

*Thomas Malipurathu SVD**

**CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN THE EMERGING ERA
OF MULTICULTURALISM:
REFLECTIONS ON INTERCULTURAL LIFE AND MISSION**

The increasingly diversified cultural scenario in the world is a major factor impacting life at various levels today. When this multiculturalism, with all its subliminal implications, comes face to face with the New Testament vision of the Christian koinōnia—understood as the mega-gathering of the followers of Jesus held together by a profound sense of solidarity cutting across national borders, cultural boundaries, ethnic divides and skin-colour variations—that encounter often leads to a veritable expansion of the mental horizons of all concerned. That in turn results in the sighting of new challenges and the opening of new pathways for the life and mission of the Christian community. This paper attempts to piece together some relevant thoughts on the subject.

1. Situating the Intercultural Discourse

1.1. A Closer Look at the Concept

A series of inter-related developments in the world around us—all of a fairly recent vintage—have significantly contributed to the effort of raising the public profile of the concept of culture. Culture has turned into a hot-ticket topic of discussion as much in academic circles as in the living room space. While anthropologists and sociologists vigorously nurture the debate, each party claiming the concept as the domain proper to its branch of science, various media forums continue to provide unending grist to the mill of exchanges of a more popular kind. Newspaper columnists, feature-writers in periodicals and television talk-show hosts all chip in to keep the pot boiling.

Despite the many indications of its dominant presence in academia and in the popular mind, however, culture is an elusive concept.

* Born at Thamarakunnu/India in 1952, ordination in 1980, licentiate in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, later doctorate in Biblical Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University. Taught Scripture for many years at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth national seminary in Pune, India and other theological faculties. 1996-2002 director of the Missiological Institute, Ishvani Kendra, in Pune. Since 2004 Secretary for Formation and Education at the SVD Generalate in Rome.

That, ironically, not for want of precise definitions, but rather for their overabundance. Already in the middle of last century, American scholars Kroeber and Kluckhohn had lined up a staggering 162 definitions of culture in their much-quoted classic.¹ These trend-setting authors had classified the 162 definitions under six headings: descriptive, historical, normative, genetic, structural and psychological. After a detailed analysis of various proposals, they articulated their own position thus:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.²

Many scholars hold that the most widely recognized and inclusive definition of culture is provided by the British anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor, who avers that “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³

Yet—we have to readily admit—all this is technical stuff. In the common parlance of today’s men and women culture is identified with the cumulative impression that the particular traits, customs, traditions, festivals, style of clothing, etc., of individual peoples and social formations make on them. Such as these are the factors that mostly impinge on people’s perception as they encounter the phenomenon known as multiculturalism.

1.2. Factors Bringing Culture into Sharper Focus

1.2.1. End of the Era of Political Colonization

The surge in the awareness regarding the importance of culture is at least indirectly linked to the end of the era of political colonization. Most countries of Asia and Africa that had for long been languishing under the burden of colonial occupation gained independence around

¹ Alfred L. Kroeber/Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, New York: Vintage Books 1952.

² *Ibid.*, 357.

³ *Primitive Culture*, New York: J.P. Putham’s Sons 1871, 1.

the middle of the 20th century. Western colonial powers were coming increasingly under pressure to recognize the right of other peoples to self-determination and self-rule. Independence movements in many countries revived people's pride in their own cultural and religious heritage. Western colonial machinery was undoubtedly powered by a kind of ethnocentrism and a pervasive sense of racial superiority. We can see it epitomized, for instance, like the phrase "The white man's burden." It was the title of a poem that the English writer Rudyard Kipling published in the year 1899 with the subtitle "The United States and the Philippine Islands." It apparently contained a rhetorical command addressed to white men to conquer and rule over other nations for the benefit of those people. Thus, "burden" could have represented both the people and the duty to rule over them.

In any case, the phrase "the white man's burden" has been interpreted as racist, or taken as a metaphor for a condescending view of underdeveloped national cultures and economic traditions, identified as a sense of European ascendancy. Such attitudes from the colonial masters awakened the dormant self-respect of people in political captivity and persuasively prompted them to reassert the worth and uniqueness of their own particular religious and cultural matrix. What this process engendered is a positive evaluation of culture in general and the steadily growing perception that all cultures encapsulate positive and negative values.

