Respecting Hermeneutical Space

Contextual Frameworks for Interreligious Communication: an Asian Perspective

by Kang-San Tan

Kang–San Tan (MA, Old Testament, Regent College; DMin, Missiology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; PhD, Theology of Religions, University of Aberdeen) serves as General Director of BMS World Mission. He has served with the WEA Mission Commission and the Lausanne Theology Working Group. He has a forthcoming book with Langham Press.

Editor's Note: This article was first presented as the ISFM plenary at the Evangelical Missiological Society's national conference in October, 2021.

This paper seeks to explore the significance of developing contextual frameworks for communicating the good news of Jesus at the frontiers of world religions,[1] with particular reference to Asian contexts. I want to explore three missional themes in my effort to raise the kind of issues and questions that need to be addressed in our quest for better communication of the good news of Jesus. Although the primary discussion will relate to Asian religions, I hope the issues can also be applied to the contexts of African and Latin American religious traditions, to new religious spiritualities, as well as the pluralistic urban settings of the West.

It's my conviction that the last frontier in Christian mission is the meeting between religions, and the future task of missiology is not limited to the more understood process of inculturation, but also involves "inreligionisation."[2] This notion refers to those Christians coming from other Asian religious traditions

> who believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, but also to adopt and live in their personal lives the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of these religious traditions.[3]

When I speak of developing contextual frameworks on these religious frontiers, I refer to those dynamic interpretive lenses which communities use to frame different ways of understanding truth and interpreting realities whenever such interreligious exchanges occur on these frontiers. For example, missiology as an interdisciplinary study might use the frameworks of scriptural interpretation, their local Christian hermeneutical community, and the teachings from another religion to seek common understanding or insights.[4]

I believe the role of mission studies is to accompany, support, and examine this mission project and journey. I invite your reflections on a global missiology that can develop contextual frameworks within the different civilizational world religions. Specifically, I wish to offer a case study on the challenge and benefit of these conceptual frameworks for the Baptist Mission Society's (BMS)

World Mission learning programme. We're asking fundamental questions: What is the role of academic missiology towards better communication of the good news for Christians within these religious traditions? What changes are needed in our curriculum to inspire a deeper meeting between religions in the contexts of our services? Again, I look forward to your responses and contributions.

Christianity and the Meeting of Religions

Christian mission begins with a Trinitarian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) whose nature is to love his whole creation, and who invites all people into a loving relationship with him. The church in mission is a community of people that not only experiences salvation, but participates in bearing witness to God's love in Christ for the world. Mission has to do with that aspect of the church that crosses frontiers into a world of globalisation, the poor, and religion. These three frontiers are interrelated domains which present opportunities as well as challenges in communicating the good news.

Of the three crucial frontiers—globalisation, the poor, and religion—it's the meaning, the role, and the context of religion that I wish to highlight. The whole subject of religion is under broad examination from scholarship. Ninian Smart's analysis is used widely, and it can serve us here. Religion is

> a set of institutionalised rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.[5]

According to Smart there are three criteria for classification of a religion: 1) a belief in some ultimate reality, whether God or eternal truth that transcends the here and now; 2) religious practices directed toward understanding or communicating with this ultimate reality; and 3) a community of believers who joined together in pursuing this ultimate reality. In popular nomenclature the word "religion" refers particularly to major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. However, in using religion as a social category, we need to be aware that the religious person is more than a religious being and that interfaith engagement is not purely a religious interaction.

The idealized representations of religion in academic missiology can reveal gaps and create dissonance when compared to the lived realities of religion on these interreligious frontiers. Western missiology is more often interested in what people believe (orthodoxy) than in what rituals people practice. Many Asian religions embrace a certain hybridity, ambiguity, and messiness when speculating about transcendence, a phenomenon which our comparative religious studies might disallow. Especially when the focus is apologetics, Western Christian orientation is too often insufficiently contextual, demonstrating

a preference for the questions they as Westerners might ask, objections they might raise, or points of contact they prefer in their specific beliefs and experiences. Christian apologetics will approach Asian religions through Western ways of reasoning, rather than allow for a reasoning determined by the dialogue partner from a different faith.[6] We are now more aware about the existence of followers of Jesus within these religious traditions (also referred as "insider movements") whose socio-religious identities remained closely linked with these Asian religions. Therefore, we could be thinking of a continuum of contextual exchanges from Western denominations, indigenous Christian communities, followers of Jesus within religions, and adherents of different religions.[7]

The idealized representations of religion in academic missiology can reveal gaps and create dissonance when compared to the lived realities of religion on these interreligious frontiers.

