

Reversing Mission: Relational Resources for Bearing Witness to the Other

Open and Relational Theologies Consultation

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In 1890, shortly after leaving the city schools for work in rural China, Charlotte Diggs Moon wrote in a letter to Virginia her “definite plan of mission work”:

The missionary comes in and settles down among the natives. His first object is to convince them that he is human and that he is their sincere friend. By patience and gentleness and unwearied love, he wins upon them until there begins to be a diversion in sentiment. There are those who will hate him to the end, but others come to recognize that he is both wiser and better than themselves. Now begins the work of teaching with some hope of making a real impression.¹

Half a decade later, however, before leaving her village to return to primary school teaching in the city, she has changed her tone. No more does she talk of the “dull” Chinese Christians needing the “moral support” of their missionary, his “holy life” reflecting the life of Jesus Christ, his example teaching them to “mould their lives.”² Instead she stops writing about missionaries at all. Her letters tell stories of the courage of the Chinese, their brightness, earnestness, and faithfulness. She writes of her “sympathy with their efforts to lead true and holy lives.”³ And she begs in magazine articles that the Chinese Christian movement be kept “as free from foreign interference as possible,” praying “God grant us faith and courage to keep hands off.”⁴ In another article she insisted, “every missionary must be willing to yield to the Chinese social convention, and strive to understand their viewpoint and conform to it.”⁵

¹ Quoted in Irwin T. Hyatt, Jr., *Our Ordered Lives Confess: Three Nineteenth-Century American Missionaries in East Shantung* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.107-108.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

It may seem exceedingly unlikely for Lottie Moon, the subject of a century of Southern Baptist hagiography, to become the patron saint of a relational theology of missions. Yet the change in the understanding of mission that Miss Moon experienced points the way toward a new conscious paradigm, in which we change the focus from changing others to entering into relationships with them, relationships that have the potential to change ourselves.

Until the twentieth century, Christian theologies of religions almost universally suffered from a significant fallacy. Christianity, the religion of the one doing the theology or proposing the theory, was assumed to have many facets and require complex thinking to comprehend or describe. But the other religions being theorized about were almost always reduced to relatively simplistic generalizations and caricatures. The complexity of religious history, conflict, innovation, and sectarian motivation in the non-Christian religion was reduced to a set of doctrinal points or eternal practices; the Other, in short, was essentialized and abstracted.

As an example of this essentialization and abstraction in its most historically astute form, we might look to the great work of Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absolute Validity of Christianity*.⁶ Troeltsch seeks to differentiate between the world religions by the way they advance their "naive claims to absolute validity." He finds, following Abraham Kuenen, that Judaism and Zoroastrianism are national religions, "associated with a particular country and concerned with tasks presented by a particular type of civilization." Islam represents the ethnic religion of Arabs, and its missionary branch merely extends the character of the Arab civilization into races that share a certain primitive set of problematics. Confucianism and Buddhism, Troeltsch asserts, are on the one hand more philosophies than religions, and at any rate, "Confucianism is essentially a national movement and Buddhism is, as a matter of fact, bound to the conditions of life in tropical countries."⁷

⁶ Reprinted as *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. by D. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1972 [1902]).

⁷ "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions," in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

The theologian of religions in this period might essentialize his own religion, Christianity; but he was unlikely to abstract it. While he probably made a claim about "true" Christianity or the "essential nature" of Christianity, such a claim nevertheless acknowledged, openly or tacitly, the manifold nature of Christianity as it actually exists in the world. Again, take Troeltsch as a vivid example. He writes of his conclusions in his 1902 work: "Christianity is itself a theoretical abstraction. It presents no historical uniformity, but displays a different character in every age, and is, besides, split up into many different denominations ... it is rather a particular, independent, historical principle, containing ... very diverse possibilities and tendencies."⁸

The essentializing claim of the theologian of religion selects from that multiplicity to construct a propositional "true" Christianity. In Troeltsch's case, he identifies the uniqueness of Christianity in its naive claim to absolute validity not on the basis of the way of life of a particular nation or race, but on the basis of "God's revelation of himself in human hearts and lives." The theologian identifies some aspect of Christianity as key and distinctive; for Troeltsch, this is the difference between claims to validity that rely on "human reflection or a laborious process of reasoning," and Christian claims that rest upon "an overwhelming manifestation of God in the persons and lives of the great prophets."⁹

