

Gospel, culture and mission: Revisiting an enduring problem

O U KALU
(UP and University of Nigeria)*

ABSTRACT

Gospel, culture and mission: Revisiting an enduring problem

This article reflects on the 1996 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. The relation between gospel, culture and mission is considered, especially from an Africa perspective, but not reserved to it in application. Apart from considering the problem of appropriate terminology to express the intricacies concerning the subject, a deeper search is conducted into the complex relationship between the believer, his mission to, and his distancing from divergent cultural sources and manifestations. Emerging perspectives are considered, which help to formulate mission strategies and historic viewpoints and attitudes. Knowledge of these perspectives is essential for a more responsible answering to the call made to all believers.

1 BIBLICAL ROOTS: BAPTISING THE NATIONS

In 1996, the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism met under the auspices of the World Council of Churches at Bahia, Brazil. One significance is that it will be the last meeting before the turn of the 21st century. So, with a great sense of history, the conferees recalled their roots in the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, and the disasters which have met the hopeful enterprise since then. Yet, under the banner, "Called to one hope: the Gospel in diverse cultures", they re-affirmed that, "We believe that it is still the church's primary calling to pursue mission of God in God's world through the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ", and seek to understand better, "The way in which the Gospel challenges all human cultures and how culture can give us a clearer understanding of the Gospel"¹.

*Professor O U Kalu was in 1996 a guest professor in the department of Church History, at the University of Pretoria.

The shift in the geographical balance of Christianity and the explosion of the Gospel into diverse cultures, which had no voice in Edinburgh, provides a further backdrop. Equally significant is the upsurge of cultural and ethical challenges undergirding a free market economy and global communication. Their oppressive *hubris* confronts the moral norms of the Gospel. Meanwhile, other faiths and prescriptions for salvation have gained force creating a complex environment. In the midst of these, the conferees affirmed that:

The church must hold on to two realities: its distinctiveness from, and its commitment to the culture in which it is set. In such a way, the Gospel neither becomes captive to a culture, nor becomes alienated from it, but each challenges and illuminates the other.

In such missions today, Christians, perhaps more than ever before, need to have a clear understanding of what God has done in history through Jesus Christ. In this, we have seen what God requires of individuals, communities and structures. The biblical witness is our starting point and reference for mission, and gives us the sense of our identity.

We need to constantly seek the insight of the Holy Spirit, in helping us to better discern where the Gospel challenges, endorses or transforms a particular culture.

Much was said and done at Bahia, but the three affirmations constitute our take-off point, as the excursion begins. The first aspect is that the conferees appeared to assume that all agreed on what mission was. Yet, underlying the dissonance of debate there were unclarified assumptions.

The "Great Command" has been taken as the root of mission. In spite of being misunderstood, it is a core conceptual scheme for what R H Niebuhr dubbed "the enduring problem of Christ and Culture"². It enables us to examine our self-understanding as Christians, our calling as disciples and our vocation as ministers of the Gospel. It helps us to critique the record of our faith community in the witness to the Gospel, beyond our walls and national boundaries.

What is mission? It is the hearing and obeying of the voice of the shepherd to become an imitator and feed his sheep. As Jesus puts the matter, those who believe in him shall not only do the works (*erga*) which he did, but will do greater things, both in confronting individual and structural demonic forces, and within an enlarged vista. McGavran sketches the vista of the task broadly to include³:

E-0 = the nurture of the *koinonia*

E-1 = witness in the contiguous area

- E-2 = witness within wider, but culturally homogeneous boundaries
E-3 = cross-cultural evangelism

This does not specify the method, which may include preaching, exhorting, teaching and witnessing. It may also involve healing and spiritual warfare. In any form, “the problem of Christ and Culture” operates just as forcefully in each of these contexts. Thus, the local congregation is just as much an evangelistic locus as any other. The *koinonia* is designed to build up the body, which will go out and witness. This is the ministerial formation strategy of Jesus. He called unto himself the twelve to be his companions, and equipped them to preach and cast out demons. This task of the local congregation is often confronted and compromised by the problem of the relationship between the mandate of the Gospel and the pulsating challenge of the cultures purveyed by the hearers in the pews. The challenge takes different forms related to polity, liturgy, doctrine, and most of all ethics. These four forms characterise any church.

As many experts say, underlying every conflict situation, the manifest issue is on the surface, the underlying clash of value systems is just below and the ideological dissonance is at the base. The core issues are: who Christ is and how his life, words, deeds and destiny relate to the dominant cultural values and reigning ideologies of the times. Most people climb onto pulpits without giving deeper thoughts about these matters, and therefore use blunt scapulas. Deluged in local church politics, they lose sight of the larger issue of significance, namely, that the only *raison d'être* of the church, is mission.

