

INTERCULTURAL FORMATION FOR MISSION

MISSION “TO” AND “AMONG” THE NATIONS

by William Burrows

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Much of what follows revolves around what it means to be in mission “among” as opposed to “to” the world’s peoples. Above all, I presume that formation for mission in a globalizing world aims at intercultural competence, for never in history has the multicultural nature of the world made it so necessary for ministers of the gospel to function in intercultural settings. Intercultural ministry is or should be an important part of normal pastoral ministry.

In the Catholic tradition of proclaiming and living the gospel, religious communities add to the richness of the church and put a vital, international, world-church face on both internal and *ad extra* (outside the community of believers) work. My second presumption, accordingly, is that – be it in traditional or new lay communities—formation is a community responsibility and involves ongoing community participation in each missionary’s lifelong formation.

In particular, we reflect on what these insights may mean for the members of congregations of men and women (1) whose *raison d’être* has been defined as *missio ad gentes*; (2) whose life ways and structures were formed in an era when that mission went in a North-South direction in which the North was viewed as the actor and the South as a recipient; and also (3) with knowledge both that new forms of lay ecclesial communities are evolving and that they are seeking to appropriate relevant elements of a great Catholic missionary tradition.

A number of matters I had been pondering on the future of mission in our new ecumenical climate came together in a Eureka moment in June 2001, when I was invited to respond to a speech by Father Michael Amaladoss, SJ, at a meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.¹ I observed that, without denying the validity of *missio ad gentes* (“mission ‘to’ the nations” — that is, to followers of other religious traditions), Michael put the accent on a particularly Asian dimension of mission in our day. Although he did not use the term in his address, my response characterized the evolution as a move toward *missio inter gentes* (“mission ‘among’ the nations”). By this I mean that mission outside the circle of believers has become mission *among* followers of other religious traditions who are one’s neighbors, friends, and fellow countrymen.² This reflects the reality that mission is shifting from activities of foreigners and cross-cultural missionaries to an activity carried on among one’s neighbors. And when foreigners engage in cross- and inter-cultural mission – sensitized by discussions of “white privilege” in mission – they will be invited by local churches to assist local ministers of the gospel.

What I want to bring into relief is this: our view of *missio ad gentes* changes when one thinks of oneself doing it as *missio inter gentes*. To unpack what I mean by that I invite you to reflect with me on insights from three Asian missiologists whose work may help us not just to grapple with but *to appropriate* a vision of mission and strategies for embodying that vision.

Jonathan Y. Tan

Professor Jonathan Tan of Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, a lawyer and Catholic theologian, has fleshed out the meaning of *missio inter gentes* in two impressive articles.³ For Tan, the distinction between *missio ad* and *inter gentes* is not between an outmoded and bad model, on the one hand, or modern and good model, on the other hand. Rather, what this Malay of Chinese ethnic extraction, who was first trained as a lawyer in Singapore and who later obtained a PhD in theology at Catholic University of America under Peter Phan, is driving at is something quite different. Although he is sensitive to the accusation that Christianity is a Western religion and that Christian mission was a colonial imposition, for him that is not the whole story.

It is important to stress Tan's *experience*. Reflecting on the situation in Malaysia, he sees a land in which many tribal people follow traditional religions, while Indian migrants follow their traditions, ethnic Chinese follow various strands of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and Christians from every ethnic group (members of numerous denominations) live side by side with a Muslim majority that is influenced by revival movements imported from Western Asia. An assertive evangelistic posture is simply impossible and counterproductive, says Tan.

To a large extent, this situation is duplicated throughout Asia. Asian Christians, except for Filipinos, live as minorities in the midst of immense cultural and religious diversity. As we consider what *missio inter gentes* means practically and operationally, it is important, above all, to realize that the ethnicity and national identities are, ironically, becoming more important even as globalization proceeds apace.

