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Mark Matson is Academic Dean, Milligan College

# Mission in Theological Education: Exotic accessory or essential ingredient?

Peter Rowan

**KEYWORDS:** missiology, *missio Dei*, church, agent, Trinity, Jesus the Saviour, Scriptures, faith traditions, theology, theological education, gospel message, culture, church history, maintenance mentality, mission mentality

Mission in theological education is often an exotic accessory on the fringes of an already packed theological curriculum. Lamin Sanneh, Professor of History at Yale, writes of how surprised he is that so few of his colleagues at Yale Divinity School 'make regular professional use of the resources in the Day Missions Library, which contains a treasure of information about the worldwide expansion of Christianity'. He goes on to say:

This indifference contrasts sharply with the flowering of interest in the Western missionary movement shown

by departments of history, political science and anthropology. It's ironic that a divinity school can carry out its mission largely uninterested in Christianity's unprecedented expansion around the world.' (1995:715)

Sanneh's comments are addressed to theological education in the West, but the situation is rarely different in non-western theological colleges. Here too, theological education can go on 'largely uninterested in Christianity's unprecedented expansion around the world'. We have hardly begun to appreciate that the explosion of world Christianity has created 'a new climate, a new culture, for interpreting the Bible' and doing theology (Yarborough 2003:30).

My aim in this article is to demonstrate the necessity for integrating mission into theological education while at the same time securing a place within the curriculum for the specialized discipline of missiology. As Eddy Gibbs and Ian Coffey have noted in their stimulating book, *Church Next*

(2000), 'The issue is not whether theology per se is important, but what kind of theology is important' (100). My thesis is that if we want to have 'theological training that provides the skills to apply the biblical texts to contemporary situations' then it must be theological education that is missiological to the core (Gibbs and Coffey 2000:100).

## 1. Foundations

I will give two quotations to set the scene for this topic; the first from David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* (1991):

We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*. So mission should be 'the theme of all theology' (494).

The second is from Andrew Kirk in *What is Mission?* (1999):

There can be no theology without mission – or, to put it another way, no theology which is not missionary (11).

This is the context for our discussion. A number of foundational elements are implied in these quotations. Let me highlight three.

First, we are involved in the mission of God – the *missio Dei*. Mission is not primarily about what we do. It begins with God; it is from God and for God. Our ministry and our seminary curriculum must be set within the context of the *missio Dei*.

Secondly, it is important to remember that the church is God's mission agent in the working out of the *missio Dei*. Evangelical missiology takes seriously the central place of the church in the mission purposes of God. This too is stated in the Roman Catholic document *Ad Gentes*: 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature' (AG 2:1965).<sup>1</sup>

Until the sixteenth century the term 'mission' was restricted to the activity of the Trinity – the Father sending the Son and the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit. It was the Jesuits who began using the term 'mission' to describe the spreading of the Christian faith among people who were not members of the Catholic Church. We need to recover that Trinitarian emphasis – that God is the subject of mission and we are participants in God's mission in God's world:

Mission [is] understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world (Bosch 1991:494).

Mission is not just one of the things the church does but is at the centre of the church's existence. And this is not a novel proposal – it goes right back to the beginnings of the NT church. For, as the NT scholar Ben Meyer rightly observes, 'Christianity was never more itself than in the launching of the world mission' (in Wright 1992:360). And further back still, we find the missionary God of the Bible addressing Abraham and promising that through him 'all

nations will be blessed' (Gen. 12:1-3). This means that mission defines the essence of the church and that when the church ceases to be missionary, it ceases to be the church. This is of course a position long held by the Catholic Church: that missionary zeal is one of the marks of a true church! As Emilio Castro wrote:

Mission is the fundamental reality of our Christian life. We are Christians because we have been called by God to work with him in the fulfillment of his purposes for humanity as a whole. Our life in this world is life in mission. Life has a purpose only to the extent that it has a missionary dimension (in Kirk 1999:31).