Mission is not taking the gospel to poor countries of the Third World, however laudable such an endeavour may be. Mission begins in the individual and reaches out to the community and the wider world. Acts 1 verse 8 does two things: Firstly, it imagines the enlargement of scale as the eddies of a whirlpool. Mission, like evangelism, is the gospel set on wings; it shoots through local contexts into wider vistas. The propelling dynamo is the Holy Spirit. His role is crucial, lest human organisation spoils the enterprise.

Our understanding and practice of mission, therefore, depends a great deal on our understanding of gospel and culture. This claim is radicated on a certain reading of the Great Command, which emphasises, not the baptism of individuals, but the baptism of nations. To baptise a nation is basically a mission to culture. The relationship between culture and ecology is rather obvious. Human beings create culture in the attempt to harness the resources of their ecosystem for their own sustenance. Civi-

lisation is the domesticating of nature's wild forces, cultivating it to a certain style of living. It is a process, as human beings invent tools for taming nature. They tackle the forces in the sky, land, water and beneath. As they do so, these forces lose their mysteries. So, Aldous Huxley could exult that man makes himself, and Marx would concur that the essence of man is his act. The end product is both mental and material culture. The very act of taming physical nature reshapes man and society.

To baptise a nation, therefore, means to bring under the gospel mandate all that constitutes a nation - her ecosystem, rulers, people, and culture. This mandate, by embracing all of life, evokes challenge from other perceptions of culture, and from the development path of the nation and her civilisation. Niebuhr puts the dilemma thus:

"The power and attraction Jesus Christ exercises over men never comes from him alone, but from him as Son of the Father. It comes from him in his Sonship in a double way: as a man living to God and as God living with men. Belief in him and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to man"⁴.

"Christians are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all things that have been commanded them"⁵.

It appears to be a "Catch-22" scenario: since, Christians are urged to go into all parts of the world, baptising the nations, and yet not to be "of" them because friendship with the world is enmity with God. A further conflict emerges in the call to be anti-structure and anti-culture, and yet utilising the ingredients of culture, since the gospel cannot operate in the air. The problem does not vanish by juxtapositioning the *oikumene* against *cosmos*, the world order, which is a consequence of the fall. This may indeed sharpen the contrasts of the scenario. It may explain the sources of predominant cultural forms, but it does not arm the Christian with the cultural weapons to use.

Is there a Christian culture? If there were, matters would have been easy. The Christian would move into any context and simply install a counter culture and wait for the Holy Spirit to mature it. Indeed, missionaries who took to the cultural high-road, mistook their iconoclastic activities for Christian culture, only to be greeted by bad press for imperialism. It turned out that they mistook their national cultures for the Christian, and were sucked into the self-serving concept of Christendom. In Spite of their

long history and extensive experimentation, the concept proved to be disastrous both to the gospel and to culture. In the face of a contrary intellectual wind, the concept dissolved into private piety, while Christianity was driven off the public square. Mop up action ensued, as the secularist invaders regained the nurseries of Christendom - education, welfare and charitable institutions. Civil religion took her place - those defenders of society, who are content that many gods should be worshiped, if only democracy and her economic corollary received their due religious homage. Liberals adjusted to the winds, while conservatives held on tightly to the mast.

Scholars have posed the problem in different ways. Robert Schreiter says that it is the encounter between the transcendence of the gospel and the complexity of the culture⁶. Andrew Walls posits two competing principles, namely, the indigenizing principle and the pilgrim principle: "Just as the indigenizing principle, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the particulars of their culture and group, the pilgrim principle, in tension with the indigenizing and equally of the Gospel, by associating them with things and people outside the culture and group, is in some respects a universalising factor"⁷. Admittedly, Augustine had posed the same problem by reflecting on the moral clash of the two cities. The Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms, each purveying certain demands.

Before essaying into the public square again, Christians have to do some serious thinking about (a) their mandate, (b) message - the gospel, (c) context - culture, and (d) strategies. Note also that the problem has been posed in two different ways - gospel and culture wherever the encounter occurs and gospel in the midst of cultural diversity. The nuance in the former is that this is not a problem concerned with cross-cultural mission, but with every context in which the gospel is challenged by cultural forms, especially in the nurture of the *koinonia*. A clear understanding of the first will inform the responsible response to contexts of religious pluralism.