1.2.2. Economic and Media Globalization

Among the various developments that have transformed multiculturalism into a major datum of human experience in today's world, of foremost impact is perhaps the complex process we have come to designate as globalization. In fact, in a generalized way the process can be described as the increasingly global relationship of culture, people and economic activity. Clearly culture is at the centre of it all. Transnational circulation of popular culture along with ideas and languages certainly characterizes globalization. But most often it refers to economic activity: the global distribution of production of goods and services. The fact is that the people who have drawn the maximum advantage of globalization have accumulated the benefits mostly from the international *economic integration*, one based on investor rights, with the interest of the general public incidental. Clearly in the whole process the concern for the common good is almost nonexistent. This is what has led to the creation of private power blocks and most beneficial effects of globalization accruing almost exclusively to the affluent. Those who oppose globalization are in fact militating against this pernicious fact and not against the creation of an atmos-

phere of global solidarity that promotes the rights of people, which the concept can and does include. It is by conveniently ignoring this crucial fact—as prominent social critics like Noam Chomsky have argued—that the strident promoters of “globalism” have unjustly branded the anti-globalization groups as opponents of all human progress.

It is this domination of multinational corporations in the promotion of globalization that has led to the phenomenon known as “homogenization of culture.” In the most benign sense it is described as the convergence towards a common set of cultural traits and practices. But in the hands of the heralds of the gospel of consumerism it has become the merging of different cultural elements and practices into one blended, uniform cultural equation that does not allow easy identification of the characteristics of individual cultures. So in reality, cultural homogenization is a by-product of consumerism, so vigorously promoted by the agents of economic globalization. The fact is that cultural conformity is used for promoting consumerism. Cultural homogenization tries to devalue cultural differences in its attempt to reduce individuals to the status of potential consumers. It simply substitutes a kind of decentralized consumerism for a more grounded and genuine sense of identity. Its promoters unabashedly claim that global culture follows global economy (to be understood as a transnational capitalist system of economic governance). It is this which has led to the coining of such pejorative expressions as “Coca-colonization” and “McDonaldization.”

Along with economic globalization, media globalization has also been instrumental in pushing the culture question to the fore. Indeed, many say that the two most powerful driving forces of international integration have been advances in telecommunications infrastructure and the rise of the internet. There is no gainsaying that digital communication technology has radically revolutionized the story of human interactions. Helpful for the trend of media globalization was the formation of transnational media corporations and the emergence of financial institutions like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. These entities have helped to create a new form of global capitalism that uses global media to disseminate messages to global consumers.

Unfortunately what has resulted from this is that global media systems have come to be perceived as vehicles of a kind of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism happens when a country dominates others through its media exports including advertising messages, music, films, television and radio programming. Evidently cultural imperialism imperils the development of native cultures. The

exponential increase in the tools of communication (the internet, satellite television, mobile phone, Bluetooth technology, etc.) and the incredible expansion of their reach have helped the spread of this evil. To be read in conjunction with it is the moral and ethical side of the global media. The various types of cyber crimes, the menacing spread of pornographic material, the misuses linked to social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., reveal only the tip of the giant iceberg.

1.2.3. Multiple Migrations of People

Yet another key factor contributing to the situation of multiculturalism is the steadily accelerating trend of migration. What the term refers to is the physical movement of humans from one place to another. It has always been part of human history. But the process has seen an immense acceleration in the past few decades. The International Organization for Migration's "World Migration Report 2011" estimates that there are 214 million international migrants currently and if today's pace continues that number is expected to reach 450 million by the year 2050.⁴ In addition to that, an estimated 740 million people are categorized as internal migrants (internally displaced people). People migrate for political reasons (civil war situation, repressive regimes, religious persecution, etc.) and at times to escape the perils of natural calamities (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, inundation, etc.). But contemporary migration is chiefly economically motivated. Large-scale movement of people occurs as they are in search of better financial prospects.

The phenomenon of migration becomes relevant for the present discussion in so far as it impacts the intercultural situation in the world today. Cross-border migration as well as mass movement of people from rural areas to urban centres within the same country is a development that has made multiculturalism a fact of daily experience for many in our times.

While taking stock of the present-day intercultural scenario from the perspective of an international missionary community, one becomes aware of the challenges and opportunities the situation presents. Christian witnessing in the contemporary context must proceed from a hugely expanded mental horizon in order to be responsive to the signs of the times. Such a proactive approach, I submit, can constantly draw motivation from the New Testament vision of reaching out to the world.

