

CATHOLICITY AND MISSION—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Conversion—Contemporary Insights and Imperatives for *Missio ad gentes*, *Missio cum gentibus* and *Missio inter gentes*
- Convener: Elochukwu Uzukwu, Duquesne University
- Moderator: vanThanh Nguyen, Catholic Theological Union
- Presenters: Stephen Bevans, S.V.D., Catholic Theological Union
Marian Maskulak, C.P.S., Ph.D., St. John’s University
Jonathan Y. Tan, Ph.D., Australian Catholic University School of Theology

The three presentations in the *Catholicity and Mission* topic session addressed the question of conversion from theoretical and practical perspectives. The presenters related their positions to the dynamic if controversial understanding of mission in a “World Church.” Stephen Bevans, S.V.D., captures the ambiguity and controversy surrounding mission-conversion in the title of his essay: “Kicking the Hornet’s Nest: Conversion, Church, And Culture,” a paper originally prepared for a Protestant audience in Germany. Bevans relied on the works of scholars like Rahner, Lonergan, Gelpi, Walls, and Rambo to sharpen his definition of *conversion*, *church*, and *culture*. Bevans describes four underlying interrelationships that link the tripod as follows: “there is no church without culture, there is no conversion without culture, there is no church without conversion, and there very well may be no conversion without church.” The fourth interrelationship is both controversial and very interesting: “no conversion without church.” This was illustrated with the story of those who radically turn to Christ in India and Bangladesh; they associate and meet frequently, but they do not submit to an institutional church. They are a type of church, proving that there is no conversion without church. Drawing from the dissertation of Jonas Jorgensen, Bevans analyzed the life and ways of these converts to Christ: the “Jesus Imandars” (Bangladesh) and the “Khrist Bhaktars” (India). They and their religious culture turned to Christ, without embracing the institutional church. Naturally this generated much discussion.

Marian Maskulak, C.P.S., in “The Monks of Tibhirine: Mission, Conversion, and Interreligious Dialogue,” analyzed with passion and depth the experience of conversion by the Trappist monks of the Tibhirine monastery in the Atlas mountains of Algeria. The story is popularly captured in the movie *Of Gods and Men*. Led by their prior Christian de Chergé, the monks illustrated a striking example of the mission of “presence” and the “dialogue of life.” In her presentation Maskulak drew extensively from two documents of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) and *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), to clarify the commitment of the monks to a mission of dialogue. Their life with Muslim neighbors, their friendship and hospitality, a mission of witness, ultimately led to the supreme sacrifice of their life. What is unforgettable in Maskulak’s narrative and reflection is the transformation of the prior, de Chergé, after the assassination of his dialogue-prayer partner and friend, the police officer, Mohammed; they prayed together, taught others how to pray and share life, and avoided sterile theological discussion that would provoke unnecessary quarrel and rancor. De Chergé believed that the sharing of “water, a piece of bread, a friendly handshake” says more about what can

be done together “than do theological tomes.” Though de Chergé did not consider himself a theologian, Maskulak suggests that he expanded or perhaps went beyond the theological position of *Redemptoris Missio* (no. 55) by proposing that conversion, as a mutual experience of interlocutors, does not necessarily entail changing one’s religion. Conversion among the monks and their Muslim neighbors was personal but intertwined. Their tragic death is interpreted by Maskulak as the supreme test of “proclamation:” dying in witness to faith in Christ. They display the complexity and ambiguity of interreligious dialogue in today’s world.

Finally, Jonathan Y. Tan organized his talk, “Mission among the Peoples: The Future of Christian Missions in Asia,” around the last chapter of his five-chapter book to be published by Orbis in 2014. His book project covers, first, the history of mission in Asia. Second, it evaluates critically the reality of religious pluralism in Asia, moving mission away from the mistaken assumptions on world conversion to Christianity by the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 and *Ad Gentes* of Vatican II. Next, he addresses the reality of migration and the implications of the general movement of peoples for mission. This provokes plumbing the question of “*missio inter gentes*” raised by Bill Burrows in his response to Michael Amaladoss’ presentation during the 2001 CTSA convention. Tan expands and deepens the conversation between Amaladoss and Burrows on moving mission away from the sending-receiving paradigm. Tan’s wants to reevaluate and redirect the mission discourse by focusing on three principles deriving from mission as emanating from the Trinity—orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos. This set of words acknowledges mission as of God (orthodoxy), but orthodoxy is revealed in the praxis of Jesus. Drawing from Amos Yong’s analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Tan thinks that from the vantage point of the margin, one might view Christianity in the midst of Asian religions as declaring that God is in the process of revealing God’s self in surprising ways. Finally, mission as orthopathos involves suffering and empathy with the peoples of Asia. The mission of the future, Tan concludes, must be based on correct doctrine informed by praxis and participation in peoples’ suffering.

The discussion that followed the presentations noted that conversion is not restricted to Christianity, that mission theology gains mileage when theologians are involved in the dialogue of life and from there move on to theological dialogue, that mission theology would be advanced by deepening the ideas of scholars such as Rahner and Lonergan, and that ultimately the overall telos of conversion and the movement of mission is towards the Reign of God.

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