

MISSION IN THE PAKISTANI CONTEXT

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Introduction

In this article, I would like to raise some pertinent questions regarding mission, and offer some views and modest comments about mission from a Pakistani perspective. The overarching title of the series, Rethinking Mission: Global Perspectives on Contextual Mission, is striking and calls for serious reflection on questions such as: Why is there a need to reconsider mission? Is it because mission has changed? Or perhaps God has changed?

But as Christians we believe that God is eternal and unchangeable, then why should we rethink mission?

These enquiries are important in any discussion of contextualizing mission. Although the challenges and opportunities for mission in the various denominations of the Pakistani church are similar, this article will focus on the mission of the Church of Pakistan¹, which was formed as a result of the organic union between Anglicans, Methodists, Scottish Presbyterians and Lutherans in 1970. It is the result of missionary endeavours and ecumenical and nationalistic movements rising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I will begin with a brief introduction to Pakistan. Following this, I will define a few key terms used in this article. I will then explain mission in the Pakistani context and the challenges to mission. Finally, I will offer some suggestions on how these challenges can be met.

Pakistan - its context

Pakistan, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, is the second largest Muslim country in South Asia (after Indonesia). It occupies a strategic position, being bordered by India to the east, Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest, and China to its far northeast. It also has a coastline along the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman in the south.

Pakistan is the only country to have been created in the name of Islam.² It has a semi-industrialised economy with a well-integrated agriculture sector and a rapidly growing tertiary sector.³ The area that now constitutes Pakistan has been the site of several ancient cultures such as the Indus Valley Civilization. Pakistan's cultural context is rooted in the traditions of ancient religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and over the last millennia or so it has been increasingly pervaded by Islam.

According to common belief, Christianity was first brought to Taxila (Takshashila) in Pakistan⁴ by the apostle

1 Numerically, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest church in Pakistan. However, the Church of Pakistan has a constitutional and legal identity.

2 Ian Talbot (1984), Jinnah and the making of Pakistan, History Today 34 (2), p. 1. Accessed 14-05-2018 from <http://www.historytoday.com/ian-talbot/jinnah-and-making-pakistan>.

3 Muhammad Umer Saleem Bhatti (22-06-2015), Services sector: domestic and outward growth, Dawn. Accessed 14-05-2018 from <http://www.dawn.com/news/1189624>.

4 There is a strong debate around the specificity of the area in which he first arrived in the sub-continent. The southern or eastern (indigenous or Indian language) sources of the Thomas tradition stress maritime arrival, while the northern or western (external Persian or Syriac) sources of this tradition stress overland origins.

Thomas in the first century A.D.⁵

However, today there are no remains of the churches that were established in Pakistan.⁶ The present church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, largely followed the colonial flag as part of the western commercial expansion from the fifteenth century A.D.⁷

The Church of Pakistan is built along caste and ethnic lines.

The Church of Pakistan is built along caste and ethnic lines. The majority of the present congregants are descendants of the Scheduled Castes⁸, who accepted Christianity during the Mass Missionary Movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India.⁹ Although it is named the Church of Pakistan, it is essentially a Punjabi church with most of its leadership and membership coming from a Punjabi ethnic background.¹⁰

Definitions of terminology

Despite its popularity, the word mission is complex, as it covers a wide range of

meanings from simply “evangelism for conversion” to “evangelism or witness encompassing a broader range of human activities.”¹¹

During the colonial era, it was predominantly understood as the work of Christian missionaries in the mission fields, but this has changed with the process of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century. A group of agents performing a specifically assigned task may also be referred to as his/her mission. In this sense, it can be reasoned that people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Abdul Sattar Edhi also had their distinct missions of leadership, liberation and service. Different religions also propagate their faiths with the same missionary zeal which was once characteristic of, and motivated, the Christian missions. This is evident in various Hindu and Buddhist expressions of faith popularised in the West, the Islamic mission attempts called Dawa, and many others who claim authenticity of their faith. Moreover, many business enterprises in the secular world use the same techniques to sell their products. In the midst of all

5 Theodore Gabriel, *Christian Citizens in an Islamic State* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 17. He further states that most of the details of St. Thomas' meeting with the legendary King Gondophares are to be found in the Acts of Thomas, the credibility of which had been doubted by scholars. However, the discovery of coins bearing his image in 1854 have thrown new light on the authenticity of the accounts.