But thirdly, we mustn't forget that while mission defines the essence of the church, it is Jesus who defines the essence of mission. The centre of the church's message is Jesus Christ. The church takes the form of Christ and proclaims the message of Christ in word and deed to the world. In his important work, *The Flaming Centre: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (1977), Carl Braaten brings us back to this centre:

The flaming centre of the Christian message is Jesus, the Christ of God, the Saviour of mankind and the Lord of history. Our overriding concern is to remind the church of its task to proclaim this message to all the nations until the end of history (2).

How does it relate to a Christian seminary and its theological curriculum? If we are participating in the *missio Dei*, and if we believe that the church is God's agent in the working out of the *missio Dei*, then in our seminary training our aim is to bring ourselves, our students and the church we serve, back to the flaming centre of the Christian message: Jesus Christ, the lord and saviour of the world. If, as Andrew Walls states, 'Christian faith is missionary both in its essence and in its history' (1996:255), then this ought to be reflected in the shape and purpose of theological education at seminaries in Asia. The missiological perspective must permeate every area of theological reflection and practice because the mission of the church is not narrow or marginal, but comprehensive and central:

The mission of the church is not simply to add to itself but to bear witness that by his cross and resurrection Christ brought back the whole creation and defeated the powers that spoil it. In this sense all Christian life is missionary, as is the work of Christians and their commerce and habits of life, their art and music and every activity that demands choice (ibid).

Here then is a foundation for a mission integrated theological education:

- God is a missionary God: the starting point must always be the *missio Dei*.
- The church by its nature and being is missionary: the church in the world is God's missionary agent.
- All theology is mission oriented because, as Bosch puts it, 'just as the church ceases to be church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character' (1991:494).
- Theological education should have a mission orientation: constantly reminding the church of its *flaming centre* and equipping Christian students to be

both faithful and relevant witnesses to Christ in their contemporary contexts.

## 2. Mission in the Theological Curriculum

The very first chair of mission studies in the Protestant world was established in New College, Edinburgh in 1866. The man behind its creation was the celebrated missionary to India, Alexander Duff. In June 1866 he recommended to the Church of Scotland that it was time to bring mission from the margins and into the centre of the theological curriculum because mission was the reason for the existence of the church. This chair of missiology (as we would call it today) would be interdisciplinary, embracing not only the standard theological disciplines but also incorporating linguistic studies, the history of religions and what today we would call anthropology and social studies.

Duff's pioneering work played an important part in the discipline of missiology being established in the universities of Germany, Holland, Scandinavia and the U.S. Sadly however, for a number of reasons, Mission Studies faded in importance in Scotland and in other theological faculties around the world. By 1908 Martin Kahler could make the following observation:

Mission, or missiology, is a somewhat marginalized discipline, taught usually as one of the subjects in practical theology. There is little curricular evidence that 'mission is the mother of theology' (in Bosch 1991:16).

David Bosch lamented the situation where in many centres of theological education the study of missiology has been separated from other parts of the theological task and has become 'the theological institution's "department of foreign affairs", dealing with the exotic but at the same time peripheral'.

To counter this trend, many today are seeking to break the traditional model of theological education by proposing that instead of a single discipline of missiology operating on the margins of the curriculum, the mission dimension should be incorporated into all theological disciplines. In other words, we should be working towards a much more missionary, or missional, theology. In his proposal for a missionary theology, David Bosch argued not for more mission courses on the theological curriculum but for a more missionary theology.

## 3. What is 'Missiology' and how can we Integrate a Missiological Perspective into what we Teach?

Missiology has been described by Andrew Kirk as 'the ordered study of the Christian church's mission'. And the call for missiology to occupy a more central role in theological curricula is due to the recognition that, as Kirk puts it, 'every aspect of theology has an inescapably missiological dimension, for each one exists for the sake of the church's mission' (in *NDT* 1988:434).

As a specialized discipline within the field of theology and religious studies, missiology is concerned with the mission of

the Christian church and includes four main areas of study: biblical, doctrinal, historical, together with cultural and religious studies.