⁴ Cf. www.iom.int (accessed on 27 December 2011).

2. Reaching Out across the Cultural Divide— Glimpses from the New Testament

The quintessential vision which the New Testament enshrines is that the Christian *koinōnia* is a mega-gathering of the disciples of Jesus inseparably held together by a profound sense of solidarity that cuts across national borders, ethnic boundaries, cultural divides and skin-colour variations. This is what we can glean from the combined testimony of the various layers of the New Testament tradition. Doubtlessly we see some conflicting impulses here and there. We might immediately think of Jesus' own contention that his mission was primarily, if not exclusively, addressed to the people of Israel ("I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; cf. Mt 15:24). This assertion appears in the Gospel story that recounts the Syro-Phoenician woman's faith (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). Scholars point out that two aspects of the early Church's faith are reflected in this story: first, the historical Jesus' limiting his activity to the Jewish fold; and second, the salvation-historical precedence of the Jews ("to the Jew first, and also to the Greek," cf. Rom 1:16).⁵ But interestingly, the final outcome of the story shows that what is decisive for divine intervention is genuine faith and not ethnic or cultural provenance. The distraught woman, responding to Jesus' submission, points out—picking up Jesus' own imagery, but with no trace of arrogance—that there can indeed be a place in God's plan even for those outside the Jewish fold. An astonished Jesus readily hands it to her and her long-suffering daughter is instantly healed. So, the story's ultimate message reinforces the aforementioned NT vision. It is not possible to go into a detailed analysis of all passages that project this ideal. What follows is an attempt to present a few representative cases.

2.1. Simeon's Unequivocal Depiction of the Gospel's Universal Reach (Lk 2:30-32)

These words form part of the Canticle of Simeon, which like the other two canticles of the Lucan Infancy Narrative (the *Magnificat* in Lk 1:46-55 and the *Benedictus* in Lk 1:68-79), are dense with theological ideas that get duly elaborated in the course of Luke's two-volume

⁵ Cf. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel according to Mark*, and Benedict T. Viviano, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, in: Raymond E. Brown/Joseph A. Fitzmyer/Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Geoffrey Chapman 2000, 613, 658-9.

work. This is of particular significance for grasping the full impact of the message that the lines under consideration convey.

The Third Gospel's unmistakable espousal of the idea of universal salvation⁶ and its evident flair for promoting the interests of those in the margins of society must be kept in mind while attempting to interpret the episode of Jesus' presentation in the temple and the special encounters that take place there (Lk 2:22-38). Two major protagonists of the scene, Simeon and Anna, are both of advanced age. In most societies and at all times people of that age-bracket normally get ignored or sidelined.⁷ Luke brings them to the centre of the stage and to full limelight in this episode. And in addition, an affirmation of immense consequence is made to come off the mouth of one of them. And that affirmation is: in the new phase of salvation history inaugurated by the birth of the Messiah, no one—absolutely no one—is excluded from the purview of God's favour. Both the chosen people and the rest of humankind have an equal claim to the divine offer of salvation.

Simeon's canticle identifies the child Jesus as the personification of God's salvation.⁸ "My eyes have seen the salvation!" the affable sage declares exuberantly as he takes the child in his arms. This salvation, he insists, is God's offer to the entire humanity (*to sōterion sou, ho ētoimasas kata prosōpon pantōn tōn laōn*). To make that point doubly clear, he adds another elaboration saying that the child is destined to be the glory of the people of Israel and a light to the rest of

⁶ Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel according to Luke," in: *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 683, surmises that the theme of universalism is Luke's hallmark.

⁷ Luke's practice of pairing a female character with a male character is in evidence here. This pairing is of particular significance in this context, even as Anna's testimony adds nothing more to what has already been established; cf. Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1991, 56. Simeon is indeed the primary witness here as a righteous man associated with the temple who acts under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2:25-27); cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1997, 140-1. Anna's role is equally crucial as the female counterpart of the prophetic Simeon. She belongs to an even more marginalized group as a widow. Yet she gets a chance for a face-to-face encounter with the Messiah! Together they represent the expectant Israel, impatiently waiting for ages for the coming of the Messiah; cf. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Volume One—The Gospel according to Luke*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1991, 38-39.

