

## A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL AMALADOSS

Michael Amaladoss begins his talk by recounting a number of the most common views of Christian mission in Asia. The topic is one on which people hold strong and contradictory views. I wish to bring into relief three important items from his talk. What unifies everything in my response is the recommendation that we think of Amaladoss's presentation as a beginning part of a process that will be carried out over several generations as Asians take up the task of mission in Asia. Indeed, Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio inter gentes* than *missio ad gentes*.

The first concrete thing to note is that Asian Catholics are in a process that can be imaged best as one of translating the Gospel or incarnating Christ in Asia in the gentle, loving, persuasive power of the Spirit. Amaladoss's presentation has been made in terms *we* Westerners can understand. Were we to listen as he spoke to a group of Indian catechists or other ministers on the same topic in one of the Indian languages he knows, even if by a miracle we could understand every word, we would, however, be at sea in a cultural world very different from our own.

Second, Michael's talk calls attention to the reality that most Asian Christians, including Catholics from the right, left, and center understand the religious traditions of Asia not as demonic or evil but as vehicles of "God's salvific encounter" with their followers.

This has produced, in the third place, an ironic state of affairs in which both Christian and non-Christian fundamentalists find themselves out of sympathy with attempts to articulate an *Asian* approach to the evangelization task. From the Christian side come accusations that such openness compromises integral Christian identity. Meanwhile, among persons following such traditions as the Muslim or the Hindu Ways, there is certitude that the "Asianizing" of Christianity is a missionary Trojan horse.

As his paper develops, Michael is dealing with such issues, even when the focus seems to be elsewhere. Countering the perception that Christianity is a EurAmerican import and not properly "Asian" remains *the* single most critical thing on the Christian agenda in Asia. If the accusation "foreign import" cannot be overcome in Asia, Christianity has a doubtful future.

Amaladoss's vision of *missio inter gentes* is essentially liberationist in the best sense of that word. In that context, Amaladoss views the task of the Christian mission in a plural religious context to be one of proclaiming and making the world ready for God's Kingdom. Yet in lines that remind me of Jacques Dupuis's magisterial *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious*

*Pluralism*,<sup>1</sup> Amaladoss also sees the ultimate reconciliation of the world's contradictions as *eschatological*, one that will bring about not a unity among religions but a unity among *believing persons*. And, as to the concrete shape of that eschatological process, he says, "We do not know what form this will take." He goes on to say:

The basic unity of the divine plan is assured by the action of God, Father, Word, and Spirit. Within this plan, the Word and the Spirit play various roles through their manifestations. The Word Incarnate is certainly aware of a special role. But it is at the service of the universal mission of God.

I agree fully with Amaladoss when he says this. I also remind myself that the idea that the religious unity of humankind will be an *eschatological* accomplishment—one in which the Spirit is active in other religious Ways (viewed as "complementary" in relation to historical Christianity)—that appears to have been at the heart of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's problems with the work of Jacques Dupuis. Although CDF was forced to back down from early accusations that Dupuis was in error, it is clear to me that the debates of the future in missiology and theology of religion will revolve around pneumatology, eschatology, and the question of complementarity of "other" religious Ways in relation to that of Jesus as the Christ.

In addition, it is important to bring into relief Amaladoss's observation that Asia finds it easier to embrace Jesus than to embrace the church. And to that I must ask whether both Asian non-Christians and many Christians find it easier to embrace Jesus than the Christ. Here one enters into the nub of the problem of evangelization in today's multireligious context.

1. Without planting the church and its teaching, its sacramental life, the spiritual disciplines that produce Christians, there are no concrete, living, breathing subjects to bear witness to and make manifest God's love for humankind in Christ and the Spirit. Yet for many in both the East and the West, church planting is a matter of profound ambivalence, at least in part because of ambivalence about the church's structures and practices.
2. If the Christ symbol is abandoned or evacuated of meaning that was declared to be the core of Christian doctrine at Nicea and Chalcedon by history of Jesus preoccupations or because it has been or is still used to justify Western religious imperialism, what happens to the Christian Gospel epitomized in texts such as Romans 8:19-25? Here the entire cosmos is portrayed as awaiting the fullness of life's possibilities as an object of divine redemption and liberation revealed in the resurrection of the Christ. Are we to take such texts as pure mythology or integral to the unfolding and explication of the meaning of Jesus as the Christ and integral to *missio inter gentes*?

