

# World Christianity and Inter-Religious Relations: *Missionsvetenskap med Ekumenik*:

## Toward a Definition of Mission Studies

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### Introduction

When I arrived at the door of my new office in this handsome building, the *Theologicum* — or in our modern rendering, the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies — I found myself faced with an interesting conundrum. Beneath my name I read the title, in English, «World Christianity and Inter-Religious Relations», and in Swedish «Missionsvetenskap med Ekumenik». I was puzzled and pleased: puzzled because, even in this early phase of my transition to the Swedish language, I realised that the one title does not exactly translate the other; pleased, because the four terms — World Christianity, Inter-Religious Relations, Missionsvetenskap, Ekumenik — combine to express the interests that lie closest to my heart as teacher, researcher and writer these past thirty years. I welcomed the juxtaposition of terms as a gift from new colleagues, and hope I can accept it as gracefully as it has been given. These are the wings, to put it metaphorically, with which I shall try to fly in Lund. In this paper I shall unfold them. I shall deal with the four terms in a sequence that expresses my own way of integrating them in a contemporary understanding of «Missionsvetenskap med Ekumenik» that remains the formal title of the chair that, *locum tenens*, I am privileged to hold this year as guest professor.

### World Christianity

Considering our subject from the perspective of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must begin with what has been the most important change in the empirical reality of Christianity in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is not, as is commonly assumed among Western scholars, the impact of secularism on Christianity in Europe and North America. Profoundly influential as secularism, and the post-secular fascination with so-called «new age religiosity» are in Western Christianity, it is a quite different phenomenon that has transformed the character of Christianity as a global religion: the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres. The aggregate of Southern and Eastern hemisphere Christians now outnumbers that of Western Christians by a ratio of about sixty to forty percent; to every two Christians in the West there are at least three in the «global South.» And the sixty percent of Christians in the «Two-Thirds World» is increasing, in some areas very rapidly, while Christianity in the West continues to decline. I shall not go further into the statistics, except to draw your attention to two excellent sources of information: the annual tally published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*,<sup>1</sup> and the World Christian Database.

My predecessor and colleague in the University of Edinburgh, Professor Andrew Walls, has written extensively on the significance of this demographic change for the very character of Christianity as a world religion.<sup>2</sup> Borrowing a metaphor from the physical sciences, he argues that it represents nothing less than a shift in Christianity's centre of gravity from the Western world to the «non-Western world». One might wish to question the use of the negative construct «non-Western» to describe this new phenomenon. I personally laboured under it, sometimes with embarrassment, in my former position as professor of «Christianity in the Non-Western World», and director of a research centre of the same name.<sup>3</sup> Misleading as it can be to generalise the complexity of the global reality of Christianity in terms of what it is not, the term «non-Western» has the value of confronting assumptions which widely persist. «Non-Western Christianity? ... Don't you mean «non-Christian religions?» is a question I'm often asked: an unintended confusion that betrays the assumption that Christianity is a Western religion, and that the «non-Western world» is populated only by «non-Christian religions.» The assumption is by no means unique to popular thinking, but continues to be found in scholarly circles. Not to belabour the point, the terminological difficulty of naming the global reality of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suggests that the scholarly community itself has problems in re-constructing its

conceptual view of Christianity as a religion that far exceeds the Western categories of analysis that have been normative at least since the European Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Transformation suggests novelty and difference. Yet one of the foremost African scholars of Christianity, Professor Kwame Bediako of the Akropong, Ghana, refers to this transformation in the subtitle of one of his books on African Christianity as *The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.<sup>4</sup> He argues that as Christianity relinquishes the almost one-to-one relationship with Western culture that has marked its history over roughly the past millennium and a half, it frees itself to retrieve something closer to its original character as an African religion rooted in African culture. Bediako draws out important continuities between the ancient Christianity of Mediterranean North Africa and Western Asia, and the growth of African Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The implications are far reaching. African Christianity has its own direct link to the early church, especially through the Church Fathers who lived in Egypt and North Africa. The ancient Nubian church has passed away, but in Egypt and Ethiopia Christianity still flourishes in indigenous forms. These remind us that the Portuguese missions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the Northern European missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, did not implant Christianity in Africa for the first time. They were but later phases in the continental history of African Christianity.

