GLOBALIZATION OF MISSION SERIES

MISSION IN MOTION

Speaking Frankly of Mobilization

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CHAPTER 1

CRISIS

Let us first turn our discussion to the context of mission today and establish the backdrop to our study. What is this *crisis* of which Bosch and others speak? For some Western Christians the notion of there being a crisis at all may be quite unknown, thinking instead that the work of mission continues—"business as usual." Nevertheless, difficulties are still acknowledged; missionaries on furlough will talk to congregations about problems of finances, visa access, laborers being few, and other obstacles seen to hinder the activity of mission in various parts of the world. But these kinds of challenges are relatively familiar and have a long tradition in reports from the mission field over the past two hundred years of the modern (evangelical) missions movement. Congregations recognize these problems and earnestly pray for God's intervention. Many still give generously to the cause. If we were to take a little time to scratch beneath the surface, however, a less familiar set of issues and challenges would be revealed, ones which have been eroding evangelical understandings of mission for some time. To missiologists and reflective practitioners of mission it is far from "business as usual." As far back as 1961 Gerald Anderson wrote,

> The underlying principles and theological presuppositions for the Christian mission have been called into question and Christians are challenged to rethink the motives, message, methods, and goals of their mission … The fundamental task, therefore, of the missionary enterprise today is to clarify the nature and meaning of its being. (Anderson, 1961, 3–4)

Times have changed since Anderson wrote and the clarification of the nature and meaning of mission's being has been fiercely debated since. Yet almost thirty years later, David Bosch (among many others then and since) still saw the question mark hanging over mission. Twenty-five years on from *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Bosch, 1991) we conclude the same. This suggests a range of issues far more foundational to the concept of mission than simple pragmatic difficulties like those mentioned above. Pragmatic considerations may be connected to the core issues but their nature is secondary or symptomatic rather than causal. To take a closer look at core issues, the research team decided to focus on Bosch's analysis of mission in crisis. We acknowledge that numerous scholars have attempted to articulate crises in mission and that Bosch's work is not exhaustive, but for us it provided a very useful entry point to a number of the major dynamics giving rise to the crisis.

Transforming Mission quickly became a standard text in missiological circles after it was first published and continues to be a primary source for students of mission. In it Bosch outlines, in quite concise terms, six factors that underlie the crisis to which we refer, not

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just within the realm of mission but for the "entire church, indeed the entire world" (Bosch, 1991, 3). We note that the context of mission has changed somewhat in the decades following the book's publication. Nevertheless, the succinct nature of his outline remains useful as it allows his readers considerable flexibility to add or subtract, elaborate, critique, or delve deeper into any one of the six points. We will briefly consider them to illustrate our context.

The Prominence of Scientific Rationale

> The advance of science and technology and, with them, the worldwide process of secularization seems to have made faith in God redundant; why turn to religion if we ourselves have ways and means of dealing with the exigencies of modern life? (Bosch, 1991, 3)

Here Bosch acknowledges classic features of the secularization debate. This remains an ongoing debate within disciplines like the sociology of religion and has spurned countless studies, papers, and books on the subject. The early figures within sociology, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, all predicted the demise of religious life in the West. Durkheim and Weber especially wrote extensively on the subject of religion.[1] From their lead, subsequent study on the notion of secularization supported the claims of these three scholars throughout much of the twentieth century. More recently, however, the issue of the decline of religious adherence in the face of secularization has been significantly challenged. That is not to suggest that there is not valid empirical data that certainly infers a staggering decline in institutional religious practice and affiliation in various regions, nor is it to suggest that basic theorizing (attributing secularization to increased scientific rationale) is necessarily incorrect in some contexts. What is becoming apparent is a picture far more complex than the simple disappearance of religious belief, eclipsed by the reasoning and functions of modernity.

An overwhelming majority of people on the planet believe in some form of transcendent reality.

