

When worlds collide. Can thinking 'mission' help us understand and heal division?

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Missiology is the mother of theology – or so some would claim. It was the German systematic theologian Martin Kahler who wrote that often quoted statement and a myriad of mission thinkers have leapt upon it and developed it since. What on earth does it mean and how does it help us? It means, that missiological thinking at its best should have a way of taking us back to the very womb and the very heart of things. That means to look to God, in fact. To look at God through the lens of mission is to see a God whose very nature and heart is missionary. We see essentially in God a divine self-sending; into creation at the very start of things, through Christ into humanity, and through the Holy Spirit into all ages, places and times. It is a very person centred and Trinitarian sending. And this missionary purpose in sending is to save; to reconcile the world to the divine self, so that all is, ultimately, harmonious and fulfilled. When God sends with these saving purposes, God suffers to achieve them. In Eden God is disobeyed, in Gethsemane and at Calvary, God in Christ is tortured. Sending, suffering but ultimately saving; the missionary purpose is primary in helping us gain knowledge of God – *logos* and *theos*, and therefore it is possible to justify the line of argument that says missiology is the mother of theology.

But how does that help us? It helps us because it acts as a necessary corrective and a clearer lens through which to view God, Church and world in both historical and contemporary perspectives. We are grateful to Karl Barth here who, following World War I and the Great Depression, wanted to recover a sense of mission rooted primarily in *God's* nature and initiative, not that of the Church. In 1932 at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference, Barth rejected the liberal agenda in which mission was understood as a 'civilising' human activity of witness and service. 'The Church can be in mission authentically,' said Barth, only in obedience to God as mission' ¹. The *missio Dei*. And mission history affords numerous examples of the tangles that emerge when the Church claims ownership of the missionary enterprise rather than its calling to be obedient to and an instrument of God's mission. One of our major British denominations recently ran an advertisement for a key post which read, 'You will direct *our* mission...' It can be called dubious missiology.

Recapping Christian history for a moment, it is during the time of Constantine, of course, that we see the Church dangerously claiming ownership of the missionary enterprise and in doing so encouraging the demise of missional thinking. It was in this period that the concept of Christendom and the Christian nation began to be developed. In 375 AD, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity thus stood at the centre of culture in the Western/Northern world. Churches and cathedrals were built in the centre of communities, not only in Europe but also in many parts of the developing world, signifying the dominant role of the Church as the pillar and moulder of society and as the habitat for mission. 'Theology was generally constructed without a missional core, and so Christianity, without missional distinctiveness, accommodated itself to political and territorial structures.' ² Such classical doctrines as *missio Dei* were lost to the church. In other words, as George Vicedom puts it, Christians could not conceive of the church as the "outcome of the activity of God who sends and saves" because "sending and saving" were not a part of their identity. ³

But, during the twentieth century, the church has been displaced as the moral and ethical institution of Western culture. It is no longer in the centre, by any means. 'The perspective that humans can think independently and arrive at understandings by their own ingenuity has for generations now challenged the sole authority of the church. We have experienced the fragmentation of Christianity. Other world religions, and new age philosophies are options for people, and we inhabit a world where perspectives of individualism, rationality, democracy, and pluralism simply will not allow the Church the power it once enjoyed.'⁴ The Church which once claimed – wrongly, we are arguing – its ownership of the missionary enterprise, does not know what to do with itself as a minority movement in a post-Christian age. So, unless the church recreates its missional identity, it will continue to function in pluralist society like a ship without a rudder. Looking at Christianity missionally, that is through a *Missio Dei* mindset, offers an appropriate theological direction for Christianity in the 21st century, in what is a phenomenally challenging and changing world and in its challenging and changing, a world which deals repeatedly with collision. They are collision of ideologies, of powers, of moralities, even of weapons. Can thinking mission help us when worlds collide? That is the question I would like us to attend to for the bulk of this article, and I am going to address it using quite a simple, Methodist preacher's methodology, because that is, basically, who I am. I want to identify three types of collision and three examples of missiological thinking which help to shine a light on them and offer insight.

