

THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL: BEARING THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

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Selamat datang di dalam Nama Yesus Kristus! Please allow me to begin by thanking the IAMS Executive Committee for giving me this great honor and privilege to make this presentation at the beginning of this conference. But with this privilege comes the responsibility of saying something not just worthwhile but also interesting. That is the tough part.

The theme of this conference is ‘The integrity of mission in the light of the gospel: bearing the witness of the spirit.’ The word ‘integrity’ here reminds us of the tough times that Christian mission has undergone in discussions and debates. On the one hand mission has been assailed from various directions, both within and without! On the other, both from the right and the left, there are those who continue to assert their own respective narrow visions of what Christian mission ought to be, often uncritically, triumphantly and stubbornly! So where can I begin? Should I try to unpack the theme, exploring the theological meaning of each key word? That I am sure will bore all of us to death. Should I enter the theological debate on what mission is, or at least give a summary? Others like Johannes Verkuyl, John Stott, Andrew Kirk, David Bosch, and most recently, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, have done this already, and have done it better than I ever can.

I have decided therefore to take a different route in trying to say something which will hopefully give us a quiet confidence or a ‘bold humility’ (David Bosch) to get on with the task of Christian mission as an outworking of the *missio Dei*. Instead of exegeting or expounding the theme systematically, I will attempt to interact with it in a reflective manner. I would like to focus primarily on what is happening at the ground level in the world, especially the non-western parts. I want to look at the way the church is growing in the Two-Thirds World and ask why that is happening, before returning to some of the issues pertaining to the integrity of mission. Or, as Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, who have wrestle similar questions in a recent book, put it, ‘It would be a very appropriate act of humility by scholars who discuss theories and theologies of religions to listen to those *who have actually turned!* It would be very odd if their discussions ... of the whole concept of turning, converting, were not influenced by those who have actually responded to the invitation, and have found in doing so the liberation they sought.’¹

What is happening on the ground?

When we begin looking at what is happening at the ground level, we see a number of things happening.

¹ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003) pp. 66.

i. *The rapid growth of the church in the Two-Thirds World*

The most significant phenomenon in the Two-Thirds World is the rapid growth of the churches in the Africa, Asia and Latin America in the last few decades. This has taken most by surprise! Speaking of Africa, Lamin Sanneh notes that we were told as late of the 1970s to expect a gradual decline of the church there in face of a resurgent Islam.² And as recent as the early 1990s, one prominent Asian theologian asserts categorically that ‘Eastern civilization has refused to become Christian.’³ Yet the evidence of growth is everywhere, with the explosive growth in China in the last three decades as probably the biggest surprise of all. Granted that the figures in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* are not exactly in the same league as gospel truth, nevertheless the trends are irrefutable as other sources also point in the same direction. There is no need to recycle detail figures here as they are easily available.⁴

Interestingly, much of the growth in Africa and Asia has occurred in the post-colonial period. Africa had largely emerged from colonialism by the early 1960s. Between 1964 and 1984, Christian numbers grew from about 60 to 240 million.⁵ In Asia, the percentage of Christians relative to the continent’s population doubled from 2.3% to 4.7% between 1900 and 1970, and almost doubled again to 8.5% by the year 2000. In particular in Asia, a lot of the growth took place in places where the church was non-existent or weak in the earlier half of the 20th century. These include South Korea which is now 25-30% Christian, and Southeast Asia with some 22%. Places like Nepal that had hardly any Christians before 1960 now has a church of half a million strong!

If any conclusion can be drawn from the above figures, it would appear that the main reason for many turning to Christianity is not the attraction of the west or the patronage of colonial powers, even if that may have been true with some. Indeed, if anything, there are clear evidence that western control, either through colonial authorities or missionaries, have contributed significantly to the slow growth of the church in the earlier period. In the case of Africa, Sanneh has in fact argued that the end of the colonial period inhibited the growth of Islam but spurred the growth of Christianity instead.⁶ Thus, in Africa if not elsewhere, ‘mission and colonialism had been in profound dialectical tension, if not conflict.’⁷

A parallel observation can be made with respect to the church in China. Despite the valiant missionary efforts of the preceding centuries, in 1949, Catholics numbered about 3.25 million and Protestants 1.30 million.⁸ The slow growth of the church could be explained in part by the strong xenophobia of Chinese nationalistic leaders, exacerbated no doubt by Japanese and western imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The slogan ‘One more Christian, one less Chinese’ summed up their feelings. But sensitive Christian leaders also

² Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 14.