At this point we need to acknowledge (as Bosch does in his second point) that the secularization debate pertains to the Western world in which scientific thought, industrialization, efficiency, and capitalist production are significant defining features. China is another overtly secular context, but, with Bosch, we will locate our discussion at this point in the West. We need also to note that Western secularism does not present itself in a clear-cut way. While we can bemoan the apparent decline in religious belief in parts of Europe, how does one account for the vitality of the religious landscape in the United States, arguably the most capitalist nation in the world? Answers are not simple; while we can see evidence

1 Marx actually didn't write very much on the subject; this comes as a surprise for many people as, out of the three founders of sociology mentioned—Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, it is Marx's controversial understanding of religion which is most widely known. We can perhaps attribute this to the fact that Marx, by far, is the better known and certainly the most demonized. Few, if any, people of faith appreciate their sacred beliefs being reduced to an opiate!

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of religious decline in some parts of the world, the very fact that an overwhelming majority of people on the planet believe in some form of transcendent reality must give us pause to recognize that secularization and sacralization are not as predictable as modern sociologists anticipated.

The Decline in Western Christianity

> Linked to the former point is the reality that the West—traditionally not only the home of Catholic and Protestant Christianity but also the base of the entire modern missionary enterprise—is slowly but steadily being dechristianized. (Bosch, 1991, 3)

Bosch's second point adds some needed nuance to his first. In the text he goes on to make the same point as many secularization theorists concerning the decline in church membership in Europe and North America, which is a valid argument but not without its complications as we have acknowledged above. Here Bosch draws our attention to the dramatic shift in the *global* demographics of Christianity. A question arises from his second point—is the base disappearing or shifting? A decade later in his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Philip Jenkins caused quite a stir with his articulation of the shift in "the center of gravity in the Christian world" (Jenkins, 2002, 2). Although Jenkins' thesis is by no means original, he does a good job at putting the demographics of global Christianity into perspective.[2] He suggests that by the year 2025, out of a total Christian population of some 2.6 billion in the world, the numeric breakdown will be 633 million in Africa, and in Latin America and Asia, 640 million and 460 million respectively. "Europe, with 555 million, would have slipped to third place" (Jenkins, 2002, 3). In his own quirky style, Jenkins makes the comment, "Soon, the phrase 'a white Christian' may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as 'a Swedish Buddhist.' Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied" (Jenkins, 2002, 3). It is quite possible to take issue with Jenkins on a number of points and, in particular, to quibble with his statistics and calculations. However, that is best left to others in the field. The main point that Jenkins makes is sound; Christianity should no longer be understood as having its base in the West.

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A corollary to Jenkins' observation of a shift in Christianity's center is the fact that missionary recruitment is shifting with it. At the turn of last century Dr. Ralph Winter with Bruce Koch claimed, "More missionaries are now sent from non-Western churches than from the traditional mission-sending bases in the West." (Winter and Hawthorne, 2009, 509). Patrick Johnstone verified this with his *Operation World* research and more recently he has produced a visually appealing presentation of such statistics in his book, *The Future of the Global Church* (Johnstone, 2011). Johnstone maintains that "the globalization of the

2 Jenkins himself acknowledges the authors Andrew Walls, Edward Norman, and Walter Buhlmann as having written of the "shift" some thirty years earlier prior to the publication of his book in 2002.

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mission force … is an unprecedented phenomenon" and notes that "from 1980 onwards the massive increase in missions was in Af(rica,) As(ia,) L(atin)A(merica), and especially Asia" (Johnstone, 2011, 228). He goes on to map out "explosive growth" in the global mission force between 2000 and 2010, particularly from China and India (Johnstone, 2011, 228).

Bosch saw the dechristianization of the West as a major challenge to continuing mission but hoped that a new paradigm would emerge as a result. Jenkins confirmed a shift in the geographical center of Christianity, and Johnstone proves Bosch's hope was not unfounded. Johnstone writes, "The whole paradigm of missions has now changed. The old, Western ways of forming relationships and strategies and working in the field will no longer do now that missionaries are being sent out from all over the world" (Johnstone, 2011, 228).

