

## **The Interface between the Biblical Text, Missiology, Postcolonialism and Diasporism.**

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Missiology, as an academic discipline, is both inter-disciplinary and integrative. It is inter-disciplinary in that it draws on a variety of disciplines, for example, biblical studies, systematic theology, history, and cultural anthropology. It is integrative because it synthesises elements from such disciplines into a coherent whole that theologically grounds missionary practice. However, each of these different disciplines is subject to an ongoing revision that reflects both an awareness of emerging trends in society and a realisation that methods, as a means to an end, are open-ended. Changes in methodology and interpretative processes can contribute to new perceptions readings the strategies and goals of missiology.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in identifying and critiquing the impact of postcolonial theory and a hermeneutics of diaspora on our understanding of the formative relationship of the biblical text to missiology. To do this I will first demonstrate by reference to selected texts, how the gospels of Matthew, John and Luke have informed the contemporary understanding of mission for Protestants and Catholics. Second, I will explain how such understandings are being assessed, critiqued and even dismissed by those committed to postcolonial hermeneutics of the biblical text. To conclude, I will demonstrate how postcolonial critical theories constitute an invitation to reframe our missiology.

### **Mission as *missio ad gentes***

The foundational importance of Matthew's Great Commission for modern mission cannot be under-estimated, although as Johannes Nissen points out, "it has been demonstrated that it [Matthew's ending] was not used as a basis for mission until the end of the seventeenth century."<sup>1</sup> Even though the Reformers did not consider the "Great Commission as binding, no biblical texts appear more frequently in the Anabaptist confessions of faith and court testimonies than the Matthean and Markan versions of the Great Commission ... They were the first to make the commission mandatory for all believers."<sup>2</sup> Bosch identifies the Great Commission as the most important biblical motif for understanding the Enlightenment paradigm. He claims that William Carey must be credited "with putting it on the map so to speak,"<sup>3</sup> and that it assumed significance for Protestant, especially Anglo Saxon, missionaries from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In particular, it encouraged an expansionist approach to mission, and given that "civilisation" or socialisation into Western culture was an important missionary task, meant that imperial powers recognised that missionary activity often complemented imperial policies.

Another text that assumed importance for 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary and imperial activities was Matt 25: 31-46, the "Judgement of the Nations." While it has not

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main/Bern/New York: Lang, 1999), 71.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, ed. ASM Series Editorial Committee, American Society of Missiology Series, vol. No. 16 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 246.

<sup>3</sup> Bosch., 340.

assumed the same significance for mission understood as expansion, Luz convincingly argues that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the least of these who are members of my family” (Matt 25:40, *NRSV*), were identified as “pagans” and so the object of proselytizing endeavours.<sup>4</sup>

### **Mission as *plantatio ecclesiae***

Bosch believes that his “Medieval Roman Catholic Missionary Paradigm”<sup>5</sup> most appropriately should have as its biblical motif, Luke 14:23 (Then the master said to his slave, “Go out at once into the roads and lanes, and compel the people to come in so that my house may be filled”). Nevertheless, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Commission was important for Catholics too. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century publication, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints*, the entry for Francis Xavier, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jesuit who journeyed to the Far East, points to a reliance on Matt 28:19-20. It provides a scriptural legitimation for conversion to Catholicism and the establishment of the church:

A charge to go and preach to all nations was given by Christ to his apostles. This commission the pastors [bishops] of the church have faithfully executed down to this present time; and in every age men have been raised by God and filled with his Holy Spirit for the discharge of this important function who, being sent by the authority of Christ and his name have succeeded the apostles in the government of his church, have brought new nations to the fold of Christ for the advancement of the divine honour, and filled up the number of the saints. This conversion of nations according to the divine commission is the prerogative of that Catholic Church, in which it has never had any rival.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to understand the ecclesiological developments that lie behind Butler’s emphasis on this commission being entrusted by the papacy to bishops. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the right of patronage granted to Spain and Portugal by Pope Alexander VI in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) had meant that Iberian colonial and missionary practice were so intertwined that they were almost indistinguishable. The Papacy recognised the problems inherent in such a situation, and established the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622. Responsibility for Catholic missionary activity became the exclusive prerogative of the pope, and his ‘vicars apostolic,’ the bishops. Mission in this context meant the establishment of a Western type church in other cultures with little respect for cultural differences.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Ulrich Luz, “The Final Judgement (Matt 25:31-46),” in *Treasures Old and New: Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allen Powell, SBL Symposium Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 285-286. Subsequently there has been much scholarly debate as to who the least members are with most modern commentators arguing that it is a reference to travelling Christian missionaries who sought hospitality from Christian households. However, this has not prevented contemporary “first world” Christians from understanding the text as applying to those millions who live in poverty. There is nothing inherently wrong with appropriating a particular biblical text, and investing it with a contemporary significance. For example, if the text just quoted is interpreted so as to challenge “first world” Christians to be in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the “third world”, then this represents an interpretation in harmony with both the OT and NT call to bring justice to all.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch., 214-238.

