the weak, promoting a spirit of forgiveness, striving for harmony, and encouraging all to take responsibility for the role in furthering the common good.

4. Peacemaking in the present is grounded in the past world-reconciling love of God in Christ and the future world-redeeming salvation of God promised in such texts as Romans 8 and Colossians 1.

The church’s commitment “to the task and struggle of biblical peace-making” raises important questions about the relationship between reconciliation, justice, and forgiveness, especially
where the church is seeking to build peace in a current or post-conflict context. Volf’s study on reconciliation in *Exclusion and Embrace* offers much help on this front, but we note here the succinct exposition of The Cape Town Commitment in a section entitled “Building the Peace of Christ in our Divided and Broken World”:

Reconciliation to God and to one another is also the foundation and motivation for seeking the justice that God requires, without which, God says, there can be no peace. True and lasting reconciliation requires acknowledgement of past and present sin, repentance before God, confession to the injured one, and the seeking and receiving of forgiveness. It also includes commitment by the Church to seeking justice or reparation, where appropriate, for those who have been harmed by violence and oppression.

From my own experience in Northern Ireland, I witnessed churches often unable or unwilling to exercise a peacemaking ministry. On the one hand, there were churches whose theology concentrated so much on the vertical aspect of reconciliation—the restored relationship with God—that the sectarian attitudes that polarized the wider society were often left unchallenged. Then there were churches that, whilst seeing the need for reconciliation and attempting to work on the horizontal level amongst divided communities, failed to make the connection not only between the vertical and the horizontal, but also between reconciliation, justice, acknowledgement of past and present sin, and the seeking and receiving of forgiveness. There is such a thing as “cheap reconciliation,” Speaking in South Africa after the dismantling of apartheid, David Bosch offered this critique:

Cheap reconciliation...means tearing faith and justice asunder, driving a wedge between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions: it suggests that we can have peace with God without having justice in our mutual relationships.

This will mean that in doing reconciliation, we will also be seeking to act justly (Micah 6:8). And it means that as peacemakers we will seek to address the socio-political and structural dynamics that hinder reconciliation because, if the structural issues that cause division and tension are not addressed, we are left with a superficial peace.

One example of a church body that has recognized peacebuilding as central to Christian discipleship is the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This is expressed in its recently adopted ‘Vision for Society’:

WE, MEMBERS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND, saved by grace and called by God to grace-filled relationships, in the power of the Holy Spirit as ambassadors of Christ’s Kingdom in a broken and divided world;

BELIEVE that the Good News of Jesus Christ challenges and equips us to develop radically new attitudes and relationships with our neighbours throughout the whole of Ireland.

WE CONFESSION our failure to live as Biblically faithful Christian peacebuilders and to promote the counter culture of Jesus in a society where cultures clash.

ACCORDINGLY, WE AFFIRM Christian peacebuilding to be part of Christian discipleship and reassert the Church’s calling to pursue a peaceful and just society in our day.

WE SEEK a more reconciled community at peace with each other, where friend and foe, working together for the common good, can experience healing and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

4.2.1. Doing reconciliation by building bridges of understanding between different religious communities

One particular area in which peacemaking and reconciliation ministry can be taken forward is through the pursuit of inter-faith dialogue. This is especially relevant in places where a minority church exists in a multicultural society and where relationships between ethnic and religious groups are crucial for the common good. The temptation for a minority church is to retreat and disengage. This can lead to ghettoism which, as Leslie Newbigin describes it, is “a practical withdrawal into the position of a tolerated minority, a cultural and religious enclave within the majority community. Correspondingly the great need is to find ways of breaking out of this isolation and entering into real dialogue with men of other faiths.”

The terrain of inter-religious dialogue is perceived by some evangelicals as a theologically liberal landscape to be avoided at all costs. However, building relationships of understanding and trust, and cooperating in local projects for the common good, can create social space for gospel seeds to be sown, and is an important aspect of the work of
peacebuilding in places where racial and ethnic tension run high. Interfaith dialogue can mean different things to different people, but if it is understood “as a means of building relationships of trust between those of different convictions and helping to understand others’ points of view,” it can become “an important instrument to further mutual comprehension and respect.”

For instance, in Malaysia, the findings of research conducted by the Merdeka Research Centre in 2006 remain pertinent to the local context. To a question exploring levels of trust among Malaysians, the Merdeka poll found that 39 percent of Chinese trust Malays, 38 percent of Malays trust Chinese, while 29 percent of Chinese and 33 percent of the Malays trust Indians. According to the Merdeka Centre, these results “indicate that less than half of Malaysians trust fellow citizens of different ethnic backgrounds.”

There is also evidence that negative racial stereotypes continue to persist among a high percentage of Malaysians. For instance, 63 percent of Chinese respondents agreed with the statement that, “in general, most Malays are lazy” and 71 percent of Malays agreed that, “in general, most Chinese are greedy”. The Centre’s research found that racial stereotypes are so deeply rooted “that a majority of members of particular ethnic groups agree to the negative views of themselves.” The findings of the poll pointed to the urgent need for dialogue and substantial social interaction among Malaysians. The urgency for this has not diminished over the past decade. Christians are well placed to facilitate such dialogue and interaction given the ethnic inclusiveness of the Malaysian Christian community as a whole.

Dialogue of this sort requires a framework or working definition, and this is something Andrew Kirk has suggested in the form of these five principles:

a. Respect for the dignity and integrity of all human beings.

b. The need to represent other people’s views fairly.

c. The need to hear and consider what others say about our beliefs and practices.

d. The call to work together in common projects that seek justice and reconciliation in society.

e. Mutual witness. This, as Kirk notes, is perhaps the “most controversial aspect of dialogue.” He helpfully clarifies that “to be consistent with its core beliefs” Christianity “has to understand dialogue as a mode of evangelism.” In this sort of context, indeed in any evangelistic setting, there is a case for saying that “authentic evangelism has to be conducted in a dialogical manner… its method is patience and gentleness, rather than aggression, persuasion rather than threat, an expectation of God’s working rather than human enterprise and exertion.”

A working definition like this provides a framework for various kinds of dialogue initiatives, providing opportunities for Christians to respect those signs of God’s grace at work in the lives of others and to bear witness to the reconciling love of God in Christ. As Kirk points out under (d), there is scope for local churches and Christian organizations to work with non-Christian communities and groups to achieve specific goals in the areas of justice, human dignity, and peace. To those who may be apprehensive of such co-operation, Ramachandra offers the following encouragement:

To work alongside people of all faiths and ideologies, without losing the critical questioning and radical challenge that the gospel poses to all faiths and ideologies, requires a breadth of vision and courage that the gospel itself can impart.

When genuine relationships of trust and respect are formed, there is always the potential for mutual transformation (an additional principle that could be added to Kirk’s list). An NT example of this is found in the radical encounter between Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius comes “to a saving knowledge of Christ,” and Peter “to a deeper discipleship, a more profound conversion of his life and cultural heritage towards Christ.”

4.2.2. Doing reconciliation by anticipating the reconciliation of all things

Engaging in ministries of reconciliation is to anticipate the reconciliation of all things. Paul gives us a breathtaking vision of cosmic reconciliation in Colossians 1:19 where he writes that Christ’s aim was “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” He thus echoes similar visions found in the OT, especially those in Isaiah 19:19–25; 65; 66.
The great eschatological vision of the OT, which is carried forward into Revelation 21–22, sees not only the peoples of the earth coming to Yahweh, but all their achievements, wealth, and glory being brought purified into the New Jerusalem (Isa 19; 60:5; Zeph 3:9; Zech 14:6; Rev 21:24–26). How this will happen exactly is not spelled out, but these various texts suggest that somehow our human activity and the whole of creation will share in the liberating rule of God. In Isaiah, the nations and their ultimate reconciliation with God and with one another are pictured in terms of a river of peace and the nations streaming, with their wealth, into “the world city of peace.” We must remember that this is very much a garden city and another way of talking about the new creation of “new heavens and a new earth.”

These passages in Isaiah and Revelation will only be completely realized in the eschatological future, but as with all aspects of Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom of God, these visions can be significantly anticipated now, bringing hope and shaping cultural and creational involvement in the present.

One example of how local churches can anticipate the reconciliation of all things and be communities of hope in the present is through our caring for creation. This can be part of bringing the whole gospel to whole people, as we involve ourselves in the whole lives of our communities. Howard Peskett’s example from the multicultural town of Southall, near London, illustrates how our previous point about interfaith dialogue and community relations can intersect with creation care and missional engagement:

I have a friend who was a full-time minister in two churches…. Since then, without losing his evangelistic concerns, he has become involved in a conservation project on a huge area of wasteland next to the town. He has found that this engagement with the environment of all those who live in Southall has given him greatly increased contacts with all sorts of people, young and old, from many of the different communities in the town. His engagement with the environment has enlarged his missionary engagement with the people he lives among.

4.3. Reconciliation: Proclaimed by telling the message of reconciliation

According to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19, God has entrusted “us,” that is, the whole church, with the “message” (literally, “word”) of reconciliation. The church is to bear verbal witness to the reconciling gospel, telling the world the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

But in those places where the church is a marginalized minority and where ethnic tensions run high, some Christians may feel that in order for the church to simply survive, or for the sake of maintaining harmonious community relations, evangelism should be off the agenda. For sure, across East Asia opportunities for evangelism and the methods used may be determined by the state of affairs in a given society. Laws may restrict religious liberty and persecution may be a reality for a Christian minority. In the past, however, some Christian leaders in Malaysia concluded that evangelism is not God’s will if suffering or persecution is a likely outcome. Afraid of potential political ramifications for the Christian community, some prominent church leaders have at times sought to convince local authorities that Christians are not interested in evangelization. But this view has been challenged from within the Christian community itself.

Working for peace and proclaiming the Peacemaker are not mutually exclusive activities. Indeed, peacemaking in Paul is connected to the church’s evangelistic witness. In several letters Paul exhorts his readers about how they should relate to those outside the faith and who are hostile to the church: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them…live peaceably with all…never avenge yourselves…if your enemies are hungry, feed them…Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:14–21, cf. 1 Thess 5:13–15). As Gorman points out, the practice of peace is a sort of apologetic, a form of bearing witness to the gospel in the most difficult circumstances….As the communities and individual believers bear faithful witness to the Messiah who taught and practiced peacemaking towards enemies, they become a living exegesis of the gospel…they become the gospel.

Conclusion

The context in which we find ourselves will determine whether our missionary engagement begins with

Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons
The missiological issues that could be explored under (2) are too numerous for inclusion in this paper. Several issues have been selected and the reflection section at the end provides scope for a wider discussion.


The classical Greek meaning of the root word 

"allazo," "to change" or "exchange," was applied to the exchanging of hostilities for friendship and the restoration of friendship after a dispute. In the NT, "reconciliation" is used to describe "the restoration of a good relationship between enemies." H. G. Link and C. Brown, *Reconciliation, Restoration, Propitiation, Atonement,* in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* Vol 3, Colin Brown, ed. (Eerter: Paternoster and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 145. Kevin Vanhoozer reminds us that *katalallage* combines "two Greek words that may be roughly translated 'contra otherness'," and that this provides us with "a vivid image of reconciliation: to reconcile is to remove the barriers that impede fellowship." Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects,* Craig Bartholomew and Robin Parry, eds. (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 43. Although it will be far from extensive, something of the theological context surrounding what is said here about the meaning of reconciliation is explored in this paper.

Peter Rowan, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: the Multicultural Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 83. Although it will be far from extensive, something of the theological context surrounding what is said here about the meaning of reconciliation is explored in this paper.

John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM, 2002), 45. Although it will be far from extensive, something of the theological context surrounding what is said here about the meaning of reconciliation is explored in this paper.


In Miroslav Volf’s opinion, “there is a disturbing lack of sustained attempts to explain the social meaning of reconciliation of human beings to God and to relate the core beliefs about reconciliation to the shape of Christian social responsibility.” Miroslav Volf, “The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,” *Mishkan: A Feron on the Gospel and the Jewish People* (2001): 12–13. Volf has been a major contributor to studies on the social implications of the doctrine of reconciliation. See his *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).


For a brief discussion on whether 2 Corinthians 5:19 is saying that only Paul and his companions are entrusted with the message of reconciliation, or if this is ministry given to the whole church, see Dean Fleming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 199–200. Fleming’s view is that “God has called the whole Christian community to bear verbal witness to the reconciling gospel.”