³ Kosuke Koyama, ‘New World—New Creation: Mission Power and Faith,’ *Mission Studies*, 10:1-2 (1993) pp. 59-77; here p. 73.

⁴ For a summary, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 2f. For more details, see David B. Barrett, *et. al.*, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) Vol. 1, pp. 3-23. On Africa, see Sanneh (2003) pp. 14f.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) p. 124.

⁶ Sanneh (2003) p. 19.

⁷ Sanneh (1989) p. 124.

⁸ Barratt (2001) Vol. 1, pp. 195f.

recognized that the whole problem was aggravated by missionary control over the budding Chinese church.

This was clearly a major concern with John Sung, the greatest Chinese Protestant evangelist and revivalist in the first half of the 20th century. He repeatedly urged the church to stop relying on missionary funds because he perceived that western control and dependency on western funds was a major hindrance to growth. Instead he argued that the church should look ‘to the Lord of all things and realize that the time has come for the church to be self-propagating, self-governing and self-supporting—truly independent!’⁹ Asked shortly before his death in 1944 about the future of the Chinese church, John Sung revealed that God had showed him that a great revival was coming. But the western missionaries would all have to leave first.¹⁰

The history of the Chinese church in the last fifty years has powerfully vindicated Sung. But it also lends further support to the thesis that the main reason why many in African and Asia have turned to Christianity is neither the attraction of the west nor the patronage of colonial powers. Clearly the evidence indicates that there is something more that is inherent within the gospel, something to do with the witness of the Spirit, that is drawing men and women to Christ! It is to this that we now turn.

ii. ***What draws people to Christ in the Two-Thirds World?***

What is it that is inherent in the gospel itself that is attracting people in the Two-Thirds World? In the case of Africa, Sanneh sums up the reasons for Christian growth as follows: removal of colonialism as a stumbling block, delay effect of Bible translation into the indigenous languages, Africa leadership and initiative, and the preservation of the indigenous names of God.¹¹ Clearly similar factors are at work elsewhere. But rather than repeating Sanneh, I would like to suggest three things, amongst others, are drawing people to Christ. They are ‘signs and wonders,’ the gospel’s power to change the individual and one’s personal circumstances, and the search for the key to sociopolitical transformation in the modern world.

a. ***‘Signs and wonders’ and Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity***

Philip Jenkins sums up much of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World as follows:

The churches that have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditionalist and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or PentecostalSouthern Christians retain a very strong supernatural orientation, and are by and large far more interested in personal salvation than radical politics ... These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. They preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-

⁹ Leslie T. Lyall, *John Sung—Flame of God for the Far East*, 4th ed. (London: OMF, 1961) p.77; also cf. John Sung, *The Diaries of John Sung—An Autobiography*, trl. Stephen L. Sheng (Brighton, MI: Luke H. Sheng & Stephen L. Sheng, 1995.) pp. 34, 54 & 183.

¹⁰ William E. Schubert, *I Remember John Sung* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1976) pp. 65f. But see also Sung, *Diaries*, pp. 34, 183 & 198f.

¹¹ Sanneh (2003) p. 18.

healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility.¹²

This summary points to what is now generally recognized about much of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World, which is its strong Pentecostal-charismatic orientation. This is not to say that all these Christians have been influenced by classical Pentecostalism and western charismatic Christianity, with its emphasis on *glossolalia*. Rather, the strong Pentecostal-charismatic orientation of non-western churches stems from worldviews that differ significantly from that of the prevailing western one. Western Christianity, at least among the more educated, in the 20th century has been largely controlled by a naturalistic and mechanistic view of the world. Within such a worldview, the supernatural tends to be rejected, whether it is about miracles, demons or, ultimately, God. This worldview is largely rooted in the Enlightenment with its narrow empiricism and skeptical rationalism. Much of indigenous Christianity in the Two-Thirds World, even in places where modernity has descended *en masse* in all forms, does not necessarily share this worldview, and hence remains open to ‘signs and wonders.’