For now, it suffices to stress that the mandate is awesome and challenging. At whatever level of evangelical enterprise, the relationship to culture must pose an enduring problem precisely because culture is a powerful expression of the human spirit and the engine that moves civilisation. It is the expression of the creative spirit which God breathed into man, and Cain was able to build a city in spite of the fall. It is the substance of human history and it yields ideologies at a fast pace. Ideologies confront Christianity as a competing explanation of the meaning of life, in spite of the protests of the votaries. Culture even influences hermeneutics. As Walls declared, "All churches are culture churches -

including our own”⁸. All cultures have positive and negative factors. The church must encounter culture in either dialogue or challenge. Schreiter says: “There can be no critique of a church without prior identification with that culture; otherwise the gospel voice is simply experienced as an alien sound unrelated to reality. An identification that does not offer criticism is an empty one”⁹. Culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ. The messenger and the recipient are both bound by their cultural categories.

We shall, therefore, need to do a proper theology of culture and, then, struggle with the practicalities and finally return to the mandate. As Van Butselaar posed the problem, “Are evangelism and culture natural-born enemies?”¹⁰

2 WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Niebuhr approached the matter rather adroitly by asking the question, “Who is Jesus”? He concluded that His life, words, deeds and destiny shape the message. Jesus emphasised a new teaching, a new community and a new life. This radical posture elicited much rejection. This message cannot be locked into a singular virtue or moral principle such as love, hope, justice or such like. He embraced all of these in his understanding of the Kingdom of God. “His moral vision”, argued Richard B Hayst stressed, “(i) renunciation of violence; (ii) overcoming ethnic divides; (iii) sharing of possession and ordering our possession, in order to be faithful to the kingdom; (iv) unity of men and women in Christ; and (v) an eschatological vision of the not yet”¹¹. These are not rules or principles but a total vision of life, to which we are called to respond imaginatively with freedom, demonstrating metaphorically the power of God in our worlds. It is a vision of a fundamental transformation of both the messengers (the church) and the world (context). Walter Wink has recaptured what he called, “God’s new charter of reality and domination-free order”¹².

In sharing the vision, we recover our identity as the people of God. As John Pobee would insist, there are three guidelines in the church’s relationship to culture: (i) It must be biblical, i.e. begin with the recognition that God has definitively revealed himself to us in the Scriptures and above all in Christ, and that the Bible is the primary source and resource for the life of the church; (ii) It must be apostolic. The church, as a hermeneutical community, must draw upon disciples who have gone before. Seeking to contextualise the gospel does not absolve us from seeking continuity with the apostles; (iii) It must be catholic¹³. We

need to recognise that Christ is preparing one church as his bride. Much liberal theologising has posited experience as the key hermeneutic, discounted the speech of God, and thrown the formation of the *koinonia* into a spin. The persona and politically reflected experience of oppression and liberation must become the criterion of appropriateness for the Biblical interpretation and evaluation of biblical authority claims. Culture becomes the measure to judge the gospel. Pobee posits Jesus at the centre, making it possible to distinguish Christian participation in issues of social justice from other motivations, however laudable.

The task is costly and, naturally, the church has, through the ages, chosen singular aspects of the kingdom for emphasis, ignoring the others. For instance, New England Puritans, in the 17th century emphasised the sovereignty of God, while the Evangelical movement in the 18th - 19th centuries emphasised converting individuals, instead of building theocracies. But, the changes brought about by the late 19th and 20th centuries - urbanisation, immigration, pluralism and secularisation - led to a social gospel which interpreted the kingdom as an earthly utopia and believed in the steady advance of human progress. Reaction to social gospel produced quietest political stance. And so, will-nilly gospel and culture continue to tango as Christians confront the gap between kingdom ideals and human realities. Ronald Wells has pursued these thoughts¹⁴. He reflects very much what Niebuhr said as far back as 1937 in his "The Kingdom of God in America":

"The Christian faith in the kingdom of God is a three fold thing. Its first element is confidence in the divine sovereignty which, however hidden, is still the reality behind all in all realities. A second element is the conviction that in Jesus Christ the hidden kingdom was not only revealed in a convincing fashion but also began a special and new career among men, who had rebelled against the true law of their nature. The third element is the direction of life to the coming of the kingdom in power"¹⁵.

Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:3-4; 24-25) that the core of the gospel is that: (i) Christ died for our sins; (ii) He was buried and rose again which is our hope; and (iii) then, cometh the end... when all things shall be subdued unto Him.

John Yoder says that Jesus predicated his ethics on a certain understanding of the salvation history and meaning of the kingdom of God¹⁶. The kingdom is a very useful conceptual scheme for relating the gospel to

mission, because in each context we merely seek to know whether the good-spell of the kingdom was preached with power (not words only) and how people responded; was there a new teaching in the midst of primal mores and knowledge? Did a new life bud in the midst of the old, and did a new community emerge which made human beings truly human and life more wholesome, as the forces which threaten life were defeated? To what extent does the gospel have the power to be truly human? When all these things happen, then, the mandate to baptise all nations has started.