In previous OMF research consultations, as well as in *Mission Round Table* (and in the various contributions of Rose Bosenett over the years), the three-fold understanding of witness as word, deed, and character has been prominent. I am borrowing the three-fold interrelated way of talking of mission—being, doing, telling—from the work of Dean Fleming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God.*

Kevin Vanhoozer, “Evangelicalism and the Church,” 8.


Norman Wirzba in Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 120.


Jewett, *Romans,* 178.

Jewett, *Romans,* 178.


Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel,* 168.

The Cape Town Commitment, 40.


The Cape Town Commitment, 40.


Building bridges of understanding must also extend to non-religious communities, for instance those in which secularism or Marxism or humanism is the dominant worldview. In such places, and where it is possible to do so, Christians will want to help explain the nature of faith more generally, as well as the gospel in particular.


Kirk, *Mission under Scrutiny*, 28-29. Kirk provides a brief paragraph of explanation for each of these principles and the whole chapter, “Mission as Dialogue,” is devoted to the topic.


Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 198. Dana Roberts writes of mission in terms of “global friendship” and of how “A chief attraction to mission in the twenty-first century is that it holds out the opportunity to forge relationships across geographic, ethnic, and economic boundaries.” Authentic friendship, notes Roberts, as a pathway to mutual transformation, “has limitations when it involves a one-sided expectation that Westerners can change other persons or social systems without being changed themselves. Yet mutuality, through friendship assumes that as people enter into relationships with each other, both sides will be changed by the encounter…mutual transformation through relationships is not a by-product of mission, but part of its raison d’etre.” Dana L. Roberts, “Global Friendship as Incarnational Missional Practice,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39 (2015): 180–4, http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2015-03/2015-03-180-rob.html (accessed 6 February 2018).

Moyer suggests that “Health is glory,” and as ‘the glory of the Lord’ means ‘the Lord in all his glory,’ so in the Zion that is yet to be (Rev. 21:24–26) every nation will be present ‘in all its glory,’ i.e. the glory of what it was meant to be and will be when its individuality is brought to mature perfection in the city of God.” Moyer, *Israel*, 403.


Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel,* 165.
Bivocationalism in Southeast Asia: Stories from the Past and Thoughts about the Future

Les Taylor

Les has lived, worked, and ministered in Southeast Asia for more than fifteen years with his long-suffering (and saintly) wife and two remarkably well-balanced children. He obtained his Ph.D. from a Southeast Asian university in 2009 and works as a research fellow at another Southeast Asian university.

Introduction

In this paper I have set myself the task of reflecting on more than a decade of bivocational ministry in Southeast Asia with the hope that a range of individuals, initiatives, and institutions will benefit from my discovery of how the nine-to-five rhythms between Mondays and Fridays can contribute to dynamics traditionally associated with Sundays. Even though I do not enjoy talking about myself, I take every opportunity to share what God has done in my life. He has responded to my stupidity with patience, and I have experienced his goodness and greatness in equal measure. A further reason for narrating the blessings and challenges of bivocationalism that I have experienced, is that stories are more powerful than propositions. Those curious about how Scripture has informed my approach to integral mission might appreciate the biblical and theological reflections scattered below. I will also take the time to introduce some analysis of cultural dynamics and social structures. For example, how might biblical accounts of Paul’s involvement in his trade inform our embodiment of bivocationalism? How can outsiders learn to appreciate their need of a patron?

Anyone who reads this paper in its entirety will be in no doubt that I am an unapologetic advocate for bivocational initiatives involving academic institutions. I hope that my enthusiasm for practitioners engaging with the social sciences and humanities will not be misinterpreted as fundamentalism. Does the missionary movement need (yet) another missiological brand or gimmick? I sincerely hope that no one launches AAM (Academia as Mission). In this paper, Missional Business, or Business as Mission (BAM), functions as a sort of analytical adversary. I have endeavoured to make my comments constructively critical and not inappropriately iconoclastic. It is worth mentioning at this juncture that at the beginning of 2006 I began exploring retraining as an anthropologist and also established a limited partnership. However, after almost a year of teaching English on a contract basis, I concluded that this business model was not viable in the small town where I lived at the time. This does not make me less biased, but I have personally weighed both and found one wanting. In my corner of Southeast Asia there was neither enough demand nor disposable income for my business plan to have succeeded. There might be in yours. If this is the case, then I rejoice.

There are other reasons for a range of bivocational models to be explored, advocated, and embodied in mission. We not only work in different places, but our personal gifts, passions, and capacity—including the ability to cope with complexity—also differ. All created in God’s image are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 131), and the body of Christ consists of more than one part (1 Cor 12). I have personally experienced how revolutionary it can be to make decisions on the basis of who am, rather than who I wished I was. As such, I celebrate that entrepreneurs are more confident that there is a place for them in mission. Does everyone possess entrepreneurial gifting and business experience? Certainly not! Some are naturally curious about their cultural contexts, while others need to be trained how to see and make sense of the new world.

Below I argue that integral mission needs to move beyond discourses about how business and development contribute to partnering locally, to include both strengthening existing Christian communities and establishing new ones. Furthermore, I suggest that there are a number of fairy tales about bivocationalism that many of us have read, tell ourselves, and/or tell others. Instead of being only personal, my reflections seek to be practical and pastoral because reflective practitioners wrestle with a number of issues. Do we need to add the unintended consequences of referring to our work as “cover,” “front,” “platform,” or “entry strategy”? Although I used to live and communicate like 007 (or perhaps Johnny English?) behind enemy lines, I now advocate talking about local careers and contributions.

The central contention of this paper is that bivocational practitioners authentically engaged in the social sciences kill four birds with one stone (without killing themselves). They acquire local languages and cultural competency at the same time as obtaining a viable long-term visa that enables them to contribute to forming young heads and hearts. This form of bivocationalism does much more than benefiting individuals. It also increases institutional capacity. I hope that those involved in mobilization will be interested to learn how this form of integral mission might help increase the number of undergraduate students relocating to Southeast Asia and beyond. I pray that I have the opportunity to interact with field leaders in contexts with limited visa options. Similarly, people responsible for membership development may have
questions about the benefits of having more members with close connections with local academic institutions.

The story of an accidental anthropologist

For reasons that I hope will soon become clear, if someone like me can retrain as an anthropologist, anyone can! After four years of living in Southeast Asia, I stumbled into this discipline that now feels like it fits me like a glove. A toxic cocktail of ill-discipline and emotional dysfunction contributed to me taking ten years to complete my first undergraduate degree (in horticulture). Most finished in just three! I surprised myself—and many others—by receiving my second degree (in theology) with the cohort I had begun with, three years earlier. Two years after this, I relocated with my family to Southeast Asia. Three years of teaching English as a second language led to increasing boredom with a job that I once loved. Anyone responsible for developing first-term workers will be aware of the dangers of boredom.

This led me to scan the horizon for the next off-ramp, but with degrees in horticulture and theology, my local options appeared limited. What would working on a postgraduate degree in theology or missiology by extension look like? Would these open doors where we lived at the time? As I explain below, I concluded that they would not. God planted what at the time struck me as a mildly mad idea: to do a research degree in anthropology at a local university. Well before finding peace with the idea of going back to school I had become curious about what struck me as distinctively local aspects of Islam where we lived. It seemed to me that what I needed to do next was to come up with a short list of local scholars and post-graduate programs that I could apply to. Although I had absolutely no background in the social sciences before penning my research proposal, the prospect of making sense of my corner of Southeast Asia brought me back to life.

Between 1996 and 1998, I spent three years acquiring tools to study God’s word. Was God inviting me to give as much time to understanding the part of the world we had relocated to? For many years, I had railed against spending even one year of preparation at a Bible College even though it was, at the time, required by most mission organizations. Almost two decades later, my acceptance of that I needed to undergo this chapter of formation was one of best decisions I ever made—second only to the woman I married! Productive practitioners are formed—not found. Formation is a process—not an event—that requires a level of patience shared by people who plant Mango trees—not Papaya plants. Mission agencies either need more polymaths or specialists willing to collaborate with others to form the next generation of practitioners.

Like others who attended Bible College two decades ago specifically preparing to live and work cross-culturally, I heard about concepts like culture and was introduced to a range of religious traditions which were not locally present at the time. The latter emphasized Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist doctrines. We learnt about Islam, not Muslims, Buddhism, not Buddhists. Another issue was that textbooks written by missionaries were almost always penned decades earlier. These faithful servants had worked in contexts that differed from where I was headed. I have a number of reasons for appealing for more anthropology in Bible colleges and seminaries. Religious studies specialists typically concentrate on what people should do, and historians are primarily interested in what people used to do. By contrast, anthropologists describe what specific people do in the “ethnographic present.” In addition, anthropologists write ethnographic monographs that describe what they have observed people doing and saying. These are often written in a style accessible to non-specialists and religious outsiders. There might not be any substitute for first-term practitioners learning how to see for themselves, but this ethnographic literature increases cultural fluency in ways analogous to the ways dictionaries and grammars assist language-learners.

Withholding the latter from language students would make fantastic material for anyone writing the screenplay for a mockumentary exposé on the inner workings of the modern missionary movement. To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is some conspiracy about the gold mine of ethnographic literature about the people and places where we work not being made more widely available to practitioners. Indeed, whenever presented with the option to tick the box label “cockup” or “conspiracy theory,” it is almost always better to choose the former.

Others better qualified than myself share this assessment. For example, Robert Priest and Brian Howell
The flexibility and mobility of anthropology also makes it compatible with an apostolic calling. Those unable (or unwilling) to enrol in an Asian university may prefer to enrol in an anthropology department in their own country. Regardless of the university that anthropologists have trained in, or the department they affiliate with, anthropologists are mobile for the simple reason that anthropologists are unable to do their job without access to people.

have lamented the marginalization of anthropology in North American missiology.5 Most graduating from conservative theological institutes acquire a range of linguistic, exegetical, and philosophical skills. Even so, few come out with in-depth understandings of anthropology. Priest recounts professors teaching doctor of missiology courses encountering students conversant with theological traditions and methods who were openly hostile to social theory. Practitioners realize that cultural realities need to be understood, but anthropologists are routinely requested to produce what Priest describes as “narrowly instrumental writings in the service of missions,” or “neat typologies or broad generalizations about such things as worldview.” These are two examples of a wider impatience with the sustained and in-depth anthropological research practiced and valued within this discipline. Anthropology is therefore only appreciated in its “instrumental and abbreviated” form. Priest also attributes anthropology’s lack of depth in seminars to anthropologists rarely teaching these courses. Missiological anthropology is now marginal to both mainstream anthropology and broader theological conversations.6

Time to get off my high horse and back to the story. After some re-writing, my research proposal and application were accepted. A number of people who have heard my story, are surprised that no complications arose from the fact that my highest qualification at the time (aside from having lived in Southeast Asia for over four years) was a degree from a seminary. This was perhaps helped by its academic dean being willing to provide an official letter providing details about my GPA. Approximately one year later, my candidature was upgraded to a doctoral track. After four years of reading, interviewing, data analysis, and re-writing—with much prayer—I graduated in 2009. Other Christians were present at my convocation, but I was the only European.

Home side and field leadership might appreciate the following details that contributed to my experience being so positive and comparatively straightforward. At the time, I had a visa and work permit in one country whilst enrolled in a university in another. I was not conducting research in the country where I was enrolled as a student. Most postgraduate students registered in one country (perhaps in the West) affiliate with a local university while conducting their fieldwork. Again, it is common for an anthropologist to spend a number of years doing this—especially if language learning is also required. Formal permission to conduct research is almost always required. However, university departments possess armies of administrators charged with the responsibility of helping new arrivals—who are usually treated as honored guests—to find their way through the administrative maze/haze. Although not part of my personal story, most universities in East and Southeast Asia have signed MOUs with universities elsewhere in the region and in the West. Among other things, these facilitate undergraduate students spending a year or semester abroad. In other words, tertiary education was globalized long before many other sectors.