Christians from the non-western world read the Bible through their own worldview lens, and find great similarities between their worldview and that of the Bible. They find that the gospel actually addresses a fundamental felt-need of their culture, which is the ability to deal with the spiritual realm and all its imponderables. This outlook is similarly shared by many within the traditional denominations that were brought from the west. Thus much of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World, whether Latin American pentecostalism, Africa Initiated Churches, house churches in China or mega-churches in the over-flowing urban centers of the non-western world, appears to the Western observer very Pentecostal-charismatic. This applies even in places where there has been little or no connection with classical Pentecostalism and the western charismatic movement in the first place.

What impacts many Christian is the manifestation of the miraculous through the power of the Spirit, especially in the healing and deliverance ministries. Throughout the history of missions, there have been numerous stories of power encounters which open the heart of many to faith in Christ. These include the planting of the first Bantu church in Africa in 1840s by the Methodist W. J. Davies, also known as the ‘Missionary Elijah,’ whose prayers brought rain in the midst of severe drought, and a similar encounter by Watchman Nee that opened a whole island off the coast of China to the gospel.¹³ Also, the emphasis on healing is so common place that it hardly needs further comment here. But something more needs to be said about the deliverance or exorcism ministry.

It is unfortunate that some of the writings in this area have taken on rather sensational tones under the rubric of ‘spiritual warfare’, which certainly is not the most helpful term. Nevertheless, this is an area which western missiological and theological research has seriously neglected in general. What needs to be emphasized is that those who have worked effectively at the grassroots in evangelism and pastoral ministries throughout much of the Two-Thirds World find that they have to deal with this as a constant problem.¹⁴ This is

¹² Jenkins (2002) pp.7f.

¹³ Gary B. McGee, ‘Miracles and Mission Revisited,’ *IBMR* (Oct 2001) p. 152ff; and Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk and Stand* (London & Eastbourne: Victory Press, 1957) pp.57-63

¹⁴ There is an abundance of literature on the subject. But one book produced by the Lausanne Movement that brings together contributions from practitioners and theologians in a responsible manner is Scott A. Moreau, *et. al.*, eds., *Deliver Us from Evil: An Uneasy Frontier in the Christian Mission* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 2002).

something that is difficult to communicate to someone who has never been involved in this sort of things. But those who have direct experience of this will testify to two things. The first is the intense fear of the spirits and of the power of fate under which many in the non-western world have lived for centuries, and continue to do so today. The second is the great joy, and the sense of God's presence and liberation that such deliverance brings! This is one key reason why many in the Two-Thirds World are turning to Christ, and also why much of truly indigenous Christianity there looks Pentecostal and charismatic.

b. *The gospel's power to change individual and personal circumstances*

One observer of Brazil's emerging churches comments: 'Their appeal is that they present a God that you can use. Most Presbyterians have a God that's so great, so big, that they cannot talk with him openly, because he is far away. The Pentecostal groups have the kind of God that will solve my problems today and tomorrow.'¹⁵ The gospel's power in the spiritual realm, which we looked at above, is one illustration of the gospel's ability to provide solutions for today's problems. Other examples abound.

For example, some years ago, a senior member of the Malaysian government came out publicly to admit that the state's drug rehabilitation centers were simply not working. He then appealed to the public to do what they can to help deal with what is a very serious problem in the country. What he did not say publicly was something he probably knew about, which is that the one group that is producing results is the rehabilitation centers run by churches! The thirty plus centers have a success rate higher than any other groups in the country. And many of the ex-inmates are now leading productive lives as useful citizens and Christians.