Let me take each of these in turn to highlight both their missiological significance and to illustrate how those of us who teach within these areas can integrate a missiological perspective.

### I. Biblical Studies

The church has always drawn its understanding of its identity and mission from the Scriptures of both testaments.

One of the hallmarks of evangelical Christians is that we endeavour to have a biblical basis for whatever we do. If we are looking for a biblical basis for marriage, or for work, or the environment, we bring together all the relevant biblical texts and build some sort of basis for our understanding and practice. There are plenty of texts from which we can construct a biblical basis for mission. Yet if you ask average church members about mission, they will give texts like Matt. 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8.

However, many fail to see that the whole of Matthew's Gospel, the whole of the Book of Acts, the whole of the New Testament, are missional documents – they were written in and for the mission of the church. Furthermore, the early Christians' key text for engaging in mission was not David Bosch but the Hebrew Bible! So we can say that the whole Bible, as Chris Wright states, is a *missional phenomenon* (2001:1), because the whole of it speaks about the mission of God and his purpose for the nations. It is not an exaggeration therefore to say that the central integrating theme in the Bible is mission.

This perspective has regained some prominence among biblical scholars. For too long biblical scholars have paid too little attention to the missionary dimension of the biblical text, and conversely, too few missiologists have given themselves to seriously engaging with the biblical text. Fine examples of scholars who are bridging the gap can be found in both Old Testament and New Testament studies. Examples of OT scholars are Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Chris Wright, former Principal of All Nations Christian College. Wright's books on OT theology and ethics, as well as his commentaries on Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, provide the kind of missiological perspective on the Old Testament that is often absent in the works of other scholars.<sup>2</sup> Such a perspective helps us appreciate that Jesus' own identity and mission, and the mission of the early church flowed out of their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. New Testament mission has its roots in the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures shaped and motivated the NT witnesses.<sup>3</sup>

In New Testament studies it is easier to find a missiological perspective, but still there is the tendency to marginalize mission to the ends of the Gospels and a few scattered texts. In his most recent work, *New Testament Theology: Many Voices, One Gospel*, (2004), one of the giants of New Testament studies, I. Howard Marshall, has said: 'New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology.' He sees mission as the unifying theme, the 'underlying rationale of the New Testament'. He explains:

By this I mean that the documents came into being as

the result of a two-part mission, first, the mission of Jesus sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings that it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Saviour, and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows. The theology springs out of this movement and is shaped by it, and in turn the theology shapes the continuing mission of the church . . . (34-35).

Essentially the New Testament is a collection of books that express the gospel or good news that was proclaimed in the Christian mission (36).

## II. Doctrinal Studies

Most of the major doctrines of Christianity were worked out in the context of mission – the church spreading and defending its message. Theology requires a missiological perspective both to inform us of the history of theological development and to keep theology dynamic and purposeful.

Alistair McGrath in *The Genesis of Doctrine* (1990) has noted how significant doctrinal developments in the history of the church have occurred in a context of missionary engagement with other faith traditions:

Dialogue is one pressure to ensuring that this process of continual self-examination and reformation continues. It is a bulwark against complacency and laziness and a stimulus to the source of faith rather than resting content in some currently acceptable interpretation of them (492).

Doing theology missiologically is necessary in order for the church to speak relevantly and at the same time faithfully into the current cultural milieu, which poses its own challenge to the way we do theology.

Missional theology enables us to meet this challenge by moving theology beyond the abstract so as to 'reflect constantly and critically upon its practical functions as well as upon its content' (Jurgen Moltmann 1984:98). For Moltmann:

A church which engages in this mode of theology may no longer ask abstractly about the relationship of church and politics, as if these were two separate things which must be brought together; rather, this church must begin with a critical awareness of its own political existence and its actual social functions (1984:98).

