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From 'Missio ad gentes' to 'Missio inter gentes'. I.

Shaping a New Paradigm for Doing Christian Mission in Asia

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The greatest challenge to the task of doing Christian mission in Asia is the question of the diversity and plurality of the Asian milieu and its peoples, with their myriad religions, cultures, and philosophies. While Asia is home to some two-thirds of the world's population, nevertheless it remains the continent with the smallest Christian population, notwithstanding almost two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for only approximately 4% of the total population of Asia, and the only Asian countries with a significant Christian percentage of their total populations are the Philippines, South Korea and East Timor.

Such diversity and plurality is not limited to the Asian continent. In the course of its 2,000-year old history, the Church has encountered a diversity of peoples, cultures and religions, beginning with the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures, before moving into Roman, Germanic, Celtic, Gallic and other European cultures from the 4th century onwards. In Europe and the Americas, the quandary was resolved by Christianity becoming the dominant religion and culture. Backed by the full might of the imperial power within a church-state alliance, the Church in Europe overcame pagan religions and institutions to christianise the Late Antiquity, leading to the emergence of Christendom. David Bosch succinctly described this development and its missiological implications as follows:

Emperor Theodosius' decrees of 380 (which demanded that all citizens of the Roman Empire be Christians) and 391 (which proscribed all non-Christian cults), inexorably paved the way for Pope Boniface's bull, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which proclaimed that the Catholic Church was the only institution guaranteeing salvation; for the Council of Florence (1442), which assigned to the everlasting fire of hell everyone not attached to the Catholic Church....¹

Bosch further contended that the "unshaken, massive, and collective certitude of the Middle Ages, which existed until the eighteenth century," perceived the task of Christian mission as that of "conquest and displacement," viz., "Christianity was understood to be unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute; the only religion which had the divine right to exist and extend itself."² For him, with the collapse of Western colonialism, Christianity "lost its hegemony" everywhere and "today has to compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies" such that "there are no longer oceans separating Christians from other religionists."³ On this basis, he concluded, "we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to world views which offer this-worldly salvation, and (2) to other faiths."⁴

More specifically, Bosch's careful observations and comments are especially relevant to the difficult task of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. The Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan hits the nail squarely on the head when he states that "it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death," and more importantly, "the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out."⁵ The issue is deceptively simple but a solution is exceedingly elusive: how should the Church in general, and missionaries in particular, react to the diversity and plurality of religions and cultures in Asia?

In this paper, I would like to proceed on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and philosophical worldviews, requires a distinctively Asian approach to a

¹David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, 474.

²Ibid., 475.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 476-7.

⁵PHAN made these remarks in his review of Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, see *Horizons* 30 (2003) 117.