<sup>6</sup> Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Principal Saints*, ed. Bernard Kelly, 4 vols., vol. 4 (London, Dublin and Belfast: Virtue & Company Ltd, 1936).

<sup>7</sup> One notable exception to this tendency is observable in the missionary work of the Italian Jesuits, de Nobili in India, Ricci in China, Valignano in Japan, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their efforts were condemned by four papal decrees in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, missionary activity encouraged and endorsed an enthusiasm for an expansionist perception of mission understood as the establishment or “planting” of the church in far off lands, which also happened to be colonies of the different imperial powers.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, despite the anti-clericalism characteristic of French governments in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, French colonial officials were happy enough to ignore their anti-clerical positions when they conflicted with French imperial aims. As Adrian Hastings notes, “Antoine Klobukowski, governor-general of French Indo-China from 1908 to 1919 declared before leaving France, that ‘clericalism is not for export’ but on arrival in Tonkin, he still assured Bishop Gendreau that ‘anti-clericalism is not for export.’ Whatever the sentiment in Paris, the reality remained that missionaries were too useful to be flung overboard, and at home the French Foreign Ministry, felt the same.”<sup>9</sup> In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mission as conversion, and the establishment of the church where it is not yet established is reaffirmed by John Paul II his encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, where he teaches that “the proclamation of the word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim” (RM # 46).<sup>10</sup>

John’s gospel is one that Catholic Church authorities have turned to in order to seeking a scriptural mandate for their missionary policies. This is particularly apparent in *Redemptoris Missio*. The pope identifies texts that make clear the relationship between missiology, christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. The pope states that “the mission of the Church, like that of Jesus is God’s work, is the work of the Spirit,”<sup>11</sup> and that it is through a baptism of water and the Holy Spirit that one is made a member of the Body of Christ, which is the Church.<sup>12</sup> John Paul grapples with the task of explaining the relationship between the universality of the Spirit’s presence in all creation, and the particularity of the Spirit’s presence in the Church. He teaches that “every form of the Spirit’s presence is to be welcomed with respect and gratitude but the discernment of this presence is to be the responsibility of the Church, to which Christ gave his Spirit in order to guide her into all the truth (cf. Jn 16:13).”<sup>13</sup> He emphasises that that the bishops together with the pope are directly responsible “for the evangelisation of the world.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, ecclesial concerns, namely that mission is the responsibility of the pope and bishops, that mission is about conversion, and the establishment of the church where it is not yet present, emerge as key in the encyclical.

### **Mission as liberation**

The third gospel text, and one which has assumed a particular significance in the last four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is Luke 4:16-19 (When he came to Nazareth, where

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<sup>8</sup> Christian communities and churches of a more evangelical or Pentecostal persuasion may appear to hold fast to an understanding of mission that prioritises conversion. Perhaps the recent influx of American missionaries into Iraq provides an example of mission understood as “saving souls,” expansion and as closely associated with American political designs.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Hastings, “The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism within Twentieth-Century Missionary Christianity,” in *Missions, Nationalism and the End of Empire*, ed. Brian Stanley, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> John Paul, “Redemptoris Missio,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, N.4-28 January 1991, 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, #24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. #47.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, #29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, #63.

he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.") Its rise to prominence flows from the enthusiasm among important groups in mainline churches for liberation theology following the publication of Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*<sup>15</sup>. The influence of liberation theology in encouraging a reassessment in traditional missionary goals should not be underestimated, despite misgivings of some about its influence on missionary practice. Some were wary of its presumed Marxist bias, while others considered it reduced missionary work to humanitarian efforts on behalf of the poor, or to involvement in justice efforts. All of these were considered to downplay the soteriological character of mission.