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<sup>1</sup>(Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997) 360-90.

Pope John Paul's encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (7 December 1990) and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Dominus Iesus* (5 September 2000) were written to counteract the reduction of Christology to Jesusology and to reject both explicit and implicit missiological positions that go in this direction. The key question is whether the categories of traditional Christological orthodoxy are necessary to anchor mission. That question is the central one in current missiological debates, as it is in theology in general.

At the risk of overinterpreting him, I see Amaladoss seeking to move beyond the categories of Western orthodoxy. In so doing, he is part of broader attempts to create space wherein Asians can enter into a new kind of missionary activity. I refer to the second one-third of his paper, where Amaladoss advances a view of "mission as dialogue." In commending this, he reminds us that Christianity and the other world religions are not *enemies* but potential allies against real, *mutual* enemies—"the structural power of evil and Mammon as selfish attachment to wealth and pleasure." He shows in a section on proclaiming Jesus Christ that the missionary must be a person of deep contemplation, able to repeat not only dogmatic formulae from the creed but words that will lead men and women "to discover the divine depths of his [i.e., the Christ's] personality in their own faith experience" in a process that "cannot be short circuited." Similarly, in sections on "the Cross of Christ," "Jesus in History," an "Asian Jesus," and "the Jesus Within," Michael gives us examples how Jesus can be light in an Asia where religious conflict is rampant, where religious traditions are subverted to political ends, and where secularist ideologies trample the rights of human beings.

With all this, I am in deep agreement. I admire how Michael has summed up for us the best of thousands of pages that have come across my desk in my twelve years at Orbis concerning how Christian mission must manifest the whole Christ and do it in ways that are good news for men and women both in their historical condition and in giving them reason to hope for God's healing, eschatological reconciliation.

Rather than spend the rest of my time amplifying such themes, I would like to draw on insights of two friends and colleagues, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh. Their views on the tasks of theology for the *missio inter gentes* of World Christianity bring into relief the significance of Amaladoss's paper.

The first person I quote is Andrew Walls, one time professor in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, then in his native Scotland at Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and for the past several years at Princeton Theological Seminary. Walls' essays have been collected in a book entitled *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis, 1996), and in a book soon to appear entitled *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Orbis, 2001). In the latter book, an essay entitled "Christian Scholarship and the Demographic Transformation of the Church" offers a glimpse into the significance of the work that Michael

Amaladoss and scores of Asian theologians and missiologists are about. Their work, according to Walls, is parallel to that of the earliest generations of Christian scholars.

In particular, once the word about Jesus Christ was translated into Greek, and entered into a Greek thought world without the builtin controls natural to Greek-speaking Jews, all sorts of new questions (for instance about the way to express the relationship between the divine saviour and the One God) were raised that were not likely to be aired when all the believers in Jesus were Jews. As the Christian mission to the Greek world expanded, Christian theology expanded too. Christians made discoveries about Christ that were only possible when their deepest convictions about him were expressed in Greek, and pondered using Greek indigenous categories and styles of debate. Sorting through the forests of affirmation and debate, identifying the genuine discoveries among the false trails and the short cuts, needed the insight and discrimination that are fundamental to scholarship. So did the business of explaining Christian faith to people whose life and thought were shaped by a Greek inheritance that has been built up over centuries. Why should they take notice of a story about a Jewish carpenter? . . . People who enquired about Christianity might already have been looking at other options and mean to go to look at more. Some of those who came upon the Gospel were ill-educated, credulous, and superstitious; others were highly educated, skeptical, and urbane. So many opportunities meant also so many possibilities of getting things wrong. The scholarly virtues of insight based on knowledge, patient examination, and disciplined imagination were called for by the very act of proclaiming the Gospel.

And so it is today. Before one parses too carefully the work of such Asian scholars and applies woodenly the standards of orthodoxy established on the road from Jerusalem to Athens, to Nicea, and onward to Chalcedon, Constantinople, and Rome, Walls asks us to consider the theological task of a new generation of Asian and African theologians as roughly analogous to the Ante-Nicene labors of the Apostle Paul in the first century, Justin Martyr, born into a pagan family around the year 100, and to Origen born around the year 185, living into the third century. My point? That Nicene and Chalcedonian Trinitarian theology formulated in the fourth and fifth centuries were necessitated by questions raised when people read Paul, Justin, and Origen in Greek. The labors of Indians, Chinese, and Koreans Christians today take place in hermeneutic terrains as complex as those of the second and third centuries. On the results of such labors will depend the shape of *missio inter gentes* in Asia and our criteria for evaluating what will constitute "success" in that mission.

