

# CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL THEOLOGIES AND OUR MISSION IN THE UK

By John Perumbalath

## Introduction

In this article I am not going to focus on my background in the mission of the church in India, but instead will answer the question: How might contemporary global theology inform local mission in the UK?

There are two clarifications to be made first. One, rather than write about a particular theology that is global, I will address contemporary theological trends throughout the world. All theological discourse is culturally conditioned even although it may not be completely irrelevant to other cultures, because of our shared humanity across the world. Since we cannot look at all the theologies of the world, I will focus on a few major theological trends/traditions.

Second, we need to remember that although we might refer to a local mission, God's mission is not local, it is global. God's concern is not just for our neighbourhood or this particular nation, so we cannot simply think about a local mission without asking what God is doing in other parts of his (and our) world. As Martin Luther King Jr said,

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

The anywhere and the everywhere are inseparable in God's mission. We should guard ourselves against parochialism in our understanding of mission.

Paraphrasing Rowan Williams,

“Mission is finding out where the spirit is and joining in.”<sup>2</sup>

This discernment has to happen locally, nationally and globally. The task of theology is no different. The discourse about God is contextual, but the best theological discourse recognizes the wider human context as well as the specific circumstances in which it is shaped. In fact theologizing, or God speak, is an act of mission.

**Mission is what happens when we stay in tune with God!**

## Three movements in the theological world

Our world and our own context in the UK has changed since the SPG<sup>3</sup> first sent out missionaries to the British colonies three centuries ago. The theological landscape today looks drastically different from how it was in the early eighteenth century. I am going to focus on three movements in the

1 Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963), Letter from the Birmingham Jail (San Francisco, California, USA: Harper One, 1994).

2 Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 2010), p. 1.

3 The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was a Church of England missionary organization active in the British Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Founded in 1701 by Reverend Thomas Bray and a small group of lay and clerical associates, it sent Anglican clergymen and religious literature to Britain's colonies, supported schoolmasters and the establishment of new churches, and lobbied for a more expansive place for the Church of England in Britain's burgeoning empire. In total, the SPG supported more than 400 overseas agents in the eighteenth century. For further details see Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2012).

theological world which have inspired some vibrant theologies across our globe.

### **The first movement**

The first movement is from the universal to the contextual. I am not saying that theologies in the eighteenth century did not have any context. In fact every theology is contextual. The problem was that we did not recognize the constraints of our particular western context, or we assumed that the theologies shaped in the post-enlightenment western context were universal and timeless. But comparing theologizing in the context of socio-economic oppression in Latin America, South Africa and Asia, those theologies that were shaped in the context of engagement with other religions in Asia did look very different.

The rise of various theologies in third world contexts have taught us that our theologies here and now are also culturally conditioned, shaped in a particular context, and are (to some extent) irrelevant to many other situations. Our culture is neither normative nor privileged. I remember when I was in my first incumbency parish, I had to do a wedding where the bride wanted to include the custom of tying mangalasutram – a locket given by the groom, tied around the neck of the bride using a thread which later on would be transferred to her neck chain as a symbol of marriage. My colleague said it wasn't Christian. I had to ask him where in the bible it said that we should exchange rings at a wedding! We had made the Western practice of exchanging rings a Christian rite!

We must realize that theology belongs to the current moment in history, and that its content is the present self-manifestation of God and our present-day faith response. Paying attention to the context has meant that theology has started addressing specific issues confronting humanity: environmental issues, gender concerns,

and other socio-economic challenges. Theology has become more holistic. And so should the mission of the church be.

### **The church's mission today in this country is re-awakening memory.**

But the church appear to carry on as if nothing has changed. We still preach as if we were preaching 300 years ago. The major change in our context is that what used to be the Christian West is now post-Christian. Mission in the contemporary West is more difficult. Our communities knew Jesus but they are not so keen to hear about him anymore. Sixteen million adults in England were once part of the church then and left. They know the Church – maybe that is the problem! I do not think that people have deliberately rejected Christ or Christianity. They slipped out while other things were happening and the church carried out without bothering about what was happening. God is not absent but he is not spoken about. The church's mission today in this country is re-awakening memory. But how can we re-awaken the memories of people when the story we tell does not touch their hearts or illuminate their minds? Or when we do not take into account their individual contexts, social, political and economic? Please go on telling the old story but tell it afresh in the new context, not just in words, but with compassion, love and grace.