The three perceptions of mission that these texts inspire – conversion/proselytisation, the establishment of the church and liberation – have been, and still are foundational for many churches. However, their privileged status is today challenged by those who argue that the bible endorsed missionary complicity in the imperial task. In the modern age, mission was primarily a movement from European and North American countries to the colonies, or in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to newly created nation states that were linked in a subordinate manner, economically and politically, to Europe or North America.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, the situation of my own religious community of Catholic sisters, the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions is instructive. After Vatican II, when the community reclaimed its original missionary focus, the different Western provinces undertook to set up mission in third world countries. Almost without exception, this led to the establishment of missions in former colonies: the French went to Senegal, the English to Kenya, the Australians to Papua New Guinea and the New Zealanders to Samoa, while the Canadians went to Peru.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, it was obvious that such missionary strategies and a continuing faith in the biblical interpretations that legitimated them could no longer be sustained. The shift from the modern world constructed by Western imperial powers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards to a world of sovereign national states after World War II was far reaching in its political significance, and this in turn has had implications at the theological and missiological levels. In particular, such seismic developments and realignments at the political level have encouraged the emergence of postcolonial theory. At the academic level, postcolonial theory seeks to provide an intellectual framework that would allow decolonized peoples to de-centre the privileged role enjoyed by Western academics in shaping an intellectual construct which had supported Western imperialism.

### **Postcolonial critical methodologies**

Therefore, I now turn to examine how postcolonial critical methodologies and one of their offspring, a hermeneutics of displacement, also referred to a hermeneutics of

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<sup>15</sup> See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Cadrid Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> I include here Australia and New Zealand, two "first world" countries despite their geographical location and their status as former colonies of Britain.

diaspora, are affecting biblical interpretation. Many postcolonialists acknowledge their indebtedness to Palestinian author, Edward Said (1935-2003). His 1978 work, *Orientalism*<sup>17</sup> is critical of Western academics who seek to depict the Orient as exotic, culturally very different from the Occident, and often fanatical. Indian born biblical scholar, R. J. Sugirtharajah<sup>18</sup> is one who is deeply influenced by Said. His reading of Said means he argues that Western biblical interpretation sought to justify the West's domination of the colonial and neo-colonial world.<sup>19</sup> He cites as an example of this predilection, German biblical scholar Ernest Renan's "doubts about the honesty and sincerity of Eastern people," in his 1897 publication, *Life of Jesus*.

Sugirtharajah states that "postcolonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence."<sup>20</sup> Not that a colonial presence should be narrowly defined as referring only to Western imperial powers. There is an internal colonialism which operates when local political elites suppress the voices of the poor, of women and of indigenous peoples, and there is also a neo-colonialism which continues to operate against the interests of the poor in the "third world" in ways analogous of the former colonial powers. Postcolonial methodologies aim at ensuring that suppressed voices are heard.

### **Postcolonial critiques of mission understood as *missio ad gentes* and *plantatio ecclesiae***

The historical and contemporary processes of biblical interpretation have captured the attention of postcolonial biblical scholars. The majority of biblical interpreters, irrespective of their social location, have long been attuned to the impact that art has had on our understanding of the different biblical characters – traditionally Jesus was usually a white, blue-eyed male, while Mary was a young, white, blue-eyed female, God the Father an old white bearded male. The devil was normally depicted in a much darker colour, even black. The danger of such artistic representations on our understanding of God, Jesus and Mary is obvious enough in the way in which we image God, and people. Postcolonial critics hold that written interpretations are every bit as damaging to colonized peoples as are such artistic interpretations.