This is not to under-rate the importance of the European contributions to African Christianity, but to insist that they cannot be treated in isolation, and must be viewed within a wider historical perspective in order to be properly understood. This has been demonstrated most persuasively by another West African historian of Christianity, Professor Lamin Sanneh of Yale Univer-

<sup>1</sup> Published by the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, CT. See also David Barrett et al. (eds.), *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and *World Christian Database* (<http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd>), (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Boston, MA.).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, and Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1996); *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, and Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>4</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

sity. Noting that African Christianity's most rapid growth, and most formative thinking, have occurred during the second half of the 20th century, therefore since the end of the Western missionary era, his *Translating the Message* argues that the missionary contribution of translation the Bible into vernacular African languages must be evaluated in relation to the African reception and adaptation of the Biblical message. What African Christians have done, and are doing with the Bible far exceeds what the missionaries imagined or thought likely; and it is this, argues Sanneh, that really accounts for the qualitative as well as quantitative growth of Christianity throughout much of Africa, making it the «Christian continent» of current times.<sup>6</sup>

In Asia, also, Christian history must be read more broadly than in terms of Western missionary impact. Throughout Western Asia, the so-called «Middle East»,<sup>7</sup> the churches of apostolic foundation in Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, of Armenia and ancient Mesopotamia, are the contemporary representatives of Christianity where it began. St Thomas is credited with first bringing Christianity to the eastern shores of India, where the churches of Kerala continue to claim his apostolic foundation and to invoke his name. The Assyrian Church of the East, usually dubbed «Nestorian» in Western literature, brought Christianity in Western China already by the early 7th century. The oldest Christian document in Chinese is engraved on a stone tablet in Chang An, the capital of the Tang dynasty. In terms that echo the language of Buddhism, it records that «the *sutra*-s (i.e. Biblical portions) were translated in the Imperial Library», and goes on to give a fascinating summary of the theology of «the Luminous Religion» (i.e. Christianity). In a delightful metaphor, it reports that the Chinese Emperor, having read the translation, likened Christian truth to a fish disentangled from the net — meaning that

the translation was «free of perplexing expressions», so that the religious principles were clear and intelligible.

19th century India witnesses a similar process of translation as, for example, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) — his Sanskrit baptismal name meaning «lover of wisdom» and «teacher» — sought to articulate Christian theology through the medium of Vedantic philosophy. But Christianity robed in Hindu attire was, with important exceptions, frowned upon by most European missionaries. Nor, due to its acceptance of the Hindu caste system, was it tolerable to the great numbers of Indian converts to Christianity who came from an «outcaste» or *dalit* background. Yet the principle of indigenisation continues to apply as Dalit Christians seek to express the liberative values of the Gospel in relation to the pre-Hindu religiosity of India's tribal peoples. In these ways Christianity in the 21st century is re-discovering itself in Asia, as in Africa, as a religion that has the capacity to transform itself by drawing on indigenous resources.

The Belgian Catholic scholar of the current transformation of Christianity, Professor Walbert Bühlmann, coined the phrase «Third Church» in his book *The Coming of the Third Church*.<sup>8</sup> One of his central arguments is that the new reality of Christianity in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres is as radically different from Western Christianity as Western Christianity is from the original Christianity of Western Asia. He divides the history of the Church into three eras: the «First Church» of apostolic foundation in Western Asia; the «Second Church» of European history that includes both the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation; and the «Third Church» that is «coming» into maturity — firstly, as a result of the missionary expansion of the Second Church into Africa, East Asia and Latin America; secondly as an independent reality, or spectrum of realities, that differ among themselves as much as they differ from the Second Church.

<sup>6</sup> Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> The terms «Middle» and «Near East» were coined in the late 19th century British imperial history, and betray an imperialist worldview should render them obsolete in our post-colonial world.

<sup>8</sup> Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church: an Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978).

Bühlmann's thesis is essentially cultural. Christianity, he argues, has never had a permanent, static centre. The Christianity of the Church Fathers grew in diverse cultural centres — Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian as well as Greek and Latin. The great ecclesiastical divisions that arose were due as much to culture as doctrine. The Chalcedonian division was linguistic as much as dogmatic, and alienated Oriental Christians from both Greeks and Latins. When the division between Greeks and Latins settled into the institutional forms of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, Christianity entered into a further phase of cultural distinction. Each was active in missionary propagation. As the Orthodox found success in the vast expanses of the Russian empire, it was Latin Christendom in its Catholic and Protestant forms that succeeded in extending itself beyond the European continent, bringing Western Christianity to Africa, Asia and Latin America. With their inculturation in their new environments, Bühlmann's «Third Church» became the new reality that represents the demographic majority of Christianity today. Bühlmann's point is that Christianity has never been defined by a single normative language or culture. It has always been a multi-contextual phenomenon, polycentric, and multi-cultural. The emergent reality of the «Third Church», now demographically preponderant, is a further stage in a historical process, and re-adjusts the internal equilibrium within global Christianity that has been distorted by the power of the Second Church.