I join with missiologists such as Gerald Anderson, David Bosch, Terry Muck, and Harold Netland in identifying the challenge of religions as one of the most important missiological issues to be explored.[8] David Bosch considered the articulation of a theology of religions as "the largest unresolved problem of the Christian church."[9] Netland asserts:

> One of the more urgent sets of issues confronting the global church today concerns the question of gospel and culture. Responsible theology in the decades ahead cannot afford to ignore the complex and highly controversial debates over contextualization and religious pluralism. Furthermore, given the global nature of the church, serious discussion of these issues must include Biblical scholars and theologians from Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as western scholars.[10]

In turning our lens on the religious predicament of mission in Asia, it's quite clear that for the last 200 years the evangelical approach of trying to replace other religions with Christianity has not been successful. Compared to Christian expansion in Europe, North America, Latin America, and southern Africa, evangelical missions in Asia just don't have any comparable record of conversion. Some writers such as Terry and Frances Muck argue that evangelical missions have a long history of ineffectiveness across this Asian landscape.[11] It forces us to ask the interreligious question. Why have we not been effective in communicating the gospel among more committed Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists across Asia?
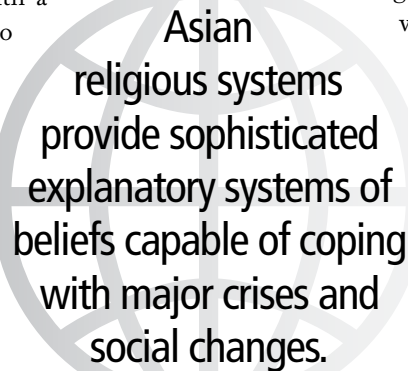
Interreligious Communications at a Crossroads

We must honestly explore the reasons for the relative lack of growth of Christianity in Asia, and especially within the heartlands of Asian religions. Careful analysis of each country and context will yield different results for different reasons. Let me preface my comments with a general historical observation: compared to the colonisation process in Africa and Latin America, European colonial expansion in Asia was not as widespread and dominant. Asian colonial expansions in places such as India, China, Japan, and Indonesia were mostly focused on coastal areas for trade purposes. British and Dutch colonial powers had also discouraged and in some cases prohibited missionary efforts in Asia, especially toward the Muslims and Hindus. Generally, Christians in Asia did not have the advantage of colonial or state power to support or coerce Christian expansion. However, this is not to deny the fact that Christian missionaries benefited from the colonial enterprise in Asia.

Extending our historical analysis raises further reasons Christianity was unsuccessful among the Asian religions. First, part of the difficulty is that Christianity came after most Asian communities had already adopted highly complex trans-cultural religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Unlike animistic peoples, these world religions can withstand new ideological and philosophical challenges. These Asian religious systems provide sophisticated explanatory systems of beliefs capable of coping with major crises and social changes in the world. Secondly, the existence of Asian religions and philosophies became embedded as indigenous wisdom over a very long period—not just centuries, but millennia. Therefore, such belief systems are intricately laced into folklore, myths, parental morality, and societal values.

Some religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, are essentially missionary oriented religions, actively propagating their faiths and seeking conversions across religious boundaries. Other religions, such as Baha'ism or Hinduism, despite the lack of any overt mission impetus, have developed highly defensive apologetics against Christianity over a long history of interreligious interaction.

These historical functions of religion in Asia make interreligious engagement a complex enterprise. Christians cannot engage with another religion without considering these religious realities in Asian societies. To complicate matters, the process of globalisation introduces additional political and economic forces which have added further barriers to conversion. Much of the violence between religions is related to political, economic, and ethnic structures that make it impossible for mutual witness. Since the attacks of 9/11, Christian missionaries have entered religious interactions in a heightened context of distrust and violence. When we treat interreligious engagement merely as a religious activity, without adequate attention to the socio-historical or political factors which shaped interreligious engagement, it is likely that such expansion may not be sustainable in the longer term. I'm merely suggesting here some of the social and phenomenological reasons for the resistance of world religions toward Christian mission efforts. In the next section, I want to explore communication challenges which might have contributed toward the relative lack of success of Christian mission among world religions.

Asian religious systems provide sophisticated explanatory systems of beliefs capable of coping with major crises and social changes.

A Biblical Call to Holistic Communication

Asian mission movements confronted by these communication challenges will do well to return to Genesis. God created humanity, and he blessed humans with fruitfulness and the care for the whole creation. When Eve ate of the fruit in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:6), there was spiritual alienation from God. I further understand there to be four dimensions of brokenness:

- Physical: She ate the forbidden fruit.
- Social: She shared it with her husband.
- Aesthetic: She saw that the fruit was pleasing to her eyes.
- Rationale: Although God said, "you shall not eat," her mind was twisted to rationalise that it was good.