⁸ The etymology of Joshua/Jesus suggests that Jesus IS salvation. Joshua means "Yahweh saves."

the nations. The terminology used here is clearly dependent on the Isaian context and “leaves us in no doubt that the salvation that God has brought is universal in its reach.”⁹

“God’s salvation” is an important expression here. What Simeon indicates about the mission of Jesus here is programmatic for the rest of the narrative of Luke-Acts and it functions as a key helping the reader’s understanding of the story.¹⁰ We get an affirmation of this fact at the close of the Acts narrative, where Paul is quoted as saying: “Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28). Luke’s story is about God offering God’s salvation to the entire human family. Equally remarkably, in what can be described as a narrative master stroke, the evangelist here depicts the centre of the world of Israel, the Jerusalem temple, as the locus of this immensely consequential disclosure about the universal reach of the Gospel.¹¹

2.2. *Jesus’ Inclusive Vision of the Kingdom (Mt 8:11-12)*

The passage in which these verses occur (Mt 8:5-13), technically speaking, is a miracle story. Yet, it highlights not so much the instant healing that results as the pronouncement that it becomes an occasion of. Indeed, that pronouncement is the focal point of our discussion here. The episode itself, although with considerable variations, also appears in Lk 7:1-10 and Jn 4:46-54. Curiously, Jesus’ statement which is the highlight of Matthew’s story leaves no trace at all in its Lucan and Johannine versions. Nevertheless, Luke employs the same logion elsewhere in his Gospel, in a totally different context and in a more complete manner (cf. Lk 13:22-30, especially vv. 28-29). Notably, both Matthew and Luke describe the supplicant in the story as a centurion (*ekatontarchos*), while John employs the word “royal official” (*basilikos*) for him. Whereas in both the synoptics, the man beseeches Jesus on behalf of his servant (*pais* in Matthew,¹² *doulos* in Luke), in John it becomes his son (*huios*).

At the centre of the story is the exemplary faith of the military official. What makes it particularly impressive is the fact that he was not a Jew. When he approaches Jesus with the request of healing his

⁹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 148.

¹⁰ Cf. Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 57.

¹¹ Cf. Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 146.

¹² Some translate the *pais* in Matthew as “son”; so, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, English translation by James E. Crouch, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 2001, 10, note 17.

servant in deep distress, Jesus readily agrees to go with him to his house and attend to the ailing man. It is at that point that the official gives evidence of his redoubtable faith in Jesus' healing power. He was aware that as a Jew Jesus would be acting against the law if he entered the house of a Gentile (cf. Acts 10:28). Observant Jews would risk ritual defilement by such an action. So he humbly admits to his lack of social respectability, at the same time affirming his familiarity with the way authority works. Those in authority can give orders and make sure that they are carried out by their subordinates. "Simply say it with a word" expresses the unlimited confidence in the authority of Jesus who can make sick people whole by means of his own word."¹³ The centurion twice addresses Jesus as "Lord" (*kyrios*) giving another clear indication of his unwavering trust in the itinerant preacher.

Jesus' reaction to these arresting words of the centurion is one of total astonishment. In no one in the enlightened and law-abiding Israel, he comments, had he ever encountered such formidable faith. And then he formulates the pivotal principle on this question. What is decisive with regard to inclusion in the kingdom of God is unrestrained faith in God and everything else is secondary. "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," he declares with down-to-earth clarity. National or ethnic identity, geographical limits, time-zone considerations and all such humanly fashioned conditions just do not affect God's kingdom and its universal inclusiveness. The words "east and west" are to be taken in an all-inclusive sense. The idea is drawn from texts such as Ps 107:3; Isa 49:12; 59:19 and Mal 1:11.¹⁴ The text in Ps 107 is more complete in that it adds "north and south" to east and west. It deserves mention that when Luke uses the same logion, he employs this fuller version (cf. Lk 13:28-29).

Some commentators point out that the primary emphasis of Jesus' words in Mt 8:11-12 is on the judgment against Israel, its exclusion from the eschatological banquet on account of its lack of faith. Israel's primacy in the divine scheme of salvation is certainly implied here, but nonetheless the idea of the kingdom's inclusiveness and its openness to diversity is equally in focus.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Cf. Viviano, "Gospel according to Matthew," 648.

