

Mission in the 21st Century

I am honored to participate in a global conversation about the nature of mission in the 21st century. I am pleased to be invited to share my thoughts about it with you.

In his book *The Wounded Heart of God* the Korean theologian Andrew Sung Park criticizes Western Christianity as a movement largely focused on the forgiveness of sins. A large part of Western theology and liturgy regards the forgiveness of sins as reason for God's children to seek a relationship with their creator. In this mode of understanding the need for a relationship with God is to secure our redemption through forgiveness. Mission arises from the impulse to save others from their sin and restore their right relationship with God.

Park identifies this primary religious impulse as one that arises from the context of the oppressor class. Those who hold the power must struggle with the fact that they cannot reconcile their oppressive behavior and their access to privileges with Christ's good example of a simple life and the unconditional acceptance of the others. For members of the oppressor class the primary question to God is "What do you have to say about my sin?"

In this context mission is about identifying the state of sin in the other, a sinful state the oppressor projects onto others, as well as to bring about a confession of sin that leads to God's forgiveness and restoration of the right relationship.

This model of mission based on the fundamental idea of sin and salvation is no useful sustainable model outside the context of oppression.

What Park describes from the perspective of the suffering masses, living under an oppressing rule is the Korean term of Han. The word Han can hardly be translated into Western languages. It is the lived, existential experience of being oppressed, of being deprived of labor satisfying own needs or giving time for own leisure – and where your labor is performed to serve the needs of others. It is the state of living without a differentiated own identity. It is the state of forced deprivation imposed by and for the will of others from whose power you can't escape.

From this worldview the question is not "What do you have to say about my sin" but "What do you have to say about my Han?" When God cannot resolve the Han of those who suffer unjustly, God has no importance in this context.

Regarding the fact that there are 69 million refugees on the globe and the earth is fighting for every breath – a mission built upon the paradigm of forgiveness of sin does little to honor the lived experience of those suffering from Han.

The family of Syrian refugees I met in a tent camp in the Jordanian desert who are forced to walk six miles in scorching heat to buy food with the 20\$ per week provided by the UN, does not need me to forgive their sins. That is no act of mission – it is the real definition of insensitive sinfulness which the privileged classes of the world cannot ignore if they want to take mission seriously.

The African refugee family I met in Sicily who had crossed the Mediterranean Sea on a rickety raft and the mother whose son died on the way and had to be thrown overboard into the sea neither needed me nor the leaders of the Waldensian church, where I met them, to say at their arrival "Welcome to Italy – your sins are forgiven".

New theologies are emerging from countries of the global South where families lived in oppression and poverty. These new theologies become the architectural element of a mission foundation which is not designed to rescue the impoverished from their sin but the oppressors from their arrogance. In

the exchange between cultures the churches of the West need to practice humility and may not enter contexts and cultures with the perceived need to call the unredeemed to forgiveness.

In this sense a new mission model of accompaniment is taking the place of proselytizing, The West which strove to conquer the globe and not only to occupy other nations but also to appropriate their wealth has never really separated its Christianity from its colonial impulses. In this context mission meant adopting the religion of the conqueror. A religion that needed God for the forgiveness of sin and projecting this sin onto the conquered and forcing them to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, to receive forgiveness and adapt to Western cultural norms.

A model of accompaniment is one in which a mission co-worker (that is the preferred term we use instead of the term missionary) shows up to embody love and not to offer forgiveness. This model asks the mission co-worker to accompany other persons on their journey, to accept hospitality and to share the results, the other persons – who are responsible for their own future health and viability – choose as the most appropriate in their context.

Mission in the 21st century will not be built according to the model of first world conquerors invading a third world country with the assumption that guilt must be forgiven so that the salvation of the Gentiles can be realized.

Mission in the 21st century will require radical humility on the part of the oppressor classes of Western contexts. Of course, forgiveness is a matter of deep theological significance – but it can't be the primary modality through which people of the West continue to try to convert the rest of the world.

In a growing global context, in which the suffering of refugees has reached epidemic proportions, in which a rising flood of fascism and intolerance is spreading quickly, in which the earth itself is suffering from the same Western theologies that justified colonial impulses – church must acknowledge a new vocation in mission. We are not called to travel the world in order to forgive sins but to incarnate love. We are not sent into mission to seek the eternal salvation of a lost soul but to alleviate the kind of suffering we have tolerated, justified or ignored already far too long. We are not called to enter a setting with answers that arose in the context of Western generosity but to be present with humility to accompany those who have the opportunity - even if not all the necessary funds - to follow their own path to happiness.

Finally, I would like to add, that many people from the West who want to work in mission will realize that there is a genuine, authentic Christianity emerging from places in the world they have seen so far only as vessel for their religion. The greatest surprise regarding mission in the 21st century may come when the West realizes that it is the mission field. It is the West that needs a revival of a faith contaminated by theologies which were inoculated with doctrines of white privileges that justified the erasure of cultures that were different from their own. Doctrines that assume the right to appropriate any wanted wealth and any capital and that exchanged the truth of the Gospel for the insignia of power and wealth.

In his book *Deep River and the N* Spiritual Sings of Life and Death*, Howard Thurman writes “by some amazing and vastly superior creative insight, the slave undertook the redemption of a religion the master had profaned”

I think mission in the 21st century will experience that the West will shift its impulse for mission from forgiveness as modality of accompaniment and that those who were historically enslaved and marginalized become the redeemers of a religion which was desecrated by the West.