We see these multidimensional natures of sin unfold in Genesis 1–11, when sin grew in societal proportions, from Adam and Eve, to broken families in Cain and Abel, and to brokenness in society in the story of Noah. But here is the point for interreligious communication: just as sin was multidimensional, our approaches and models for communication must be comprehensive and multidimensional as well. When God called Abraham to build a nation, the calling of Israel was not merely to be worshippers of Yahweh but to be a blessing among the nations—to be culture makers. These early accounts in Genesis establish both an ecological dimension of mission (caring for the earth) as well as an economic blessing for society (to be fruitful, to be a blessing among the nations). There is a cultural, ecological, and economic mandate in mission.

Turning to the New Testament, the words of Jesus give us not only the missionary imperative to go, but also models of whole-life discipleship that bear adequate witness

interpersonally, communally, and culturally. To those on the frontiers, where there are growing local churches as well as insider movements within those religious worlds, Jesus says, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). What does Jesus demonstrate in communicating the good news that is relevant for newer mission movements within religious frontiers? Our Lord Jesus has a full agenda: to announce, teach, and baptise (Matthew 28:18–20), and he promises that he will be with his disciples continually through the presence of the Holy Spirit until the end of the age. The geographical (and socio-religious) borders that the twelve apostles had to cross on their initial mission are made explicit in the ever-expanding circles of a universal missionary mandate in Acts 1:8: Jerusalem (M1), Judea and Samaria (M2), and the ends of the earth (M3).
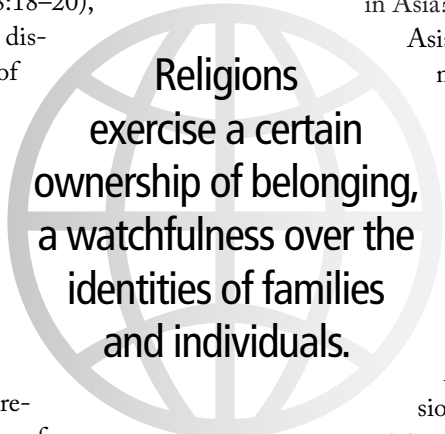
Having preached throughout the eastern region of the empire "from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum" (Romans 15:19), Paul proposes to go to the "ends of the earth," to far-away Spain where the continent ends. For Asian Christians today, the fulfillment of the Great Commission encompasses a complex challenge to be interreligious witnesses in our home nations, as most of us residing there live amidst Asian religions (Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists).

The Communication Challenge of Asian Religions

I see four interreligious communication challenges in Asia today. The first arises when Asian churches *limit the communication of gospel witness to evangelism and the nurture of churches who join the existing church.* They fail to address the complexities of crossing religious and cultural frontiers. Even though Christian mission might be crossing ethnic and geographical boundaries, the focus of communication tends to be driven by preaching communities. This singular focus of communication neglects both a learning from and a meeting between religions, a posture which would allow Christians to remain within those socio-religious traditions as people of faith. Too often the goals of mission are deemed to have had an impact only when these religionists have rejected their traditions and have converted to Christianity. We extract converts from these religions rather than seeing the good news of Jesus become embedded in the socio-religious cultures of Asia.

The second communication challenge is when *Asian churches limit mission to the proclamation of the gospel, focusing on doctrinal debates or spiritual conversion rather than responding to the needs of the whole person in a holistic manner.* The Asian church is a poor church, and they preach the gospel

> Religions exercise a certain ownership of belonging, a watchfulness over the identities of families and individuals.

in a context of much suffering and need. Mission in a post-pandemic context has opened many opportunities amidst a poverty that is not merely a lack of money or resources, but a lack of social, medical, and educational access. Christian solutions must be local, sustainable, and relevant to these socio-economic realities. How will followers of Jesus open up spaces for an intelligent assessment of the problems in Asia? Holistic transformation is needed for the Asian church to function as a witnessing minority among dominant religions.

The third communication challenge relates to *how Asian churches will address the problem of their identity with a Christianity viewed as a Western religion.* Religions exercise a certain ownership of belonging, a watchfulness over the identities of families and individuals. After 200 years of Western Protestant mission endeavours, we have seen major receptivity to the gospel in Africa and Latin America, but not in Asia. It is there—among the historic transcultural religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam)—that less than 1% have turned to Christ. Where we have seen successes in Asia, it has been primarily among tribal communities, South Korea and the Philippines (where due to historical and post-war social factors, Americans were viewed positively as liberators who brought Western progress).