2.3. Peter's Bold Initiative to Expand the Horizons (Acts 10:1-11:18)

This long sequence in Acts actually describes the fledgling Church's first real encounter of a cross-cultural kind. It is true that the author had earlier narrated the story of the Samaritans receiving the good news (8:4-25). But then—although estranged from the mainstream Jewish faith—the Samaritans were still considered “half Jews.” There also is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch receiving baptism, depicted right after that (8:26-40); yet once again it has to be considered as an isolated case. But in the detailed narration of what happened in the case of the centurion Cornelius and his household, we have on hand an event of breakthrough significance. A number of factors indicate that the author of Acts attaches considerable significance to this sequence. Its sheer length is first among them. The ripples caused by the incident remain under surface until they clamorously resurface in the form of the larger question of the relationship between the disciples of the Jewish background and those of the Gentile persuasion, a contentious issue that was finally settled at the so-called “Jerusalem Council” (15:1-35).

There is no unanimity among scholars about dividing this long narrative into subsections. But basically it appears to be a drama made up of five distinct scenes: i) Cornelius' vision (10:1-8); ii) Peter's vision (10:9-16); iii) Messengers from Cornelius at the lodgings of Peter (10:17-23a); iv) Peter's testimony at Cornelius' house (10:23b-48); and v) Peter's defense of his actions in Jerusalem (11:1-18).¹⁵ Through this narrative sequence what Luke intends is “to show how the Church made this most fundamental and dangerous step, which would involve the greatest struggle and demand the most fundamental self-reinterpretation for the nascent messianic movement, which in fact would in principle establish its identity as a universal and not simply ethnic religion.”¹⁶ It undoubtedly signaled a major paradigm shift as far as the early Christian community was concerned and for the crucial influence it exerted on the earliest band of Jesus' followers for its own transformation, it can be appropriately called “the story of Peter's conversion” as well.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York: Doubleday 1998, 447; for a different division, cf. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Doubleday 1997, 299-300.

¹⁶ Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1992, 186.

¹⁷ Cf. Charles E. van Engen, Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission – Acts 10:1–11:18, in: Robert L. Gallagher/

The opening sentence of Peter's discourse in the house of Cornelius is perhaps the key idea that this sequence proposes. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," declares Peter, "but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34). This realization of Peter—occurring to him through his own strange vision on the rooftop of the Joppa lodgings, the first-hand report of the vision Cornelius had and the astounding event of the descent of the Spirit on Cornelius and his household—had revolutionary import for reformulating the self-understanding of the early Church. Although this new self-understanding would be ratified by the representatives of the community only at a later moment (at the Jerusalem Council), what happens in the Cornelius sequence is that "under heaven's direction Peter, the spokesman of the Twelve, officially inaugurates the mission to the Gentiles."¹⁸ Luke rightly sees it as a breakthrough event of enormous consequence and that is why he goes into lengthy details in narrating it and attaches many remarkable literary features to its retelling.¹⁹

2.4. Paul's Single Overarching Principle (Gal 3:28)

Given the background of the Letter to the Galatians as "the most Pauline of the Pauline writings,"²⁰ its highly polemical language, the direct antinomy Paul posits in it between faith and the works of the Law, the profound ideas that he proposes about the freedom that the Christians have won, etc., commenting on a single verse from it, that too in a cursory manner, can appear to be a naïve exercise. However, since the verse in question (Gal 3:28) seeks to project a pivotal ideal in the context of the topic this paper has undertaken to discuss, the minimalist approach may find some justification. The ideal in question is that ostensible differences based on cultural, social and gender considerations become inconsequential through the effect of one's incorporation into Christ's body through faith and baptism.²¹

Paul Hertig (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004, 135; also Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004, 24, quoting James G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Petersborough, UK: Epworth Press 1996.

¹⁸ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 447.

¹⁹ Cf. for a brilliant treatment of such features, Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two, The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1991, 128-145.

²⁰ Brown, *Introduction*, 467.

²¹ Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Letter to the Galatians, in: *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 787.

Paul in Galatians builds up a strong case against the preaching of a group of Judaizers who insisted that justification won through faith in Christ was not complete without observing the works of the Law.²² For Paul, the Law having been superceded by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the only decisive saving principle was the acceptance of God's grace through faith and its sacramental complement: baptism. Thereupon one becomes subject to the law of love (cf. Gal 5:6). Then he goes on to show that a community that is brought together by these crucial factors evolves into a close-knit family, in which superficial elements such as culture, class and gender should not come in the way of its functioning as one body.