The problem of nomenclature remains. Bühlmann is aware of the obvious danger of lateral association of «Third Church» and «Third World». «Two-Thirds World» has won some consensus, notably among evangelical scholars, but invites criticism as being a cliché that focuses attention on quantity more than quality. The Anglo-American scholar, Professor Philip Jenkins coined the term «Next Christendom» in the title of his book that explores the demographics of 21st century Christianity,<sup>9</sup> only to find that his African and Latin American critics vehemently rejected this on conceptual

and experiential grounds. «Post-colonial Christianity» serves to emphasise the contemporary character of Christianity since the demise of the European and other empires, but it implies methodologies that by no means win universal assent.<sup>10</sup> «Contextual Christianity» focuses on Christianity's interaction with many cultures and societies from which it may previously have been absent,<sup>11</sup> but it dangerously perpetuates the error of suggesting that there is some form of universal Christianity against which contextual variations can be measured.

Given the difficulties into which all these terms run «World Christianity» may be the least worst option. «Global Christianity» may be grammatically more felicitous, although it risks uncritically association with globalisation. Both serve to refer to the most important feature that distinguishes Christianity in the 21st century from any previous stage in its history: that it is has become, for the first time in two millennia, a truly world religion, present on all continents in indigenous forms. These demand to be studied contextually, and each contextual construct must be analysed and interpreted in its own terms. The study of global, or world Christianity no longer assumes, tacitly or explicitly, that there is a meta-narrative of Christian history that has universal validity. Christianity, rather, is a multi-contextual phenomenon, about which generalisations can only be drawn through a process of bringing the multiple contexts into dialogue with each other.

### *Missiology*

Missiology, or Missionsvetenskap, denotes the scientific study of mission. As Professor Olaf Myklebust of Oslo demonstrated in his *Study of Missions in Theological Education*,<sup>12</sup> it origin-

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, several of Rasiah S. Sugirtharaj's books, most recently *Postcolonial Reconstructions: an Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992 and 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Olaf Myklebust, *Study of Missions in Theological Education* (Oslo: Egede Instituttet, vol. 1, 1955, vol. 2, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

ated as a discipline in relation to church history and practical theology. Professor Gustav Warneck set this course in his teaching and writing in the University of Halle in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it was continued by the first Catholic professor of mission, Josef Schmidlin, at the University of Münster from 1910. In the United States it was pre-eminently Kenneth Scott Latourette who pioneered mission studies in Yale University, again under the aegis of history — yet with a difference: his perspective widened beyond church history, with its preferences for particular ecclesial traditions as represented in the work of both Warneck<sup>13</sup> and Schmidlin,<sup>14</sup> and he embarked on the ambitious venture of writing *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*. It eventually appeared in seven volumes,<sup>15</sup> and stands as the first attempt to produce a global history of Christian expansion. For example, the first volume dealing with the early church, discusses Christianity in the Persian and Han Empires, in Central and Southern Asia, in Nilotic and Eastern Africa as well as the Roman Empire. The criteria by which Latourette assessed «expansion» further indicate that his eyes were fixed on the relationship of Christianity to world history: in addition to geographical and demographic aspects of expansion, he considered «the effect of Christianity on mankind (sic) as a whole.»<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while the scientific study of mission had normally found its place as a university discipline in departments of church history, it is not an entirely symmetric partner, for it challenges church historians to think in broader terms of global Christianity. This, of course, raises questions of selection and perspective in church his-

<sup>13</sup> Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time: a Contribution to Modern Church History* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1901. First published in German in 1884.).

<sup>14</sup> Josef Schmidlin, *Katholische Missionsgeschichte* (Steyl, 1925).

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1938–1945).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p.9.

tory curricula. Mission professors in the second half of the 20th century tended to become hybrid scholars, their study of mission being related to other areas of expertise. The final years of Latourette's work in Yale saw him appointed as the Sterling Professor of Missions and Oriental History, a position he held from 1949 to 1953. He was a scholar of China and Japan as well as of Christian mission, and was especially insightful regarding the ways in which Christianity impacted the 20th century development of these societies.<sup>17</sup> His contemporary at Princeton, Professor Samuel Marinus Zwemer, held the chair of Christian missions and the history of religion, and pioneered the anthropological study of popular Islam as the context for understanding the nature of Muslim communities and Christian interaction with them.<sup>18</sup> Both scholars evidence a shift in the focus of mission studies by the mid-20th century. No longer confined to the study of the historical expansion of Western Christendom into the so-called «non-Christian world», missiology began to explore the ways in which Christianity encounters world civilisations and cultures. The missiologist typically starts with the world as the global context in which Christianity is studied, rather than coming to the world from the confessional perspective of a particular ecclesial tradition.