A second illustration of this comes from the debates over mission to Dalits in India, whether it should be humanization or evangelization. Underlying this debate is the question of what is it that effects the genuine transformation of Dalits. It is argued by some Dalit theologians that conversion, based on a spiritualized gospel, has not only failed to help them socially but has further alienated them from their own cultures. This position of course has been challenged earlier by scholars like Stephen Neill and Duncan Forrester, and recently by Samuel Jayakumar.¹⁶

In a careful study of two Dalit communities, the Nadars and Paraiyas, in Tirunelveli District in Tamilnadu, Jayakumar furnishes clear historical evidence that it was the Dalits' coming to faith in Christ that paved the way for their upward social mobility against a background of centuries of oppression. Christian faith gave them a new identity in Christ, awareness of character transformation as a prerequisite to social change, access to modern education, emergence of indigenous leadership against a background of total subservience, and so forth. Further, echoing Sanneh's thesis on Bible translation, Jayakumar argues that the translation of the Bible into Tamil significantly rejuvenated Tamil language and culture. For centuries, or even possibly millennia, these Dalits had been prohibited from reading the Hindu holy writings in Sanskrit. But now for the first time they possessed their own holy *Vetham*, the Bible, in Tamil! Jayakumar sums up by arguing that Biblical concepts like new creation and sons of God nurtured in Dalit believers a new identity and dignity, thus bringing about a fundamental change of consciousness. 'Hence, contrary to the contention of Dalit theologians, the study has demonstrated that the Dalits' conversion to the Gospel of Christ began to release

¹⁵ Jenkins (2002) p. 77.

¹⁶ Samuel Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate* (Oxford: Regnum, and Delhi: ISPCK, 1999).

them from centuries of despair and bondage when there had been no escape from their situation.’¹⁷

It should be noted that the Dalit debate has moved somewhat in another direction since the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in Indian politics in the 1990s and recent attempts made to hinder religious conversion in India. Many Dalits are now wanting to convert to other faiths as a means of getting out of their oppressed position defined under Hinduism. It appears now that some of the same Dalit theologians, who had earlier argued against encouraging Dalits to convert to Christianity, are now arguing that freedom to convert is an unalienable human right! All these, in different ways, merely go to underline the point that there is something inherent within the gospel which is powerfully drawing people to Christ!

A third illustration comes from Miriam Adeney’s delightful book, *Daughters of Islam*.¹⁸ It explores with deep sensitivity a number of Muslim women becoming Christians, the human struggles and pains that they went through in coming to that point, and the freedom they have found since. It is not an easy subject to discuss in our present context because of the tremendous sensitivities involved. The temptation of course is to ignore it ...until of course it hits you personally.

Some years ago when our children were still very young, our family came to the beach perhaps a couple of miles away from where we are meeting. When we arrived, I notice a Muslim family nearby. Both the father and children were in the sea having a whale of a time. The mother however, fully clad from head to toe as her tradition required and thus unable to get into the water, was sitting on the beach watching with her family. The moment we hit the beach all our three kids dived into the water. It must have been one of those mad moments of family life—my wife decided that she too would jump into the sea fully clad, shorts, T-shirt and all! A minute or two passed and then suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks. I do not know what it was that inspired this other lady, whether it my wife’s impulsive madness or something else. But the next moment she was in the water enjoying herself with her family, still fully clad in her traditional garb from head to toe! I doubt any of you have seen that ever!

As I drove home that afternoon, I found myself in deep reflection. Here was a person whose tradition would never allow her to go into the sea in a swimming costume, or even in shorts and T-shirt for that matter! She is thereby shut from the enjoyment of such wonders of God’s creation. What do salvation and liberation in Christ mean in such a situation? As you reflect on this, please tell me what integrity in mission mean here? And let’s not forget that women like her form one-tenth of the world’s population.

c. *Sociopolitical transformation and nation-building in the modern world*

The gospel is not seen only as something that can change our individual circumstances. It is now increasingly seen as something that is even bigger than that! There has been much discussion in Two-Thirds World theological writings, especially those from Roman Catholic and conciliar Protestants circles, on mission as liberation for sociopolitical change. But there appears to be relatively little that deals with the gospel of Christ as providing the spiritual foundation for the moral and cultural rejuvenation that is needed for the building of a new society. Yet, one of the things about the gospel of Christ that is

¹⁷ Jayakumar (1999) p. 148.

¹⁸ Miriam Adeney, *Daughters of Islam: Building Bridges with Muslim Women* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

increasingly attracting attention to itself is its perceived power to provide precisely such a foundation in the modern world. Admittedly, this concern has not been articulated in this form in any widespread manner. But we shall see, in at least one highly significant instance, this concern has existed for many decades.