The question is, I believe, "What sort of message needs to be shaped to make it more readily understandable in Asia?" Hwa Yung, the Methodist bishop of Malaysia, has

written a book that puts the question succinctly when he asks whether Asian Christian theology and identity more nearly resemble a mango or a banana.⁴ The mango, he notes, is an indisputably Asian fruit, green before it matures. Depending on the variety of mango and growing conditions, the fruit beneath the skin is yellow through and through. The banana's origins are uncertain, but when it ripens, the green changes to yellow, while the fruit is always white. Surveying Asian theology and attempts at Asian theologizing, Hwa Yung sees them vitiated by tendencies to borrow from Western thought. Although they are yellow on the surface, have they really sunk deep roots into Asian religious traditions? Is Christian theology in Asia, in other words, more like a mango or a banana? Hwa Yung concludes his book with the observation that Asian Christian identity is not yet clear, but he is clear also in saying, "What we need are more theological 'mangos' and not 'bananas' " (Hwa Yung, p. 241).

Jonathan Tan is trying to produce mangos in a brilliant article demonstrating that the symbol and reality of the Crucified Christ are vitally important for Asia and translatable into Asian thought forms.⁵ I am not qualified to judge the adequacy of detailed exegetical work of Tan on Confucian and Taoist texts. What becomes indisputably clear is that the resources of Asian philosophy for articulating the deepest insights and paradoxes of Christ's revelation of God should not be doubted. Moreover, Tan's work shows that the death and resurrection of Jesus and the salvation prefigured and accomplished in them can be expressed in Confucian categories and that Asian soteriology need not be expressed solely in terms of socio-political liberation. Rather than bifurcating soteriology into transcendent (other-worldly) and immanent (socio-political) dimensions, Tan shows that the Crucified Sage embodies the total Way of discerning and manifesting what the Sage has learned from God for all humanity. Jesus, the crucified and risen sage, according to Tan, in the climax of his life in his death and resurrection, proclaims and makes manifest the "Way of the Lord of heaven .

... the Reign of God to all peoples.”⁶

In regard to intercultural formation for mission, Tan’s work shows the importance of offering candidates who are capable of advanced studies the opportunity to enter deeply both into the religious and philosophical texts of Asia and those of the Christian tradition. The missionary group or congregation that lacks a critical mass of members who can help their fellow members understand and appreciate the depths of other people’s original religion is a group whose insertion into other cultural contexts runs the risk of superficiality. This, of course, is especially challenging for short-term missionaries who want to do something practical but risk transporting their native cultures into environments where their application does not fit.

Amos Yong

Amos Yong of Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia describes himself as a “Chinese-Malaysian-born, American-educated, systematic-and-constructive-theologian.” In an address to the American Society of Missiology in June 2006, Yong addressed one of the key problems facing Christianity in an era when recognition of religious plurality and tolerance are seen to be essential.⁷ How, he asks, does one reconcile today’s openness and tolerance with standard interpretations of the Luke-Acts narratives in which one reads words like “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4: 12)? Yong examines how Pentecostals should respond to the missionary call of the Spirit, but his exegesis has lessons for the broader Christian world. It is also an example of the depths of both Evangelical and Pentecostal theology, a depth many Catholics have never encountered.

Yong sees need for recovering forgotten universal horizons of Luke-Acts wherein the Holy Spirit is portrayed as “poured out on all flesh” (Acts 2: 17). He notes that “this

does not mean that entire religious traditions are to be uncritically accepted or that every aspect of any particular religion is divinely sanctioned.”⁸ He does maintain, however that one finds in the Lukan parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and elsewhere an image of Jesus ready to enjoy the hospitality of non-Jews and a Holy Spirit who in Luke-Acts is active in the world, the Holy Spirit whose behavior is manifested in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10) as forcing Peter to recognize God’s saving presence outside Jewish communities.

The religious “other,” in essence, is not a mere object of efforts to convert or enlist in social betterment crusades, but a person who can be the guest and friend of the Christian and who can extend friendship and hospitality to the Christian. In other words, in the full gospel sense of the word, those outside the family of faith are neighbors. One of the legacies of the traditional way of reading Luke-Acts is to see the other solely as someone to be converted. Yong has moved, although he does not use the term, to a *mission inter gentes*, toward an idea of Christian mission exercised as one would among one’s neighbors

In terms of a formation of Christians for mission today, at least this much needs to be said. All need face-to-face experiences with persons of other faiths in relations marked by friendship and neighborliness. Both our formation and work communities need to be places where non-Christians feel welcome as friends and neighbors. As a recent SEDOS⁹ conference theme put the matter, formation needs to be “intercultural formation for *missio ad gentes*.” A solid part of that formation must involve living in situations where interreligious interchange takes place.