6 The Mar-Thoma Church in South India is a continuation of the same tradition.

7 Alex Thomas, *A History of the First Cross-cultural Mission of the Mar Thoma Church 1910-2000* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), p. 56. According to Elizabeth Koeppling, “India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar,” in Peter C. Phan (ed.), *Christianities in Asia* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 10, by the mid-twentieth century, all the major Protestant denominations in their various versions were present in what is now Pakistan.

8 The ancient Indian texts divided the society into four castes, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. There was also a fifth element which included those people who were entirely out of its scope, such as the tribal people and the untouchables. In view of their socio-economic and depressed condition, the Scheduled Castes were introduced and assisted by the British Government. These included the Megs, who were a weaver caste, the Chamars leatherworkers, and the Churhas sweepers and scavengers. Today they can be found in both India and Pakistan.

9 The mass movement began with the conversion of an illiterate Chuhra named Ditt. He lived in Sialkot and earned his living buying and selling hides. For a detailed account of Ditt's conversion and the mass movement, see, for example, James Massey, *Punjab: The Movement of the Spirit* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996), pp. 9-11; John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), pp. 46-47; J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933), pp. 44-45.

10 Wayne McClintock (1992), “A Sociological Profile of the Christian Minority in Pakistan,” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XX(3), p. 347, maintains that according to estimates, 97% of all Christians in Pakistan are Punjabi, with 80% of them residing in Punjab, and the remainder living in other parts of the country have migrated from Punjabi villages and towns in search of employment and/or education.

11 Tim Naish, *Mission and Evangelism: A Theological Introduction* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2016), p. 4.

these multifarious concepts of mission, it is essential for the church to clarify its identity and mission.

In the midst of all these multifarious concepts of mission, it is essential for the church to clarify its identity and mission.

However, the theological implications of mission have been reclaimed in the contemporary era and the focus has shifted from “the church’s mission”, to “mission being rooted in the nature of the Triune God and reflected in God’s redemptive action for the creation.”¹² The church doesn’t have a mission, but it is *missio Dei* because it is God’s mission, and the church partakes in this mission because it has been equipped and sent out (Jn. 20:21) with a purpose. That purpose, that *raison d’être*, in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, is to

“share the good news of Jesus Christ because of gratitude, because we have received without payment an inestimable gift.”¹³

This sending out, however, needs to be understood as a change of mode of presence. It may be a call for some to physically move elsewhere to proclaim the gospel, but more specifically, that every Christian is called and moved by God, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to be an agent of mission, wherever they are.¹⁴ Such an understanding of mission is clearly evident in the lives of the prophets and Jesus who challenged and changed

their contexts, the implication being that God’s mission by nature has always been radical. Therefore, as followers of Christ it is important for us to reflect on our calling and new identity on the one hand, while on the other reconsidering how we can engage in mission in a radical way so that it becomes holistic and liberating. Such a transformation can only happen when we live in a manner that is adapted to the local culture, immersing in its vulnerability and brokenness.

The emerging emphasis in mission on its significance, based on a critical inquiry made by various theologians and the World Council of Churches, has made it imperative for the global church to reflect on doing theology in context: the actual situation of brokenness of the world, to identify the sources of brokenness, the effects, the alternatives, the solutions, and the way forward. In view of this, it can be said that mission is God’s response to a particular context.¹⁵

Mission in a Pakistani context

The socio-political and religious situation of Pakistan has significantly changed over the last 70 years, due to ongoing conflicts with India, long periods of military rule in between brief democratic governments, the gradual process of Islamization, politicizing of religious differences, and the blasphemy law (295C), which is frequently misused. Here, I would like to particularly mention Asia Noreen, commonly known as Asia Bibi, who, as you are aware, has been in prison since 2010.¹⁶ The Blasphemy law was part of the legislature designed

12 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 390.

13 <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/779/gods-mission-and-ours-in-the-21st-century>.

