

## WORLD CHURCH THEOLOGY

- Topic: *Missio Ad Gentes: An Asian Way of Mission Today*  
Conveners: Gerald M. Boodoo, Xavier University of Louisiana  
Phillip J. Linden, Jr., Xavier University of Louisiana  
Moderator: Camilia McPherson, Independent Scholar  
Presenter: Leo Kleden, SVD, Jakarta, Indonesia  
Respondent: Paul Varuvel, Christ the King Seminary, New York

Leo Kleden could not attend the conference. An edited version of his paper was read by Gerald Boodoo. Kleden articulated a theological approach to mission that is rooted in his work and experience as an Asian missionary in the religiously pluralistic society of Indonesia. He explains the terms *missio* and *ad gentes* in a sense that goes beyond the narrow views of the past. *Missio* is not limited to preaching, baptizing and establishing church communities in the so-called non-Christian lands. It is "giving witness to the reign of God, to its universality and openness, which embraces all humanity from every nation and culture throughout history."

One of the key affirmations of Kleden's theological approach to mission is: "Understood as a basic attitude of being open to others, dialogue is the only viable way of mission." He presents a fourfold dialogue: with faith seekers and those who have no faith community, with the poor and the marginalized, with people of different cultures, and with people of other religions. The Second Vatican Council, the Statements of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences and Kleden's own congregation, the Society of the Divine Word, all undergird such an approach. While this fourfold dialogue might appear as Christian engagement with four distinct groups of peoples, it is in fact different aspects of one and the same activity.

A related and significant issue is the recent increase in the number of missionaries from Asia who proclaim the gospel in other areas of the continent and elsewhere in the world, notably the United States and Europe. In contrast to the missionaries of the earlier centuries, says Kleden, the Asian missionaries today have no claim to political, cultural or religious superiority; rather, they seem to be sent empty handed and from a position of weakness. However, their strength lies precisely in their *kenosis* and weakness, in so far as they must then rely on the context they inhabit to shape their missionary activity.

In the Asian context, mission without an active-contemplative presence would be irrelevant. Similarly, mission would be enriched if narrative theology were used instead of mere dogmatic formulations. Continuing the paradigm of the reign of God to describe mission, Kleden suggests that God's salvation which results through mission is discernable in the two signs of liberation and communion, the former leading to the latter.

In his response, Paul Varuvel responded in basic agreement to Kleden's position. However, he expands on Kleden's insistence on the plural nature of mission in Asia today. Varuvel says: "In the pluriform Asian context it is not possible to project one single model of mission as valid for every part of Asia. Not only do we need different ways of *doing* mission, but the *end* of mission must also be pluriform on so far as it leads to different types of responses."

Varuvel goes on to say that what characterizes the Asian context is not the postmodern condition but the postcolonial situation and how that informs the interreligious milieu of Asia. Theological reflection in this area has occasioned a shift in the understanding of salvation and liberation where non-Christian religions are concerned. A christocentric perspective is giving way progressively to theocentrism, pneumatocentrism, cosmocentrism, regnocentrism, and finally to soteriocentrism. These shifts raise the fundamental question about the centrality accorded to the person and message of Jesus Christ but it is a question that must be handled from the perspective of not primarily engaging mission to build up the Church but rather, to build up the Reign of God.

Varuvel asserts that the Asian way of mission must "embody three essential traits that characterize its culture: tolerance, experiential knowledge, and dialogue." More than this, an Asian way of mission will not be exclusively Asian. Dialogue with the rest of the world and other theological approaches will be necessary. According to Varuvel, this "communion of communions will safeguard an Asian way of mission from becoming an exotic species."

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