Paul in his times daringly contended that "the heirs of Abraham are not free-born male Jews who have been circumcised; they include women, slaves and Gentiles."²³ That contention remains perennially valid and continues to gather new meanings even today. Moreover, the vision which Gal 3:28 proposes has profound social and political implications and for that reason it can be termed revolutionary.²⁴ The abolition of the social and class distinctions between Jews and Greeks, between slaves and free people, between men and women is of a piece with the core of the Christian worldview. Down the ages this ideal has set ablaze many searing trails in lands far and wide, however imperfectly leavened by the message of the Gospel.

3. Christian Witness—Multiculturalism Interface

Against the background of the universally verified fact of cultural awakening, the positive evaluation of individual cultures and the emerging scenario of multiculturalism, how would one delineate the challenges the cumulative effect of these factors poses—and the opportunities it proffers—for the task of Christian witness of our day? And how would the options we formulate connect with the sweeping, all-inclusive vision of the New Testament? What follows is a halting, tentative attempt at putting together some home-spun reflections.

²² For a brief yet illumining look at the background of the Letter to the Galatians along with the major issues and problems it raises, cf. Brown, *Introduction*, 467-481.

²³ John Bligh, *Galatians: A Discussion of St Paul's Epistle*, London: St Paul Publications 1969, 323.

²⁴ Cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1979, 190.

3.1. *The Reality of the World-church*

There are differing interpretations of the Christian dispensation's voyage across the centuries and the twists and turns its history has undergone. Many say what in the beginning was a "reform movement" within Judaism²⁵ passed on to the stage of "Palestinian Christianity," and from there soon afterwards to the stage of "Hellenistic Christianity" (the Hellenistic Christians vastly outnumbering those of the Jewish background). Despite the early prominence of flourishing Eastern centres such as Antioch and Alexandria, in a matter of few centuries—aided by the Roman Empire's political clout—there emerged what many designate as the "European Christianity" as the dominant subculture and it retained that rarely contested position well beyond the middle of the 20th century. And in the opinion of the magisterial theological thinker of modern times, Karl Rahner, it was at Vatican II that a credible image of the "world-church" finally emerged. Seen against such a backdrop, Jesus' words at the final commissioning of his disciples: ". . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) did indeed contain a grand vision. A vision that embraced the whole world, up to its farthest corners, encompassing all peoples and ethnicities, cultures and languages. The image of the world-church spotlights that luminous vision and in some way functions as the prolepsis of the ongoing developments on the cultural front.

But is this noble ideal of the world-church actually operational? I am afraid not. The Church is still to a great extent Eurocentric. That is why we continue to hear views such as that the Greco-roman culture is intrinsic to the Christian worldview. Is that a sustainable claim? Can any culture claim the Gospel vision as its own sole preserve? Christianity is not of European origin. It became widespread in Europe long after it had sunk strong cultural roots in the East. It was the benign political climate that helped the Western segment of the Church to gain power and wealth and subsequently come to possess a controlling interest in the enterprise. Later, the conquest model of mission and the *plantatio ecclesiae* approach to the spread of faith cemented this perchance-acquired ascendancy. A genuine acceptance of the vision proposed by the ideal of the world-church, de-

²⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1991, 41-42: "During the early stages there was clearly no intention to form a separate religion. The Judaism of the time exhibited a degree of pluralism which permitted Jewish Christianity to exist as one group among many without severing its links with the main body"; cf. also Bevans/Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 10.

manded by today's world reality, invites all concerned to rethink this idea of Eurocentrism, realizing its unsavoury consequences.

There is no denying the fact that the "white man's burden" attitude, which was central to the advance of the colonial machinery, had rubbed off on the missionary enterprise as well. The vestiges of it are still operative in the mindset of many in the Church. If the Church is convinced that ethnocentrism is an evil that must be purged, efforts are required to reconfigure this mindset. The positive impulse which the rising trend of multiculturalism entails should inspire all of us to objectively assess the lights and shadows of all cultures.