14 Naish (2016), p. 5.

15 Rana Youab, in a telephone conversation (14-2-2017).

16 Asia Noreen (popularly known as Asia Bibi) is a Pakistani Christian woman who was convicted of blasphemy by a Pakistani court in 2010. She was involved in an argument with her fellow workers while harvesting. The other women were angry at her for drinking water from the same cup as them. She was later accused of insulting Prophet Muhammad, a charge which she denies, and imprisoned. A district court in Shekhupura sentenced her to death, which, if carried out, would make her the first woman in Pakistan to be lawfully killed for blasphemy. The decision has been suspended since 2015 while she is still in prison, and her family have gone into hiding after receiving death threats.

and introduced by the British in 1885 and amended in 1927 to control religious hatred among adherents of all religions.¹⁷ After partition, the law became part of the Pakistan Penal Code, and during the Zia regime further amendments (295B and 295C) were made in order to bring the law into conformity with Shari'a.¹⁸ The situation is further compounded by the fact that anyone who questions the law has to face grave consequences, as in the cases of the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, who was killed by his personal guard, and Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for minority affairs, who was assassinated by Tehrik-e-Taliban.

Persecution and marginalization of Christians is a serious concern for the church in Pakistan.

Persecution and marginalization of Christians is a serious concern for the church in Pakistan. The majority of Pakistani Christians are socially segregated and extremely poor. While conversion to Christianity was considered a means of escape, sadly the stigma of untouchability remains even today, and they are looked down upon by the majority of the community. Despite promises of equal rights and status for all Pakistanis, Christians feel insecure and alien within their own land. They have been reduced to the status of second-class citizens or dhimmis. However, equally disturbing

is their economic situation. A primary challenge for the church is how to make the Christian community economically viable. It is a sad reality that, despite strenuous efforts through education and other developmental projects, only about 25% of the community has been able to climb the social ladder, while the rest lives in abject poverty. This further contributes to their alienation.

To them, their identity as liberated people must provide a sense of mission to liberate themselves and other marginalized groups from ongoing segregation. If they are to be truly liberated, it is imperative that the church develops strategies based on the social, political and economic implications of liberation in Christ.¹⁹ Therefore, Dalit theology can be a vital resource for the church. The oppressed Christians need to develop a clear self-understanding of their identity as followers of Christ who have discovered an ensuing sense of mission for their community's growth and development.

In recognizing that all people experience the Divine in their own ways, the church engages in dialogue with adherents of other faiths at different levels, between friends, in neighbourhoods, and at the national level, but also specifically through activities such as seminars and live-in experiences, even by visiting holy places. This dialogical approach promotes peaceful coexistence, strengthens and builds relations by eliminating mutual misunderstanding, and even helps combat

¹⁷ According to the Criminal law (Amendment) Act XXV of 1927, defiling any place of worship or deliberately insulting the religious beliefs of any groups was punishable with up to two years' imprisonment or fine or both.

¹⁸ 295B relates to defiling a copy of the Quran and a penalty of life imprisonment, while 295C relates to defaming the Prophet. Gabriel (2007), *Christian Citizens in an Islamic State*, p. 59. Despite laws to safeguard the rights of minorities, this law is often used arbitrarily against minorities and even other Muslims in order to settle personal scores and grudges. The frequency of the law being misused has drastically risen in the past few years and the tragedy is that the accused is even susceptible to harm after being acquitted. Individuals and families have been assassinated, and entire villages have been burnt and devastated, leaving scores dead or injured. For details, see Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/pakistan-christian-man-sentenced-death-under-blasphemy-law-2014-03-27>.

¹⁹ Siga Arla, "Challenges of Contemporary Mission: A Reflection from India," *Indian Journal of Theology* (2001), pp. 1-7.

fear and insecurity. Christians and Muslims also work on common issues through research and various other projects.

The situation in Pakistan is such that not only minorities, but also women face challenges of patriarchy and socio-cultural restrictions. The church recognizes their services in various forms but the door to ordination remains closed to them. Women have been accepted at local theological seminaries for the last 20 years or so. It is worth mentioning that the Diocese of Raiwind, Church of Pakistan, has ordained three women as deacons, two of whom were ordained as Presbyters by the Episcopal Church, USA, and the Methodist Church in Britain, where they are currently serving. This leaves me as the only woman deacon in the Church of Pakistan.