This has led Andrew Walls, one of the more influential scholars of mission in the second half of the 20th century, to add a fourth principle in the study of Christian mission to those adumbrated by Latourette: «the expansion of the Christian faith by its inter-action with different cultures and different languages, so that by cross-cultural diffusion it becomes a progressively richer entity.»<sup>19</sup> The term «inter-action» is here crucial. As Latourette was concerned with the «action» of Christianity upon world civilisations, Walls has been more perceptive of the reciprocal nature of this process: the impact especially of traditional cultures in Africa and

<sup>17</sup> His publications included *The Development of China* (1917) and *The History of Japan* (1918).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, his *Studies in Popular Islam* (London: Sheldon Press, 1939).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

elsewhere upon Christianity as it was received and adapted by new cultural environments. Regional studies have thus become a characteristic feature of the study of mission. An early pioneer of this kind of scholarship was Professor Bengt Sundkler, for twenty-five years the incumbent of the chair of mission in Uppsala. His *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* is a pioneering study of how indigenous African religious traditions have shaped indigenous African Christianity.<sup>20</sup> More recently, returning to Yale and to Latourette's current successor, Lamin Sanneh has shown that mission entails a reciprocal dynamic of transformation: dealing mainly with the context of West Africa, he analyses both the impact of the missionary message on a local culture, and the transformation of missionary message by the local culture. The scientific study of mission explores this double complexity, engaging not only institutional aspects of the challenge — i.e. the transition from expatriate to indigenous churches — but more fascinatingly still, the emergence of local patterns of Christian life, practice and creed. The «Christianisation» of culture is now paralleled by contemporary interests in the «contextualisation», «indigenisation», «acculturation», «inculturation» of Christianity in all the cultures of the world. Borrowed from the social sciences, these terms evidence a shift of disciplinary approach of contemporary missiology, a subject that now engages anthropologists, sociologists, linguists and cultural historians, and thus belongs as clearly to inter-cultural studies as to church history in a traditional sense.

It is telling in this respect that one of the most influential analyses of mission studies, published in the last decade of the 20th century, is entitled *Transforming Mission*. Its author, the South African missiologist David Bosch, applies the concept of «paradigm shift», that Thomas Kuhn developed in relation to the history of science, to the transformations that have occurred in the history of Christian understandings of mission, and to the ways in which mission is

studied. Paradigm shifts represent revolutionary rather than evolutionary transformations of knowledge. As Einstein introduced an entirely different concept of physics to that of Newton, who in his time replaced Copernicus, Bosch argues that comparable paradigm shifts are evident in the history of mission. Having demonstrated his argument through analysis of diverse concepts of mission in the New Testament and in Christian history, he devotes the largest section of his book to what he sees to be the key elements in «an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm» of the late 20th century.

Whereas earlier paradigms of mission focused, as we have seen, on the expansion of the church or Christianity, the new paradigm is centred on mission as the action of God toward creation (*missio Dei*), in which the church participates as a pilgrim people, witnessing the Gospel of liberation, justice and love that is radicalised by renewed encounter with Jesus in the lives of the poor and marginalized, and proclaiming God's Kingdom (Reign) as a present reality, though a presence that has yet to be made fully real. In this new paradigm, mission is no longer perceived as the movement of the church or Christianity from one part of the world to another, but as the action of God through the Christian communities that exist throughout the world. Mission in this new paradigm is therefore shorn of any normative association with Western Christianity or with Euro-American empires. Mission orientates itself, rather, to the Biblical understanding of the eschaton, the fulfilment of God's redemptive action in creation through the realisation of the Kingdom of God as a present reality yet to be completed. Mission in this sense is the action of the whole Church in the whole world, struggling to make real God's gift of new creation, in the assurance that God's kingdom is a promise that is realisable in history.