The fourth communication challenge is that *the Asian church needs resources to understand these Asian religions.* This will require specialists from among these religious traditions, some of whom might even be practitioners of dual belonging, who could help the church discover meaningful ways to engage and witness. The Asian church also needs to learn how to receive insight and wisdom from these religious traditions so that the gospel can be incarnated within them. Global missiologists have many opportunities to learn alongside these specialists as we reflect on the challenges of communication and mission.

These dominant Asian religions have sustained Asian civilisations over millennia. We need to go beyond competing on these frontiers of religions, and seek to engage, reflect, and collaborate within these religious worlds as we address these four communication challenges.

Communication Frameworks Among Religions: Three Missiological Themes

As we consider the issue of communication, the approach I have taken is to focus our discussion on the lack of success of evangelical engagement with Asian religions.

While there is evidence of movements today, Christian mission is at a crisis and a crossroads. Conservatives would like to remain faithful to the evangelical traditions and keep the gospel pure. Others are asking receptor-oriented questions about whether followers of Jesus within these religious worlds might raise different issues and insights.

I would now like to propose some mission themes which hopefully offer a way forward. We at BMS are engaging with at least three basic communication frameworks. The first is the *study of scripture* through the lens of local communities within these religions, and the second is a serious *study of culture*—both as external observers and internal participants. I like to think we do these first two as pearl sellers ("selling the gospel") as well as treasure gatherers (finding wisdom within other cultures). The third framework is a more in-depth *study of global missiology* as it relates to our communication of the good news of Jesus. This will require a deeper understanding of how Jesus is confessed and experienced within the lives of other religious adherents over a few generations. This is the unavoidable process of gospel transformation that emerges in the lives of these adherents who function alongside Asian religions. They generate identity markers, articulate new meanings and senses of devotion, and offer alternative solutions to grave societal issues. Asian societies are in search of peace, progress, and positive changes, but they struggle with global social problems such as poverty, over-population, the climate crisis, economic disparity between poor and rich. Other social crises confronting Asia include religious hatred and rising fundamentalism, tribalism, unemployment, global migration, a refugee crisis, and a global pandemic.

> I like to think we do
> the study of scripture
> and a serious study of culture
> as pearl sellers ("selling the gospel")
> and treasure gatherers ("finding
> wisdom within other cultures").

I believe the unfinished task of world evangelisation on these religious frontiers will benefit from the contributions of an interdisciplinary missiology that integrates the disciplines of history, culture, and religion. With these foundational disciplines we seek to identify and develop new frameworks for understanding complex interreligious engagements that could lead to flourishing communities in modern society. To help us, we need multiple frameworks for study: pluralistic religious realities; regional and global studies; and, specialist studies of modern social phenomena, such as migration, diaspora, and the refugee crisis, as well as gender, post-colonialism, and the climate crisis. I don't have answers or specific proposals but only an invitation to contribute from specific disciplines towards this challenge of interreligious communication, where Christ is confessed as Lord for the renewal of all things.

Evangelicals and "Inreligionisation"

Mission frontiers of an interreligious nature usually refer to those socio-religious groups without meaningful local expressions of the good news of Jesus Christ.

> Non-Christians in Asia are more isolated from Christians than in any other continent in the world. At least two factors contribute to this: (1) the isolation of Christian churches in majority Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim cultures; and (2) the relatively fewer Christian missionaries serving within Asia than in the rest of the world. Muslims in Africa have only slightly more contact with Christians than their world average. Christians in the Global South face a formidable challenge in their lack of contact with non-Christians, especially Muslims.[12]

The theology of religion (the study of Christian relationship with other faiths) is a fairly new academic discipline, and evangelical theologians are still developing its key tenets. In this section, I want to consider how a Trinitarian theology *of religion* may help us to change our understanding and approach toward the religions.

Let me begin with theologian and Catholic priest, Raimon Panikkar, who I believe makes a groundbreaking contribution to our subject. He claims that there is a Trinitarian substructure in all religions, but also that there is a Trinitarian structure to reality. He speaks of a "cosmotheandric" principle—the coming together of cosmic, divine, and human, the supreme example of which is the incarnation.[13] Unfortunately, he developed this towards a pluralistic position which affirms that all religions are salvific (leading to salvation). But unlike Panikkar, another Catholic theologian, Gavin D'Costa, developed an inclusivist position through this Trinitarian perspective. He argued that because of "the presence in the world of the Spirit of God … there too is the ambiguous presence of the triune God, the church, and the Kingdom."[14, 15] In other words, the Holy Spirit's presence in the world can be found even in non-Christian religions. This means Christians can engage with these religions to learn about the truths of God.