Two interesting examples of this have recently been brought to light in a book by Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (2000). Chang shows how Augustine and Aquinas can be understood from a missiological perspective. Augustine wrote the *City of God* in order to help one of his Bishops come to terms with the demise of the Roman Empire and the confusion which followed. Aquinas wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles* as a response to the rise of Islam in the 11th century. Chang argues that both books were written in and for missionary contexts, and to help the Christian communities to which they belonged to communicate the gospel in a changing world and in culturally relevant ways.<sup>4</sup>

Hwa Yung in *Mangoes or Bananas* (1997) has drawn atten-

tion to the fact that 'historically, Asian theological reflections have emerged in the context of mission' and that the key criterion for testing the effectiveness of Asian theologies should be the extent to which they 'serve to advance the mission of the Church in Asia'. He states:

Ultimately, any authentic indigenous theology – indeed, any theology for that matter – must be missiological and pastoral in its fundamental conception . . . every theology must ultimately be judged by its efficacy in enhancing or obstructing the mission of Christ, the *missio Dei* (18-19).

In the same way – how should we assess the adequacy of what is offered in terms of theological education? The answer is the same: *we assess the adequacy of theological education in our seminary by asking how effectively the curriculum serves to advance the mission of the Church in Asia*. As Bosch affirmed:

For theology it is a matter of life and death that it should be in direct contact with mission and the missionary enterprise (1991:494).

## III. Cultural and Religious Studies

The task of mission involves the church understanding the relationship between the gospel message and the various human cultures and faiths in which that gospel is communicated and takes root. What characterized many western missionaries in the past was their inability to disentangle biblical truth from their cultural baggage. One of the greatest challenges facing the church around the world, particularly in newer contexts, is how to contextualize the good news. This means recognizing at least the following:

- The gospel is always communicated through culture;
- All theology is culturally conditioned;
- In each new context the church should not only be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, but also self-theologizing;
- Within the church, Christians should not be separated by cultural norms or practices. As Andrew Kirk points out, 'Culture is a given fact of creation but there are no grounds for it being a cause of division within the Church' (1999:77).
- Culture influences our sense of national and ethnic identity. While the gospel does not replace cultural identity, as Christians we find our identity in the non-racial community of the worldwide Body of Christ, in partnership with others who are different from us.
- 'One of the biggest barriers to cross-cultural mission within countries is that of prejudice and hostility between neighbouring but different groups' (Tan Kang San in Dowsett 2001:181).

The degree to which we understand the relationship between gospel and culture will determine the quality of our teaching and discipleship. Is our theological education more than skin deep? Is it penetrating and transforming the world-views of students? A mission integrated theological education should mean that it is.

## IV. Historical Studies

The Christian faith has spread throughout the world, sometimes by the direct efforts of the church and sometimes by missionary societies. A distinctive feature of Christianity is how it has spread cross-culturally. Andrew Walls has shown how the church's survival is dependent upon cross-cultural contact:

For Christian expansion has not been progressive, like Islamic expansion, spreading out from a central point and retaining, by and large, the allegiance of those it reaches. Christian expansion has been serial. Christian faith has fixed itself at different periods in different heartlands, waning in one as it has come to birth in another (1996:257).

Making sense of this history and engaging in any meaningful reflection on it must mean taking seriously the fact that 'Cross-cultural transmission is integral to Christian faith'. In other words, by studying church history we are, today, studying the global expansion of Christianity, the magnitude of which has been recently emphasized by the Wheaton historian, Mark Noll:

In order to grasp the current situation of world Christianity concretely, consider what went on last Sunday. More Roman Catholics attended church in the Philippines than in any single country of Europe. In China, where in 1970 there were no legally functioning churches at all, more believers probably gathered for worship than in all of so-called 'Christian Europe.' And in Europe (as reported by Philip Jenkins) the church with the largest attendance last Sunday was in Kiev, and it is a church of Nigerian Pentecostals. Last Sunday, more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the U.S. combined. And several times more Anglicans attended church in Nigeria than in these other African countries. In Korea, where a century ago there existed only a bare handful of Christian believers, more people attended the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul than all of the churches in significant American denominations like the Christian Reformed Church. In the United States, Roman Catholic mass was said in more languages than ever in American history. Last Sunday many of the churches with the largest congregations in England and France were filled with African or Caribbean faces. As a final indication of global trends, as of 1999 the largest chapter of the Jesuits was in India, and not as in the United States as had been the case for many decades before.<sup>5</sup>