3 THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

It is germane to have a proper theology of culture, before pursuing matters further. In the West, it is often assumed that there is a special relationship between the gospel and Christianity. Indeed, this has often interfered with the best of missionary activities when advocates insisted on the expression of Western mores as a sign of conversion. Some believe that because of the prevalence of Enlightenment world view, demonic forces are more prevalent in non-western cultures. As Brad Long and Doug McMurry said, the Enlightenment built a "Brass Heaven", an invisible barrier of thought that sought to shut off God and entomb the people in a casket of doubt¹⁷. Dark forces prance around the casket with abandon. The interchangeable use of culture and civilisation has not helped matters.

Culture is human achievement in the first place. It describes the activities of man on nature. Therefore, culture is always social. Sociologists tend to depict culture as artificial, secondary environment which man superimposed on nature. The renaissance art critic, Jacob Burckhardt, asserted that three powers underpinned civilisation; namely, state, culture and religion¹⁸. He postured them as independent variables. He saw language as the spearhead of culture and the arts as the foremost expression. The disengagement of religion and matters of belief from culture is a peculiarity of his intellectual milieu. Culture includes the material and mental products of the society. Culture is the world of the society's repertoire of values which she conserves and transmits to future generations. Thus, culture is created or generated, conserved in the face of opposition and transmitted often with modifications; unless in societies where cultural values are encrusted as customs. "In such closed societies", says Peter Berger, "*Nomos* and *cosmos* appear to be co-extensive"¹⁹.

Berger's use of *cosmos* leads us to pursue the meaning of this biblical term. In the Bible, there is a distinction between the *oikumene* and *cosmos*. The first is a geographical term, meaning, the whole inhabited

earth. Basically it is, the world of nature which God created, and He saw that it was good. It is the domain of humans, animals, trees and the inanimate world of nature. This is the powerful environment that holds so many challenges for man. When used theologically, the derivative, ecumenical, is an affirmation that Jesus is Lord over the whole earth. The role of Jesus in the creation saga is rather obvious, because, as the writer of John put it, there was nothing made without him, and Paul, in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, sang paeans to the creative powers of Christ. *Cosmos* is postured as the world order, a super structure which has been imposed on the *oecumene*. Two roads appear from here: The Bible writers create a catastrophic image in which the prince of the air has seized the wholesome creation and guiled her into fulsome rebellion. He crafted embellishments - *kosmetikoi* - which dazzle the inhabitants of the earth, influencing them to dance to new ethical or value norms. The matter is so serious that a warning has gone from the heavens that friendship with these new-fangled cultural forms is enmity with God. A demonically-controlled *cosmos* is separated from the world, as was created by the divine Word. At the heels of *cosmos* is chaos, from which the order in the world was created. It would appear that even though defeated by light, chaos has not given up, and constantly threatens the orderly working of God's world. Culture, under the control of "cosmic powers" is a harbinger of disaster and object of rescue. This means that, at one level, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with culture, except that it can be hijacked and imposed upon and produce death instead of life.

Anthropologists would rather avoid the religious deep end and perceive the stirring of the creative powers of the human spirit. This is what Berger calls "the cosization process"²⁰. From here, anthropologists turn their attention to the character of culture, its structure and functions in society. Indeed, it is accepted that culture is dynamic, changing in response to changing challenges. Change can be slow, fast, induced by external or internal forces; it can be lopsided or innovative. The point is that each culture comprises certain goals, which society has posited for itself and which it considers good and strives through its members to achieve. The theory of cultural relativism comes into full force: different cultures propose different goals²¹.

But Noam Chompsky argued for a certain "deep level" of cultural reality underlying the surface phenomena of cultures, a level in which the surface diversities are brought closer together in the form of true cultural universals²². The idea, argues C R Taber, comes from linguistics, where several theories of language posit a deep structure accessible from the

surface structure only by means of a rigorous analytical method²³. When accessed, this deep structure is more alike across languages, than the surface structure would leave us to believe. Thus, each culture provides a wealth of particular means for meeting the needs of her surrounding ecosystem, but underlying the particulars, there seem to be universal and fundamental aspects which are rooted in the reality of humanness. Years ago, the anthropologist Goldschmidt observed that human beings are more alike than cultures²⁴. “The analogy to language is apt, because”, says Aylward Shorter, “There is an imaginative grammar of culture. Each culture is a universe of signs comparable to language, a configuration of images, concepts and interpretations. Through the process of enculturation, this grammar is acquired unconsciously by the individual members of the society”²⁵.

Our concern is to build on this, to affirm that the “Great Command”, as an aspect of recreation and transformation, has support even in anthropological theory. Moreover, the enduring problem between gospel and culture comes from the very nature of both concepts - the creative energy of the human soul confronted by transforming ethics rooted in the perceived will of the creator of the universe.