Without adopting a pluralist position, other Christian writers such as Finnish theologian Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and American theologians Timothy Tennent, Amos Yong, Gerald McDermott, and Harold Netland, all have developed a variety of Trinitarian positions in order to provide Christians

with a more adequate framework for engaging people of other faiths. For Kärkkäinen, the Holy Spirit invites the church into relational encounters with religions, "Seen from a Christian perspective, other religions are not salvific as such, yet they can help the Christian church to penetrate more deeply into the divine mystery."[16] Based on this concept of the Trinity, Yong argues that the Holy Spirit works within these religious structures. God's Holy Spirit is the life-breath of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in every human being and the presupposition of all human relationships and communities; and the religions of the world, like all else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.[17]

An important assumption of this paper is that the goal of Christian mission is to usher in God's Kingdom on earth by inviting people of other faiths to share in God's love for the whole of creation. The presence of God's Kingdom is understood in terms of bringing all things under the kingship of God. Regarding the function of religions, the presence of this Kingdom involves the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values. This means

> # The presence of this Kingdom involves the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values.

that whenever Jesus is encountered as Lord, instead of a discipleship compromised by other religions, I am arguing for a more radical following of Jesus' model—the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. This is a transformative process I am calling *inreligionisation*. This process conceives the goal of mission as not only evangelism and church planting, but includes a radical worldview transformation of whole cultures and religious life. Jesus is confessed as Lord over every aspect of life, including past religious cultures.[18] In alignment with the Lausanne Theology Working Group's Occasional Paper on the Whole World:

> We affirm the gospel's claim and power to transform any person, culture or religion, and we recognise that such transformation is required also, or especially, *in our own cultures*. (italics mine)[19]

I believe the last frontier for Christian mission in the 21st century is the meeting between religions, and consequently, the most important task for Christian mission is not the challenge of contextualisation but the challenge of inreligionisation. Evangelicals must "ask not only for 'inculturation' but 'inreligionisation,' i.e., not only Chinese Buddhism or Indian

Christianity, but also Hindu Christianity."[20] Beyond the debates of insider movements, "inreligionisation" is the attempt by Christians coming from Asian religious traditions to

> believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory certain doctrines or practices of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in modified form, into Christianity, but also to adopt and live in their personal lives, the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of religious traditions other than Christianity.[21]

As evangelical Christians, the way we do this is through "critical contextualisation."[22] There will be truths and practices within religious faiths which need to be rejected. Others will be deemed neutral, even though they were not practised in Western Christianity. But, in this sorting process, we will also be enriched by these former religious traditions.

Nevertheless, once evangelicals are willing to take part in an inreligionisation project as committed disciples of Jesus Christ, we will begin to meet those from other religious worlds and grapple with deeper contextual issues of discipleship within those religious systems. Questions emerge on these religious borderlands:

- How can Christianity meet other living faiths in such a way that there will be a Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity?
- What is the theological value of other religions and how should religious plurality inform and challenge the development of new understandings of Christian witness among living faiths?
- What is the relationship between the gospel, local culture, and non-Christian religions for those who are insiders?
- Should it be—or would it be—possible for evangelical Christians to boldly and humbly move into new strategies of mission which included intentional discipleship amid non-Christian religions?
- To what extent could Asian Christians be given the freedom of experimenting with religious devotional practices which were traditionally identified with non-Christian religions?
- How can we do critical contextualisation Christo-centrically?

I believe these issues continue to be the most controversial and challenging for the church amid increasing pluralism and rising atheism.

Who Is Jesus Christ and How Is He Transforming Worldviews?

Inreligionisation presents us with these two essential questions that determine our understanding of salvation and mission.

- Is Jesus Christ the final revelation of God and the Lord and Saviour of the world, or is he merely a religious leader or teacher?

- How would the church faithfully and effectively communicate the gospel story in a way that millions of people from other religious traditions become persuaded that Jesus is not merely a Jewish figure but also our Saviour promised for all secular and religious people in our contemporary 21st century?

First, who is Jesus Christ? In the traditional enclave of Asian religions, there is a need to develop a more adequate portrait of Jesus Christ as one who is greater than a Western Jesus—one who is both transcendent and immanent in various cultures. Secondly, we should consider how Jesus sought to transform Jewish worldviews. Unlike modern Christian missionary efforts, biblical scholarship suggests we have much to relearn from the way Jesus used relational, subversive, and indirect approaches of storytelling, parables, miracles, and healing, to radically challenge Jewish worldviews.[23]