Moonjang Lee

My third Asian theologian, Moonjang Lee, is a Korean teaching at Gordon Conwell Seminary near Boston. He

has degrees from institutions in Korea, the United States, and Britain. He has taught in Germany, Scotland, Korea, Singapore, and the US. I first met Moonjang at a seminar on studies of world Christianity arranged by Andrew Walls at Princeton Theological Seminary. The central insight of his paper that day — “On the Asianization of Theology and Theological Education” — is the focus of this section. I believe it ties together what each of the previous two theologians has said and focuses it on our topic, educating missionaries in our age.

Lee’s paper has gone through several revisions and will soon be published. I have his permission to share his ideas with you, but I will not quote him directly. Lee sets the context of his thinking as one in which Christianity is a “Post-Western” religion. Yet Asian students, he notes, come to seminaries to seek wisdom only to find that the themes being discussed are not the questions they have. A great gap yawns between the desire to *know* Christian truth and the way academic institutions function — often as if there were no overarching Truth meant to become the novice’s living way and very lifeblood.

As Lee presented his ideas that afternoon, it began to dawn on me that even in Western Catholic tradition, we once practiced what he was terming an Asian “religious” way of learning in monasteries where psalms were chanted, daily chapters unfolded the scriptures in the light of the feast of the season, and formal study was also *lectio divina*. For Lee, the goal of theological studies is something Bernard of Clairvaux would have recognized and applauded, a threefold way of:

1. embodying truth
2. attaining spiritual awakening, and
3. self-transformation

I believe that it is everyone, not just the Asian student formed in Northeast Asia under the influence of Taoist, Confucianists, and Buddhist thought, who seeks: (a) to learn the Tao (Way) of Jesus revealed within the heart; (b) to be enlightened as to the true nature of the self, the human community, nature

and their true end; and finally (c) to be introduced to a path of self-transformation that will enable one to live ever more authentically as a Christian human being. *Do our formation centers initiate students into the total Way of Jesus? Or are these programs, despite so many attempts at overseas training programs and the like, a form of testing ground that candidates must pass in order to be admitted to membership?*

At risk of seeming unaware of the constraints that scarce time and financial resources place on the formation of lay and short-term missionaries, it seems important to acknowledge that Lee’s challenges for this sort of formation need to be discussed in relation to all candidates, not just those seeking to enter religious life. Being a missionary is less a question of *what* one does in mission than of *how one embodies* the Spirit and person of Jesus. Christian life, to borrow from Lee’s terminology, is inseparable from the Tao, the total Way, of the Christ.

FORMATION FOR MISSION AD ET INTER GENTES IN OUR DAY

Mission As “Art” and the Need for *Poiēsis*

The first practical observation I want to make is that work in mission is an art calling for *poiēsis* (Greek for the *art* of fashioning something beautiful from everyday realities, whence “poetry”) much more than it is the unfolding of principles. The same is true for creating the kind of communities that carry on the actual work of mission, and equally so for the initial formation of men and women for mission. Most of all, the judgment that underlies everything that follows is this: every missionary community’s ongoing life must be a continual circle of observing, judging, and acting in concrete contexts in the attempt to fashion something beautiful out of the social realities in which the missionary community lives. The art of intercultural formation is primarily *poiēsis* — introducing the fledgling and maintaining the veteran in the art of inserting themselves creatively, intelligently and vitally into the context in which they live and work.

At a second level, the actual missionary work of the disciple is much more an act of *poiēsis* than an application of principles. Christian life brings into existence a Christic dynamic out of the material of our lives in the way the artist, the poet, or the craftsperson brings a work of art into reality. The fundamental Christian ethic is to make good things happen that would not happen if the disciple of Christ were not there. What we are about in intercultural formation for mission, then, is finding a way in which to help the person who presents himself or herself experience the kind of study, discipline, and social interaction with veteran missionaries that nurtures a person who creatively reflects the missional charism of the community and who chooses to commit one's entire being to that task. Ongoing formation refines that dynamic and equips the missionary to meet new demands and situations.