But we also note certain aspects of culture, namely, that language is the heartbeat of culture, and therefore, translation is important in the relation of gospel to culture. The element of fluidity and change creates opportunities for the acceptance of new cultural forms, material and mental. It creates cultural pluralism; this realisation of both elements of particularity and universalism destigmatises. Being less judgmental and open to the goals of each culture, it becomes obvious that each culture stands equidistant to the other, as long as it affirms life.

But before going deeper into the culture-gospel encounter, attention must be drawn to the issue of world view. Underlying culture is the world view, as the hermeneutic which interprets the creative pattern of human action. Or, as M Kraft puts it, “The cultural lens through which human experience is viewed”²⁶. Various anthropologists have sought to capture the character of world view: Lorimer Fison in 1892 called it “mind world”; Edward Sapir termed it “the unconscious patterning of behaviour in society”; and Robert Redfield referred to world view as the “way a people characteristically look outward on the universe”²⁷. Redfield noted that patterns of thought, attitude toward life, conceptions of time, a mental picture of what ought to be and the order of things, and their view of self and others, are all included in a peoples’ world view.

Paul G Hiebert organises the content of world view in three categories - cognitive, affective and evaluative²⁸. These refer to the abstract

ideas, inter-personal structures and ethical values. Charles Kraft underscores the place of values in a world view, "The culturally structured assumptions, values in commitments underlying a people's perception of reality"²⁹. "World view", he says, "points to the deep-level assumptions and values on the basis of which people generate that surface-level behaviour"³⁰. "Therefore", concludes Marguerite Kraft:

"[World View] affect how people perceive self, the in-group to which they belong, outsiders, nature around them and the non-human world... (and) makes it possible for (people) to feel comfortable in their environment... World View is a picture of what is and ought to be and it provides the motivation for behaviour and gives meaning to the environment"³¹.

Like the rest of culture, world view is inherited unconsciously, but is deliberately transmitted. It could be encrusted into customs and underpin the resistance to change. Cultural change can often be seen as battering waves chipping away the crusts, initiating a process of separation, reconstruction and reprioritisation as a new way of viewing the world emerges. As a wise student quipped, world view is how we view the world. It does three things: explanation, prediction and control of space-time events. It is a mental construct which enables us to make meaning of our realities. Like theory - building it enables us to quest for the underlying simplicity in our complex world. It brings into a casual relationship wider vistas of reality and everyday life.

The import of this discussion is that Christians come to the encounter with their ingrained commitment to the culture into which they have been elaborately acculturated, as well as the underpinning world view which waves the band of certitude. In certain cultures, this is reinforced with covenants woven with religious fabric. Individuals and communities weave covenants with the gods in the air, land, water and the ancestral world. Perhaps this is why the biblical reassertion of the power of Jesus makes it explicit that at the name of Jesus, every knee must bow, whether that knee is in the heavenlies, or on the earth, or in the earth below. Religion legitimises world view even in secularised societies. Civil religion provides rituals which play the same role. The Bible and a host of canons and covenants abound which provide the predicates of world views, which, in turn, underpin cultural values and norms. In mission, the task is how to ensure that the world view of the advocate does not act as a hindering blinker and impede the entrance of the word.

Is there a Christian world view in the Bible? There is, and this is the root of the conflict between the gospel and culture. As Niebuhr argues, there are about five positions which Christians have taken in response to the enduring problem³²:

“Christ against culture”: a rejectionist posture, in which the affirmation of the gospel leads to a jaundiced perception and attitude toward culture. Perhaps, there is a strong other-worldly orientation.

“Christ of culture” turns Jesus into a cultural hero whose own life, deeds and teaching constitute immense cultural creativity, inviting emulation. He becomes an icon of various causes from conflicting ideological bases. It is a short step to a comparison with other great cultural heroes and religions. It could also lead to an universalising principle, identifying the Christ figure in all cultures.

“Christ above culture” affirms the participation of Christ in the culturally-contested issues of his times, but points to the divine nature of Christ, and argues that no cultural expression fully comprehends the full meaning of Christ. Although access to God is through the specificity of cultural self-understanding, that can also be an escape, unless a distinction is perceived with cultural embodiment and the divine initiative.

“Christ and culture in paradox” explores the elements of discontinuities, continuities, tension and polarities. A note of duality in key values is sounded: justice and love; wrath and mercy; and, creation and redemption. These run as undercurrent in the relation of Christ to culture.

“Christ, the transformer of culture” looks forward to what human culture can be, a transformed life, and to the glory of God. He sent his Son to the world, not to condemn it, but to reveal God’s love and redeem all those who believe. The eschatological hope of believers includes the transformation of the world of nature, which groans under abuse”.