All over the Two-Thirds World, national leaders and intellectual elites are wrestling with the challenges of social and economic modernization, and seeking adequate foundations to build these upon. In the early part of the 20th century, most people assumed that with increasing secularization, all over the world emergent societies will be tolerant, rational, pragmatic, humane and progressive, even as traditional religions gradually fade away. That certainly did not happen. As Gilles Kepel noted, by the 1970s the secularization process was in reverse instead. 'A new religious approach took shape, aimed no longer at adapting to secular values but at recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society.'¹⁹ This trend is so widespread from al-Qaeda to the Hindu BJP in India that no further documentation is needed. In one widely reported statement in this part of the world, Lee Kuan Yew urged his fellow citizens to go back to Confucian values to prevent Singapore from becoming 'a nation of thieves and robbers.' This concern also finds expression in the on-going Asian versus Western values debate.²⁰ Clearly the quest for an adequate foundation for building societies and nations characterized by justice, equality, freedom, economic prosperity and political stability is an on-going one.

This is particularly true in the case of China. Despite China's xenophobia, the gradual collapse of the old China in the 19th century and the loss of confidence in the ancient traditions led to a great openness to the gospel at the beginning of the 20th century. Yet by the 1920s, a strong anti-Christian reaction set in among many intellectuals. China was looking for national salvation, against the twin backdrop of internal cultural decay and external foreign aggression. But the conservatives preached a gospel that promised only spiritual salvation. Chinese leaders therefore saw the gospel as yet another superstition, totally irrelevant to the future of China! On the other hand, the modernists' social gospel offered much in terms of education, science, medicine and the modernization of China. But it had no real answer for China's inner spiritual quest, and therefore lack the power to effect moral transformation and cultural rejuvenation. Hence that too was rejected. Against this background Chinese theologians of that period made the first attempts to argue that Christianity can play a crucial and effective role in nation-building and the social reconstruction of China.²¹

It is doubtful that the anti-Christian Chinese leaders took Christian responses of that period seriously. But what is interesting is that this question never faded away but has now resurfaced afresh in modern China amongst intellectuals. There are many in China who are raising the same questions all over again and looking now to the Christian faith as the answer to the future of China.²² In one case, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, the top think-tank of the Beijing government, is said to have expressed the following opinion:

¹⁹ Gilles Kepel, *Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trl. Alan Braley (University Park, PA: Penn State Uni. Press, 1994) p. 2; quoted in Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York & London: Simon & Schuster, 1998) p. 96.

²⁰ See, e.g. Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think?* (Singapore & Kuala Lumpur, 1998) and Greg Sheridan, *Asian Values Western Dream: Understanding the New Asia* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999).

²¹ See Wing-Hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1983) esp. 5-26, 85-152.

²² See e.g. Sanneh (2003) pp.67f. But he is not the only one who have spoken about this trend. I have also heard this myself in personal conversation with Chinese intellectuals.

One of things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubts about this.²³

This may or may not represent a majority view in China as yet, and certainly not in the rest of the Two-Thirds. But it is a view that certainly cannot be ignored. Scholars like Harold Berman and others²⁴ have drawn attention to the clear relationship between concepts of freedom of conscience, human rights, universal franchise, the rule of law and other foundational concepts in western liberal democracy to their roots in Christianity which undergird them. These things are often taken for granted by those of us who live in the west. Often it is assumed that they will simply emerge with modernization in the non-western world. And whenever it fails to happen, western journalists and governments are quick to accuse non-western leaders of corruption, craze for power, dictatorial tendencies or, simply, moral and cultural backwardness. They are often right, but nevertheless miss the point!

The fact that the foundational concepts of liberal democracy fail to emerge in most non-western societies is because there is no adequate basis or reason for it to do so! As Berman argues, 'These principles ...for Western man as a whole ...are, above all, historical achievements created mainly out of the experience of the Christian church in the various stages of its life ... These successive ages of the church have created the psychological basis, and many of the values, upon which the legal systems of democracy and socialism rest.'²⁵ In other words, whatever other sources may have contributed to the emergence of liberal democracy in the modern west, Christianity played an indispensable and fundamental role. Clearly, this aspect of the gospel of Christ has not been discussed adequately at all, at least not in missiological literature. But with the increasing prominence given to the role of religion in social change and nation-building, it is almost certain that this theme will receive increasing attention in the coming days.