There is a need for a truly global church history, not a history dominated by European and North American concerns. For, as Lamin Sanneh points out: 'Church History has generally been defined by a Western perspective. What European Christians have thought and done has been considered superior to what Christians elsewhere have thought and done' (1995:715). A truly global church history, according to Wilbert R. Shenk, will be marked by at least the following:

- Global church history will enable adherents from diverse backgrounds to embrace the larger story as 'our story'

because it clarifies their identity as members of a common – though culturally variegated – experience over time.

- Global church history will recognize the local to be essential to the global; there is no global apart from the local.
- Global church history will recognize the power of narrative and social history to create a universally meaningful story. The global dimension will remain abstract and distant until it is grounded in narrative.
- Global church history will illuminate the meaning of the church precisely in its capacity to incarnate the life of God as revealed in Jesus Christ among all peoples in all places and in all times. Global church history will celebrate cultural authenticity combined with ecclesial unity (1996:56).

Without the missiological perspective, church history lacks its key ingredient and ceases to be a meaningful story.

## 4. Obstacles to Integrating Mission into Theological Education

These four areas: biblical studies, theology, history, and culture, constitute the scope of the discipline of missiology. But the mission dimension can and should be integrated into each respective subject. However, three obstacles stand in the way of this kind of integration.

Firstly, as Andrew Kirk has pointed out, there is confusion about the nature of mission itself (1999:20). Especially in the West, mission is something done over there, somewhere overseas where the church is either non-existent or newly established. This view can be heard even here in Malaysia when Christians talk about 'mission trips', so that mission is a particular activity done among people some distance away. However, mission integrated theological education requires the perspective that mission is the essential being of the church and that it takes place within the church, across the street as well as across the world: 'the missionary frontier runs round the world. It is the line which separates belief from unbelief . . . Mission takes place from and to all continents and within each nation' (1988:435).

A second obstacle can be the seminary itself. All sorts of valid emphases compete in today's seminary market, and the mission emphasis is seen as just one among many. Seminaries and Bible colleges can find themselves distracted from their original focus by worthy pursuits such as accreditation and the academic needs related to it, or by the physical needs of a campus and the building projects that become necessary to improve the training environment. In other words, a maintenance rather than mission mentality takes over. In surveying over 30 evangelical Bible schools, colleges and seminaries in Europe with roots in the evangelical missionary tradition, Bernhard Ott found that they were not as mission oriented as they thought. He rightly points out this is not solely a European problem.

Thirdly, if specialists working in their own disciplines are not fully aware of the mission dimension of their work, then it would be difficult to incorporate it into their teaching. And here is the challenge for theological educators: that they begin to see and explore the intrinsic missionary dimension

to their subject in the same way as Chris Wright in Old Testament studies and Howard Marshall in New Testament studies. In teaching the Gospel of Matthew, some students have looked at my course description and exclaimed, 'You're teaching it from a mission perspective!' and I say, 'Is there any other way to teach it?' In the whole area of biblical studies full justice can be done to the Bible only by recognizing that its integrating theme is mission: 'a book about mission from beginning to end, written by and for missionaries!' (Kirk 1999:20).

Some may object and say that this kind of missionary commitment to biblical studies or any other area of theology is not a sound scholarly approach. But as Kirk says,

Such thinking is confused, since all theological study is implicitly committed, and commitment and critical scrutiny are not mutually exclusive. Far better that all theological disciplines come clean and admit their implicit missionary agendas! (ibid).

In terms of our theological education, 'coming clean' will mean that, 'Everything, every program aim, every course objective, every assignment, every research paper, every test must be developed in view of the church in mission' (Ott 2001:83).