In the good (?) old days when people lived in fear of their superintendent, field leader, or General Director, first-term workers completed language and culture acquisition requirements before any requests to commence advanced degrees would even be considered. This was standard operating procedure for a number of reasons. People did what they were told, and new arrivals accepted that the short-term pain of language study would yield long-term gains. Study distracted fallible first-termers as much as enthusiasm for email messages, having one’s face constantly in Facebook, novels never being far away, and too much time being spent watching movies or television series from home. For a highly motivated learner with a fiercely autodidactic learning style, re-training as an anthropologist brought structure to language and culture acquisition. A nuclear scientist may choose to learn a local language while studying abroad, but no anthropologist can collect data without adequate language skills. Most study relevant Asian languages before commencing their fieldwork, and those who have not, make this their first task after arriving. Indeed, the most respected anthropologists are usually those who are most fluent in the languages of their informants.

For anthropologists, language learning and cultural acquisition go together. First-term language-learners are required to write up interviews and cultural observations, but these are also tasks done by any anthropologist (the latter being referred to as participant observation). Other benefits for relocating to East or Southeast Asia as a student enrolled in the social sciences or humanities are many. Students are less of an expatriate anomaly. It makes their presence in communities that can be suspicious of outsiders understandable. Lest I be misunderstood, “understandable” should not be confused with 100% watertight. Newcomers should ignore the most suspicious members in their communities. They should furthermore celebrate—and intentionally spend time with—members of the majority who are either ambivalent about or delighted that a stranger is seeking to learn from and contribute to their corner of the world.

Re-training as an anthropologist might have brought structure to language and culture acquisition, but I have also personally benefited in a number of other ways. This includes opening the door to a credible professional
Anthropology is accessible to anyone curious about their world and the fascinating range of ordinary people that fill it. Anthropologists can study almost anything. If you are interested in religion, become a religious anthropologist. Those fascinated by language should consider a career in linguistic anthropology.

Urban anthropologists study life in cities, and anyone possessing photographic or videography skills might benefit from becoming a visual anthropologist. No matter who you are, or what you are interested in, you can become an anthropologist.

The flexibility and mobility of anthropology also makes it compatible with an apostolic calling. To reiterate, those unable (or unwilling) to enrol in an Asian university may prefer to enrol in an anthropology department in their own country. Regardless of the university that anthropologists have trained in, or the department they affiliate with, anthropologists are mobile for the simple reason that anthropologists are unable to do their job without access to people. Most anthropologists have a university in their home country that they affiliate with during a home assignment. For anthropologists such movements are understandable. Before returning overseas, the painless process of affiliating with a department or research institute can be initiated. I would be extremely surprised if any department would turn down the opportunity to host foreign students or colleagues with solid academic credentials planning to locally conduct fieldwork. A more mobile profession might exist, but I have never encountered one. Wherever they work and whoever their subjects may be, most anthropologists are respected by their subjects. I have yet to meet anyone who does not love it when outsiders become expert in, and advocate for, local history and ethnic identity.

In search for a patron saint for anthropologists

Although practitioners like David Penman and Robert Hunt embodied forms of engagement with academia that pricked my interest, if you held a gun to my head and demanded the name of the person who has inspired me most, it would have to be Saul of Tarsus (a.k.a. the Apostle Paul). Philip Fountain has related conversations where nominations for the patron saint of anthropologists have been short-listed. Some suggested that Thomas was at the top of the list. After all, he refused to believe without seeing Jesus himself.

Paul trumps Thomas for the following reasons. A detailed reconstruction of Paul’s attitude to his trade and ministry from his letters and Luke’s orderly account are beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to make the following observations. Wherever he was, Paul got out and looked around. He is presented as a practitioner who paid close attention to his context—even aspects of local materiality that deeply disturbed him. Did Paul enter the market in Athens primarily to preach to the captive audience there? I think not. Immediately after Athens, Luke recounts that Paul travelled to Corinth...
where he made tents alongside Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1–4). In his farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul reminds them that he coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. His own hands had supplied both his own needs and those of his companions. In everything he did, he showed them that by “this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:33). By working, Paul prevented his ministry from being brought into disrepute or derailed. Paul and his companions commended themselves to the Corinthians through their hard work and sleepless nights (2 Cor 6:5). Paul compares himself to his adversaries in Corinth who didn’t have to work hard with their own hands (1 Cor 4:11).

In 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul gets back on his high horse, asking whether he has the right to food and drink, or whether it is only he and Barnabas who had to work for a living. Over and above leading a quiet life and minding one’s own business, Paul advises the Thessalonians to work with their hands which will “win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thess 4:11). Elsewhere, he recounted working night and day while he preached the gospel there to avoid being a burden (1 Thess 2: 6–9).

While some routinely refer to their “work” as a cover, entry strategy, or platform, Paul’s tent-making trade permitted him to make authentic connections with people—many of whom played important roles in his ministry. Secondly, work established Paul’s credibility. Thirdly, by working where he wandered, Paul’s mobility increased. All the tools that he required fit into a small bag, other raw materials were picked up along the way, and there was unlimited demand for the tents he produced in the places he worked and preached. As a tent-maker, Paul established a credible presence in the marketplace. As a Pharisee, he was also present and comfortable on the Sabbath in local synagogues. Luke relates that this led to him eventually being invited to speak at the Acropolis. What is remarkable about Paul’s speech to this Greek audience is that he demonstrated his conversance with Greek philosophy and poetry. Although rooted in a range of Jewish traditions, he was also familiar with Greek ones. In addition to a toolbox of tent-making tools, Paul possessed a bookshelf that contained Jewish and Greek texts. These contributed to his ability to both celebrate Saturdays and work days, and also to engage Greek audiences.

There are other ways that Paul’s involvement in his mobile trade differs from some contemporary “tent-makers”. Limited space—and perhaps the patience of my readers—prevents me from developing these thoughts. Paul in his letters might have explained the crucial role that work played in establishing his local credibility, but Luke’s account of Paul in Corinth suggests this was where his priorities changed. The following is an extract from a letter to my (lonsuffering) supporters.

The end of 2015 roughly coincides with the end of a season. Many of you will be aware of “tent-making” as a badge, brand, and methodology. On the basis of my re-reading of some of the texts that are based on, perhaps we can also talk about tent-making mythologies. To be sure, there were times when Paul’s trade was central to his ministry (especially while in Corinth and Thessalonica). Acts 18:1–11 relates Paul leaving Athens for Corinth where he met two Jewish believers who were also tent-makers. They all worked together in the marketplace, and spoke to the local Synagogue every Sabbath. However, Acts 18:5 mentions that when Silas and Timothy arrived, Paul entered a season when his focus changed in two ways. Preaching became more important to him, and he became more focused on his Gentile neighbors (v. 7). From his letters to the Corinthians, it is clear that he still worked. Therefore, although the elements in his ministry remained roughly the same, his priorities changed.

Like all of us, there were chapters in Paul’s apostolic ministry. He had established a credible presence in local marketplaces and synagogues. He was also occasionally invited to share what he had shared there in institutes like the Acropolis in Athens. As a place of learning where there was a lot of talk about old and new ideas, this looks a lot like a modern university. All the elements in Paul’s portfolio were credible, but all were subordinate to his apostolic calling. Being in the solar system was what was most important. Was Paul the best tent-maker in town? Perhaps, but probably not! Although he had a following, he was almost certainly not the most respected guest preacher at local synagogues on Saturdays. He was invited to speak at the Acropolis, but he did not have tenure. Paul was in the solar system, but he was a Pluto. Had his apostolic calling scuttled plans at ever being Mercury? Was ambition (perhaps driven by the desire to be accepted) incompatible with his calling?

Allegiance to local institutions and the individuals that lead them come in a range of shapes and sizes. His primary allegiance was to the God of Israel who through the resurrection of his Holy Servant Jesus hadenthroned him as Messiah. After Paul’s personal encounter with the Messiah, it was clear that he had work to do. As he had to eat, he worked wherever he wandered. But he been chosen, called, and commissioned to do another job.

Readers will now be clear that I am uncomfortable with utilitarian attitudes towards work (whatever its form). However, the issues of mobility, credibility, and apostolic calling need to be further explored. Most practitioners experience seasons in their career. I personally celebrate the adventurous young people who, instead of making money and getting on with their career, learn languages and incarnate themselves in local communities as non-conformist activists. I have observed long-term
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This is to say that I have never had

graduated, I chose a Pluto trajectory.

This began with a name card stating

my presence among them changed.

observed that local attitudes to me and

five years in Southeast Asia, I had no connections with local

institutions. Once I came under the

patronage of a local university, I observed that local attitudes to

me and my presence among them changed.

Although cultural bottlenecks differ across contexts,
outsiders need local patronage, which provides a place
in the local social hierarchy. During my first four to five
years in Southeast Asia, I had no connections with local
national institutions. Once I came under the patronage of a local university, I observed that local attitudes to

me and my presence among them changed.

Every Asian country possesses its own currency. Nevertheless, there is one
that is traded throughout the region: the currency of status. In addition
to studying anthropology to bring
structure to language and culture, and the work of an anthropologist
being compatible with the passions
and priorities of most practitioners,
like other academic careers in East
and Southeast Asia, it also comes
with status. This is as true for PhD
candidates, visiting scholars, or
research fellows. I do not want to
be accused of being either a paper
tiger or straw-man slayer, but some
enthusiasts for Missional Business
appear to (erroneously) assume that
a worker’s most precious commodity
is time. Leaving aside the possibility
that many tasks expand to fill the
time given to them, in many parts of
East and Southeast Asia there is little
value in being free during the day.
The reason is that most of the people
that I need to connect with are only
in teashops before evening prayers and
after night prayers.

In addition to status, there are other
ways that practitioners benefit from
bivocational models. Although cultural
bottlenecks differ across contexts, outsiders need local patronage, which provides a place in the local social
hierarchy. During my first four to five
years in Southeast Asia, I had no connections with local
national institutions. Once I came under the
patronage of a local university, I observed that local attitudes to me and
my presence among them changed.

This began with a name card stating
that I was a PhD candidate. After I
graduated, I chose a Pluto trajectory.
This is to say that I have never had
a full-time and salaried position
at any university. I have affiliated
with the best local institutions as a
research fellow. However important
the reputation of the institution one
graduates from might be, I wish to
add that this does not trump the
warmth of one’s personal relationships
with influential individuals that one
studies under. Both are door openers.
When I meet local leaders (which I
do on a regular basis) I am almost
always asked where I graduated from
and who my supervisors are (not were).
In most parts of Southeast Asia, one
never stops being someone’s student.
My supervisors—none of whom were
particularly religious—knew me as a
devout follower of God’s Holy Servant
Jesus, but it became increasingly
a nonissue. I am accepted and respected
in many corners of Southeast Asia for
a number of reasons. I would like to
think that my generosity and personal
integrity have played some part, but
as most middle-aged men are better
human doings than human beings, it is
possible that it is the quality of my
work. The better my work, the more I
get to say. I have no idea of knowing
what doors would have opened to me
if I was only interested in a visa with
few time constraints, but I am glad
that I made the decisions that I did.

Conclusion

Let me close by making the
following short comments about how
individuals and institutions benefit
from bivocational models of ministry.
Particularly in countries where religious
entrepreneurs are not welcome, there
are a number of pastoral benefits for
first-termers being involved in some
form of integral mission. Those with
local patronage need not live like
007. Although everyone has secrets,
there is wisdom in increasing the
areas of our lives that we can openly
talk about. Monday to Friday and
nine-to-five routines bring a rhythm
and tangibility to life. It is unwise to
assume that young people in their
first term have ever been mentored
in how to manage their time. As a
result, the crucial task of learning local
languages often expands to fill the time
given to it. Those with unlimited time
often struggle with discouragement
and boredom that might be mitigated
by some sort of hands-on local
contribution. This relates to another
way that individuals benefit from forms
of bivocationalism concerned with
the social sciences—anthropologists
learn local languages and cultures. In
addition to this, relocating to East or
Southeast Asia as an anthropologist
comes with cultural capital. It provides
new arrivals with status and patronage,
which make our presence more
understandable. This is particularly
valuable for those just starting out in
their careers.

Over and above these individual
benefits, in what ways do institutions
benefit from bivocational models
involving the social sciences and
humanities? This form of integral
mission increases the number of young
people who are being incrementally
exposed to the needs and opportunities
in East and Southeast Asia. Many
assume that involvement in mission
requires committing career suicide.
This has not been my experience. I
would argue that the future viability of
our movement will be determined by
our success at co-opting young heads,
hearts, and hands. Our organisation
can be legitimately proud of the
quality of the language and orientation
program. Indeed, it is entirely possible
that universities do a comparatively
poor job. Does this mean that we
should not send young workers to learn
Asian languages in local universities?
I would hope that most would have a
both-and (not an either-or) attitude.