Particularizing the Global Missionary Context

Moving further, the art of forming missionaries for intercultural ministries is not simply the art of forming men and women for routine pastoral ministries, but helping candidates who are led by the Holy Spirit to join a concrete group of disciples and become competent in intercultural settings. One might fairly object, "That's good theory, but what about concrete practice." In recent months, I have spent a good deal of time working on the English translation of a biography of Pierre Claverie, O.P., the martyred bishop of Oran, by Jean-Jacques Pérennès. Claverie's life has revealed practically quintessential missionary orientations for the twenty-first century.¹⁰ A brief reference to Claverie's life may make my suggestion more practical. It also highlights issues that need to be faced in forming candidates for short-term mission. For Claverie's life is that of a missionary who goes with the intention of spending his entire life outside his own culture. How does one make the necessary transformations for short-term missionaries?

Born a *pied-noir* in Algiers,¹¹ Claverie had lived his early life in the colonial bubble as if Arab-Muslim Algeria did not exist. The Dominican novitiate was a transformative event for Claverie, but his intercultural breakthrough came when he did his compulsory military service in Algeria after having become a Dominican. Later assigned by his superiors to work in Algeria, he plunged into studies of Arabic and the Quran. As the years went by, he went deeper and deeper into the paradox of the revelation of God in the Crucified One, and realized that the role of his tiny Catholic flock in Oran was not to witness to the glories of Catholicism but to incarnate and bear witness to Jesus as a tiny minority in a Muslim sea.

As the situation in Algeria worsens, you see Claverie becoming ever more deeply a friar preacher helping a flock that numbered more and more martyrs understand this dimension of Christian life and their mission in that context. A man with many Muslim friends, he saw the rise of "Islamism" as a deformation of Quranic teaching that he understood more deeply than the zealots. In his writing, speaking, and pastoral leadership, he was a man inserted totally into the Algerian reality, all the while realizing profoundly that he was an Algerian only, as the French subtitle catches it in words difficult to translate into English, *par alliance* – in a form of covenant relationship with Algerian culture and people. In the end, having led his flock and much of Algeria in absorbing the shock of two religious sisters who were killed in September 1995, the abduction of the seven Trappist monks of Tibhirine in late March 1996, and the discovery of their severed heads on 31 May 1996, he and his young Muslim driver were killed on 1 August 1996. Three days earlier he had written:

The death of these monks who were our brothers and friends for so long wounded us once more, but strengthened our ties with the thousands of Algerians who are sick of violence and eager for peace. Their silent message has resounded in the hearts of millions throughout the world. We are remaining here out of fidelity to the cry of love and reconciliation that the

prior of the community left in the spiritual testament in which he clearly foresaw his own death. I [Claverie] am taking precautions, and I have the protection of the security forces, but it is God who remains the master of the hour of death, and only he can give meaning to our life and to our death. Everything else is just a smokescreen.¹²

One sees in the life and death of Claverie the formation of a missionary in its essential dimension. *First*, having gotten to know Dominicans in his childhood, when his adult conversion took place, he felt an attraction to their way of life. The possibility of a call to cross-cultural mission was intrinsic to his religious life. He realized that he needed to master contemporary Arabic, the Quran, and modern Algerian writing and literature if he was to live a life fully inserted in the reality of the Maghreb. The Dominicans gave him the opportunity to do so. He took up that opportunity in a way that led to him not just getting by but deeply impressing native Arabic-speakers.

Second, Claverie was formed by insertion into the life of the church in Algeria, but equally so by his deep empathy for the life of Islamic Algeria in all its vicissitudes. He had a gift for friendship and he made friends. His formation was never finished. He engaged in serious study, prolonged study, study that lasted throughout a lifetime. But it was not mere academic study. Rather, it was reflection on his intercultural missionary reality. The community he lived in even after becoming a bishop made that possible. It was the warp and woof of everyday life.