Firstly, I am interested in the kind of collision which so often occurs between so-called fundamentalist and liberal mindsets. Even naming them that way is a problem. But it is the collision that Fred Astaire sang about to Leslie Caron in the film 'Daddy Long Legs,' in a song written by Johnny Mercer. 'When an irresistible force such as you meets an old immovable object like me you can bet as sure as you live, something's gotta give, something's gotta give, something's gotta give.' (Johnny Mercer; a theologian. Whatever next!) Does mission thinking help where there appears to be no give and no take? And this could be on a whole range of topics; between literalist and liberal interpreters of text, be that the Bible or the Qu'ran. It could be between the proponents or the opponents of adult or infant baptism. It could be about human sexuality. It could be about political ideology; between Robert Mugabe and Gordon Brown. Does mission thinking help when there is a stance or a truth claim held with such passion and rigidity that nothing moves? This collision I call **attitudinal**.

Secondly, I am interested in the kind of collisions that occur between people because of difference and diversity; in birth, identity, language, location, values, experiences and faith. These are all elements that make up culture and so I describe this as **cultural** collision to distinguish it from the attitudinal. There may be a whole range of attitudes displayed within and across cultures, ranging from loving and neighbourly to insulting and violent or anywhere in between on that continuum. Cultural collisions occur when the unfamiliar and unknown, or the vaguely familiar and the partially known need to engage and interface. Cultural collision happens when a someone who has never switched on a computer before goes to an adult education class, 'Computers for the terrified' and tries to get to grips with Microsoft. Or when the generations look at what each other is wearing to go out for the evening and gawp at each other completely mystified. This is cultural collision.

Thirdly, I am interested in the kind of collision that occurs because of differing faith convictions and expressions among Christians, and am going to risk labelling this as **evangelical** collision. When we differ dramatically in what we believe faith in God through Christ requires of us in communicating the faith. Jesus tells his disciples in the Great Commission of Matthew 28, 'Make disciples, in all nations, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.' Is the commission from Jesus to me, then, really to make a disciple of everyone I meet? How? What do I tell them? When the Eden teams work on some of the roughest estates in the UK, like

Hattersley in Greater Manchester, they tell young people, 'You have a passport to heaven, that's Jesus. Give your life to him and you're going up there. (Heaven) Reject him and you're going down there. (Hell).' They find themselves colliding dramatically with some of the other clergy and churches in the area because of the way they express their convictions and what they believe is required of them by God. We all want to spread the good news but how? This is evangelical collision.

Now, why would we claim that missiology, thinking theology through the lens of mission, would have any wisdom here? I just want to lay down a carpet of reasons without justifying them too much, and then to bring the insights from mission thinkers that I promised. As we said before, if we believe God's very nature is missionary; sending, suffering, saving – then missiology makes us look for those marks of mission when worlds collide. Who is sent to whom and why? Where is the sacrificial suffering? Where is the evidence of salvation? Another reason is that when we look at these things through the lens of mission we are compelled to think about movement, about crossing borders – that's what missionaries have always done - about being in comfortable and uncomfortable zones, be they psychological, theological or geographical, and about global perspectives. God's mission embraces equally the whole inhabited earth. It is not confined to the remnants of the Roman or the British Empires. And so, as we wrestle with these things, mission theology constantly taps us on the shoulder saying; don't assume systematic theology out of Western Europe has the monopoly on God's wisdom. The lens of mission can also be quite cruel in its clarity. It forces us to look honestly at the mission history of the Church; its tremendous, laudable and world-shaping activity in so many ways, but also its dreadful mistakes and arrogance. And we must read the Church's mission history accurately and listen to those who help us to reread it, through that sharp, all too revealing lens. A mission lens also requires us to look through it for signs of healing and reconciliation beyond collision. So when we look at areas of conflict and collision, the church's mission history is a fertile soil for learning and new growth. Those things make up the carpet of reasons that I lay as petals before you to be either trampled on and discarded or gathered and treasured, whichever you choose! And so we move to these three examples of collision and some mission inspired responses.

Attitudinal collision. Mindsets in which there is no movement.