As Augustine would say, Christ redirects, reinvigorates and regenerates the life of man and all his works. All cultural productions are subjected to the anvil or judgment of Christ. There are two sets of ideas clustered here. The first is shown in the seed parables of the kingdom’s presence.

The seed grows mysteriously, showing the power and presence of God in his creation. It could blossom, like the case of the mustard seed, and birds of the air would bask on the branches. Sometimes matters are not

that auspicious, as some of the seed could fall on the wayside and birds would eat them. Thorns and hard soil could also thwart the prospects. Quite often, tares would grow among the wheat. In all cases, the Lord of the vineyard is there, sharing in the prospects. It is his business. He cares, feels the pains and seeks to liberate.

A Bolivian statement brings out the second point, "This gospel brings liberation, a salvation that reaches man's whole being, his goal and eternal destiny, also his historical, material, individual and social being"³³.

Lamin Sanneh takes a historical perspective and demonstrates that in the career of Christianity three phases have predominated³⁴:

"A quarantine phase, when all contacts with the cosmos is reduced to the barest minimum. Intensive religious life predominates with a certain self-sufficient attitude, nurtured in isolation and in defiance of the world.

Syncretist phase. The world of other beliefs and ideas insinuate themselves into the main body of Christian teaching and practices. Compromise and accommodation predominates.

Reform and reassertion of orthodoxy would be triggered off. The battle lines would be redrawn. That is, the ideal of charismatic purity that quarantine embodiments are recast, to produce the vision of a religious community which stands in need of judgement and salvation. A critical selectiveness determines attitude towards the world. Reform in itself does not reject the world, nor does it reject human instrumentality in setting the world aright. It distinguishes between earthly kingdom and its heavenly counterpart, and carries this distinction further into the matter of human means and the divine end, for which they might be employed, but not exchanged"³⁵.

Sanneh concluded that primitive Christianity inherited the law and the synagogue from Judaism. Through Jesus, she came to a fresh understanding of God's impartial action in all cultures. The "many tongues" of Pentecost was an affirmation, which exploded as the Gentile breakthrough. Paul formulated pluralism as the necessary outworking of that which Jesus preached; God does not absolutise any culture or cultural form, but cast on them all his breath of favour, judgement and cleansing from the stigma of inferiority and untouchability. This does not mean that every culture is a holy ground. Even ardent cultural nationalists admit that many ingredients of their culture are oppressive. All cultures stand under the judgement of the gospel.

The conferees at Bahia, therefore, imaged the relationship to culture in three other ways: alienation, captivity and breakthrough. Alienation of the gospel and culture could ensue from iconoclastic, insensitive evangelism. Captivity of the gospel by culture or judging gospel from cultural experiences is equally a potent force. But the gospel should be a liberator from life-denying aspects of culture. They concluded that conversion should be a re-orientation of culture rather than a break or alienation. In our contemporary experience, the tendency toward the captivity of the gospel is fuelled by nationalism, the divinity of the market economy and a global ideology which celebrates the victory of capitalism and fosters individualism, competition, and autonomy from ethical and religious control. This culture is ardently propagated by the media, and controlled by business interests. It is as if people were controlled by the information technology. As the quest for alternative spiritual forms heighten, Christianity becomes the butt of all frustrations.

4 EMERGENT PERSPECTIVES

Two issues have dominated theologising outside the West in recent times, namely, culture and politics. They are outgrowths of the experience of colonization, slavery and domination. These bred an endemic problem of identity. Many saw culture as an anchor and bastion of identity. As European technologies swamped indigenous knowledge and culture, the only resort was the rampart of culture. The iconoclasm and scientific racism, which suffused early process of Christianisation, only deepened the problem: is God a stranger to the firmament of host indigenous cultures? The matter soon became more complex as the non-western world was sucked into larger economic and value ambits. The question of pluralism was added.

The discussion could be centred on Africa for the sake of clarity; but many colonised communities were asking the same questions and agonising over the same predicaments. In the 1960's there was a chorus for indigenization. It was argued that the problem was how to ensure that the gospel bore the imprint of African culture. One problem was the meaning of the word, to be from the soil. Yet everyone knew when the gospel was brought, who the first converts were, and how the vertical and the horizontal progress of the external change agent could be plotted. It smacked too uncomfortably as adaptation. This surface level analysis deals with acculturation, when the gospel was inserted into a cross cultural context. Indeed, the term, contextualisation raised consciousness of the

input of the receiving host context urgently. Unsatisfied, the World Council of Churches coined the term, incarnation, which had enormous theological implications. As Christ came into a Jewish community and used the resources of that culture to communicate the power and truth of the kingdom, so must he act in each human community in love and saving grace. A further articulation of this by Jesuits soon produced the term, inculturation, which dealt with the activity of the gospel at the deep-level culture.