And yet, this does not mean that missiology as a specific discipline needs to disappear from the curriculum. In fact this was one of David Bosch's concerns. If all theology becomes missionary, this may weaken specific missiological studies. Therefore, while we should aim to integrate mission into our theological education and appreciate that 'Christianity's unprecedented expansion around the world' has created 'a new climate, a new culture, for interpreting the Bible' and doing theological education, there is still a need to maintain and develop the discipline of missiology so that there can continue to be an intentional focus on specific missiological issues.

## 5. What Next?

If faculties are prepared to assess the adequacy of the theological education they provide by asking how effectively their curriculum serves to advance the mission of the church in Asia, how should they proceed? Let me suggest the following as a basis for discussion:

- Work with a full-orbed understanding of mission: comprehensive and holistic, taking place 'from and to all continents and within each nation'.
- Rethink curriculum design so that it reflects mission as 'the theme of all theology' (Bosch).
- Build strategic partnerships with mission agencies and mission minded churches. How do the courses we offer relate to the mission of the church in our context? Are we talking to local churches and to mission agencies about the kind of training they see as necessary for ministry at home and abroad?
- Promote the relevancy of missiological theology to those training for pastoral ministry. Most of those studying at seminary are preparing for some form of local church ministry. There is the tendency therefore to think that in local church ministry a missiological perspective is

unnecessary because mission is just one of the activities done by the church. However, our role as a seminary is to help the church see mission as the orientation of the church in its local and global context. The Asian context is a mission context in which every pastor needs to be equipped with a missional perspective on church life and ministry.

- Encourage students to get wide exposure to a breadth of mission work.
- Recruit teachers who have a global, international perspective and are therefore mission minded in their subject areas.
- Build partnerships with seminaries in other parts of the world. The theological education we provide can then be enriched by the global church context and as a result our theology 'grows'.

What would it mean for a seminary to move towards a mission-oriented curriculum? It does not mean simply adding a few extra mission courses, 'decorating our curriculum with some missiological flowers here and there'. Don't get me wrong, we ought to have mission courses in our curriculum, but the challenge is 'to design programs which are mission-oriented at their very heart'. Ott captures the perspective we need to develop right across our theological curriculum:

We stand beside God and look into the world. Our eyes are wide open towards the world to understand what is going on there, and at the same time, our ears are wide open towards God to hear his interpretation. And then we are called to become agents of transformation . . . this is the kind of theological education that God wants, our churches desire, and the world needs (85).

Finally, we dare not talk about mission in theological education without recognizing and obeying the call to participate in mission.

Johannes Verkuyl had been a missionary in Indonesia for 23 years before becoming a professor of missiology in the Netherlands. In his best known work, *Contemporary Missiology*, Verkuyl issues a warning which is particularly relevant to those who of us who teach:

Never – I repeat, never – will missiology be a sufficient substitute for actual participation in the work of mission. The call goes forth for participation to work both here and abroad. If missiology should ever become a substitute for genuine participation, it would teeter on the brink of blasphemy (1978:407-8).

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## Notes

- 1 Promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965.
- 2 See also 'Christian Mission and the Old Testament: Matrix or Mismatch?' [www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk/ColdTest.htm](http://www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk/ColdTest.htm)
- 3 This is one of the weaknesses of David Bosch's otherwise magnificent book, *Transforming Mission*. Out of over 700 pages he devotes about three-and-a-half to the Old Testament in a chapter entitled 'Reflections on the New Testament as a Missionary Document'.
- 4 I am indebted here to the brief comments on Chang's book by Terry Muck, 'The Missiological Perspective: What Does It Mean to Do Theology Missiologically?' Editorial in *Missiology*, Vol. XXXII No. 1 (January, 2004), 3-4.
- 5 Mark Noll, discussion on 'Faith and Conflict: The Global Rise of Christianity' Wednesday, March 2, 2005, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, found on Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life: [pewforum.org/religion-america/](http://pewforum.org/religion-america/)

# THINKING?

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