What I have tried to do is not to discuss comprehensively the reasons why the church is growing in the non-western world. Rather, I have examined briefly three things which have contributed to the attraction that Christianity holds for many in the Two-Thirds World. I have tried to help us 'to listen to those *who have actually turned*' in order to help deal more objectively and fruitfully with the theme of 'the integrity of mission in the light of the gospel.' This brings us back to the on-going theological discussion surrounding the theme.

Some comments on the on-going discussions

²³ Quoted in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003) p. 5.

²⁴ Harold Berman, *The Interaction of Law and Religion* (London: SCM, 1974). See also Peskett and Ramachandra (2003) pp. 41f; and Sanneh (2003) pp. 73f.

²⁵ Berman (1974) pp. 72f.

In their comprehensive historical study of the theology of mission, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder affirm that Christian mission must occur in three modes.²⁶ The first is ‘mission as participation in the mission of the Triune God (*Missio Dei*); the second is ‘mission as liberating service for the reign of God’; and the third is ‘mission as proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal savior.’ Except for those on the radical left or the far right, I believe most of us who stand firmly on the classical Christian tradition will have no difficulties agreeing with these in general. When it comes to the details, some of us may have some difficulties. In particular, some of us may have problems with mission as proclaiming Jesus as universal savior, against the twin background problems of the religious pluralism debate on the one hand and the western guilt complex on the other. How can mission be carried out with integrity unless these are resolved? Once again, I will again attempt to bring some observations from the ground level to bear on these issues.

i. ***Tolerant Pluralism?***

There is no need to rehearse here the parameters of the religious pluralism debate. Further, in the west, a public consensus, shared by some Christians, has emerged that a tolerant and inclusive world requires that we reject any exclusive claims. This, it seems, should apply to religion also. But on the ground level, in the much of the Two-Thirds World, this view is not shared by the vast majority of Christians, even if some western writers would like to think differently. Three comments would be appropriate here.

First, some writers have argued that the non-western thought categories are more inclusive and pluralistic. There may be some evidence for this, but it is also often overstated. This may be true when it comes to religious practices at the folk religious level. African, Chinese and Indian religions deal with a plethora of gods and spirits, and often it is a case of the more the merrier. This was also true of Graeco-Roman religion where the only heresy then was exclusivism, because it violated the *Pax Deorum*! But the same cannot be said of non-western philosophical-religious beliefs as defined by respective religious authority.

For example, Hajime Nakamura may be right in suggesting that Indian culture is very tolerant, although events in recent years may suggest otherwise. But he is clearly overstating when he suggests that heresy in the western sense is absent in Indian religion.²⁷ If so, how is it that both Buddhism and Jainism, which grew out of Hinduism and share many beliefs in common with it, were both eventually excluded from orthodox Hinduism? The fact is that Hindu orthodoxy has always been defined by the acceptance of the foundational authority of the *Vedas*, and ‘those Indians who did not and do not accept the sacrality of the *Veda* have been and are regarded as non-Hindus by those who did and do.’²⁸ Similarly, in Chinese thought, as far back as the 6th century B.C. we find in *The Analects of Confucius* (Book 2, Chap. 16) the following statement: ‘The Master said, “The study of strange doctrines is injurious indeed.”’²⁹ Indeed there has always been in China a long established cultural category for wrong teaching which is ‘*contrary to the Way of the Sages.*’

²⁶ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) pp. 281-398.

²⁷ Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1964) p. 168-172.

²⁸ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Oxford Uni. Press, 1989) p. 18; see also n. 45 on pp. 18f.

²⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960) p. 150.