Challenges to Mission

Mission relates to God's redemptive participation in creation, and Christian mission involves educating the whole membership of the church. As God's agents, we are called to responsibly get involved in the world and in the process of new creation in Christ. This can only be possible when the church is fully aware of its purpose and role, and is equipped for mission through teaching, training and theological reflection.

The Pakistani Church has a strong cultural identity which draws from ancient traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. It displays a tangible love for Scripture, which leads to a living relationship with God and sharing the gospel message boldly. This is also what keeps the community faithful unto death. The churches are full of people despite terrorist attacks.

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But on the other hand, in the attempt to contextualize, and perhaps inadvertently, in its response to the process of Islamization, being more than influenced by the abundance of grace offered to us through Christ, the church has increasingly begun to think and define its own faith in Islamic terms,²⁰ with its own brand of Sharia which unfortunately is the Mosaic Law. There is also the comparison between the Bible and Quran. Whereas the Christian understanding is that of the Word of God becoming flesh, the Muslims emphasize the Word of God in the form of a book. This situation often leads to confusion and misunderstandings for the Christians on one hand, and bibliolatry and an emphasis on religiosity on the other.

From the Pakistani Christians' perspective, the initiative to engage in dialogue is usually limited in scope, because of fear of syncretism, and it often excludes women and youth. There is also a lack of transparency. Therefore, the church struggles to answer these questions: Is interfaith dialogue a compromise of Christianity? Do all participants in dialogue have to share the same understanding of what interfaith dialogue is, and what it is not? Is it acceptable if some come to proselytize?

The church is blessed through being rooted in the life of the poor. Therefore, it serves the people through its diakonia ministries such as hospitals, healthcare programmes, education, projects for women, youth, the differently abled, and several other initiatives. However, there is often a critique of this mode of mission: that it lacks boldness. But an appropriate response to this would be that the Christian community's presence, both numerically and socio-economically, is generally like a fly on the wall, and that therefore the church makes the most of

20 It is not my intention to critique the religion of Islam, but rather to highlight some of the ways in which it has affected the church in Pakistan.

the opportunities it gets.²¹

A seriously challenging area for mission is the growing disparity between the rich and poor.

A seriously challenging area for mission is the growing disparity between the rich and poor. The majority of the Pakistani Christians remain stigmatized, and are even marginalized by affluent Christians. They remain without resources and trapped as bonded labourers, or are forced to continue doing menial jobs. Unfortunately, many of them become victims of dollar missions. Pakistani soil has always been considered fertile, particularly in terms of mission planting. Because of economic dependency and a dearth of local theologians and missiologists, mission strategies and plans are developed mostly in the west, then imported into and implemented in Pakistan. Since they neither address the actual issues, nor people's needs, their message becomes life-denying rather than redemptive. In this scenario, economic growth is crucial for the liberation of the community, as not only will this effectively pull it out of the quagmire of poverty, but will also facilitate social acceptance. Pakistani Christian women outnumber men in terms of church membership and active participation in church life, but the door to ordination remains closed to them. This is mainly because of the debate around theological texts (particularly the Old Testament and Pauline texts) and socio-cultural restraints. Gender oppression is infused with different meanings in Pakistani culture. For example, the missionaries emphasized the oppression of Asian

women in order to justify their mission of saving "brown women from brown men,"²² while in the postcolonial period, subordination has been due to [Pakistani] cultural characteristics, where female subordination and domesticity influence the social and religious ethos. This creates barriers to recognition of women's dignity, role, and their social development. In light of this, perhaps we might ask: Should the Church of Pakistan conform to practices and norms that have been established for centuries? Or should the church maintain that because of changes in societal understanding and behaviour, it is required to change?