Dr Kosuke Koyama was born in Tokyo in 1929, and is one of Asia's foremost mission thinkers. He now teaches in the States and has published some thirteen books, his best known works in English being 'Waterbuffalo Theology' (1974) and 'Mt. Fuji and Mt. Sinai' (1984). His response to attitudinal collision, I think, would be to propose the development of a crucified mind, and I would like us to work with his insights a little.⁵ Just as we saw that the nature of a missionary God is person centred; Father, Son and Spirit in a constant encounter between persons, so. Koyama reminds us that attitudinal change is unlikely to happen when 'ologies' encounter each other, but that when persons do, there can indeed be movement. (Maureen Lipman, a popular British actress ages used to appear in television advertisements as a Jewish Mother very proud that her son had another 'ology.!) 'Ologies' tend to inflate, dismiss and stereotype. Koyama recalls meeting a missionary couple from the West at Bangkok airport. They had just arrived and were keen to express their missiological summary that Thai Buddhism was simply a manifestation of demons.

Thirty million people in the Buddhist tradition of 700 years brushed aside in one second. But British tabloid newspapers do similar all the time – especially in relation to Islam. And some of our good church people read them and believe them. When God desired attitudinal change in the fallen people God had created, Koyama argues that God sent not an ideology but a human person; Jesus, whose mindset was not missionary and crusading but rather missionary and crucified. And he quotes 2 Corinthians 8.9 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.' In attitudinal collision, the aim so often is to bulldoze people and histories without appreciation of their complexities. I cling to the 'ology' I know; however poorly formed or easily adopted, as armour and weapon. Yet Jesus, of the crucified mind, whom Christian people claim to follow, had no weapon or armour, only nakedness and the cross. Something had to give, because God's agape love does not insist on its own way (1 Cor 13.5) and so the Crucified One, obedient to sacrificial love, modelled a mindset for apostolic discipleship which Christian people are called to adopt. Does a crucified mind achieve attitudinal change? Mark 15.39 is an interesting and powerful testimony. It was not at the moment of Christ's triumphant resurrection but at the moment of his agonising last breath that a Roman centurion's mindset was blown apart and he marvelled, 'Surely this man was a son of God.'

Cultural collision: Cultural diversity in the global context

Samuel Escobar has written extensively on mission out of a Latin American context. He is Peruvian and has lived in various parts of the Americas and Europe. I am drawing on his work in 'A time for mission,' the challenge for global Christianity which was published in 2003. When I reread Escobar in preparing for this, he reminded me that cultural collision is not actually the most helpful way of describing what I'm trying to get at here. Globalisation is a much more helpful term because it speaks not just of collisions, but of the merging and melding and interfacing and engagement of cultures in the global context of which we are now all a part. To speak of one culture colliding with another as though cultures were neatly distinct and separate and always mutual irritants is not accurate. That is why we teach a course at the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies called, 'Mission, leadership and globalisation,' because we know that when key leaders from the wider world church come for studies and when Anglican priests and Methodist and URC ministers are in preparation for ministry in Britain, more and more the challenge is to equip people for mission and ministry in a global context. But in doing this, we really need that sharp and critical mission lens again to see clearly the potentials and the pitfalls. Escobar reminds us about the ambiguous relationship that existed between Western missions in the past and the modernisation process that preceded globalisation.

Missionaries came to see themselves not only as evangelists but as civilisers, so that missionary advancement and the principles of colonial expansion seemed to have common aims and objectives. Surveying that through the critical lens of mission, are we now to say that mission in the 21st century and the principles of economic globalisation are a suitable and God inspired match? Escobar says, and I quote, 'The culture of globalisation creates attitudes and a mental frame that may be the opposite of what the gospel teaches about human life under God's design.'⁶ For example, the total identification of the gospel with modern, Western/Northern values, dominated by North America. We should have no illusion that for Osama Bin Laden, North America is the face of Christianity – they are one and the same. No light or shade there. Thinking Christians in a global culture must also realise that economics and market forces in our globalised world are producing a gulf between rich and poor which is quite terrifying in some places. One Indian missionary quoted by Escobar says, 'Some 300 million people guzzle Coke, even as 700 million struggle to find clean drinking water. These are India's poor. Because if CocaCola wants to make profits, it has scant regard for village water systems – and this has been well documented in India. But, even with all this to reckon with, Christianity is itself global good news, and Christian mission too benefits from efficient communication at a global level and a connected economic system. So, as Christians try to play their parts with integrity on an increasingly complex global stage, Escobar sharpens the question for us beautifully when he says, 'A great challenge to Christian missionaries in the coming years will

be how to become first and foremost messengers of Jesus Christ and not just harbingers of the new globalisation process. They will have to use the facilities of the system without being caught by the spirit of the system.'