Growing numbers of "third world" biblical scholars are engaged in bringing a postcolonial critique to bear on the biblical text.<sup>21</sup> This work is driven by their belief that the bible was a colonial tool used to inculcate Western values and denigrate non-Western values and traditions. At the same time, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, among both the

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<sup>17</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> See R. J. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Musa W. Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible," *Semeia* 78 (1997), Kwok Pui Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," *Semeia* 47 (1989), Archie C. C. Lee, "Biblical Interpretations in Asian Perspective," *Asia Journal of Theology* 7, no. 1 (1993), Moonjang Lee, "A Post Critical Reading of the Bible as a Religious Text," *Asia Journal of Theology* 14, no. 2 (2000), Johnson Teng Kok Lim, "Historical Critical Paradigm: The Beginning of an End," *Asia Journal of Theology* 14, no. 2 (2000), Said, Stanley J. Samartha, "Religion, Language and Reality: Towards a Relational Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 2, no. 3 (1994), Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonising Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), R. S. Sugirtharajah, "The Bible and its Asian Readers," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (1993).

colonized and the colonizing classes, there were those who resisted such a use of the biblical text. This process of resistance to the dominant Western interpretations has continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, in the writings of Latin American liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez<sup>22</sup> and Elsa Tamez.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the phenomenon of Basic Christians Communities, first in Latin America, and then in other parts of the “third world,” has allowed the oppressed to engage in the work of biblical interpretation. The social location of the poor encourages radical interpretations of the biblical text that can elude those whose natural environment is the more comfortably affluent world of the university or seminary. I now turn to a brief examination of some representative postcolonial interpretations of missionary texts.

### **Some representative postcolonial interpretations of missionary texts**

We have already noted the importance of Matt 28:19-20 for the modern missionary enterprise, and seen how it provided a biblical legitimation for the European imperial adventure. When considering Matthew’s gospel, it is important that the interpretative process examines the context in which the gospel came to birth. Contemporary Matthean scholarship believes that the community that lies behind the gospel was initially a Jewish Christian community. For the majority of the Jewish people in the intertestamental period, the Roman Empire was the enemy. This led to their insistence on strictly observed cultural boundaries, boundaries enshrined in the Law, in order to register their opposition to Roman power. However, Matthew’s community eventually separated from the rabbinic Jewish community (c. 85 CE), because its belief in Jesus as the fulfilment of the law was in opposition to the rabbinic position which emphasised the totality of the Mosaic Law. At the same time, as Gentile Christians became numerically more significant, Jewish ritual and purity laws which had formerly distinguished the community from its Gentile neighbours assumed less importance.

The acceptance of Gentile Christians into the community, and the relaxing of ritual and purity laws, those markers of opposition to imperial rule leads South African postcolonial biblical scholar, Muse W. Dube to ask: “Does not Matthew’s opening of boundaries, his agenda of discipling the whole world according to the commands of Christ, indicate a collaborative stance [with the empire]? Matthew’s command to christianize the world ironically befriends the Roman Empire’s political and cultural imposition of its structures on Jewish people and all its colonized subjects.”<sup>24</sup> Her postcolonial interpretation of this text allows her to see it as one that aided and abetted the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire’s universalising enterprise. She believes that something analogous occurred in 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary activity. The particular was categorised as “pagan” or “uncivilised” and in turn this usually meant that the relationship of missionaries to indigenous and colonised peoples was one of cultural domination. Or as W. R. Hutchinson writes: “Christianity as it existed in the West had a right not only

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<sup>22</sup> See Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> See Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. S. H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Dube: 19.

to conquer the world but to define reality for other peoples of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Dube’s postcolonial hermeneutic obliges the reader to take takes as their entry point into the interpretative process the socio-historical context in which a text comes to birth, and to identify its commonalities and differences with the specific context of the contemporary community. In this instance, if the nature of Roman imperial rule, and the Jewish response are acknowledged, then the reader is required to move beyond privileging later interpretations associated with Western Christianity’s commitment to a universalising expansion.

Likewise, she is critical of modern interpretations of John that encourage a high christology, an institutional ecclesiology and a universalising missiology such as we find *Redemptoris Missio*. These positions are in opposition to postcolonial interpretations. In interpreting John 20:21, (“As the Father sent me, so I send you,”), Dube claims that Jesus is transferring power to his disciples, historical and contemporary. This transference to hearers, readers and disciples, is an on-going process which requires them to act “out his story with almost the same authority that has characterised the Johannine Jesus. Furthermore, this transference of power, at least as it stands in the gospels (Matt 28:18-20/Lk 24:46-47) suggests that the biblical story is an unfinished story; it invites its own continuation in history; it resists the covers of our Bibles, and writes itself on the pages of the earth.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, her interpretation militates against those that legitimate hierarchy, centralisation and universalism.