Is the adage “the more, the merrier”
true? If it is, then strategic partnerships
with evangelical student movements
such as IFES might reduce the amount
of work required to increase the
number of young people involved in
the social sciences and humanities.
It might also ensure that it goes
further. Increasing the number of young people committed to having a missional presence in religiously diverse universities will have a number of institutional benefits. I am delighted that the number of Asians in the fellowship has increased. We now need to reduce the average age. There are other institutional benefits from more members undergoing a season of formation in the social sciences and humanities. I sincerely hope that those responsible for membership development will be willing to chew over this proposal. The final institutional benefit for an organization committed to alternative ecclesiological models is that it is difficult to advocate that local religious entrepreneurs should be partially self-supporting when those making this pitch have a comfortable standard of living paid for by their supporters. MRT


2 Priest forwards a number of proposals about how missiological anthropology can be strengthened: (1) Christians should become actively involved in the anthropology of religion and the growing field of the anthropology of Christianity by publishing scholarly articles in top peer-reviewed journals and attending professional meetings; (2) Anthropologists teaching in missiology programs must be active in their discipline. In order for Christian colleges and universities to have an increased appreciation for empirically based research related to Christian ministry, they should strengthen the position of the theoretical and methodological aspects of the social sciences in their curriculum. When undergraduate majors in anthropology are offered, advanced degrees in missiology will become more solidly anthropological; (3) More missiologists are needed to engage in ethnographic research of the length and calibre more missiologists are needed to engage in ethnographic research of the length and calibre.; (4) When undergraduate majors in anthropology are offered, advanced degrees in missiology will become more solidly anthropological; (3) More missiologists are needed to engage in ethnographic research of the length and calibre. 

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5 For an analysis of the role that Protestant and Catholic missionaries have played in anthropology, see Howell, _American Anthropologist, 59–70_.


7 To be clear, this is not unusual or unreasonable. I am aware of more than one Bible college that discourage non-Christian applicants. I am unaware of anyone applying to an anthropology department who was turned away on the basis of their religious affiliation.


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Witnessing to Christ in a Pluralistic World: Christian Mission among Other Faiths

Regnum Edinburgh 2010 Series


In our pluralist world, a theology of religious pluralism is needed so that we can better understand our own faith and the faith of others. As one of the Edinburgh 2010 themes, “Christian Mission among Other Faiths” was examined by a wide range of contributors representing various theological positions. Case studies focus on Christian mission among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, new religious movements, and folk or primal religions.

More books and resources

Refer also to the list of books and resources in the bibliography in _Mission Round Table Volume 1.3_ on the theme of “The Church in the Midst of the Temple and the Mosque,” pp. 26–31.

Recognizing God in the Other: Christian Missions with a Multi-religious World

Pascal D. Bazzell

With your understanding of missions, you are sure to lose all missionary zeal and the motivation to take the gospel to all the corners of the world.” This is only one of the numerous reactions I have received in recent months in response to my understanding of missions. Many of those who react to my understanding support a paradigm of mission that entirely contradicts that which I am at least partially attempting to address in this article. Even so, I do not see another alternative. The traditional concept needs to be re-examined. Mission needs to be understood as the work of God in the other and thus as the recognition of God’s truth as revealed in the other. Even if many may not readily admit it, missionaries and churches, by way of their mission practices, all too often foster an enemy image in the other, many times without being aware of this. If this is the case, then the attitude and perspective toward the stranger has not fundamentally changed. If I do not recognize God in the other, then I will inevitably hold the perspective that people of other cultures or religions are only liberated through our proclamation of the gospel. This perception of missions corresponds with an understanding of colonial power. In both scenarios, the essence is about how to best conquer foreign lands. Even if the motivation for missions is right, historians will be right to say: “Have they learned nothing from the dark missionary epochs?”

I see no alternative to perceiving mission as God’s work in the other, even if some are uncomfortable with this change of perspective. Seeing God in the other does not, however, imply an uncritical acceptance. Missiology is primarily not a seeking to find commonalities, but a battle to see God working in the other—or not. Amos Young argues that Acts 2:17 describes the release of the Spirit of God upon all humankind and that therefore pneumatological symbols of God’s presence and action will not only be found within the Christian church, but also in other cultures and other religions. Missiology is thus not primarily a discipline of gospel communication from one culture or religion, but the hermeneutics of perceiving God’s working throughout the whole of creation. On the one hand, the Christian sending aspect of the gospel is the core of the Christian faith. The absolute truth of Jesus must be preached throughout the whole earth. In this way missions and evangelization belong to the core essence of the Christian faith and the church as its community. On the other hand, it is increasingly recognised that the Spirit of God is at work throughout all creation in the same way in which he was personified in Christ. Thus God’s revealed truth forms a part of different religions and cultures. The truth of Jesus Christ becomes simultaneously the truth of God’s light that illuminates all humankind (John 1:9). It is not an either/or situation. The message of the gospel and the recognition of truth in the other go hand-in-hand. It is a recognition of the work of God’s Spirit throughout all creation which reconciles humankind in Jesus Christ (the missio Dei) and at the same time a recognition of the commission and essential nature of the church to preach and live the gospel of Christ in all its fullness.

All too often church dogma and theology place priority on the proclamation of the right concept and image of God. This poses the risk of wanting to press the works of God into the correct mould. The world-wide church provides a clear indication that there are different perceptions of God. For this reason, this short essay advocates impetuses for the hermeneutics of perception—towards the other. This is of great significance.
Mission Round Table

for Christian missions. Where clear boundaries are set towards the hermeneutics of differentiation, a door is opened towards the hermeneutics of perceiving God’s work beyond personal, ecclesiastical, and theological limits. This is not about relativizing the gospel. Rather, it is about connecting with the experience of God in the other in order to be part of the missio Dei. Christ’s “metanoia” message is meaningful for all humankind, cultures, and religions, but only in the early Christian understanding of a turning to Christ and not in the way of a conversion or turning away from one’s own culture or religion.

Recognizing God in the other

Church history points to a concept of the Great Commission involving a mission to people. Ralph Winter’s prophetic address during the 1974 Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization describes Christian missions as a mission to all peoples. From this present-day model, Christian missions among the peoples evolved, wherein the gospel is preached in a relevant way and where biblical theology and church are aligned with the culture. In my missional journey in the Philippines, however, I discovered that the missio Dei is at work long before the missionaries come onto the scene. Contextualization does not adequately capture this dialogical nature of missions, whereby various aspects of God’s work (or that of the gods and spirits) are being evaluated and exchanged. Missions implies that we recognize the work of God in others as part of the missio Dei and enter into it. This insight led me from the perspective of Christian missions among the peoples, which emphasises contextualisation, to my present-day understanding of missions with the peoples, which respects the divine in the other.

Christian missions with the people

Jalal-ad Din Muhammad Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi scholar, wrote: “The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.” Reflecting on this poem, I asked myself how church history with its missionary expansions would have developed if it had been shaped by Paul’s statement that we as believers now see in a mirror obscurely (1 Cor 13:12). Although we have received the fullness of God’s truth through Jesus Christ, we recognize that we fail to comprehend the whole. Although God gives the truth generously to the receiver, it does not imply that the completeness of truth is not undivided. For the Giver—in this case God—is always bigger than his revelations. Rumi’s statement recognizes that there are truths that expand beyond a contextual understanding and its social position. Furthermore, Rumi ascertains that others also possess God’s truths, meaning that they were intended to comprehend specific truths.

The missio Dei is the basis of existence for God’s people (first the Israelites, then the church). But at the same time, God is at work in a mysterious way in all cultures and religions. Missions is therefore perceived as the entering into God’s work of salvation in the other part-bearer (of God’s truth). The purpose is an exchange beyond the boundaries which we have set before God and which hinder our missionary activities. The story of Peter and Cornelius, which plays a key role in the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, underlines this. In this story, we see how the early church learns to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the other. The story of God’s revelation in this passage becomes a prophetic rectification for Peter and the early church. This encounter, as well as Peter’s openness towards the Holy Spirit, changed the principles of the church, its mission practices, and its theology.

Missiology that recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit outside one’s own sociocultural, theological, and church borders, must give room to the divine in the other. This includes the divine in the religious other. And this takes place without the need to deny our Christian faith or to relativize the gospel. Rather we engage through mutual encouragement in finding the whole truth together. Engaging in the hermeneutics of perception in recognizing God’s work in the other will impact the way we respond to the other. As the Holy Spirit helped Peter to overcome cultural and theological barriers, may he also erase our exclusive mindset.

Cornelius needed to jump over sizeable hurdles as he took a step towards Peter in order to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. To help Peter overcome the barriers that held him back, God used the vision of the large sheet from heaven. Cornelius and Peter were then placed in a metaphorical relationship with each other, each having been led by their own respective visions. Despite their differences, they were united as receivers of different revelations. Their standing side by side had a new and unique significance. This is how the Holy Spirit positions his work: it is spread between the participants, rather than being placed exclusively on Peter or Cornelius. It would be a missiological error to either assume that all revelations are equal or that there are no revelations apart from our missionary endeavours to spread the gospel. It is the function of missiology to recognise the kind of revelations given to both sides of the mission frontier and

Although we have received the fullness of God’s truth through Jesus Christ, we recognize that we fail to comprehend the whole. Although God gives the truth generously to the receiver, it does not imply that the completeness of truth is not undivided. For the Giver—in this case God—is always bigger than his revelations.
Our present understanding with the emphasis on contextualization has the understanding that the church has the whole truth and uses dialogue to explain the gospel to the other (Christian missions among the peoples). Christian missions with the peoples goes a step further to where a dialogue takes place between God and the church, between God and the other, and between the church and the other.

the degree of their significance.

Christian missions with the people expresses a new missions approach for our present-day pluralistic context. Inherent in this approach is the actual attempt to grasp God’s saving grace in the other—including the religious other—and simultaneously remain grounded in the truth which is wholly revealed in Jesus. In this endeavour, we need to remind ourselves of the reality that David Bosch highlighted: there is no pure gospel.7 Rather it is always a component of a culture. Thus, the Good News in our present pluralistic world has been smudged by negative historical influences, such as the crusades and colonialism. If missionaries initially were concerned about not preaching a double-sided gospel—the gospel of Jesus Christ and of their own culture—the challenge of our day is to not reinforce negative historical and contextual associations with a specific setting.8 Nowadays the gospel is a part of many cultural and religious traditions, though it is often incomplete and sometimes misleading. And yet, not recognizing the fact that God’s truth and revelation is a component of the other underlines the negative historical and contextual associations people have with the gospel. Even if the actual context constitutes a different setting for Christian missions, the beauty of the Bible does not determine a specific manner of missions. Rather, the Bible testifies to the diversity of missions.

“Christian missions with the people” is an emphatic acceptance of the divine in the other. This approach attempts to recognize the work of the Spirit in the other and to participate in it. Christianity is shaped by the fullness of the truth of God in Jesus Christ, but missions today also needs to include an openness to God’s work outside our ecclesiastical and theological boundaries. Whereas it was assumed in the past that the Christian church (or the missionaries) stand between God and the other (Christian missions to the peoples), our present understanding with the emphasis on contextualization has the understanding that the church has the whole truth and uses dialogue to explain the gospel to the other (Christian missions among the peoples). Christian missions with the peoples goes a step further to where a dialogue takes place between God and the church, between God and the other, and between the church and the other. Thus, the truth of God in the other becomes part of Christian missions. At this point, Christian missions means participation in the dialogue between the trune God and the other. This leads to a complex, dialectic space.

This concept of missions promises to promote a spirit of humility as the importance of the other, including the religious other, becomes apparent. This should hopefully expose the triumphant spirit which, in some churches and mission organizations, still pervades missiological methods and theology. The presentation of a rather dark picture of the other as a lost soul as a means to motivate the church to go to the ends of the earth is still prevalent. Historians are likely to look back on our era with surprise as they take note of the fact that the church has continued to send out colonialists. What would the attitude of missionaries be if they are only presented with a demonised image, and what would their attitude result in considering that the demonised image inevitably leads to military strategies and the language of spiritual warfare in order to conquer the dark lands for the gospel?9 If we, however, recognize that God reveals himself to the other even before the missionary is present, then our current mission practice will hopefully be characterized by more humility because mission belongs to God and not us.