Steps to address the challenges

Pakistan continues to deal with some major challenges, but it also stands at a crossroads, making efforts to move forward. It is a challenge, but then life is a risk, and as followers of Christ, we are called to take risks for the gospel. Terrorist attacks are reason enough to jolt us into a unified community who collectively resolve to break free from the bondage of poverty, division and subservience, thereby transforming our lives and the lives of those around us. Unfortunately, this has not happened, due to an overemphasis on institutional religiosity, with a holier than thou attitude which continues to dampen the church's efforts of love and unity amongst its members, people of different faiths and social groups. Here, I would also like to request that the church in the west take these realities into consideration as they plan their strategies, however important they may be. As companions in the gospel, we need to protect our missionary heritage, while at the same time also foster healthy relationships through

21 Manawar Rumlshah, "The Church in Pakistan and Her Present Realities." Unpublished paper presented at the Church of Pakistan Mission Partners Forum (CPMPF) conference held at Waris Road, Lahore, 22-24 February, 2014.

22 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, cited in Kwok Pui-Lan, "Unbinding Our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse," in Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (eds.), *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 67.

mutual responsibility and interdependence.

The first step towards rethinking its mission would be to redefine evangelism, mission and witness. "A new hermeneutic and re-reading of Scriptures need to be promoted to suit the [contemporary situation of Pakistan]."²³ The task of the church is to give careful consideration to evangelism, as well as safeguarding its mission.

As we continue to hope and pray that the Church of Pakistan may come to view the importance of unity in a minority context, the second step towards rethinking its mission would be finding a common platform and strategies which lead to a common hope. The platform could either be within the church, such as the Synod of Church of Pakistan where life-giving decisions are made, or in the wider society, providing opportunities for the church to engage in intra- and interfaith dialogue so that mutual edification and communal harmony may be promoted despite disruptive elements.

Once the Church of Pakistan is willing to act with wisdom and tact, it can undoubtedly win over those who dominate.

Third, in the pursuit of justice, economic growth, active participation in governance, both at government and church level, and collective advocacy from civil and religious leaders, could play a pivotal role in combating challenges such as persecution and corruption at the national and church level, and also in altering the community's situation. Once

the Church of Pakistan is willing to act with wisdom and tact, it can undoubtedly win over those who dominate. Rather than displaying separatist tendencies of ghettoization, engagement with other stakeholders, including the majority community, will enhance the church's self-perception, while networking with other minority groups can effectively reduce alienation and marginalization.²⁴

Fourth, for the gospel to take an incarnational root in society, and renew and transform unjust structures, the church needs to lay open to critique the socio-cultural aspects that it has internalized. If there is any hope of experiencing transformation then the church needs to develop a culture that encourages people to live in the world for the sake of the world, without being of the world.²⁵ According to Keller,

"Christians are truly residents of the city, yet not seeking power over or the approval of the dominant culture. Rather, they show the world an alternative way of living and of being a human community."²⁶

And finally, the church must acknowledge the objectification of women as gentle, passive and exotic beings, and give them their rightful place. Women comprise almost half of the population in Pakistan. Therefore, the church has to deal with the question of women's liberation, equal rights, and job opportunities; and, within the church, the challenges of appropriating the Christian gospel in a patriarchal culture. The church is still quite far from seeking what it means to

23 Stanley Samartha, *The Search for New Hermeneutics in Asian Christian Theology* (Bangalore: BTESSC, 1987), p. 50.

24 Seppo Syrjanen, *In Search of Meaning and Identity: Conversion to Christianity in Pakistani Muslim Culture* (Vammala: Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1978), pp. 113-114.

25 Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

26 Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 126

be a liberated woman in Christ, and what is the role or mission of women. There is an urgent need to develop a substantial framework for “mission to women as well as, mission of women (both to men and women; church and society)”²⁷ in Pakistan. This can be achieved by bearing in mind the Pakistani cultural ethos of family values, as opposed to the radical and separatist western feminist ideology. In terms of ordaining women, the hierarchical and patriarchal structures within church and society must be challenged. Rather than imposing a western, male model of ministry, the Church of Pakistan needs to develop a model of ministry specifically designed for a Pakistani woman.

The story of the church needs to be retold by women.²⁸ The Pakistani Christian women, who form a minority within a minority, need to challenge patriarchy, but also the legacy left by colonialism, cultural imperialism, and the horizontal violence of women against women.²⁹ In doing so, I believe that women can claim back the authority to be theological subjects reflecting on and participating in God’s liberating mission in our church and context.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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on the Rethinking
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27 Siga Arla (2001), p. 2.

28 Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 116.

29 Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 30.