Our search for an Asian face of Jesus is ultimately an issue of the Lordship of Christ. The issue is not just what non-Christians think of Jesus ("who do people say I am?") but who Jesus is to Asian Christians ("who do *you* say I am?"). This Christological question penetrates the depth of Christian worship, discipleship, lifestyle, mindset, and worldview where one's loyalty to Christ is not confined to prescribed religious boundaries. "Jesus is Lord" cannot be verbalised merely by individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms, nor the safe confines of ecclesial boundaries, but must be reimagined in public spaces. Contextually, our answers to the question of who Jesus is cannot be completely disconnected from those questions about Jesus commonly held by our Muslim and Buddhist neighbours. For Asians, these Christian portraits of Jesus should emerge from the sufferings and heart struggles of Asia rather than a Christology developed in 16th- or 17th-century Reformation Christianity, or within 20th-century Western evangelicalism. Radical discipleship must result in Christ penetrating every aspect of the various socio-economic and political worlds of Asia. "Jesus is Lord" must be lived out in the daily life of business, marketplace ethics, hospitality to migrants, and serving the poor. The Apostle Paul had these deeper dimensions of Christ's Lordship in mind when he proclaimed that

> Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Col. 1:15–16).

Western philosophies have been deeply influenced by the Graeco-Roman conceptual duality of being and doing. The result is that Christian ethics is more often taught such that its application is entirely up to the individual. Buddhists, on the other hand, are interested in the outworking of doctrines.

They first emphasize *doing*, rather than the giving of priority to the conceptual understanding of doctrines. The credibility of the gospel suffers a serious blow when Christians preach ethics without providing significant pointers by actually practising these ethical teachings. Therefore, the meaning of "Jesus is Lord" among Buddhists has more to do with Christians practising what they preach and demonstrating higher ethical standards in their workplaces. When Buddhists see such radical and self-giving lifestyles, they will be interested to know about such a religion, a religion that works. Upon a closer encounter with the Christ of the Bible, they will stumble upon the mystery of the gospel, a way that it is not about self-fulfilment but rather about following Jesus in the way of the cross.

"Jesus is Lord" cannot be verbalised merely by individuals in the privacy of their bedrooms, nor the safe confines of ecclesial boundaries, but must be reimagined in public spaces.

Decentering Academic Missiology and Western Mission Structures

There is an urgent need to *decenter* Western missiological frameworks. If we look at other religions and contexts only through a particular theoretical lens, we could easily distort the reality on the ground. For example, if we teach mission studies from a particular discipline and methodology, without sufficient learning and engagement with different religious or non-Western thinkers, there is a danger that we might treat these various religions or cultures merely as data, or, at best, as mere theories to help us look at the world around us. Postcolonial studies have challenged some of our limited and rather antiquated perspectives on Christian mission, which appear to distort other parts of the world. For instance, are we sensitive to the way our methodology and approaches to the study of peoples and cultures are unintentionally creating theological frameworks of power and control? A decentering would certainly alert us to this tendency.

One crucial decentering over the past half century is the way many academics, theological institutions, and Western agencies now recognise that the church in the Global South (or majority world) has become the focus of growth for sending mission workers around the world. But, if this is so, what development is required in theological curriculum? How ought we serve majority world Christians in becoming effective witnesses within their major religious traditions? One emerging

conviction is that the future of world evangelisation depends on well-equipped intercultural mission workers to, within, and from the majority world. This shift—this decentering of our Western missiology and its attendant structures—can potentially foster a greater polycentric contribution in intercultural mission preparation, learning, and capacity building.

Mission departments must reflect on the way this decentering has specific application to their strategy, structures, and terminology. Before I introduce the way BMS is examining appropriate and necessary changes in our overall program, let me outline two crucial shifts.

Two Strategic Shifts

The Shift from Cross-cultural to Intercultural Learning

In certain missiological domains there has been a conscious change of language and tone from speaking of *cross-cultural* mission to *intercultural* mission. Corrie claims that "Intercultural Theology" emerged in the 1970s as a way of expressing theological mutuality and equality between cultures.[24] It was a response to the critique of elements of the cross-cultural mission movement (CCMM) and post-colonial reflections on the overtones of Western Christendom.

Corrie argues that intercultural mission is characterised as ". . . relational, mutual, dialogical, open-ended and creates space within which God's *missio Dei* can be experienced." The trajectory of movement in traditional cross-cultural mission tends to be deductive and driven by strategic goals, whereas, as Corrie explains it, intercultural mission

> . . . implies a process of understanding that is provisional, more open to change, with a journey that is open ended . . . our intercultural aim is a critical dialogue in a listening, self-reflective and learning environment.

This shift in emphasis brings with it a provisionality that may not fit well with measurable outcomes or the strategic interests of a mission agency.