### **The second movement**

The second movement extends from imperialism to post-colonialism. The eighteenth century missionary movement was tied up with colonialism: political aggression and missionary propagation went hand in hand. In certain cases, for instance the SPG mission in Barbados, missionary movements were directly involved in the oppression of people in the colonies. And this was in some

way inspired by a theology that was imperialistic and triumphant; a theology that did not recognize human suffering, and which lacked compassion; a theology that spoke of God in the context of our political security and power. Initially, this type of theology was exported to the colonies, and so those theologians in the third world found themselves alienated from their own intellectual world, and often from their own communities, because of the colonial origins and continuing colonial character of their theology. Ever since the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>4</sup>, a word which Said defined as the patronizing representation of the East by the West, many third world theologians have started using the tools of cultural criticism in their theologizing. Post-colonial theology is not just the theology in a post-colonized world, but is a theology that is decolonized.

Post-colonial theology calls for a new kind of relationship in mission. We cannot carry on with a donor-receiver relationship. Our relationship is one of interdependence and mutuality. In the traditional model, even when we went to another land to carry out God's mission, we created a space there and invited others to join into that space. Or we planted our space in another land and inculturated local people into our practices. My first incumbency parish in Calcutta was a SPG parish, St James' Church in Calcutta. When I moved to England in 2001 and became the Associate Rector at St George's Church in Beckenham, I thought I would have to learn a lot in terms of liturgy: but in practice it wasn't much. I realised I just needed to sing the Sung Eucharist and the Evensong in exactly the same way I did in Calcutta! I had already been living in a Western space back there in Calcutta.

**Mission is not about recreating our space in another context but rather creating a new space wherever we are, here in this land or another land.**

Mission is not about recreating our space in another context but rather creating a new space wherever we are, here in this land or another land. It is about creating a new space where we and others are together, where we grow together and learn from each other. As Ephesians 2:17-18 suggests, those who were far off and those who were near both have access through Jesus. We need to be pilgrims journeying with people - not announcing that we have already arrived and are now inviting people to join with us where we are.

Post-colonial theology also invites us to undertake some kind of unlearning, that is, to be critical of our mission practices and theologies which involve patronisation in our understanding of and approach to others. Our society has changed. Our communities have become global. They are multicultural, multi-religious, multiracial and multilinguistic. In one sense our world is shrinking; what was strange to us yesterday is familiar to us today. Our world may shrink but our perception of God needs to expand - God is bigger than we thought he was. When we truly understand that God is bigger than we have ever imagined, then we will go beyond multiculturalism, and choose to be intercultural. In today's UK the church needs to be intercultural in order to fulfil its local and global mission.

### **The third movement**

The third movement in theology is from the

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient* (New York, USA: Pantheon Books, 1978).

modern to the postmodern. The hallmarks of modernism were objectivity, certitude and pure reason. The use of the correct scientific methodology produced the right results. Real knowledge was universal, general and timeless. The theological enterprise of modernity followed neatly along in its modes of absolute certainty. Both modern liberal theology and fundamentalist theologies have one thing in common: certitude. But confidence in modern theology was shattered when the project didn't deliver. The philosophical and cultural shifts beyond modernism have affected many of our contemporary theologies. Many theologians, in particular biblical scholars like Professor Walter Brueggemann, believe postmodernity represents a missional opportunity.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that postmodern approaches might take us beyond liberalism and fundamentalism, both of which are products of modernity.

**There are different stories of reality available and possible. Our mission is to place our story alongside them, showing that the world can be construed differently.**

How does this shift affect our mission? In the postmodern era, all claims of reality are fully under negotiation. There are different stories of reality available and possible. Our mission is to place our story alongside them, showing that the world can be construed differently. This calls for humility on the one hand and willingness to engage in dialogue on the other. We need to tell our story in such a way that people

hear it as local, particular and timely, addressing them where they are. We must remember that imagination is important in postmodern understanding. We don't just learn by addition and subtraction, or through scientific theories - those were modern! Now we need to capture the imagination of people.

### **Conclusion**

This is a call for renewing a public voice. There are compelling stories out there which people inhabit. The church must find a public voice to place our alternative story in the public space. The alternative story we tell is powerful in that it offers hope and assurance, and it issues a challenge and a warning to society. But this public voice is not merely a matter of words. Our humility in truth-telling should be accompanied by courage in public action. God's story is not just to be verbalized, it needs to be embodied.

Another missional challenge for postmodernity is taking communities seriously. Modernism was highly individualistic but such rampant individualism has failed. There is an opportunity to put community back at the centre of our focus. The church must address the aspirations, disappointments and struggles of the communities as we tell our story today.

In our postmodern and postcolonial world, we can't afford to carry on with outdated mission paradigms. Let us pray for God's wisdom to discern where the Spirit is and to join in.

## **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

Join the discussion  
on the Rethinking  
Mission forum

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: Fortress Press, 1993).