The study of mission in this new paradigm confronts the contemporary missiologist with immense challenges, far greater than any one person can be expected to bear with full competence. As missiology has moved from history to intercultural studies, the new paradigm gives much greater attention to the other areas of theology: to the Biblical sciences, to systematic theology, and above all to practical theology as

<sup>20</sup> Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948. 2nd edition, International African Institute: Oxford University Press, 1961).

the radical implementation of the Gospel in relation to social, political and economic conditions. In a certain sense this is not a new discovery. It was the *raison d'être* of the first professorship in mission studies in Europe, created in 1867 for Alexander Duff in New College, Edinburgh. He held the Chair of Evangelistic Theology, the responsibility of which was defined as «very largely (to) deal with the subject of foreign missions.»<sup>21</sup> As Andrew Walls notes, «the concerns of the new chair would penetrate all the traditional aspects of the theological curriculum — Biblical, dogmatic, historical and practical — and by involving the study of faiths and thought patterns other than the Christian, go well beyond the traditional curriculum.»<sup>22</sup> Yet Professor Duff was, to the core, a Presbyterian theologian. David Bosch's «emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm» challenges mission theology to move beyond confessionalism into an ecumenical dimension that draws upon the theological resources of all Christian traditions and cultures, and is potentially open to the whole world. A theology of mission in the 21st century has to be a global theology, constructed through an ongoing process of dialogue among Christian theologians on all continents.

### *Inter-Religious Studies*

Bosch's «emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm» includes what he terms «mission as witness to people of other living faiths.» This brings us to the third of the terms that I have promised to discuss in this paper: «inter-religious relations». I want briefly to indicate how the question of relationship with other religions has been a central concern of Christian mission throughout the 20th century. As Bosch puts it, «few themes have dominated missiological (and indeed general theological literature) the way the entire area of the theology of religions has done.»<sup>23</sup> But I want to argue that, while there is and probably never has been a single agreed

Christian approach to this challenge,<sup>24</sup> the current diversity of missiological views represents a greater paradigm shift in the understanding of mission and mission studies than Bosch suggests.

At the end of the first decade of the 20th century some twelve hundred leaders of American and European mission boards and societies gathered in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, for a World Missionary Conference. The conference has come to be regarded as a key moment in the modern Protestant missionary movement. It articulated understandings of mission that differed sharply from those that pertained in the 19th century, and set mission priorities that survived through at least the first half of the 20th century. One of the liveliest debates centred on «The Missionary Message in relation to non-Christian Religions.»<sup>25</sup> The consensus that emerged from the experience of missionaries working among a wide range of religions was that while «Christianity is the final and absolute religion», the Gospel fulfils «the hidden craving of the human heart» for a true relationship with God that is found in all religions. Theological support for this position was found in, for example, the broadly tolerant theological approach to other religions among the Church Fathers, exemplified in Justin Martyr's concept of the *logos spermatikos* that is «seeded» universally in the reason of all human beings. Citing Jesus' words in *Matthew 5:17*, «I have come not to abolish but to fulfil», the Edinburgh conference advocated a «fulfilment theology» that saw the purpose of mission being to transform other religions from within, enabling them to find their own way to Christ.

<sup>24</sup> For an illuminating «general history» of Christian theological thinking about other religions, see Paul Tillich's Bampton lectures *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1963), especially lecture two, *Christian Principles of Judging Non-Christian Religions*.

<sup>25</sup> World Missionary Conference, *Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian Religions* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier and Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the minutes of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1867.

<sup>22</sup> Walls, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch, 477.

If this marked a paradigm shift from 19th century missionary negativity towards other religions, fulfilment theology was itself confronted by theological challenges in later decades of the 20th century. Karl Barth pronounced a categorical *nein* to fulfilment theology's understanding of religion and human progress. Religion, he argued, is an expression of unbelief, and religions, far from awaiting fulfilment in the Gospel, serve only to obstruct the Gospel's call for an unqualified human response of faith in the unmerited gift of divine grace in Jesus Christ. Religions stand as much under God's judgement as does 19th century confidence in human progress. As the sinner is made righteous in God's eyes through faith alone, it is only possible for religions to become righteous as they respond to the Gospel. This entails their evangelical transformation that it is the task of mission to affect.<sup>26</sup>

Barth's theology radically influenced Protestant missionary thinking in the mid-20th century, but was itself challenged by Karl Rahner's notion that the gift of divine grace, universal in nature, is sufficient for the salvation of those who live devout and moral lives in religions other than Christianity. Religions, he argued, should be construed as socialisations of grace, the normal way by which human communities respond and relate to God. As, through their religions, human beings experience divine grace, they respond «anonymously» to Christ.<sup>27</sup> If Rahner's concept of «anonymous Christianity» has not found wide acceptance, his influence on the Second Vatican Council was immense, especially in the «Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions», in Latin the *Nostra Aetate*.