This use of the term intercultural better fits the perspective of the BMS programme than does cross-cultural. Using the term intercultural mission highlights the focus on preparing mission workers for working in both near and distant cultural contexts as well as developing the skills and sensitivities for working alongside other mission workers/local Christians in the location of their mission service. But are we willing and capable of moving from intercultural to interreligious learning? For example, inviting Buddhist, Hindu, as well as Islamic scholars to teach their religious perspective and include religious immersion experiences as part of our own religion, theology, and mission classes? What

about studying the Bible through the lenses of non-Christian religions, alongside the Qur'an, the Analects, the Bhagavad-Gita, and Buddhist scriptures?

The Shift from Partnerships to Polycentrism

The philosophy of intercultural mission requires a polycentric orientation that can provide the necessary methodology. Bendor-Samuel comments: "The term polycentrism is being used to describe this globalising process in which no one centre is seen to dominate the mission landscape." Kirk Franklin and Nelus Niemandt suggest ". . . that polycentrism offers inspiration, models and methods for defining and understanding current and future structures within the *missio Dei* and its global mission contexts."

> Intercultural mission "is provisional, more open to change, with a journey that is open-ended . . . our intercultural aim is a critical dialogue in a listening, self-reflective and learning environment."

Polycentrism is characterised by the shift of power through decentralisation, a movement from established centres to the margins, that embraces equal authority and a revolving leadership within the community of operation.

Polycentric working will mean continued investment in establishing hubs or networks co-owned and co-managed by all participants, of which the Western partner is only one. This polycentrism ensures freedom for hubs/networks to structure their priorities as they collaboratively identify their needs and opportunities. In keeping with this shift in emphasis, consideration should be given to inviting partners to evaluate our performance—as we evaluate theirs—and continue to draw partner representatives into organisational oversight and management.

The BMS Learning Programme

Within BMS we have begun to decenter our mission by prioritizing the following values and objectives:[25]

- To transition BMS from being a UK sending agency towards being a partner in transnational alliances of local mission networks embedded in mutually enriching relationships with majority world Christians.
- To decentralise leadership and management structures within BMS, with influence moving from the UK to other parts of the majority world.

- To embrace a culture of mutuality and learning as part of a polyphonic mission movement, in which we learn to give up power and control, and increasingly appreciate and learn from multiple perspectives outside BMS.

- To develop the resourcefulness of specialists in cross-cultural mission from the majority world, with a clear commitment to a collaborative learning culture which will drive the development of BMS mission personnel and partners.

- To determine an appropriate structure to deliver collaborative learning, with special focus on global missiology and contextual mission.

As to the structure of the programme, it will focus primarily on intercultural mission preparation and capacity building. Below is a diagrammatic representation of the programme with some additional notes.

Figure 1. BMS Learning Programme

Intercultural Mission

At the heart of the programme is the commitment to mutual learning and action in intercultural mission preparation and capacity building, whether in the UK or partner locations, as a contribution to the future success of world evangelisation. The five circles in the outer ring represent the means and areas of work associated with this specific focus on intercultural mission preparation and capacity building.

Global Faculty

Over the next five years we seek to establish a global missiology faculty to augment the capacity of majority world seminaries and colleges with regard to preparation for intercultural mission. The intention is to concentrate on capacity building within existing seminary faculties; it is not about

facilitating visiting lecturers across a range of theological subjects. Members of the global faculty will be required to have a global missiological orientation in keeping with polycentrism.

Research

We will proactively engage in missiological research by drawing on the expertise of experienced researchers and academics (including global faculty) to (1) better equip BMS for future development; (2) contribute to a body of missiological knowledge that can inform the development of resources for churches, partners, and mission workers in intercultural mission; and, (3) to support BMS departments in garnering their learning through internal monitoring, evaluations, and learning activities by commissioning experienced research analysts.

Conclusion

The challenge of engaging with Asian religions is a formidable task, and my assessment is that evangelicals do not have a very good track record. My 'Macedonian call' is to invite contributions of missiology on the question of how the meeting between religions can co-generate new inreligionisation communities that are unashamedly committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Christian scripture—the only two non-negotiables. This conference theme has focused on issues relating to communication and mission, which can easily assume shallowness and speed. Just as European Christianity took a few hundred years to successfully transform their pagan cultures, so the task awaiting Asian Christianity is to confess Jesus Christ from within and not outside their religious cultures. This is a generational project, one that I expect will take a few generations, and promises a process not too dissimilar from the transformation of European societies.