Missiology is therefore the discernment and recognition of the presence, the action, and even the absence of the missio Dei. It is not always easy to recognize the true work of God because of ideologies about what God’s work should look like.10 Thus, recognizing the missio Dei outside our boundaries and participating in it can be difficult. The language and categories often vary greatly from those we are used to within our Christian churches. Contextualisation has just as many limitations because it often uses the language and categories of the western world, resulting in misunderstandings, or even worse, the misinterpretation of God at work in the other and therefore results in judgment.

Whereas fear of syncretism tends to limit our understanding of the missio Dei, we do not find this fear in the God of the Bible. In the story announcing the birth of Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us about the wise men who used astrology in order to understand the mysteries of the universe. Their insights about the star led them to the King of the Jews, whom they then worshipped
(Matt 2:1–12). Jacques Matthey uses this story to illustrate that some people outside of God’s chosen people seem to understand the significance of the person of Jesus and the transformation he brings into the life of humankind better than his chosen ones do.11 God himself describes the heathen King Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant” (Jer 43:10) and the Persian Cyrus is called “his anointed” (Isa 45:1). Or take the example of the compassionate Samaritan—a person of another religion, culture, and ethnicity—used by Jesus to demonstrate, first of all to his audience and then to Christians over thousands of years, what it means to be a good neighbour (Luke 10:25–37). Amos Young points out that “if the glory of the new heavens and earth will be constituted in part by what kings and nations bring into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24, 26), it is inconceivable that such will be bereft of the beauty found in other faiths.”12

Jürgen Schuster expresses a difficulty in understanding that God should only hear prayers from a particular biblical tradition and reject all other prayers from people outside these traditions. Furthermore, Schuster argues that the criteria used here is not the question of the “right” or “wrong” religion, but God’s response to people’s worship of God has to do more with the heart attitude of the worshipper than their religious affiliation.13 Because there is no pure gospel, there is also no pure Christianity. Christianity is a cultural fellowship, an enculturated community. Therefore, fear of a syncretistic Christianity should not limit us—unfortunately, this has already happened. Rather, we should emphasize a correct attitude which will result in a more biblical Christianity. Schuster rightly argues:

In our effort to find clear formulations and clear content-related notions, we missionaries and theologians from the West tend to first of all resolve the question as to who God is as compared to other gods. We have the notion that a person can only “believe” in the biblical sense if they have understood this difference. Interestingly, God proceeds in the reverse order. He begins his story with a person with the image of God available to them at that point in their lives. And he invites the individuals, who have encountered him and to whom he has spoken, to join him on a path. While journeying together on this path, God permits himself to be known more clearly and thus the concept of who God is becomes increasingly clearer. It is a dynamic event. And during this process, fear of syncretistic perceptions may quickly befall. God does not share in this fear. He sovereignly journeys on his way with this person.14

For this reason, we need a greater missiological hermeneutics of perception which does not presuppose the “right” notion of God in the other, but which opens itself towards God’s work in the other. This should not produce a blurred syncretism or an overemphasis of context over the Bible, but rather, the intention is to address the prevalent tendency in our current missiology towards a word-flesh and spirit-flesh dichotomy. Confessions of faith and traditions frequently attempt to provide a theological framework for the missio Spiritus, whereas its nature is: “The wind blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8). And every now and again such unexpected blowing will lead to tension in our mission practice and theology. When correctly implemented, however, the strength of missiology is its ability to hold both aspects in the correct tension, on the one hand being grounded in the Bible and the traditions, and on the other hand recognizing and participating in the missio Dei. When missiology is able to hold these two aspects in perfect tension, then it truly becomes the “mother of theology,” not only for the New Testament, but also for the church in our current theology.15

**Embodiment of the truth in relation to the other**

Christian missions means engaging in a relationship with our neighbour. The aim of Christian mission is not to create a meta-religion or a meta-theology. Instead, we should bring our declaration pertaining to the truth, such as our claim that Jesus is the only Way, the ‘Truth, and the Life, into tangible areas of engagement with our neighbour—the imams, the rabbis, the prostitutes, and the businessmen. Missions with the people supports our intent to buttress the gospel within the tensions of universality and particularity through the cultural and secular media of our time. Therefore, Christian missions in today’s world should be characterised by a communication of the truth, not only from one’s own religious perspectives, but in a dynamic and tangible relationship with the other, thereby including the truth of the other. Gerhard Gäde expounds that since there is only godly truth, the truth in other cultures and religions are in principle the same truth that is proclaimed by our own religion.16 For our present day pluralistic context it is essential to further develop a missiological Hermeneutics of Perception in order to more ably recognize the presence of missio Dei in other cultures and religions.
In conclusion, it needs to be said that missions with the peoples is about being co-pilgrims in faith with the other, seeking and proclaiming God together. Christian missions is thereby not characterized by only giving, but also by receiving; it is not only about proclamation, but also about listening to the work of the triune God in the other in order to participate in God’s mission, precisely with the people. MRT

1 My idealistic understanding of the Great Commission has been greatly altered by my experiences while serving for almost fifteen years in Mindanao, the second largest of the Philippine islands. The context there is characterized by decades of conflict and colonialization, during which indigenous Muslims have been systematically suppressed and exploited by Christian settlers, an act promoted by the central government of the Philippines based in Manila. In 2015, I introduced my early thoughts on my present understanding of missions in a presentation at the 2015 four-day jubilee conference of Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of Intercultural Studies. This is found in their conference publication: Pascal D. Bazzell, “Who Is Our Cornhusk? Learning from Fruitful Encounter at the Boundaries of Mission.” The article has also been published in The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness, Charles Van Engen, ed., Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016). I developed some of my thoughts further for the combined conference of the Evangelischer Arbeitskreis für Mission and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für bibeilich enuerte Theologie in Basel, Switzerland. This article, which was published in German in the conference publication, describes my present understanding of mission. This edited version incorporates only a rough overview of my thoughts, just sufficient to make a broader outline perceivable.


7 David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission, 297.

8 These are very different contexts to those which Paul found in Athens when the gospel of Jesus Christ was first preached. A good example of contextualization is when Paul referred to “the unknown God” as he proclaimed the Gospel (Acts 17). However, we often don’t encounter the same context as Paul when his audience heard the gospel for the first time. Yet, many of us like to be like Paul and do all the interpretation for our hearers while forgetting to listen to how the Spirit of God worked in that context two thousand years ago.

9 The commission of the church is to proclaim the fullness of the gospel in Jesus Christ. This naturally implies that the church enters into a spiritual battle against the forces and powers of evil (Eph 6:10–18). Every culture and religion (including Christianity) is held in bondage by the same demonic powers and forces. The proclamation of the gospel is a proclamation of being set free from these powers and forces of evil, a freedom that can only be found in Jesus Christ.


15 Sunquist, Understanding Christian Mission, 10.

16 Gerhard Gride, Christus in den Religionen: Der christliche Glaube und die Weltreligionen (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), 83.
The Gospel in the Filipino Context: José M. de Mesa and Melba P. Maggay

Andrea Roldan

Introduction

“Three hundred and fifty years in a convent and fifty years of Hollywood,” is what is jokingly said of the Philippines. Since 1521, the country has been through three waves of Christian evangelization—the first two under the Spanish and the third through American occupation. Despite the nation’s long history of Christian influences and the fact that their homeland is widely considered to be the only Christian nation in Asia, Filipino believers continue to grapple with what it means to be Filipino and Christian.

An important aspect of evaluating where a people are at in terms of their Christian faith is their ability to self-theologize. For many Filipinos, the Greco-Roman form of Christianity is the only form known and their broken self-image, self-esteem, and identity due to colonial rule crippled efforts to produce indigenous and local theologies and expressions of faith. A valid and valuable question to ask is how far Filipinos have come in terms of theologizing against the backdrop of the effects of colonial rule in eroding their sense of pride and confidence in their own expressions of faith seeking understanding.

Stephen Bevans argues that there can be no such thing as “theology” and that there is only “contextual theology.” He states: “Doing theology contextually is not an option…The contextualization of theology—the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context—is really a theological imperative.”

This paper looks at the existence of theology developed within the Philippine context by describing, comparing, and evaluating the work of two contextual theologians: José M. de Mesa, a Roman Catholic, and Melba Padilla Maggay, an evangelical. This study hopes to explore the ways in which these Filipino indigenous theologies exist and are developing and also to describe how they fit within the various contextual models categorized by Bevans.

The process by which this essay will develop is by first providing the background of each theologian. Theology develops in context and hence understanding the contexts that have informed both de Mesa and Maggay is key to describing and evaluating them as contextual theologians. This background will be followed by a description and comparison of how each theologian approaches theology in context. The final section of this paper will present an evaluation of both theologians in terms of their engagement with the Filipino context and religious consciousness.

This paper will not attempt an exhaustive evaluation of Maggay’s and de Mesa’s published works. Its aim is to be mostly descriptive and evaluative.

For many Filipinos, the Greco-Roman form of Christianity is the only form known and their broken self-image, self-esteem, and identity due to colonial rule crippled efforts to produce indigenous and local theologies and expressions of faith.
as it engages some of the ideas of both theologians. And while it acknowledges the need for Christians to engage with local culture in the wake of the current presidency in the Philippines, it does not include the contextual theologies that are emerging in the present societal and political climate.

**Bevans’ models of contextual theology**

According to Bevans, doing contextual theology takes into account two things: the *past* as recorded in Scripture and kept alive in tradition as well as the experience of the *present.* The experiences of the present, or, in other words, context, include the experiences of a person or group, their culture, social location, and the reality of social change. This includes the understanding that no context is static. Based on the way theologians engage with the elements of Scripture, tradition, and context, Bevans brings to the table six models of contextual theology: countercultural, translation, synthetic, praxis, transcendental, and anthropological. Each model can be placed along a spectrum with the countercultural model being the most conservative in its recognition of the importance of context but radical in distrust of its “sanctity and revelational power” and the anthropological model, on the opposite end, being the most radical in terms of its emphasis on “cultural identity and its relevance for theology more than scripture or tradition.” Practitioners of the praxis model will focus on social change as they articulate their faith, whilst those who prefer the synthetic model will “attempt the extremely difficult task of keeping all elements in perfect balance.” The sixth and final model—the transcendental model—focuses on the subject who is articulating rather than on the content of what is being articulated.

**Two Filipino theologians: Two faith streams**

**José M. de Mesa**

Approximately 85% of the Filipino population is Roman Catholic in terms of religious affiliation. Despite the constitutional separation between church and state, the Roman Catholic Church continues to enjoy a certain level of influence and power in the country. Though Roman Catholicism has, until the last century, been under the shadow of colonial rule, a growth in the number of local Filipino theologians and nationalistic efforts to “Filipinize” Roman Catholicism has been observed. This growth in indigenous theological reflection within the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines can be mostly attributed to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Vatican II underscored a commitment to the re-rooting of the Good News within specific socio-cultural contexts which resulted in regional affirmations globally. In Asia, for example, the 1977 Asian Colloquium on Ministries noted that “Asian churches must become truly Asian in all things” and that “the principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the root” of the Asian churches coming into their own.

Because the building up of the local church became a priority, local Catholic ministers, priests, and theologians began to emerge in the Philippines. One of these is José M. de Mesa. Though relatively unknown outside of the country, de Mesa is considered one of the most articulate and creative theologians produced in the Philippines. The Roman Catholic Church backed its commitment to seeing indigenous churches grow by supporting many, including de Mesa, to pursue further theological studies. De Mesa obtained his PhD in Religious Studies from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium. He specializes in Systematic Theology and teaches at the De La Salle University in the Philippines. He is also member of the Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs and is on the advisory board of the Concilium Advisory Board for Liturgy and Sacraments based in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. De Mesa’s various publications, consultations, and lectures on inculturation have earned him national recognition.

As a married Catholic theologian, de Mesa has been subject to scrutiny by more conservative Catholic Filipinos who have labeled him as being liberal in theology and scholarship.
Maggay has been considered one of the most influential voices in the Filipino evangelical community

Melba Padilla Maggay

Whereas, thanks to Vatican II, the halls of Europe’s universities and seminaries became the ground for the theological development of many Filipino Catholic priests and scholars, it was the streets and halls of the Philippine universities for Filipino evangelicals. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Philippines was under the rule of a dictator and the country was overshadowed by clouds of increasing poverty, debt, American influence, and communist insurgency. There was no choice, whether one was Catholic or Protestant, but to grapple with social realities. When it came to coming to terms with what was happening in the country, many—particularly the impressionable youth—determined the choice was between the Communist Manifesto and the gospel. Many from the evangelical community chose to separate the secular from the sacred. Others, especially those from the evangelical intelligentsia and the evangelical student movement, believed the solution was to think, feel deeply, and engage with Scripture in context. Enter the likes of Melba Padilla Maggay who, as a student at the left-leaning University of the Philippines, began to lead others into an exciting period of evangelical social and theological engagement.