Missionary communities, whether religious or lay, that become so overwhelmed by practical pastoral-missionary work are not places where prayer, continued study takes place. If I may use the Latin word, *otium* (time to devote oneself to things other than work) is in too short supply. Conversation, study, reading — including conversations about “secular”

matters and reading in the literature, culture, and politics of the region in the vernacular of the region — be it in Arabic, Urdu, Mandarin or Twi — are an essential dimension for growth in missionary life. It is hard to imagine how a missionary moving in and out of a country in a two or three-year cycle of short-term mission can master such languages. Can he or she be anything but a type of United Nations, NGO, or foreign office civil servant whose primary reference remains the goals of the sending organization and not a local people?

Two Principles and Some Practical Questions

My first principle is that to serve as effective intercultural missionary agents and leaven today, missionary communities need to be willing to live in faithful but real tension with the “mainstream” church. I am not counseling rebellion. I am counseling a willingness — for the sake of embodying the gospel — to live the charisms of their founders, even if they do not fit easily on the diagram of a national or diocesan pastoral plan.

The truest missionary is formed not primarily by instruction in classrooms by learned professors or even in the hands of formation directors. Rather a man or woman is attracted to a community of disciples. As heart speaks to heart, she meets the Lord in the breaking of bread liturgically, in community and individual prayer, in fellowship with experienced disciples, and in solitude. To the extent the members of that community live and breathe in the Spirit of Christ, their life’s work and actions lead the new member deeper into the encounter with Jesus. *The second principle, accordingly, is that “recruitment” and formation are two sides of one coin and formation is a lifetime task about which we need to be serious.*

This is nothing new. The best missionaries have always become that way in something like the process we see concretized in the lives of Bishop Pierre Claverie and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Required are persons young and old who want to be vital parts of community and who can provide either the

energy of youth or the leaven of experience and insight to be part of new groups or of a second founding of an older one.¹³

* * *

I end without a dramatic conclusion. The problems we face as a church are not easy ones to solve. Prayer, reflection, discussion, study, reading, debate, and dialogue alone can align us with God's Spirit as we attempt to discern God's preferred future for ourselves as individuals and as members of our communities.

¹ Michael Amaladoss, SJ, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001) 1-14.

² William R. Burrows, "A Response to Michael Amaladoss," *CTSA Proceedings* (2001), 15-20.

³ Jonathan Y Tan, "From 'Missio ad Gentes' to 'Missio inter Gentes': Shaping a New Paradigm for Ding Christian Mission in Asia," *Vidyajyoti* 68 (2004) 670-88; and 69 (2006) 27-41.

⁴ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Regnum 1997).

⁵ Jonathan Tan, "Jesus the Crucified and Risen Sage: Toward a Confucian Christology," in Roman Malek, ed., Vol. 3b of

The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ, vol 3b (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Monumenta Serica and China-Zentrum 2007): 1481-1513.

⁶ Ibid., p. 36 (note that I am citing a typescript of Tan's article; I did not have access to the published version, bibliographic data for which is given in the previous note.

⁷ Amos Yong, "The Spirit of Hospitality: Pentecostal Perspectives toward a Performative Theology of Interreligious Encounter," *Missiology* 35 (No. 1, 2007): 55-73. See his forthcoming *Hospitality and the Religious Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).

⁸ Yong, "Hospitality," p. 59.

⁹ SEDOS residential seminar, Ariccia, Italy, 24-28 April 2007; see *SEDOS Bulletin*, 39 (May/June 2007).

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Pérennès, *A Life Poured Out: Pierre Claverie of Algeria*, trans. Phyllis Jestice and Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, forthcoming, October 2007); original French edition, *Pierre Claverie: un Algérien par alliance* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2000); Italian edition, *Vescovo tra i Musulmani: Pierre Claverie martire in Algeria* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2004).

¹¹ A *pied-noir* (literally, "black-foot") is a person of European descent, usually a Frenchman born and/or living in Algeria during the colonial era.

¹² Pérennès, *Life Poured Out*, p. 227.

¹³ This insight is central to the work of Gerald Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (Mahwah, NJ, 1988).

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