But in the case of the nature of the Other, the claim usually involves declarative statements about the religion with no acknowledgement or awareness that such statements are equally as selective as the properly qualified statements about Christianity. There are two reasons for this unbalanced treatment. First, Christianity's self-understanding as a uniquely historical faith colored the perception of theologians. Christian theology forefronts history in two key concepts: treatments of the incarnation, seen as the intersection of time and eternity; and *Heilsgeschichte*, wherein historical events are given eternal meaning. Theologians of religions did not view other belief systems as historical. While Christianity is distinctive in its claim that

⁸ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

God's revelation can be decisively located in a historical person and event, other faiths do not by contrast find their foundations solely in what Mircea Eliade called "original time"¹⁰ -- the primordial sacred period when the ordinary laws of causation are suspended. Compare for example the origin and authority of *hadith*, binding Muslim traditions about the prophet, rooted in recorded history. The claim of Christian uniqueness caused blindness to the historical aspects of other faiths.

Second, until the rise of a historical consciousness, the radical contingency of any particular perspective was not appreciated. The theologian of religions could assume an ahistorical, godlike view over time and space, generalizing without guilt, because human beings were assumed to be able to divest themselves of socialization, acculturation, and localized myopia.

Within the lifetime of Ernst Troeltsch, the apex of these essentialized theologies of religion was achieved and its demise recorded. Troeltsch, in an address given near the end of his life, outlined his famous argument establishing Christianity as the highest and best of all religions – and then tore down the edifice. In the first place, he retreats from his essentialized concept of Christianity:

The further investigations, especially into the history of Christianity, ... have shown me how thoroughly individual is historical Christianity after all, and how invariably its various phases and denominations have been due to varying circumstances and conditions of life. Whether you regard it as a whole or in its several forms, it is a purely historical, individual, relative phenomenon, which could, as we actually find it, only have arisen in the territory of the classical culture, and among the Latin and Germanic races.¹¹

In the second place, having apparently in the meantime met some actual Buddhists and Hindus, he alters his conclusion that they also make genuine and existentially valid claims to absolute validity:

¹⁰ See *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by W. R. Trask (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

¹¹ *Place of Christianity.*, pp. 22-23.

I found Buddhism and Brahminism especially to be really humane and spiritual religions, capable of appealing in precisely the same way to the inner certitude and devotion of their followers as Christianity, though the particular character of each has been determined by the historical, geographical, and social conditions of the countries in which it has taken shape.¹²

Troeltsch thus moves beyond his abstracted concept of other religions. His well-developed historical consciousness has been supplemented by an empirical consciousness of the indisputable fact of pluralism -- not a theory of religions, but a reality of indissoluble difference.

The remedy for these essences and abstractions is particularity. Yet particularity in the realm of missions might seem difficult to achieve. Against the indisputable contingency of the times and places in which we do missions, we find pitted the apparent absolutism of the gospel imperative to evangelize. When Matthew's risen Jesus commands the disciples to go and make disciples and baptize, we feel not only a standard against which our action is measured, but a characterization of the nations to whom the disciples are sent. We infer from the cumulative effect of the missionary story of the New Testament an unavoidable abstraction of the unevangelized at least, and their essentialization at most. Before we set out to make disciples of them, we must believe that we know at least one crucial fact about them -- perhaps *the* crucial fact about them. Before we have even met them, we know what they need; we know what they lack, and it is the reason we enter into relationship with them. Such an abstraction or essentialization may seem to arise from the nature of mission itself.

However, there is particularity deep within the nature of mission, as well. We have the opportunity to situate our theology of mission not only within the theology of religions as it has evolved in the twentieth century, but also, as heirs of the historical consciousness, within the history of missionary efforts and reflections on such efforts. According to David Bosch in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*,¹³ the nature of mission as given in the New Testament and as understood as incumbent on Christian communities since that time has not remained static. The motivations and scriptural rationales for missionary activity have

¹² Ibid., p. 23

¹³ New York: Orbis Books, 1991.