Second, some advocates of religious pluralism have advanced the pragmatic argument that only such an acceptance of the equality of all religions will enable all people of good will to work together for human liberation. In responding this, M. M. Thomas, who had himself strongly advocated humanization in his own time, nevertheless noted that, at least in the history of India and the church there, this argument finds no support whatsoever. All the evidence for modern social renewal in India, including efforts within renascent Hinduism, moving it towards the quest for greater justice for all, points incontrovertibly to the impact and leavening effect of Christ in his uniqueness and power. He goes on to say that, ‘The point I am making is that any Christian approach which takes seriously the common mission of all religions and ideologies for cultural renewal and humanization... cannot minimize the centrality of Jesus Christ and the implication of that faith for a realistic humanism.’³⁰

My last comment on pluralism from the ground level is to quote from one Japanese theologian, Yasuo Furuya of the International Christian University, Tokyo. Writing as an Asian soon after John Hick’s call for a Copernican revolution in christology, he welcomed the new found interest in the west in oriental religions. But he categorically rejected the idea that ‘the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a “Ptolemaic” view which is to be changed into a “Copernican” view.’³¹ He notes that Christians in Asia may not write much about dialogue with other religions. But they are not ignorant about the issues because they have lived with these religions for centuries on a daily basis. Moreover, ‘they know that it is a matter of death and life in their own existence. Precisely because of this awareness, they have to be cautious and prudent ... On this point, western theologians seem to be imprudent and unprepared.’³² Consequently, he makes the following plea: ‘Accordingly, while you are excited about the dialogue with other religions, I wish you would also have dialogue with your fellow Christians and theologians in Asia.’³³

I am aware that some of us have genuine sympathies with the pluralist agenda, and that the academic arguments involved are complex. Nonetheless, I must confess that I believe Furuya is right. If you are to talk to evangelists, pastors and theologians from Asia, you will find that the vast majority of them will not be pluralists, precisely because they have had long familiarity with other religions.

ii. *Western Guilt Complex?*

Turning to the issue of the western guilt complex, I will need to be more circumspect in what I say since I am not from the west. I realize that the history of western colonialism in the modern world, together with issues like the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, slavery and the Holocaust, have created tremendous problems for the western psyche. For some Christians, this guilt complex seems to have brought them to the point where the proclamation of the gospel and the call to conversion is now seen as a form of ‘religious imperialism.’ I am also not unaware of the many failures of Christian missions (though not only from the west!) when they enter other cultures. Nevertheless, I think scholars like Lamin

³⁰ M. M. Thomas, ‘A Christ-centred Humanist Approach to Other Religions in the Indian Pluralistic Context,’ in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) pp. 49-62; here p. 55.

³¹ Yasuo C. Furuya, ‘The Challenge of Asian Christianity,’ *Theology Today*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Apr 1978) pp. 92-94, p. 94.

³² *Furuya* (1978) p. 94.

³³ *Furuya* (1978) p. 93.

Sanneh and others have effectively challenged the idea that Christian mission has been major destroyer of culture. I would therefore simply make one extended comment which hopefully will provide some light.

I would like to suggest that we should look at this issue from a rather different angle. To begin with, it is clear that some of the historical accusations associated with the western guilt complex are simply false and remain unsubstantiated. At the same time, there remains much that western missionaries and, especially, colonial powers were guilty of. But the question we need to ask is, where does the guilt complex come from, and what does it ultimately point to? In world history there have been many conquests and expansions of empires, many of which have been carried out in the name of religion. I am not much of a historian, and I stand corrected. But I am not aware of any society or culture in history that have self-critically developed a guilt complex as deep and extensive as that of the present western world over its past mistakes. One can easily name a number of non-western societies and nations even today, which have practiced (and may still be doing so) territorial expansions and various forms of oppressions in name of religion or national interest. In which of these do we find any serious wrestling with a guilt complex at all? I am not saying those who come from other cultural and religious traditions do not have the capacity to develop similar guilt complexes. I am only saying that, outside the western culture shaped by a Christian history, I do not see evidence of the emergence of any other such complex on a similar scale anywhere else.