3.2. *Community Witnessing*

Let me begin by narrating two titbits from my personal experience. On a recent trip to Japan I had a chance to visit the city of Tokyo. While there I was staying with the only SVD community present in the Japanese capital. The day before I was scheduled to return, the superior of the community invited me to dinner in a nearby Japanese restaurant. The rest of the confreres in the community joined in, making up a group of six. The menu for the evening was complete with the traditional *sukiyaki* (a popular one-pot dish usually cooked at the table as you eat). As drinks were being served, we got into exchanging pleasantries. As a group we were a real cultural mix. The six of us belonged to five nationalities: two Japanese, one each from China, the Philippines, the Netherlands and India. The generational mix was remarkable, too: the eldest was 85, in the 60th year of his ordination and the youngest had just turned 31 and was in the second year of his ordination. Of the other four, one was 82, two others in their early 60's and the last in his mid-40's. Commenting on the picture of variety that we presented as a group, one of the members commented: "What organization other than a missionary congregation like ours can provide the setting for a meeting of cultures like this? Isn't this a miniscule picture of the universal brotherhood we all hope for?" Well, I couldn't agree more. But then, who would take issue with your dinner companion on any matter at all while enjoying a leisurely meal in a high-end restaurant!

Some months ago, while attending a conference, I got into a conversation with a religious sister, who for many years was a member of the general administration of her fairly large international missionary institute. At one moment our exchanges turned to the topic of internationality. "We already have countless problems of making a community with members drawn from the same national and cultural background a functioning entity," she remarked, "then think of the

uphill task we face with communities of an intercultural make-up!” She went on to explain by telling me that an intercultural community from the outside may look impressive and a functioning one may indeed provide true Christian witness. But it often happens that we spend more time and energy on fire-fighting (to settle interpersonal conflicts) than on devising creative ways of carrying out our task of witnessing to the Gospel. I could hardly challenge her.

The preferred model of witnessing which the New Testament presents is that of community-witness. Starting with Jesus’ own practice of sending out his disciples in pairs on mission (cf. Mk 6:6b-13; Lk 10:1-16), one can cite numerous examples from the NT writings where evangelizing work is shown as being carried out by pairs or groups. It is a clear pointer to the effectiveness of community-witnessing over against individual efforts at proclamation. In those early days interculturality was perhaps not a meaningful option. But even today, multicultural communities cannot be projected as an ideal to be pursued. It is true that if a community made up of individuals from different cultural backgrounds functions as one body in their missionary outreach, the witness becomes truly stirring. But it will equally be true, I believe, of a community made up of, say, men and women, individuals of older and younger generations, the highly educated and people with just the ordinary level of schooling, all drawn from the same culture. What impresses people is the image of teamwork we project, many individuals joining hands, and jointly putting the shoulder to the wheel.

3.3. *Conversion from Institutional Selfishness*

In today’s global village situation, encountering other cultures has become a matter of daily experience for large sections of the population. In the case of many who had been raised in a mono-cultural ambience, such encounters may have been helpful for expanding their mental horizons. Moreover, such experiences often lead to an enhanced appreciation of other cultures and to a generally respectful attitude towards them. In situations of cross-cultural interactions we are cautioned about the need for being respectful and sensitive.²⁶ British missiologist Max Warren’s acclaimed dictum is often quoted

²⁶ American missiologists, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, in their recent volume entitled *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2011, emphasize this aspect in their engaging discussion of intercultural mission. Very appropriately, the title they use for the chapter discussing intercultural mission is “Entering Someone Else’s Garden”; cf. pp. 72-87.

in this context: “Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Also we may find ourselves treading on people’s dreams ... More seriously still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.”²⁷

The respect and sensitivity recommended for our dealings with other cultural groups, I believe, should be extended to our approach to other faith traditions and to our missionary interactions among the followers of other religions. As the logical next step, the legitimacy and acceptability now accorded to cultural pluralism should be extended to the plurality of religions. Concretely it would mean we stop our preoccupation with numbers and give up all pretensions for collective conversions.²⁸ Measuring the strength of Christian presence in the world using the yardstick of numbers is a crude practice, nay arbitrary and absurd.

Seeking to convert people from one religion to another has nothing noble about it. As a matter of fact, it amounts to trivializing the essential religiosity that resides in the inner sanctuary of humans on which any and all religious belief is built. The following words of former German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, should serve as an eye-opener: “I was and am now aware that many people find strength in their Christian faith. [...] Christian mission towards believers of other religions has always seemed to me a violation of humanity. If someone has found support and protection in his religion, no one has the right to convert this person to another religion. [...] when a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu or a Jew [...] imagines that only his religion is revealed by God and blessed and comes to the conclusion that it is his duty to lead his own religion to victory over other religions, he violates the dignity and freedom of people of other religions...”²⁹ This is not to deny the freedom of individuals to change their faith or religious affiliation. That would amount to the denial of a person’s basic human rights. In fact, as James W. Heisig has cogently argued, “We must defend the right to lure others to one’s own beliefs by reason or

²⁷ Bevans and Schroeder make repeated reference to this dictum in their latest volume; cf. 20, 59, 76.