Beyond acculturation, which bred cultural domination, the gospel “becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it, so as to bring about a new creation”³⁶. Years ago, Harnack asserted the implications of this view, “The image of Christ remains the sole basis of all moral culture, and in the measure in which it succeeds in making its light penetrate is the moral culture of the nations increased or diminished”³⁷. Focus on the decoders rather than on the messengers of the gospel, would indicate that the process of translation and inculturation usually begins early amongst the hearers of the Word. It is the institutional church which interrupts the process. With her hardware of cultural policy derived from the culture of the gospel bearers, there is an attempt to direct the pattern of hearing and acting the gospel mandate. It stultifies the interaction of gospel and indigenous cultures.

This leads to a call for a mission strategy, which takes the world view of the people seriously, and begins to explore the grooves, through which the gospel could address the concerns of the ecosystem and the world view which underpins it. The covenant approach is proffered. The contact of the gospel and the culture of non-western peoples involves a clash of covenants. The covenant with the gods of the fathers is embattled by the covenant with Jesus Christ. It is a spiritual encounter with shared aspects of world views. For instance, both share a three dimensional concept of space, the control of the visible realities by the invisible, the control of the whole of life, being in community with a Supreme Being, and the responsibility of humans to maintain order so as to enhance the quality of life. The presence of initial forces makes life precarious; these enemies are ranged in a military formation as principalities, powers, rulers of darkness and princes of the air and demons. Wrongdoing and breaking of the moral codes open the gates to let in these enemies of human beings. The restoration of life is achieved through prayers, sacrifices and offerings and acts of reconciliation. Evil does not exist in the abstract, but uses people. Certain parts of the human body are important in their activities, e g blood, hair, saliva, head, heart, eyes and stomach. Words have power

which could be used to activate spiritual forces. Those who have practised esoteric arts have confessed the relationship between the Biblical world view and theirs. Admittedly, there is much misuse. The key issue is what the gospel says to such a context, with the pulsating fears, hopes and vulnerability. Does indigenous knowledge aid the Christian agent in the response to these matters? A covenant approach proposes a dialogue between these world views in such a manner that the gospel understudies the primal context and brings the resources of the gospel to bear on the problems. In the encounter, the exigencies of the context would influence the pattern of Christian presence³⁸.

Three other ancillary problems require comments. Firstly, situations where religious pluralism is an issue. The Christian is supposed to be rooted in the gospel and yet open to the semen of transcendence in other religious traditions. This is not an advocacy for one world religion or any such mushy concept of equality of all religions, but an assertion that exclusivity is the basis of honest dialogue. A covenant approach enhances the ability of the gospel bearer to witness effectively, because there is the potential for testing the spirits.

Second, the prevalent culturalism in the West has created an air of moral crisis, which Brueggemann described with the exile paradigm³⁹. He asserts that the West has lost the old certitudes, as Israel lost her moorings based on the temple cult. The privilege and dominance of the white male as well as other forms of certitude have been shattered by the rise of other races, new economic order and the strident voice of women to mention only a few of the complexities, exacerbated by the electronic technology and moral anomy. Several emotional somersaults followed: denial, rage, indignation, fear, violence and search for resources to cope with the exile. The dalliance with New Age and Eastern Religions are signs of the search in the absence of God. They are efforts to re-imagine the world. Even Christians are befuddled as they watch the center of Christianity slip away, and as they realise that there is a plurality of voices in the Canon. There is no hegemonic social truth. The question which Pilate asked Jesus is still reverberating with a vengeance in the exilic context. But it is not only in the West that these untoward facts exist. The Third World has experienced breakdown of primal order, the surge of modernity, legitimacy crises and economic collapse which have stunned the populace. The quest for an absent God is just as fervid. Recently, an Anglican priest from Uganda was bemoaning the implosion of the Baewezi-Bashomi cult, even among church leaders. It is a quest for quick answers to the pulsating confusion of the post civil-war situation. It is as if darkness had covered Africa at noon tide.

The Christian God seems to be silent and people resort to admixtures of the Bible and the old ways. Various theological enterprises have proffered succor in the past: Liberation Theology, with a very strong Marxist social analysis and Black Theology, with a race backdrop, but none seems to suffice. It becomes crucial to re-imagine mission in such a manner that faith can turn loose from old certitudes, so as to receive the newness in the serious engagement with indigenous knowledge.