One of the most respected evangelical thinkers in the Philippines and the majority world, in addition to being a writer and anthropologist, Maggay co-founded the Institute for Studies in Asian Culture (ISACC) to be an evangelical think tank. Maggay’s book, Transforming Society—perhaps considered her most influential work—has been translated into several different languages globally. She serves as president not just of ISACC but also of the Micah Network, an alliance of more than 600 development organizations around the world. Maggay is a member of the board of the Center for Community Transformation as well as the International Council of Interserve. She also helped found two other institutes based in the Netherlands and Sweden that focus on social transformation. It is popularly said that Maggay dislikes being called a theologian, having perhaps in mind arm-chair theologians holed up in their academic offices with a narrow window to the world. She continues to be one of the few Filipino evangelical thinkers who exert a wide influence through her lectures, writing, and leadership.

Two Filipino theologians: Two faith models

José M. de Mesa

An evaluation of available work by José M. de Mesa shows breadth and creativity in terms of theological insight and depth. His emphasis on the importance of indigenous theological reflection, spurred and encouraged by Vatican II, is due to a conviction that this is indicative of, as well as an aid to, the indigenous presence and mission of the church. De Mesa’s theological reflections and development, as Bevans notes, can be viewed as illustrative of a more liberal use of the synthetic model, gravitating towards both the anthropological and praxis models. In various publications such as “Doing Theology as Inculturation,” and “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” de Mesa uses the word “inculturation” to describe the process of “making the Gospel meaningful and challenging within a specific cultural context.” For de Mesa, the gospel is expressed in a particular culture and therefore it is not possible to extract its essence from its cultural expression and merely translate it. Cultural embodiment is therefore intrinsic to gospel communication. In addition to gospel communication being dependent on context, de Mesa also sees that no one has a monopoly of the message and meaning of the gospel except in relation to the present situation. Moreover, the process of appropriating the message and meaning of the gospel is not merely a matter of applying to a given context or situation what is thought to be discovered within the biblical tradition. Evident in de Mesa is a keen understanding of the essential role that culture and context play in gospel communication.

To encourage Filipinos to take up the resources of their culture and appropriate the message and meaning of the gospel, de Mesa emphasizes and encourages de-stigmatizing and re-valuing culture as necessary steps to the process of inculturation. By taking a positive outlook on culture and focusing on inculturation, de Mesa exhibits a tendency to lean towards an anthropological model of contextual theology which, as Bevans notes, focuses on the value and goodness of the human person and emphasizes culture. As de Mesa states, the methodological approach to inculturation “should emphasize the positive resources and potential of the culture to interpret and respond to the questions of contemporary society.”

He also discusses the importance of an appreciative awareness of each culture, calling strongly for the “retrieval
(rediscovery and recovery) of the strengths and riches of the cultural wisdom and genius of a people” affected by colonialism and modernization.21

It is interesting to observe that though de Mesa uses an anthropological model to address the effects of colonialism and modernization of society, the principle of theologizing he endorses for the inculturation of the gospel is also very much synthetic. In both papers mentioned above, de Mesa sees the process of doing theology in context as a mutual interaction between two traditions of experience: the Judeo-Christian tradition (past) and contemporary (present) experience, with each being a source and target to each other. For de Mesa, theology can begin from either pole. In his view, this process isn’t so much that the Judeo-Christian tradition is merely translated or transplanted into contemporary culture or that contemporary culture creates its own faith tradition without reference to Jewish-Christian heritage. Rather, de Mesa sees an interplay between the two so that both serve as an “interpretative and critical guide to the other.”

De Mesa does not stop at being synthetic. He sees that, ultimately, doing theology in context means that theologizing should take off from the issues, questions, and concerns of a given socio-cultural context. This makes his approach not only anthropological and synthetic but also praxis. De Mesa also believes that theology should be catalyzed by context and that theologizing should be done. As he states, “It is only in the actual doing of theology itself, which requires careful analysis of both culture and Tradition, especially Scripture, that better clarity and fuller understanding come, and this within the practice of the faith itself by the community.”

The scheme de Mesa proposes develops in three stages, all of which reflect a dialectical relationship between anthropological, synthetic, and praxis models of contextual theology. The first stage is where context—its issues, questions, and concerns—serves as the indicator of what theology should be about. Meaningful theology, as such, is catalyzed by context. The second stage is characterized by the “respectful” and “critical” correlation of the context—which de Mesa terms as “cultural aspects”—with Judeo-Christian tradition. Relevant cultural aspects are used as interpretative elements to “discern and discover the riches of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in relation to context.”24 The third stage involves the interaction between the two traditions of past and present and puts forward a “tentative” theological interpretation that addresses the initial issues that triggered the theological discourse in the first place. De Mesa uses the word “tentative” to reflect the character of theology as a continuous reflective process and in being non-absolute in its claims. This theological undertaking, de Mesa hopes, will ultimately impact the actual situation from which it arises.25

To summarize, de Mesa exhibits a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of theology in context. He not only provides a model for the engagement of the traditions of the past and present, he also breaks this down into details and stages.26 As Bevans notes, de Mesa’s work is “rich in scholarship, rich in creativity, and the work of a person who seeks sincerely to understand his faith.”27

Melba Maggay

Compared to de Mesa, Maggay’s seminal works offer no systematic scheme for approaching theology in context. Her background as a social anthropologist informs her engagement with Scripture and society. In the introduction of Transforming Society, perhaps her most important contribution to integral mission, she writes: “I am not a theologian and I have no intention of being one.”28

Nevertheless, Maggay has been considered one of the most influential voices in the Filipino evangelical community. Unlike de Mesa who provides a systematic way of approaching theology in context, Maggay focuses directly on engaging the realities of Filipino society. Whilst maintaining a highly cognitive approach in her discussions, Maggay engages directly with context rather than working up from theory. In her work up to the late 1990s, rather than thinking through theological and hermeneutical complexities, Maggay jumps directly to praxis.

By directly engaging with, for example, issues concerning church and social action, Maggay demonstrates a leaning towards what Bevans articulates as the praxis model of contextual theology which is described as “a way of doing theology at its most intense level—the level of reflective action.”29 In Transforming Society, Maggay sees that “the Word must take flesh” and that “the saving power of God needs to be made visible, otherwise it is only empty words.”30 Throughout the rest of the book Maggay argues for the church to take upon itself the task of changing society. She engages with the dichotomization between evangelism and social action. She also addresses the role of the church in times of pressure, disorder, and injustice, and at the same time warns against making an idol of social concern.31

In her earlier work, Maggay also shares a particular concern for the communication of the gospel in the Filipino context. For Maggay, the gospel has yet to be communicated in a way that has truly wrestled with the Filipino people’s world view. In Gospel in Filipino Context, for example, Maggay states that because the Filipino
thinks in concrete images, the gospel needs to be communicated through the use of parables and stories rather than general truths and propositions.32 Whereas for the western mind ideas are communicated, for the Filipino mind what should be communicated are events. Secondly, though generally lacking within Philippine Protestantism more symbols and images should be used. The gospel also needs to be communicated in a way that builds on the network of relationships that comes naturally to Filipino culture rather than through western evangelistic efforts that are centered on “lectures, mass rallies, and media spectaculars.”33 The outworking of a gospel communicated in the Filipino context will therefore need to take into consideration the reality of the person of Jesus Christ rather than the idea of him.

In some ways this way of engaging with Scripture and context leans more towards Bevans’ countercultural model in that Scripture serves as a corrective. Bevans notes that the practitioners of the countercultural model “recognize that if the gospel is to be adequately communicated, it has to be done ‘in the language of those to whom it is addressed and to be to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them’ and that ‘culture itself is not an evil.’” He adds that this model sees the necessity of analyzing and respecting context but allows for the gospel to take the lead in the process so that context is shaped and formed by the reality of the gospel and vice-versa.”34 This is exactly what Maggay does in Gospel in the Filipino Context, Filipino Religious Consciousness, and her other essays up to the late 1990s.

In her more recent essays, Maggay has begun to look at cultural and context driven readings of Scripture in ways that she had not previously. In a short essay published in 1989 entitled “Reading, or How to Get the Seven Blind Men to See the Elephant,” Maggay began to explore the complexities of multiple readings of the same text.35 Her approach, however, was mostly theoretical and seemed more like touching the surface of the role of context in hermeneutics. Using the same title in 2013, she published a more extensive study of the relationship between text and context, Scripture reading, engagement, and culture. In this recent contribution to the collection of essays entitled The Gospel in Culture, Maggay shares that while she was conducting a Bible Study amongst the Ifugao tribe in the mountains of Northern Philippines, one of the Ifugao women blurted out an out-of-the-box interpretation of the reason why the long-bleeding woman had trembled with fear. For her, a poor girl from the mountains, it was because she was afraid that Jesus would ask for a fee.

Maggay here begins to grapple more intentionally with how context reads into Scripture in a way that her earlier reflections did not. As such, her approach seems to have moved from the praxis and countercultural models of contextual theology towards a more synthetic model. The perspective Maggay presents of culture is that it is “the overall frame by which we view reality” and it “conditions our reading of the text.”36 She also states that “what we see, what we appropriate, and what we communicate are all conditioned by that complex of reflexes which have to do with our predispositions as shaped by our social location and conditioning.”37 Hence, for Maggay, culture informs the reading and interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, perceptions as to the meaning of Scripture are culture bound. With regard to the question of defining what is “essential” and must always be present in terms of the communication of the gospel in any given culture as well as the question as to whether “essence” and “accidents” of culture can be separated, Maggay offers no answer.38

Unlike de Mesa, Maggay is not a systematic theologian. She looks at and wrestles with the realities of Filipino society and tries to find ways to reconcile her faith and Scripture. She uses the lenses of the disciplines of literature, communication theory, and anthropology, and her brilliant mind to serve as a prophetic voice within the evangelical Filipino community. And though she may refuse to be called a theologian, she demonstrates that she is one and a very good contextual one with the courage to engage with even the most educated and experienced.

The gospel in the Filipino context: Two streams in convergence

Theology, as faith seeking understanding, does not arise in the abstract. It is born and developed in a concrete setting, culture and history. It is, therefore, culturally and historically relative.39

– Stephen B. Bevans

It is interesting to observe how two theologians engage with the same context. Both de Mesa and Maggay are products of the same generation within Philippine history. Their theological reflections have emerged in the midst of and in response to a singular context but have also emerged from and were shaped by two different faith communities and traditions that were collectively grappling with societal realities. As Bevans notes, theology is born and developed in a concrete setting, not only in the context of culture and history. Though de Mesa and Maggay may have come from the same historical, socio-political, and cultural context, their faith communities and affiliations serve as a context that sets the scene for divergence in theology, approach, and emphasis.

Adversity has a way of pushing Christians to think and feel deeply. Moreover, it is in the midst of suffering that the most profound theological reflections often emerge. The time under martial rule and the dictator Ferdinand Marcos shaped these two contextual theologians. Their religious affiliation in turn shaped the ways in which they engaged with the context.

The Catholic Church—as the majority religion in the country—has, throughout Filipino history, enjoyed a great deal of influence and power. Priests and
leaders of the Catholic Church rested on cushions whilst other denominations struggled to find their identity, purpose, and voice. During the Marcos era, Cardinal Sin—the most visible representative of the Catholic Church—used his power with a “great deal of ambiguity,” wherein one moment he would upbraid government and then the next allow “his offices to be used as sacramental sanction to the activities of the state and the vaulting ambitions of its politicians.”40

The evangelical church in the Philippines, on the other hand—as the minority—has attempted to reconcile faith with social realities in two ways: either through solidarity—as embodied by the more radical groups—or by separation and capitulation—by those who struggled with modernism and the “social gospel.”41 During the dark period under Marcos, evangelical students grappled not just with the realities of communism, poverty, and widespread social injustice but also with the reality of the influences of the Roman Catholic Church, western missionaries, and American Christianity.