My second quotation comes from the Gambian Catholic theologian and historian, Lamin Sanneh, a convert to Christianity from Islam, a doctor in Qur'anic studies and now a United States citizen. Sanneh is professor of history at Yale University and of world Christianity and mission at Yale Divinity School. His signature book is *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1989). His most recent book is the much acclaimed *Abolitionists*

*Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Harvard, 1999). In a preface to be published in the twentieth anniversary edition of the late Spiritan priest, Vincent Donovan's perennial, best selling, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Sanneh observes:

It is crucial to Fr Donovan's critique of Western Christianity that we understand it by placing his remarks and observations in the revealing contrast between a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity. . . . [Donovan] suggests that the cultural assimilation of Christianity in the modern West has been at a very high price. . . . [It] has demanded a deep discount of Christianity's central claims about revelation, the truth and reality of a transcendent God, the prevenient grace and power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible as God's eternal word, and faith and trust in divine providence. The West became uncompromising, seeing the Gospel only on its own terms.

In strong words that echo his long friendship with Lesslie Newbigin, Sanneh goes on to say:

Whereas in the Gentile phase that began with Pentecost (Acts 2), the church prospered by rejecting submission to the Mosaic code as definitive of the Gospel, with the Enlightenment the church survived by embracing the rationalist worldview of the agnostics. In the modern Western phase, the Bible cannot just be the handbook of faith, it must be subjected to all the stringent tests we apply to texts of any kind. Accordingly, faith itself is made to conform to verifiable rules of evidence, in fact is perceived as nothing more than the presupposition in the tools of analysis, just as the church is required to acquit itself by modern standards of organization and professional training, because piety is emotion in search of structure.

Sanneh's ultimate point is that African, Latin American, Indian, Sri Lankan, Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, and Japanese Christians are in the process of translating the Gospel into Asian, African, and Latin American vernaculars. And the best of them are doing it without feeling a need to be subservient to Western rationalist canons of evidence. Which is not the same as saying they are not rational in what they do. Rather, they approach Biblical texts and the experience Christian reality with a vastly different set of presuppositions and horizons.

Scott Sunquist of Princeton Theological Seminary has said that "Christianity is a world religion that was long dominated by the West." He and his colleague Dale Irvin are today working on a monumental two-volume book entitled, *History of the World Christian Movement*. In the first volume, to be published this fall, the rise of Islam is treated as a development roughly equal in importance to the shaping of Christianity as the rise of the Papacy. In the second volume, Spanish and Portuguese incursions into and invasions of Africa, Asia, and the Americas from the mid-fifteenth century onward, are seen as more pregnant with possibilities and fateful for world history than provincial sixteenth-century developments in Switzerland and Germany.

The point of the labors of Walls, Sanneh, Sunquist, and Irvin is the need for all Christians to become aware that the body of Christ is now a global body and that Christian scholarship—both in the West and the rest of the world—needs to turn to reconceptualizing and reenergizing the Christian mission. In their labors as historians, they remind us that Christianity exists by being missionary or it ceases to exist vitally.

Michael Amaladoss reminds us that *missio inter gentes* does not require Christianity to relate to other traditions as enemies. His sad tale of communal and religious warfare reminds us that this lesson has not yet been learned by everyone. Nor are all sinners against this principle Christians. In the northeast of Amaladoss's native India, for instance, a strong arm reconversionist effort attempts to end a mass conversion movement of tribal peoples into Christianity by returning them to true Indian, that is to say, "Hindu" identity. Never mind the fact that these were followers of traditional religions, that they were never Hindus, and that they were long looked down upon and kept under subjection by Hindus.

The chief *missio inter gentes* of Christians in Asia, Amaladoss proposes, is one of trying to bring about shalom among peoples riven by myriad divisions. He roots that mission in the ministry of the historical Jesus. How the experience of acting in the name of Jesus translates into Christology, as Asians tread the *via crucis* of historical commitment and relationship to the risen Christ remains to be seen. The crucial thing for us in the West, I believe, is to become better informed about this *missio inter gentes*, so that we may be in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in the global Body of Christ.

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