The point I am making is. What has been almost completely overlooked is that the very fact of the western guilt complex may well be one of the supreme evidences for the enduring validity of the gospel in the post-Christian western world! For it shows that the gospel has such power to shape a culture that, even when its propositional claims have been forgotten or rejected by and large by that culture, its hold on the conscience of the culture continues to endure. To borrow a phrase from the theme of this conference, that may indeed be the ultimate ‘witness of the Spirit’—His lingering, yet unquenchable, presence in a society and culture that once worshipped Him, but is now rather embarrassed to take Him seriously any more! But as the Scriptures reminds us, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for cannot disown himself” (2 Tim 2:13).³⁴

What then do we conclude from all these? The right conclusion is that the western guilt complex is a call to repentance from all forms of mission that are presumptuous, insensitive, ethnocentric, militaristic and triumphalistic. Mission in such modes will always lack integrity in light of the gospel. The wrong conclusion, however, is to suggest that we must deny Christian mission on the assumption that mission *per se* lacks integrity. For the very sense of guilt in the western conscience over past failures points to the moral power of the gospel and its enduring validity in human life. Without this sense and burden of guilt in the world which the Spirit bears witness to in our heart and conscience, this world would be a far more cruel, heartless, unjust and oppressive one! And the evidence before us is that only when and if our hearts and our cultures have responded to the call of Christ and experienced the work of the Spirit in us, can such a conscience develop on the sort of scale that we find in the west. Thus the western guilt complex properly understood is also a profound call to us to a humble confidence and boldness in mission, and not a turning away from it!

³⁴ I believe it was Stephen Neill who had made a similar point in his discussion of Gandhi’s method of non-violence. He argued that Gandhi’s method worked because of the Christian conscience of the British public and government. If Gandhi had used the same methods in a totally different context like that under Stalin or Hitler, it would have been a totally different story. I believe that there are adequate examples to justify Neill’s argument.

Summing-Up

It is time for me to draw the threads together. I would like to conclude with two comments. The first is addressed to those of us from the west. Earlier I have argued that in spite of all our mistakes many on the ground have turned to Christianity because they have found Christ to be the answer to their deepest needs and longings. This is the case both at the personal as well as at the societal and national levels. It demonstrates that there is something inherent within the gospel itself that is drawing men and women all over the Two-Thirds World to Christ. Hundreds of millions have found meaning, hope, healing from disease, deliverance from bondage to and fear of the powers of darkness, upward social mobility, adequate foundations for nation-building and new communities, and ultimately forgiveness of sin and eternal life. If this is true, then can the church of today maintain its integrity in the face of the colossal spiritual, physical and sociopolitical needs in the world if it holds back from obeying the call of our Triune God to mission? Can it speak of being a church that bears the witness of the Spirit if it shies away from the ministry of liberation and the proclamation of Christ as the universal Savior?

As I reflect on this as one from the non-western world, I am reminded of the words of the John Staupitz, Luther's mentor. I hesitate somewhat in repeating them here because I might offend our Catholic friends. But as the church situation is totally different today I hope you would understand that no offense needs to be taken. Shortly before his death, still as an Augustinian monk, Staupitz wrote pastorally to counsel the younger Luther against fighting non-essentials. Then he added a tremendous word of encouragement, which expressed his own appreciation for what Luther had done so courageously: '*We owe much to you, Martin. You have taken us from the pigsty to the pastures of life.*'³⁵ As we in the Two-Thirds World remember those from the west, who sacrificially brought the gospel to us through mission in various modes, Staupitz's words sum up the deep sense of gratitude that many of us feel. I hope that will both encourage and challenge you to mission.

My final comment is for all of us and is about an actual encounter I had. Some time ago, while spending a few months in Britain, I met a dignified Chinese lady in the kitchen of our hostel. A full professor from a Chinese university in a highly specialized field of IT, she was doing some advanced research at the local university, one of the most prestigious in the country. Here was a person who epitomizes the future of China. On finding out that I was a pastor and taught theology, she said: 'You people must come to China and preach the gospel!' Startled by her statement, I asked her whether she was a Christian. When she said, 'No,' I was even more amazed. I then asked her why she said what she did. And I will never forget her reply: '*China needs God. If China does not know God, there is no hope for her future!*'

My prayer is that over the next few days of worship and prayer, study and discussion, and fellowship and fun, we may together receive much grace, so that we will be empowered to give to countless others like this woman much hope for a future in Christ!

³⁵ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon; rep. by New York: Mentor Books, 1950) p. 198.