Whereas de Mesa, supported by the Catholic Church and through the patronage of Vatican II, delved deeply into indigenous theological reflection from within European academic circles, Maggay’s thoughts were formed in the halls of the leftist university and the streets. The 70s and 80s shaped Maggay and encouraged her to lean more towards the praxis model. Consistent engagement with Scripture and evangelical scholarship, however, modified her approach so that it was centered on being countercultural. As noted by Bevans, the countercultural model realizes that some contexts are simply “anthethetical to the gospel and need to be challenged by the gospel’s liberating and healing power.”42 This is what Maggay embodied in her writing. She consistently challenged not just the political scene but also social realities and Filipino religious consciousness.

De Mesa, on the other hand, looked at context and though cognizant of the reality of poverty and injustice, called for transformation resulting from cultural positivism rather than focusing and highlighting the need for a prophetic voice that calls for a complete social upheaval. As a Roman Catholic, de Mesa could only work within the confines of his religious affiliation. To be countercultural would have meant shooting himself and his religious affiliation in the foot.

Instead, de Mesa sought to redeem Filipino Roman Catholic religious consciousness in spite of it being heavily impacted by its colonial past. Since Filipino society and religious consciousness is so deeply informed and influenced by Roman Catholicism, de Mesa cannot help but be more positivistic in his approach to Filipino culture and be redemptive and conciliatory in terms of Filipino religiosity and the Roman Catholic faith. Since he assumes that to be Filipino is to be Roman Catholic de Mesa finds no need to be a prophetic voice that is critical of the context. Instead, he approaches culture, context, and religious consciousness with a redemptive purpose. Maggay, on the other hand, is able to stand outside of the standard Filipino religious consciousness—framed and shaped by centuries of Spanish and Roman Catholic influence—and challenge it.

Based on these observations about how religious affiliation has informed Maggay’s and de Mesa’s theologies, it can be argued that Bevans’ statement about theology as being culturally and historically relative can be extended—it is also shaped by religious affiliation, identity, and consciousness. It can also be argued that theology in itself, and the context it emerges from, is also relative to power as evidenced by de Mesa and Maggay, with the former emerging from the majority and the latter from a minority in Philippine society.

Almost thirty years after the overthrow of Marcos, a series of coup d’etats, economic crises, and mini revolutions, the Philippines is finally coming to a level of stability it has not seen in a long time. Within the last ten years, without a singular demon—such as Marcos—to decry, and with the challenges of pluralism and an increasingly globalized and networked society, the evangelical church in the Philippines is being forced to think more deeply and theoretically about the relationship between Scripture and context.43 Maggay, for example, with greater exposure to the complexities of hermeneutics and access to other more tooled theologians, is beginning to delve more into the details of cultural readings of Scripture.

Within evangelical circles, it is worth noting that competing theologies are not so much about models but orthodoxyes. The struggle, at least within Filipino urban churches, is between the liberal and conservative, the reformed and non-reformed, and literal and non-literal interpretation. This reality is possibly due to the influence of American Christian theology.

In its contemporary state, one can see an increase in dialogue between the different faith streams in the Philippines. Globalization as well as greater political and economic stability have driven theologians to reflect deeper into technicalities of translation, context, and hermeneutical detail. As such, it can be argued that both the more liberal stream of Roman Catholicism, as represented by the likes of de Mesa, and the evangelical stream are coming to a stage of convergence in terms of their engagement with Scripture, tradition, and context.
If theology is to be relevant at all, it needs to be meaningful within a given context. For the Philippines, one only hopes that in the same way that the 70s and 80s produced contextual theologians like Maggay and de Mesa, contemporary and post-modern theologians of similar stature will emerge in the future.

Maggay is moving from being counter-cultural to becoming synthetic in her theology. Her access to and dialogue with other contextual theologians, including Rene Padilla and even de Mesa, is informing her discourse. While remaining synthetic, de Mesa—in the context that the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines is losing more of its political grip and influence, the renewal taking place within Roman Catholicism, and the growing influence of the charismatic and evangelical movements—is moving from anthropological and praxis leanings to a more countercultural model. In a paper published in 2002, he begins to question, for example, the “institutional imperial model of church.” He states that to develop into a huge overarching institution so far reaching in its jurisdiction and control that it claimed to be a big ‘perfect society’ rather than a small imperfect church.”

The question, therefore, arises as to whether theologians such as Maggay and de Mesa can simply be identified with one particular model of Bevan’s contextual theology or whether their theological reflections—depending on the particular issue or context engaged—are more fluid in adopting one kind of model in one situation and another model in a different situation. In other words, is theology a dialectical process, do theologians develop in their theological methodology so that they epitomize one model at a given point in time and another at a later stage? Similarly, is it possible that all theologians might eventually become synthetic in their approaches to engaging with Scripture, tradition, and context?

Bevans argues that certain models function more adequately within certain sets of circumstances. What is important is that every theologian needs “to be aware of the range of methodological options available.” Whether or not all theologians become synthetic over time is not a question that Bevans addresses. What is clear, however, is that for our contemporary, postmodern world, the synthetic model is the most powerful and creative model for contextual theologizing. As Bevans noted, there can be no such thing as theology per se; there can only be contextual theology. Both Maggay and de Mesa demonstrate this to be so. Authentic expressions of faith seeking understanding cannot be separated from one’s context if it is at all to be transformative. Moreover, if theology is to be relevant at all, it needs to be meaningful within a given context. For the Philippines, one only hopes that in the same way that the 70s and 80s produced contextual theologians like Maggay and de Mesa, contemporary and post-modern theologians of similar stature will emerge in the future. Without contextual theologians emerging—in the sense of intentional theologizing engaging with and emerging from the Filipino context—what can be said of Filipino appropriations of the Christian faith will not find clear answers. Intentionality is key, whether it be from the Roman Catholic or Evangelical stream. The end result, we hope, is a continuously developing sense of convergence with regard to Filipino religious consciousness, identity, and societal transformation reflective of Filipino Christian faith and commitment. MRT

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2 Bevans refers to tradition as faith experiences that are kept alive, preserved, defended, and perhaps even neglected or suppressed in the past. Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 5.
3 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 31.
4 Ibid., 32.
5 Ibid.
8 De Mesa, “Doing Theology.”
9 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 99.
11 Ibid.
14 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 99.
15 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 117.
17 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 125.
18 De Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” 195.
19 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 55.
20 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 126.
21 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 126.
22 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 121.
23 De Mesa, “Doing Theology,” 128.
27 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 102.
28 Maggay, Transforming Society, 11.
29 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 70.
30 Maggay, Transforming Society, 21.
31 Maggay, Transforming Society, 43.
34 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 119.
37 Maggay, “Reading,” 159.
39 De Mesa, “Doing Theology” 122.
40 Bevans, Transforming Society, 38.
41 Bevans, Transforming Society, 38–39.
42 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 118.
43 The current president and government in the Philippines, however, seems to be catalyzing a wave of biblical and theological discourse within the country not just within the halls of evangelical seminaries and think tanks but outside as well.
45 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 139.
46 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 93–95.
47 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 3.
During the past century the church has grown around the world in directions and in ways that were frequently unexpected and unprecedented. In recent years, one of the most debated means of growth has been insider movements—movements of people to faith in Christ who remain within their original cultural and religious communities. A growing body of literature describes this phenomenon, with some writers simply trying to describe what they see, others promoting it as a new expression of God’s Spirit, and more decriing its various forms as syncretistic at best. As most of the published literature on the theme comes in the form of articles in journals or compilations, I was excited to discover a longer examination written by a well-known theologian of culture with experience working in Asian and African cultures. Would the book fulfill my expectations?

*Insider Jesus* was not written so much to describe or evaluate various insider movements as “to provide a theological perspective for thinking about them” (2). Dyrness sets the stage in chapter 1 by examining the development and collapse of contextualization in recent mission thinking. Some of the book’s most challenging cultural and procedural issues are found here and demand our attention. I believe that Dyrness rightly claims that “the event of Christ, and of Christ’s renewing work, is not indigenous to any culture” and that “it has to be received as a crosscultural—indeed a countercultural—reality” (21). If this is correct, we may need to rethink our whole understanding of contextualization and indigeneity.

Chapter 2 considers how God’s role as Creator and Redeemer has impacted human culture from the very beginning. Culture and religion are both human responses to God’s work. The author believes that where cultures and religions promote human flourishing God works through them to bring redemption. Messengers of Jesus Christ should therefore get to know the logic and structure of a local cultural in order to illuminate what God is already doing there.

The third chapter focuses on religion as understood in biblical narrative. Israelite religion is said to “reflect both the religious and the cultural environment that Israel inhabited and also what God was up to at a given time” (45). As people long for and search for God, he responds, not with indifference but with “a remarkable tolerance toward other religions” (48). To be sure, religion must be saved because God is the author of salvation. Even so, religion gives people space to search for God and may provide places where Christ is encountered.

Examples of spaces where Christ is said to be found are recorded in the case studies in chapter 4. Here insider movements from Africa, Latin America, India, Thailand, and the Philippines are recounted. These movements vary greatly in detail and connection to the historical church and will strike many readers as being, at best, on the fringe of Christianity. Even so, we are encouraged to “watch this space” to see how the Holy Spirit continues to work in the divergent groups and brings them along on their road to discipleship.

Chapter 5 addresses issues of how Christians should understand and engage the various religions around them and recognize the working of the Spirit of God among them. Of great importance is Dyrness’ understanding of religion as “the particular cultural practices that develop to express the inbuilt human longing for God” (101) that, for most people, is “often expressed in stories, legends, aesthetic artifacts, and rituals” (104). For the gospel to make progress in the world, it must be understandable in terms that the receptors recognize, and when it is thus understood it may produce forms of church that are not instantly recognizable to others.

The final chapter sums up the ideas brought out in the book that the Spirit of God is working through insider and emergent movements today. While different reactions to these movements are acknowledged (138–40), Dyrness believes that the most helpful model for understanding them is that of “dual belonging”—in which a follower of Jesus can accept a new identity without giving up their previous identity (140).

Though I found the book stimulating and recommend it highly for those who want to better understand insider movements, I was not fully convinced by all the arguments given for a number of reasons. First, the book reveals an unduly optimism toward culture and religion that I believe does not take sin’s impact on culture seriously enough. Certainly, God is at work in cultures and individuals before someone brings the gospel along, but walls have often been erected to hold the gospel and Spirit out. Second, this optimism carries over to the discussion of the biblical narrative’s attitude toward other religions. The destruction of the Canaanites shows that God finds their morals and religious practices to be an abomination as they are so intricately intertwined and warns Israel against both. Third, the book’s regular encouragement to patiently watch for what the Holy Spirit is doing through a particular movement—even if it looks far from orthodox—would seem overstated if applied to other sub-Christian cults. While a few groups—like the Worldwide Church of God—have come to denounce their founder’s teachings and align themselves with evangelical Christianity through their study of Scripture, what level of hope should we hold out that others which have retained unorthodox or heretical doctrines for many years will one day come to the truth? Fourth, I was surprised to find myself in agreement with many statements made throughout the book, only to see these ideas applied to insider movements in a way that did not follow logically. Read the book for the breadth of its examination of the study, but be sure to pay close attention to the details.
Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities

This book presents a comprehensive survey of insider movements—the creative, unexpected ways in which God is drawing large numbers from major non-Christian religions to follow Jesus as Lord within the religious communities of their birth. This anthology brings together diverse voices to explore this phenomenon from the perspectives of Scripture, history, theology, missiology, and the experience and identity of insider believers. It highlights key issues that will enhance dialogues between field workers and agencies.

The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes
Melba Maggay, ed. (Manila: OMF Literature/Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 2013)

Maggay and twelve other contributors consider the concept of “Gospel in Culture” from various Asian perspectives. Issues in reading, appropriating, and transmitting the faith are examined in three sections: (1) Christianity and Culture: Historic Appropriations, (2) The Text in Context: Hermeneutical Explorations, and (3) The Gospel in Context: Communicating in a Pluralized Context.

Appropriate Christianity
Charles H. Kraft, ed. (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2013)

With contributions by eighteen authors, this book examines contextualization in three crucial dimensions: truth, allegiance, and spiritual power. While there have been helpful discussions of the contextualization of theological truth, the other two dimensions must be addressed for contextualization to be truly biblical as allegiance to Christ is the basis for all that makes us Christian, and Jesus characterized spiritual power.