Increased Pluralism

> Partly because of the above, the world can no longer be divided into "Christian" and "non-Christian" territories separated by oceans. Because of the dechristianization of the West and the multiple migrations of people of many faiths we now live in a religiously pluralist world … This proximity to others has forced Christians to reexamine their traditional stereotypical views about those faiths. (Bosch, 1991, 3)

Again, Bosch builds upon his previous point, creating another layer and reinforcing the challenges facing evangelical missions. He forces us to consider what mission should look like in a pluralist world and hints at the significance of dialogue with other faiths. Throughout much of the evangelical missions community Bosch's projection is coming to pass. Postcolonial pluralism is giving rise to greater degrees of cross-cultural and inter-religious sensitivity in mission praxis. We live in an age that increasingly understands and appreciates the importance of context; a globalized world where it is considered arrogant at best (xenophobic at worst) to think your worldview is the only valid view. While a triumphalist approach to mission activity is still detected, the desire to minister to those from another culture and religion with loving humility and respect increasingly underpins missionary intention.

We live in an age that increasingly understands and appreciates the importance of context.

Western Guilt

> Because of its complicity in the subjugation and exploitation of peoples of color, the West—and also Western Christians—tends to suffer from an acute sense of guilt. This circumstance often leads to an inability or unwillingness among Western Christians to "give an account of the hope" they have (1 Peter 3:15 NAS) to people of other persuasions. (Bosch, 1991, 3)

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Perhaps the sense of guilt to which Bosch refers can be linked to his discussion regarding some motivations for and aims of mission activity. Comparing Verkuyl and Durr, Bosch highlights various impure motives for the missionary endeavor. At the top of the list are "(a) the imperialist motive (turning 'natives' into docile subjects of colonial authorities)" and "(b) the cultural motive (mission as the transfer of the missionary's 'superior' culture')" (Bosch, 1991, 5). Additionally, he cites the "romantic motive" and the "motive of ecclesiastical colonialism" (Bosch, 1991, 5), the former referring to a form of wanderlust and the latter to the exporting of "one's own confession and church order to other territories" (Bosch, 1991, 5).

While we certainly should acknowledge the negative aspects of the Western missions movement throughout its history, elsewhere Bosch provides a significant balance to this issue. He states that, "I am convinced that the missionaries were, by and large, a breed fundamentally different from their colonizing compatriots" (Anderson, Phillips, and Coote, 1993, 176–177). Others have also written on this issue of postcolonial Western guilt and offer a more nuanced reflection. In his aptly titled article, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex" that appeared in *The Christian Century*, Lamin Sannah emphasizes the significance of Bible translation by missionaries and sees this as having, ultimately, a subversive effect on oppressive colonial rule. "Here was an acute paradox … Colonial rule was irreparably damaged by the consequences of vernacular translation—and often by other activities of missionaries" (Sanneh, 1987, 332). As the teachings of Scripture were made available in native languages and inculcated into the culture of indigenous groups, the subjugation and discrimination of colonial powers was often questioned and seen to be out of alignment with the teachings of Christ. In this way the missionary endeavor eventually had an emancipatory impact from Western rule.

Postcolonial Western guilt is still a contributing factor in our understanding of the crisis in mission.

The Western missions movement also provided tangible benefit to the societies that emerged, as revealed through the statistical analysis of Robert Woodberry, who examined the activist attributes of what he calls "conversionary Protestants" and concludes,

> In cross-national statistical analysis Protestant missions are significantly and robustly associated with higher levels of printing, education, economic development, organizational civil society, protection of private property, and rule of law and with lower levels of corruption. (Woodberry, 2012, 268)

The influence of missionaries on indigenous groups was also not a one-way street; a level of reciprocity can be detected. In his book *An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812–1920*, Jay Case observes,

> When evangelical missionaries sought to influence the rest of the world, they inadvertently built conduits by which influences from new movements of world Christianity circulated back to affect American evangelicalism. (Case, 2012, 7)

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