²⁸ In a recent letter that he wrote to Pope Benedict XVI, reputed Indian social activist and Aryasamj leader, Swami Agnivesh, requested him to declare a moratorium on collective conversions. Such conversions, he maintained, bring about a host of problems in societies where they take place. The full text of this letter appeared in *Cathnews.India*, an electronic newsletter, on November 8, 2011 (cf. www.Ucannews.com).

²⁹ The passage containing these lines is quoted by Martin Ueffing, Editorial/Vorwort: *Verbum SVD* 52 (2011) 5.

example or impassioned buttonholing. But when it comes to employing impersonal, technical apparatus, religion has to consider the negative impact wrought on the message by the filtering media.”³⁰ Conversion of all people to the ideal of *homo religiosus* is a universally acceptable proposition. What most people oppose is the Church arrogating to itself the mission to convert everything to a unity defined by itself as the exclusive centre.

The urge to convert followers of other faith traditions is part of the institutional preoccupation that weighs on the Church. It is linked to an untenable posturing that the institutional Church is the replica of the kingdom of God, while in reality it is only a symbol and a servant of the kingdom. More importantly, such institutional grandstanding flies in the face of the logic proposed by the defining icon of the Gospel message—the crucified Lord—who is a symbol of powerlessness and vulnerability, not of dominion and invincibility (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-25). Trying to shore up the grandiosity of the establishment by belittling the essential human religious sentiment is ultimately self-defeating.³¹ We must keep in mind that what goes around comes around!

ABSTRACTS

Die wachsende kulturelle Vielfalt in der heutigen Welt beeinflusst das Leben auf vielfältige Weise. Trifft diese Multikulturalität mit ihren oftmals unterschwelligen Folgen auf die neutestamentliche Vision der christlichen *koinōnia* – als Gemeinschaft aller Jünger Jesu Christi, verbunden in tief empfundener Solidarität über alle Grenzen politischer, kultureller, ethnischer oder rassischer Art hinweg –, bewirkt diese Begegnung häufig bei allen Beteiligten eine deutliche Erweiterung des geistigen Horizonts. Das wiederum führt zur Erkenntnis neuer Herausforderungen und der Eröffnung neuer Wege für Leben und Mission der Kirche. Dieser Artikel versucht, einige relevante Gedanken zu diesem Thema zu skizzieren.

El escenario cultural que se va diversificando cada vez más en todo el mundo, es uno de los factores de más impacto sobre la vida en varios niveles. Cuando este multiculturalismo con todas sus implicaciones subliminales, se confronta con la visión del Nuevo Testamento en cuanto a la *koinonía* – comprendida como el encuentro máximo de los seguidores de Jesús, reunidos por un profundo sentido de solidaridad que supera fronteras nacionales, límites culturales, divisiones étnicas y variaciones en el color de la piel – este encuentro lleva muchas veces a una expansión impresionante de los horizontes mentales de todos los participantes. A su vez, esto resulta en la visión de

³⁰ Christian Mission: The Selfish War: *Verbum SVD* 22 (1981) 379.

³¹ This, as Heisig rightly maintains, is a manifestation of an institutional selfishness, hence the need for institutional conversion; *ibid.*, 370-377.

nuevos desafíos y a la apertura de nuevos rumbos para la vida y la misión de la comunidad cristiana. En esta contribución se presenta un primer esbozo para juntar algunas ideas importantes en cuanto a este propósito.

Un scénario culturel mondial de plus en plus diversifié est l'un des facteurs majeurs qui influencent la vie aujourd'hui, à différents niveaux. Lorsque cette multiculturalité, avec toutes ses implications subliminales, est confrontée à la vision néotestamentaire de la *koinonia* chrétienne – comprise comme le méga-rassemblement des disciples de Jésus ayant en commun un sens profond de la solidarité au-delà de toutes frontières nationales, culturelles, de toutes divisions ethniques ou de couleur de peau – la rencontre entraîne souvent un véritable élargissement de l'horizon mental des personnes concernées. Il en résulte la perception de nouveaux défis et l'ouverture de nouveaux chemins pour la vie et la mission de la communauté chrétienne. Ce texte représente une première mise en forme de quelques pensées pertinentes sur le sujet.