changed and evolved over time and across Christian sects. Bosch points out that the very term "mission" only becomes attached to the activity once called "propagation of the faith" or "illuminating the nations" in the colonial period, adding more than a whiff of expansionism and political imperialism to the project.¹⁴ The key text adduced to sermons and exhortations to evangelize changes throughout Christian history, from John 3:16 in the patristic period, to Luke 14:23 in medieval Catholicism, to Romans 1:16 and following for the Protestant reformers, to Acts 16:9 for the eighteenth century, only arriving at Matthew 28:18-20, the "Great Commission," in 1792.¹⁵ The accepted view of this last text, the so-called Great Commission, through most of Christian history up to and including the Reformers, was that only the original apostles had been given this imperative, and they had in fact fulfilled it completely. The text was not therefore binding on post-apostolic generations.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in our own time we are likely to identify it as the source of our compunction to evangelize. Bosch further points out possible shortcomings of the reliance on the Great Commission as the divine command to take part in mission:

First, it is almost always polemical, an attack on what is regarded as the watered-down understanding of mission in "ecumenical" circles. Second, it is usually couched in a most simplistic form of biblical literalism and proof-texting, with hardly any attempt at understanding the commission from within the context in which it appears in Scripture. Most important, it removes the church's involvement in mission from the domain of *gospel* to that of *law*.¹⁷

The tangled, contingent, and illuminating history of missions shows us that we are not limited to the rationales, programs, methods, or even scriptural justifications for missions that we have absorbed from our immediate environment and the recent past. We are rich in resources for reimagining not only what missions is, but what it should be.

We stand at a different point from the pre-twentieth century theologians of religions.

There is no doubt that it is now more difficult to form an action plan based on a theology of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 236, 240, 289, 340.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 341.

missions with reasonable scope and coherence, given our twenty-first century standpoint. We have actual experience with those religions as well as social scientific data about them that resist and refute our efforts to essentialize and abstract them and their adherents. And we are aware of our own radical contingency based on our location in time and space, and should therefore hesitate to speak for Christianity in all times and all places.

However, both of these barriers to modern theologies of religions can be transformed into the foundation for a relational theology of mission. The three-dimensional contingent reality of other faiths and faithful people in the world should humble us; we are not the only ones with a rich message and good news to tell. Thus humbled, we may approach the faithful Other without hierarchical assumptions. It is not only we who speak and they who listen. Process relationality sees the both of us in a web of relationships rather than a hierarchy of power. Even if we don't intend to listen, we are spoken to. As Bosch indicates in his critique of missions motivated by the Great Commission, the hierarchy inherent in an essentializing and/or abstracting conception of the Other precludes the kind of multifaceted relationality that process thought presupposes as the real basis of existence. Yet over and over again in the history of modern missions, we can find thoughtful and sensitive missionaries whose prior assumptions about the lost sheep to whom they are sent explode in the face of the particularity of those people. Lottie Moon said in her later years that she was embarrassed by her efforts to show off her Christianity by patient, saintly example to the Chinese around her. Instead, she said, she should have been learning from the Chinese and attending to their examples. The truth of this relationality overwhelms the prior assumption of hierarchy, given enough experience and enough openness to reflecting on that experience. At the same time, our radical contingency and historical consciousness opens up the history of missions to us as a resource. Freed from an essentialized and timeless Christianity, we can recognize the variety of ways missions has been theorized, theologized, practiced, justified, and intended. We are not "stuck" with the theology of mission we were taught in the institutions that socialized and acculturated us.

In this brief paper I can only sketch what I see as the problem for relational missions to overcome, and suggest a broad strategy one might adopt for going forward. I propose that the theology of missions that arises out of a relational Christianity take as its scriptural warrant: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). The Other to whom we minister in the mission field is too easily assumed to be the one devoid of Christ or the knowledge of Christ. The missionary, on the other hand, is the vicar of Christ, standing in for Jesus, delivering propositional knowledge, initiating practices, and most importantly, revealing Christ to the Christ-less through example. Such an exemplary view of mission makes the missionary into Christ and the missionized into the sinners for whom Christ came. The essentialization on both sides, and the abstraction on the side of the object of the mission, can only be mitigated with great effort, and cannot be eradicated as long as this conception remains unchallenged. The hierarchy and power structure inherent in such a view is unmistakable, but not unquestionable.