The decentering of Christianity to the Global South has provided us with new possibilities and directions for our journey. Within Asian Christian communities, there is a need to sustain new movements towards Christ beyond traditional Christian identities. To accomplish such a grand task, we need to retrain mission workers with skills to undertake the task of critical contextualisation, and apply this approach not only to cultural realities, but to religious spheres. Rather than a dualistic separation of religion and secular life, we look towards the transformation of Asian religions as a subversive Christian gospel touches every dimension of these Asian cultures. Missiology as an interdisciplinary study must yield special contributions to this inreligionisation project. Therefore, my hope is that this discussion on communication and mission within Asian religions will raise new issues of critical contextualisation within curriculum development, seminary structures, and global missiology. I expect any comprehensive vision for world evangelisation today will require a new collaboration between training institutions, mission agencies, and indigenous mission leadership from each of the religious traditions. **IJFM**

Endnotes

1 For this paper, I use the notion of "frontiers of religions" as zones of contacts and creative exchanges between adherents of different religions. If these power exchanges remain open and liminal, with no one group being able to establish dominance, these frontiers become possible spaces for new insights and horizons for "sense making" within the fluidity and complexities of this meeting between religions. For further discussion on the concept of frontier zones, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religions in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

2 This concept of inreligionisation was popularised by Aloysius Pieris, and then identified by David Bosch in 1991 as an urgent issue within theology of religion. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 478. See also Ravi Santosh Kamash, "Inculturation or Inreligionisation"? *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 39, Issue 2 (April 1987): 173–179.

3 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 61.

4 Christian contextual frames for doing theology refer to attempts of faith seeking understanding through an integration of four domains: 1. Christian "memory" interpreted in Scripture; 2. Traditions, theology and liturgy as mediated through historical constructions (e.g., an Orthodox faith, or Anglican denominational identity, or new dual belonging identities); 3. Local Christian communities, especially when they function as hermeneutical communities; 4. The social, political and religious contexts of the Christian. I develop these contextual frames further in two publications: Kang San Tan, "Is Dual Religious Belonging Syncretistic? An Evangelical and Missiological Perspective," *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism,* Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vahakangas, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 190–208; and Kang San Tan, "The Inter-Religious Frontier: A 'Buddhist-Christian' Contribution," *Mission Studies* Volume 31, No 2, (July 2014): 139–156. See also Jonathan Ingleby, *Naming the Frame: Why Christians Need the Bigger Picture?* (Gloucester: Wide Margin, 2011.)

5 For a discussion on the definition of a religion, see Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience* (Hoboken: Prentice Hall, 1981), 15–25.

6 Benno van Toren and Kang-San Tan, *Humble Confidence: Reimagining Interreligious Apologetic* (Downers Grove: IVP, forthcoming).

7 See an excellent treatment by William Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

8 "No issue in missiology is more important, more difficult, more controversial, or more divisive for the days ahead than the theology of religions," Gerald Anderson, "Theology of Religions and Missiology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium,* ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 200–208; "The encounter between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and the Christian evaluation of other religions, acts as it were, as an epitome of mission theology," Eric J. Sharpe, "New Directions in the Theology of Mission," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (January–March, 1974): 14; and "The theologia religionum [or "theology of religions"] . . . is the epitome of mission theology." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 478.

9 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 476–477.

10 Harold Netland's book review on Kwok Pui-Lan's *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995). Available at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199809/ai_n8819152/ (1 November, 2011).

11 Frances and Terry Muck, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

12 Todd Johnson, David Barrett and Peter Crossing, eds. 2010. "Christianity 2010: A View from the New Atlas of Global Christianity," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 2010).

13 See a critical review by Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "How to Speak of the Spirit Among Religions: Trinitarian 'Rules' for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 2006): 122.

14 Gavin D' Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000). See also Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). In this later, more recent book of his, D' Costa has moved his position toward exclusivism.

15 n10, Karkkainen, *How to Speak of the Spirit.*

16 Karkkainen, 122.

17 Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

18 Kang-San Tan, "Transforming Conversion: From Conversion to Transformation of Culture," in *The Soul of Mission: Perspectives on Christian Leadership, Spirituality, and Mission in East Asia,* ed. Kang-San Tan (Kuala Lumpur: SUFES, 2007).

19 "The Whole World: Statement of the Lausanne Theology Working Group," 201, accessed March 25, 2022, https://lausanne.org/content/lop/the-whole-world-reflections-of-the-lausanne-theology-working-group-lop-65-a.

20 n4, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*

21 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously,* 61

22 Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology* 12 (July 1987): 287–96.

23 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). This is a key line of argument in N. T. Wright's book.

24 John Corrie, "The Promise of Intercultural Mission," in *Transformation,* 2014, Vol. 31, no. 4, (October 2014): 291–302.

25 Part of the following section is adapted from BMS's Intercultural Learning Strategy Paper by David McMillan.