As the two Karls are often taken as representing the «exclusivist» (Barth) and «inclusivist» (Rahner) typologies of late 20th century theology of religion, it is John Hick, formerly

Professor of the Philosophy of Religion in Birmingham, whose name attaches to the so-called «pluralism» paradigm. Professor Hick called for a «Copernican revolution» in the Christian theology of religion that re-centres Christian theology around God by de-mythologising the Incarnation and removing Christianity, Christ and the Church from the centre of the theological universe. Hick calls for a re-focussing of Christianity as one of the many ways of relating to the Absolute, as Copernicus refocused our vision of the Earth as a planet orbiting the Sun.<sup>28</sup>

While the pluralist approach has attracted wide support toward the end of the 20th century, not all pluralists accept the reductionist implications of Hick's theology. Many Indian theologians, for example, argue for a pluralism that is premised not on an abstract concept of the Absolute, but on the Biblical concept of the Kingdom, or Reign of God (*regnum Dei*). As the Asian Conference of Catholic Bishops puts it, «The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Reign of God, and building up the Church to be at the service of the Reign of God. The Reign of God is therefore wider than the Church ... The Church is not placed at her own service: she is entirely orientated towards the Kingdom of God that is coming. For only the Kingdom, as the fullness of God's manifestation, is absolute.»<sup>29</sup> In this new understanding of mission, Christians must engage in active dialogue with other religions, as other «ways of the Kingdom» (*viae regni*), and celebrate the contribution that other religions can make to the realisation of God's reign of justice in all human communities.

This brief summary of some 20th century Christian theological approaches to the challenge of religious pluralism shows that there are significant differences of perspective among Protestants and Catholics, and between Europeans and Asians. The latter is, I suggest, of greater importance for the future. Enormous as the demographic growth of Christianity has been

<sup>26</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1/2, section 17; and vol. 4/3 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark: 1956–1969).

<sup>27</sup> «Christianity and the non-Christian religions», in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions* (London: Collins, 1980), p.76.

<sup>28</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Conference of Asian Roman Catholic Bishops. <http://www.fabc.org> (consulted February 2006).



in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres, it has not yet produced Christian majority populations in any African and Asian countries. With the exception of the Philippines, Asian Christianity remains a small and marginalised minority religion in all Asian countries. The enormous growth of Christianity in Africa takes place mainly in regions where Islam has not already been present for many centuries. This points to a sharp difference between the contextual conditions in which Western and non-Western theologies of religion are formed. In the West, Christian theologians think in an epistemological framework that has for centuries been deeply influenced by Christianity. In Africa and Asia this is simply not the case. Asian and African Christian theologians habitually undertake their work through conscious inter-action with indigenous religious traditions that shape their societies. It is therefore not strange for them to identify themselves as religiously-hyphenated theologians who embrace what, in post-colonial jargon, is termed «cultural hybridity»: for example, the Buddhist-Christianity of the Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, the Taiwanese theologian, C. S. Song, or of Lynn de Silva and Aloysius Pieris in Sri Lanka; or the Confucian-Christianity that is being articulated by some Chinese and Korean Christian theologians; or the Hindu-Christianity of now three generations of Indian Christian theologians. African Christian theology has integrated many aspects of traditional African religion. Some contemporary Palestinian theologians identify themselves as Muslim by culture, Christian by faith.

All these theologians live religious pluralism in ways that the West finds difficult to imagine, far less to emulate. Religious pluralism is the empirical reality of their lives and of their theologies. Theology of religion is not merely an intellectual debate, but has direct bearing on the way in which Christians, for the most part as demographic minorities, relate to the larger communities of faith that have shaped Asian and African societies. Reconciliation among religions has become a dominant theme, without this entailing a compromise of Christian identity and ways of thinking, either by way of diminution of the Christian message, or its merger into some higher philosophical or mystical principle

of meta-religion. The Pakistani Christian theologian, Charles Amjad Ali, working in the context of Islam, argues that dialogue is a process in which Christians and Muslims are challenged to bring their respective understandings of the nature and practice of truth — from the Bible and the Qur'an respectively — to bear upon the social, political and human questions that face Muslims and Christians together as fellow citizens in Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

The implications of Amjad-Ali's argument are far-reaching. In terms of Bosch's «emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm», they challenge us to go much further than living humbly with «the tension between being both missionary and dialogical.»<sup>31</sup> Where pluralism is the given reality of society, as in most parts of Africa and Asia, and increasingly in the West, dialogue is no longer being understood merely as an enlightened means of mission, but as the nature of mission itself.