Evangelical collision: When Christians collide over how to communicate the good news

Peter Phan is a Vietnamese Catholic writer on theology and mission with a lot of very helpful perspectives about this. I'm drawing on his book called 'In our own tongues' for this last section in which he asks a lot of questions about appropriate evangelism across Asia, but they are good questions even outside Asia. He is very realistic about local context. There are some parts of the world where proselytising; explicit proclamation of Jesus for the purposes of conversion is forbidden and religious freedom restricted or denied. Some of us are quick to say; thank goodness that is not the case in Britain, but of course it is, in some forms. In the classroom, on the hospital ward; Christians in professional roles are required to be careful and cautious. And this is where there can be evangelical collision. The passion and conviction of some to speak and declare a particular message about salvation in whatever place and at whatever cost because they believe that is what is required of them; in season and out of season, as it were. And the conviction of others that a different evangelical approach may be required of them; which is where Peter Phan is helpful in speaking of a 'spirituality of presence' and 'the silent witness of life.' He then goes on to develop the notion of 'kenotic spirituality.'⁷ *Kenosis* is derived from a Greek word meaning 'to empty' and it is a very interesting notion to bring to this topic of evangelical collision. Why? Because that irritating but revealing mission lens will remind us that throughout the Church's history, missionaries crossed cultures and borders with hands, hearts and minds **full** of 'stuff.' Indigenous peoples were employed in number to transport missionary baggage; you will have seen the pictures and the movies.

The evangelical missionary heart is traditionally a full heart and longs to bless others from its richness and its bounty; with words, with theology, with the message of eternal life. Missionary mouths are full of words. Missionary hands are full hands; take our money for your hospital and your school. The missionary traditionally is the primary mover and giver. There is another type of great commission in Matthew's gospel though, is there not? Chapter 10 – take no gold or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey. This demands us to "Go empty. Kenotic evangelism". So, I find myself asking, is evangelical collision really reflecting a dualism between fullness and emptiness? And is there any kind of middle way? Peter Phan longs for those with evangelical convictions about giving out to learn to be gracious and grateful receivers and to recognise their changed status. We are no longer – if we ever truly were – primary movers, but collaborators, assistants, servants. Far less powerful that way of course, this is always a problem for the traditional churches. But evangelical collision might be addressed, we propose, by reassessing our conventions about being full and trusting that good news might be communicated even through our emptiness. But then Methodists, to whose company I happen to belong as a Christian disciple, have etched upon their covenant hearts the prayer; 'let me be full, let me be empty.' So this is hardly news, is it?

Thinking missiologically can help us understand and heal division, I have argued, when worlds collide; and we have cited the examples of attitudinal, cultural/global and evangelical collision. But in the end, what matters is that theology and missiology embrace far more than they collide, to further the purposes of God's kingdom. Not separate disciplines, but firmly clasped hands.⁸

¹ Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*, quoted in Thomas, Norman E. *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*. Orbis, Mayknoll, 1995:104

² Gailyn van Rheen *Monthly Missiological Reflection # 21* <http://missiology.org/mmr/mmr21.htm>

³ Vicedom, George F. *The Mission of God*. Trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans. 1965:80

⁴ Gailyn van Rheen *Monthly Missiological Reflection # 21* <http://missiology.org/mmr/mmr21.htm>

⁵ Koyama, Kosuke. *Waterbuffalo theology. Twenty-fifth Anniversary edition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999:150ff

⁶ Escobar, Samuel. *A time for mission: the challenge of global Christianity*. Leicester, IVP, 2003:57

⁷ Phan, Peter, *In our own tongues*. Orbis, Maryknoll, 2003:139ff

⁸ I am grateful to members of the Lancashire Theological Society, the Worcester Diocese Initial Ministerial Development group and colleagues at the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies for their insights and responses to this material when presented in lecture, workshop and conversation. They have improved it enormously.