The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, 3rd ed.
Philip Jenkins (New York: OUP, 2011)

This new edition draws on new scholarship to illuminate the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the global South. It addresses pertinent issues such as how the new Christianity is likely to affect the poor, how we should interpret the success of prosperity churches across the global South, whether Christianity will contribute to liberating the poor and give voice to the previously silent, and if Christianity liberates women or introduces new scriptural bases for subjection.
Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World

David Harley

The Apostle Paul lived in a pluralistic society. His own people worshipped the one God, the God of Abraham, and obeyed the Mosaic Law. The majority of people in the Mediterranean world prayed to the gods of Greece and Rome. Many venerated their ancestors while all were commanded to worship the Emperor. Many also followed foreign cults and mystery religions. Paul was called to preach the gospel to people of every nation (Acts 9:15), and what he wrote in the first eight chapters of Romans makes it abundantly clear why he was convinced of the universal relevance of the gospel. Since all have sinned and stand under the judgment of God, it follows logically that all need a savior. This was the good news that Paul sought to share wherever he went, but he was constantly confronted with the challenges of witnessing in a pluralistic society. The Roman authorities viewed his preaching as a threat to emperor worship. The Ephesians saw it as an insult to the goddess Diana. The Greeks thought the good news he proclaimed was nonsense. And the Jews saw it as a heretical rejection of their ancient religion.

In Romans 9–11 Paul addresses the topic of Christian witness in a multi-faith society. He does so with specific reference to the Jewish religion, but his approach to the Jewish question provides a model for Christian witness to any religious or cultural group, whether in the first century or the twenty-first.

Respect for the religious tradition and devotion of others

First, it is evident that Paul had great affection and respect for the Jewish people. They were his people, his family, his friends, whom he knew and loved. He knew how this people had been singularly blessed by God. He respected, cherished, and valued their religious heritage. He recognized how important it was for them.

Paul knew how much they had received from God. God had made them his people, shown them his glory, given them his law, and taught them how they should worship him. He had given them innumerable promises of blessing, a multitude of great spiritual leaders, and, in the fullness of time, he had sent his Son to be their Messiah. Paul appreciated this wonderful religious heritage which he shared with them.

He too was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. While Paul had common ground to build on in his communication with Jews, he tried a similar approach to other peoples in so far as it was possible. He tried to show that he understood and appreciated their religious traditions. He often began his preaching from a point of mutual understanding. When speaking to polytheists in Lystra, he refers to the great Creator God (Acts 14:15). When addressing Greek intellectuals in Athens, he quotes from their philosophers and poets (Acts 17:22–31). He looked for common ground, for points of agreement, for aspects of a culture that he could respect and admire. That is as evident in his letters as it is in his preaching. In every culture and ethnic group there is much that is fine and honourable, customs that show respect, ethical understanding that encourages morality, and spiritual understanding about the importance of prayer or the character of God. So far as was possible, Paul always showed respect and appreciation for the culture and heritage of the people to whom he spoke. His approach was as positive as possible.

In our witness to our pluralistic world, we need to start by looking as positively as we can at the beliefs and culture of others. We must do this because we can’t respect people unless...
we understand them. And we can’t understand unless we take the time and trouble to learn and study what they believe and what is important to them. We cannot share with them unless we are first prepared to listen to them.

Paul also had a high regard for sincerity and religious devotion. In Romans 10:2, he says of the Pharisees: “I can testify that they are zealous for God.” Jesus called some of the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. Doubtless some of them were. Doubtless today he would call some Christians hypocrites. But we should not for a moment imagine that all Pharisees were like that. Many, like Nicodemus, had a real love for the word of God and a deep desire to obey that word. Many would have known the Psalms by heart and meditated on them constantly. They were meticulous in obeying the law. They were disciplined in keeping times of prayer, and their prayer lives would put the prayer lives of most evangelicals to shame. They kept the Sabbath day and refused to use it for anything except for prayer and the study of God’s word. They honestly tried to obey the law of God. Paul admired their zeal. He had respect both for their religious heritage and for their religious devotion. If we seek to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, we would do well to follow Paul’s example.

Conviction of the universal relevance of the gospel

In the opening chapter of Romans, Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first to the Jew and then for the Gentile. In chapter 10 he reiterates his conviction that this message is of the utmost relevance to the whole human race.

First, he speaks of the necessity of the gospel (10:1–5). While he respected the Jewish religious tradition and the sincere devotion of many Jewish people, he recognized that they were trying to establish their own credibility with God and assert their own goodness. But Paul was convinced that no one could do that. No one could earn enough credit to gain a place in heaven. “Believe me,” says Paul, “I tried. I know it’s impossible to make the grade. You can never earn righteousness as a reward. You can only receive it as a gift. That’s why Jesus came and died.”

Paul also spells out the simplicity of the gospel (10:6–10). Here is the wonderful truth that he sought to share with everyone he met. You don’t have to do the impossible, he argues. You don’t have to climb to heaven. You don’t have to act as if Christ had never been born and the Son of God had never come down to this earth. You don’t have to find your way up to God because he has come down. You don’t have to build up your own reservoir of credits. You don’t have to compensate with hard cash for every mistake you have made. You don’t have to collect points until you have earned enough to get a free pass into heaven.

You don’t have to act as if Christ was still in the grave and the work of salvation was incomplete and that you have to do something to complete it. Christ has died and now he has been raised from the dead. As Paul said earlier in 4:25, “Christ was put to death for our sins and raised for our justification.” There is nothing for anyone to do except to believe with their hearts and confess Christ with their lips (10:9).

Paul concludes by spelling out again the universal relevance of the gospel (10:11–13). Whatever a person’s racial, religious, cultural, or social background may be, the gospel is for them. The Lord is Lord of all. He bestows riches on all who call on him. The gospel is for everybody. This is a teaching that is not popular in our relativistic age. Postmodernism pervades western society and, I fear, is creeping east along the internet. Western media extol a message of tolerance: “Let everyone have their own beliefs.” Everyone is right. Every truth is true. If a person thinks something is true, it is true for him. If someone says that the world is flat, then that is their conviction and they have every right to hold it. But the fact is that they are wrong. To allow for such thinking is relativism gone mad.

There is such a thing as absolute truth. Even if they say it a thousand times and hold it with absolute conviction, the world will never be flat. When the writer of Genesis declares that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth he is declaring to a pluralistic age that there are not many gods but one God, and he has made all that there is in its intricacy and its interrelatedness. The biblical proclamation is always that those who believe in one God are right. Paul goes on to spell out the corollary that since there is only one God he alone can offer salvation. As Isaiah writes: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). As Christians, we must face the logic of our faith. If we have a Savior, he is the Savior of the world. If he is not the Savior of the world, then we have no Savior.

**Passion and perseverance in sharing the good news**

Paul is passionate about the gospel and longs that everyone—both Jew and Gentile—will hear it and respond to it. We hear the burden of his heart reflected in his cry: “How shall they hear without a preacher?” (10:14). We see his deep concern expressed again and again in these chapters: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” (9:2). “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (10:1). He longs and prays for the salvation of his compatriots and cries for them as Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem.

Paul didn’t spend time speculating about their eternal destiny. He didn’t argue that those who were sincere...
but had never heard of Christ would probably be OK. He believed there was no salvation apart from Christ. Likewise, we have no right to gamble with other people’s salvation or to theorize while people are waiting to hear. Paul longed that they would hear as soon as possible and he longed that preachers would be sent (10:14–15).

He knew it was not easy to witness in a pluralistic society. It was his common experience that many were not interested in such an amazing message. Echoing Isaiah, he complains: “Who has believed our report?” (10:16). Paul often experienced rejection and recognized that in some small way he was walking in the footsteps of his Savior, for he refers to Isaiah’s picture of the Suffering Servant. Paul knew it was hard to be a messenger of Christ or follow in the steps of the Servant King. He knew that those who were sent out as Christ’s ambassadors had to be willing to persevere. They had to be prepared for rejection, to be prepared to be vulnerable, and to be prepared to suffer. They would not always be welcomed. They would often be misunderstood.

**Witness through sacrifice and transformed lives**

Paul lived in a multi-faith, multi-cultural society. He was a theologically trained Jew and a Roman citizen who was familiar with the Greek language and culture. He was ideally placed to build cultural bridges and to communicate effectively across cultural bridges. He was appreciative of the religious and cultural background of others. He was sensitive in the way he sought to communicate in differing cultural milieus. At the same time he was convinced of the universality of the gospel and he was passionate that all should hear it. So what was his recipe for effective witness in such a context? What was his advice to those who would seek to preach Christ in such a pluralist world?

At the beginning of Romans 12, he called them to live lives of sacrifice, to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, thus following in the steps of their Savior. That would be a mark of true devotion to God. Had not Jesus called them to deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him? Paul knew from experience how hard the road of discipleship could be and he challenges any who wish to be an ambassador for Christ to realize that they are called to a life of sacrifice and service.

Paul also stressed that those who preach the gospel should demonstrate the truth of the gospel in the way they behaved. They should practice what they preached. They should declare the gospel not simply in their words, but in their lives. They were not to be like everybody else. They were not to follow the same moral codes in their personal lives or their work. They were not to have the same priorities in life as those who had no hope beyond the grave. They were to be different. They were not to be conformed to this world. They were to be transformed: “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2). That was God’s call to Israel. They were called to be different, to be holy, to be set apart, so that the nations around them would notice the difference in their lives and be drawn to worship the true God (Deut 4:5–8). Likewise, the messengers of the gospel in our pluralistic world are called to proclaim the gospel first through who they are and then through what they say. They are not to be conformed to the lifestyle and behavior patterns of those around them. They are to be transformed, and that transformation will authenticate their message.

So how will such transformation take place? That is the burning question that comes to all of us who seek to serve and witness to Christ in our pluralistic world. It will take place as our minds are renewed by our relationship with Christ, our encounter with the Spirit, and our study of the Scriptures. As we read and reflect on God’s word our worldview will change, our attitude to people will change, and our priorities will change. We will begin to think God’s thoughts after him. Such transformation will not be instantaneous. It will be much more a process than a single event. And it will take place as we spend more time in the Scriptures, walk more closely with our Savior, and keep in step with the Spirit. The fruit of such a process is that we will find greater clarity about God’s will for our lives and greater fruitfulness in our witness. We will discover that God’s plan for our lives and for our ministry in this multi-cultural world is good, pleasing, and perfect.

Though we may have had other ideas and ambitions for ourselves, nothing could be better than following God’s plan. Though we may have our own good ideas about the most effective pattern of witness in a pluralistic world, God’s will, if we pursue it, will be the best of all. That’s why we need to listen to Paul’s words again and again. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). And then we need to live it out and teach it in our pluralistic world.
Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World
Bryant L. Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017)

Written by an experienced leader in global development, this book provides a theological perspective on globalization with a perceptive analysis that considers concrete realities including global poverty. Its many diagrams and sidebars incorporate the views of global partners and draw readers to reimagine Christian mission in ways that announce the truly good news of Christ.

Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World
Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017)

Conflict and hatred in today’s world raise questions as to whether peace is possible and if it is, where we could begin. Huckins and Swigart are modern-day peacemakers who invite us to move toward conflict and brokenness. They provide biblical and current-day illustrations of everyday peacemakers and offer a theologically-based, personal, and practical set of tools to equip us to join God to restore broken relationships, unjust systems, and global conflicts.

Theology without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations
William A. Dyrness and Oscar García-Johnson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015)

This book argues that the current demographics of Christianity—the changing face of world Christianity and the rapid church growth outside the West—demand that theology becomes a comparative exercise in which different voices reflect their different settings and begin to learn from each other. It integrates Western theological tradition with emerging global perspectives, envisions a constructive integration of traditional and postcolonial theologies, and underlines the contributions from the Global South.

Jesus for Japan: Bridging the Cultural Gap to Christianity

Christian growth in Japan has been slow. This book helps to fill a cultural gap, bridging the messages of Jesus and Paul to the gospel mission in Japan. It is a collection of insights from Japanese literature, the arts, and religion. No other work to date has attempted to include this much information in one book, focusing on Japanese opinions, research, and theology. It is jam-packed with the nuts and bolts of how to connect with the Japanese in a way that will bridge the cultural chasm that prevents many at present from accepting Christ as their personal Savior.