With the new scriptural touchpoint, the situation is reversed. The missionized are Christ, and we are the servants of Christ. We relate to the Other not as the speaker, but as the listener. We go to the Other not as being sent, but as following. Such a view recognizes the presence of God and Christ in every occasion. Such a view highlights and celebrates the contingent manifestations of Christ and of faith in various locations in time and space, and does not attempt to "see past" that contingency to an essential or abstracted Other.

We are exhorted to go and meet the Other, not for their sake, but for ours. At home, in our relatively homogenous communities, among people of faith socialized like ourselves, we seek in our relationship with God an opening to the wider world. One meaning of salvation in process terms is access to a broader and more comprehensive view of value; we are saved from our provincial, narrow, severely limited image of the world, of truth, goodness, and beauty. Yet without going to the wider world – without meeting the concrete manifestations of difference, the incarnations of those challenging and enlarging values – our broader view is likely to stay merely theoretical, our relationship with those Others mediated through our abstractions and

presupposed essences. In Christ we are awakened and opened to a world bigger than our particular concerns. But we must still go and meet this world. We must still enter into relationship with it – not with what we think it is, or what we would like it to be, but what it is. At the risk of rewriting the evangelists: We go not to *make* disciples, but to *be* disciples – learners, followers.

A student of mine doing research on missions was present as I was working out this view, and objected in a very specific and instructive way. If we are not the actors and agents of mission, she asked, how will we know when we have done it? How can we gauge success? The assessment of mission efforts, of course, has been a concern of evangelicals ever since industrial methods were applied to missions in the early twentieth century. In its extreme forms, success can only be proven quantitatively, as we see in the current evangelism campaign of the Southern Baptist Convention, the rather grammatically-awkward "Everyone Can! Kingdom Challenge," with its goal of one million baptisms and its methods for reporting numbers from participating churches back to the home office. If we cannot count church memberships, confessions of faith, baptisms – in other words, if we cannot count instances of change in those to whom we are sent as missionaries, how can we know whether we are having any effect? How can we know if we are transforming the world for Christ?

I contend, as a starting point for further discussion, that in reversing mission to focus on the other as Christ and ourselves as sinners, we can only measure our success insofar as we ourselves are changed. Insofar as our perspective is altered, our understanding deepened, and our values enriched by the intensity that comes of contrast, our mission is fulfilled. The problem with all measures of success that focus on the Other is that they can only count external signs, not internal relations. Evangelism has long been uneasy totting up baptisms, confessions of faith, and the like, knowing that sometimes these events do not translate into lasting discipleship. Yet, related to the missionized only externally, through the abstractions and essences seemingly necessary for the mission process, there seems to be no way for a more certain measure based within human hearts. And of course, the only human heart to which I have certain and direct

access is my own. Therein, paradoxically, lies the solution. If I know the change in my own heart from coming into relationship with the Other, then I know a change has occurred. Only that subjective change is certain, and only that, existentially speaking, can be the change I have been sent to effect.

In the web of relations, contingency itself is a well of deep meaning. Theologies of missions have usually resisted contingency in their drive to find a lasting, secure motivation and methodology for mission activities. I believe that a relational theology of mission can turn its attention to those contingencies and plumb their depths for the Word they speak to us. Those contingencies are incarnate in the Others whose stubborn individuality presses back against all our efforts, rooted as those efforts are in political and ideological power, to essentialize and abstract them, to make them into predicates for our action. We are not called in mission to come into relation with those Others in the hope of changing them; that would require us to know them, at least the most important parts of them, the parts that matter, ahead of time – before we had even met them. Instead we are called in mission to come into relation with those Others to give embodiment and particularity to the differences that enlarge and enrich our world. In their depths we find Christ; there we serve and follow. One of the SBC's "Six Points of Challenge" for their evangelism initiative states, "I understand that if you witness, you win. If you don't, you lose."¹⁸ I may disagree with the competitive imagery and the underlying assumptions of this statement – yet I find that I agree wholeheartedly with its singleminded emphasis on the evangelizer rather than the evangelized.

¹⁸ Southern Baptist Convention, "Six Challenge Points of the Everyone Can Kingdom Challenge" (accessed November 4, 2005), <http://www.everyonecan.net/templates/cuseveryonecan/details.asp?id=29574&PID=211897&ma st=>.