Furthermore, a pluralistic understanding of «mission» invites comparative analysis of the phenomenon as it occurs, both historically and in contemporary terms, in other religions: in Buddhism and Islam, to a lesser extent with Hinduism and even Judaism, and very clearly among the so-called «new religious movements» that thrive under the conditions of globalisation. While the term «mission» is used occasionally by Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu groups when expressing themselves in the English language, we must be resist interpreting their understanding of the concept through Christian lenses. For this reason I hesitate to introduce the term «comparative missiology», but let it suffice until something better is coined. What is essential is that the Christian phenomenon should be placed in comparative analysis with the study of inter-cultural transformation that we find in other world religions.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Amjad-Ali (ed.), *Developing Christian Theology in the Context of Islam* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Bosch, 488.

### *Ecumenics*

David Bosch designates the new model of mission as «an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm.» In the final section of this paper we must ask: in what sense can mission and mission studies be defined as «ecumenical»?

As with the history of mission itself, ecumenism has developed through several distinguishable paradigms, of which I shall mention three. The first is «inter-confessional» ecumenism, where the focus lies on reconciliation among mainstream churches or confessions in a common search for effective unity. In terms of Protestant initiatives, inter-confessional ecumenism has roots in the missionary movement. The Johannine text, «may they be one so that the world may believe» (*John* 17:21), inspired the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, 1910, giving it the reputation as «the symbolic beginning of modern ecumenism.»<sup>32</sup> But the missionary impulse was complemented by two others: ecumenical action in the social application of the Gospel that crystallised in the Life and Work Conference in Stockholm in 1925, and the search for doctrinal agreement in the Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne in 1927. Life and Work, and Faith and Order formally converged in 1948 to form the World Council of Churches, and the International Missionary Council, that resulted from Edinburgh 1910, followed suite in 1961. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople played an influential role in the formation of the World Council of Churches, and by 1961 both it and the Russian Orthodox Church were formal members of the WCC. Roman Catholic initiatives in inter-confessional ecumenism centred on the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (1964), as a result of which the Vatican entered into «ecumenical dialogue» with the WCC and the Orthodox churches. Ecumenical studies have

<sup>32</sup> Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope (eds.), *The Ecumenical Movement: an Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1997), 1. This same volume quotes a passage from John R. Mott's closing speech at «Edinburgh 1910» as the first document in its section on «The Ecumenical Vision» (10–11).

largely been concerned with the history of these developments, as illustrated in the publications of Dr Rouse and Bishop Neil,<sup>33</sup> Professor Michael Kinnamon,<sup>34</sup> and Professor John Briggs,<sup>35</sup> with an analytical focus mainly on social and doctrinal issues. Other studies, essentially of the same genre, concentrate on bilateral dialogue between different confessions.

While «inter-confessional» ecumenism has been important for the historic churches — both the First and the Second Church, to recall Bülmann's terminology — it was already evident when the World Council of Churches was formed (1948) that the historic confessions did not adequately represent some of the most important developments of Christianity in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres. In 1950 the People's Republic of China dissolved denominations in the creation of the Three-Self Patriotic Church that was to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-governing. Chinese Christianity thus became identified with Chinese society and culture, ridding itself of Western denominational associations, and the number of Chinese Christians rapidly increased. As denominations have become an anachronism in China, so the indigenous church movement in Africa and parts of Asia has consciously moved away from traditional European ecclesial categories in search of more contextual communal identities. The massive growth of Pentecostalism throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia, effecting both Protestant and Catholic confessions, also points to the weakening of traditional confessional loyalties. In the early 1970s the Swiss missiologist/ecumenist Walter Hollenweger, the first Professor of Mission at the University of Birmingham, drew attention to the nature and implications of these phenomena in his classic study, *The Pentecostals*,<sup>36</sup> and his research into the Kimbanguist

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neil, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: (1) 1517–1948 (11) 1948–1968* (London: SPCK, 1954).

<sup>34</sup> See note 31.

<sup>35</sup> John Briggs et al. (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1968–2002* (Geneva: WCC, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Walter Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM, 1972.) See also his *Pentecostalism: Origin and*

Church (Church of Christ on Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu) in Kongo.<sup>37</sup> In both cases the renewal of Christianity under indigenous conditions in the global South challenges traditional denominational and confessional identities, and introduces new ecumenical and missiological realities.