Third, mission assumes an organic character, confronting the death bearing manifestations of culture in the political arena, poverty, abuse of human rights and environmental degradation. Our ecological ethics often betray the unwholesome power ethics, lack of stewardship and truncated concept of mission. Mission is to the whole of culture, life and nature. To engage in mission is to engage in spiritual warfare. Salvation is a military term. The cross towers over the wrecks of time with the assurance of our victory in spite of the tensile strength of the opposing forces.

Finally, S H Skreslets has drawn attention to the need for the churches in the West to remodel the structure of mission to networking, civil society and NGO forms of operation⁴⁰. He cites the examples of this model and the effectiveness in responding to the challenge of poverty. Above all, it avoids the top-down model which causes alienation. Instead of charity, the agents of the gospel would work with communities to explore the meaning of the kingdom in their midst and the liberation from forces which dehumanise and yet without doing violence to their identity. This is the meaning of the name of Jesus, Emmanuel. God is not absent; He is in the midst of his people in exile, calling them to a new experience of his awesome reality. Both in the West and beyond the mandate is to reshape old traditions to acts of hope; to re-imagine them into revolutionary and subversive ways and to talk about the newness of God.

NOTES:

- 1 From the conference proceedings on World Mission and Evangelism 1996, Bahia, Brazil.
- 2 R Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York 1951, 39.
- 3 A McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Grand Rapids 1980.
- 4 Niebuhr, *op cit*, 28.
- 5 Niebuhr, *op cit*, 206.
- 6 R Schreiter, "Inculturation of the faith with culture" in: N Greinarcher & N Mette (eds), *Christianity and Cultures*, New York 1994, 15-24.
- 7 A Wells *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, New York 1996, 9.
- 8 Wells, *op cit*, 10.
- 9 Schreiter, *op cit*, 18.

- 10 Van Butselaar, *Africans, missionaries et colonialistes: les origenes de l'Englise prebyterienne du Mozambique* (Mission suisse) 1880-1896 Leiden 1984.
- 11 R B Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, San Francisco 1996.
- 12 W Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis 1992.
- 13 J Pobee, *West Africa: Christ would be an African too*, (WCC Pamphlet no IX), Geneva 1996.
- 14 R Wells, *History through the eyes of faith: Western Civilization and the Kingdom of God*, San Francisco 1989.
- 15 Wells, *op cit*, 88.
- 16 J Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, Minneapolis 1972.
- 17 B Long & D McMurry, *The collapse of the heaven: Rebuilding our worldview to embrace the power of God*, Grand Rapids 1996.
- 18 M Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the nature of religion*, New York 1959.
- 19 P L Berger *The Sacred Canopy: elements of sociological theory of religion*, New York 1967, 24.
- 20 Berger, *op cit*, 32.
- 21 M J Herskovitz, *Cultural Reativity*, New York 1973. See also, D Bidney, "Cultural Relativism" in: D L Sills (ed), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, New York 1968, 543-547.
- 22 N Chompsky, *Language and Mind*, New York 1968.
- 23 C R Taber, *The world is too much with us: Culture in Modern Protestant*, Marcon 1991.
- 24 W Goldschmidt, *Comparative Functionalism: An Essay in Anthropological Theory*, Berkley 1966, 134.
- 25 A Shorter, *Toward a theology of inculturation*, New York 1995, 6.
- 26 M G Kraft, *Understanding spiritual powers*, New York 1995, 20.
- 27 W R Ingwe, *Science and Ultimate Truth*, Folcroft 1973, Fison Memorial Lecture 1926.
- 28 P G Hiebert, *Anthropological insights for missionaries*, Grand Rapids 1985, 46.
- 29 C Kraft, *Christianity with power: Worldview and the experience of the Supernatural*, Ann Arbor 1989, 182.
- 30 C Kraft, *op cit*, 182.
- 31 M G Kraft, *op cit*, 1.
- 32 Niebuhr, *op cit*, 39-44.
- 33 E Comba, *Faith, action and politics*, Subir Biswas Memorial Lectures, Bangalore 1985, 17.
- 34 L Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, Orbis 1989, 1-6.
- 35 Sanneh, *op cit*, 40.
- 36 Shorter, *op cit*, 11.
- 37 R Harnack (1957:123)
- 38 O U Kalu, "Unconquered Spiritual Gates: Inculturation Theology in Africa Revisited", *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 1/1 (1994), 25-37. See also O U Kalu "The Dilemma of Grassroot Inculturation", *Religion in Africa* 25/1 (1995), 48-72. See also L Magesa, *African Religion: The moral traditions of abundant life*, New York 1997.
- 39 Brueggemann in his *Laidlaw Lectures*, Unpublished (1997).
- 40 S H Skreslets "Networking, Civil Society and the NGO: A New Model for Ecumenical Mission", *Missiology* 25/3 (1997), 307-319.