The third paradigm of ecumenism can be termed «inter-religious», referring to what is sometimes called the «wider ecumenism» of dialogue among religions. This is ecumenism in the literal sense of the Greek words *oikos*, meaning «house» or «home», and *menô*, meaning «to dwell» — i.e. «the whole inhabited earth.» It expresses the vision of humankind as an extended family, united under the sovereignty of God, the whole earth being «the house of the Lord» (*Bet elohîm*) as the Psalmist proclaims (*Psalms* 36:8). Admittedly other occurrences of the term in the Bible imply the more specific meaning of the «people of God» as defined by obedience to the Mosaic covenant (*Numbers* 12:7) or «the church of the living God» (*1<sup>st</sup> Timothy* 3:15), but these also need to be understood in relation to God's universal covenants with Noah and Abraham (*Genesis* 9 and 17.)

It is quite appropriate, therefore, to recognise that while the modern ecumenical movement has emerged mainly through inter-confessional dialogue among Christian churches in search for common ground in mission, social action and doctrine, another source lies in the World's Parliament of Religions that met in Chicago in 1893. Part of the World's Columbian Exposition that celebrated Christopher Columbus' reaching the Americas, the Parliament gathered some sixty leaders of what were considered the ten «great religions» of the world. Their purpose was «to unite all religions against irreligion,» to set forth «their common aim and common grounds for union,» and to secure «the coming unity of mankind (*sic*) in the service of God and man (*sic*).»<sup>38</sup> Over the following century a

variety of national and international interfaith organisations have come into being, dedicated to the Chicago vision of developing common purpose among world religions. In 1993 a second World Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago, and among other things approved a «Declaration of a Global Ethic» that it had commissioned the Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, to prepare. This comprises four principles: that there can be no better global order without global justice; that every human being must be treated humanely; that the religions of the world need to move towards a culture of non-violence and respect for life, solidarity and just economic order, tolerance and truthfulness, and equal rights partnership between men and women; and that there needs to be a transformation of individual and collective consciousness.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent meetings of what it now termed the World Parliament of Religions take place on a quinquennial cycle, gatherings having been organised so far in Cape Town (1999) with attention to religions and HIV/AIDS, and in Barcelona (2004) where the issues of religiously-motivated violence, refugees, safe water, and international debt were addressed.

## Conclusion

This paper has been an exposition of a text, the text being the designation of the responsibilities that attach to the Professor of Missionsvetenskap med ekumenik in the Centre of Theology and Religious Studies. While World Christianity and Inter-Religious Relations do not translate Missionsvetenskap med ekumenik, I have argued that the latter combination of terms find their meaning in our 21st century in relation to the former. As mission and ecumenism have contributed to the emergence of World Christianity and inter-religious relations in the 20th century, so they are themselves in the process of being transformed by what they helped produce.

*Development Worldwide* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Walter Hollenweger, *Marxist and Kimbanguist Mission* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Richard Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: the East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xvii.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.earthspirit.org/Parliament/parliament-stat.html> (consulted February 2006).

Mission studies is therefore one of the most innovative areas of the curriculum of theological and religious studies. Having sustained several paradigm shifts of seismic proportion over the past century and a half, mission studies have earned the right not only to exist in the modern university, but to challenge the dangers of parochialism that lurk within the specialisation of all academic disciplines, and to redress the bifurcation that impoverishes theological and religious studies.

It has not been my intention, either explicitly or by stealth, to address policy questions regarding the future development of these studies in CTR. As a guest professor among you, I would simply acknowledge that many of the resources that make for creative *missionsvetenskap med ekumenik* are found in this institution. In these times of enforced economy, it is well to remember another meaning of the Greek *oikoumenê*, namely the good management of the household, the «economy» of our resources. It is good eco-

nomy to concentrate on the things for which we are best resourced, and forgo others, however interesting. It is with particular interest, for example, that I note the presence here of both Judaic and Islamic studies. What could this contribute to the contemporary search for an *oikumene* among the Children of Abraham (*Abrahamsbarn*),<sup>40</sup> in the context of Sweden as much as the Middle East. What would be the implications for *missionsvetenskap med ekumenik* that takes reconciliation of ethnic peoples, religious communities, national identities as its normative concern? This is not the place to begin answering such a question: it simply illustrates, by specific example, the potentiality of World Christianity and Inter-Religious Relations, *Missionsvetenskap med ekumenik* in Lund.

<sup>40</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: a Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM, 1995).

### Summary

The article discusses contemporary trends in the Mission and Ecumenical Studies in the context of World Christianity and Inter-Religious Relations. It engages with late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship, particularly relating to Christianity in Africa and Asia, and interacts with the paradigm-analysis of Mission Studies as advanced by David J. Bosch in his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