A postcolonial hermeneutic of Luke 4:16-19 is more problematic for the contemporary missiologist. The emerging significance of this text coincided with the apparent decline of Matt 28:19-20 among Christians of a liberal persuasion, whether Catholic or Protestant. Furthermore it is not associated with the modern imperial enterprise but rather with liberation theology, which itself emerged as a critique and rejection of Western economic imperialism. However, postcolonialists argue that postcolonial theologies did not evolve from liberation theology but rather represent a different trajectory, despite the fact that both share similar agendas, and both seek the transformation of existing socio-economic and political structures.

Postcolonial theology is critical of liberation theology on several counts. First, it identifies liberation theology as modern, rather than postmodern, an offspring of the Enlightenment. It asserts this because of liberation theology’s reliance on historical-critical methodologies, and because of the frequent conversations between Latin American liberation theologians with those of the “first world.” This has led to liberation theology being compromised through its efforts to make the gospel relevant to liberal and educated Western Christians. Second, its christocentric character fails to sufficiently acknowledge indigenous and world religions, and accord them the respect due to them as belief systems of millions of people. It precludes taking interreligious dialogue seriously. Perhaps this last criticism can best be explained if not countenanced, by the fact that liberation theology came to birth in Latin America, a continent where Christianity, notably Catholicism, had been the dominant religion for at least four centuries. Third, most damning of all is the fact that it has romanticised

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<sup>25</sup> W. R. Hutchinson, "A Moral Equivalent for Imperialism: Americans and the Promotion of Christian Civilisation, 1880-1910," in *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era: 1880-1920*, ed. T. Christensen and W.R. Hutchinson (Aarhus: Aros, 1982), 71.

<sup>26</sup> Dube: 12.

the poor and has “ended up as a liberation theology of the poor, rather than a theology of liberation by the poor.”<sup>27</sup>

### **A Postcolonial offspring, “a hermeneutics of diaspora”**

One of the more interesting variations of the postcolonial interpretative processes is “a hermeneutics of diaspora.” A variety of meanings are attached to “diaspora.” Historically it referred to those Jewish people who lived either voluntarily or involuntarily outside Palestine. It also came to refer to those early Christians who believed they had no lasting city here and thought of themselves as a pilgrim people on a journey to a heavenly city, to Africans who were shipped off to slavery in America, to the Irish who left their homes in the wake of the Irish famine. Contemporaneously, it refers to the millions who in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been displaced from their homes because of violence, famine, ecological degradation or it may refer to those who move in search of a greater economic security and opportunity than their own country offers them.

NT scholar, Cuban born Fernando Segovia, now residing in the United States is perhaps the most important example of a biblical scholar pursuing the implications of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century diasporic movements of people for biblical studies. While the movement of Europeans to non-Western countries characteristic of modern age still continues, it is in significant decline from what occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Instead we have a situation of reversal as people from “Third world” countries head for Western countries in search of political and religious freedom, and improved greater economic opportunities. Several consequences flow from such migrations.

- These people bring with their religious traditions which may be Islamic, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist or indigenous. Some critics hold that this variety of traditions can be inimical to the integration of new immigrants into the community of the host country.
- Migrants are generally younger, less well educated and poorer. With good reason they tend to live together and the negative side of this is a certain ghettoization with its attendant social problems.
- The arrival of non-Western Christians into Western countries leads to changes in Christian rituals and liturgies.
- It also impacts on the life of Christian academic institutions, as the diversity of faith perspectives of both students and teachers will affect theological disciplines.

"The dispersion of non-Westerners from their homelands to settle in the West" has led to a "geographical translation that has come full circle," he said. "The children of the (Western) Empire have come home to roost, and they are not always well-liked." For

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<sup>27</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 115. See too Fernando F. Segovia, "Liberation Hermeneutics: Revisiting the Foundations in Latin America," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 106-132.

<sup>28</sup> "In the nineteenth century – between 1815 and 1915, roughly 50-60 million Europeans emigrated overseas ... By the early 1990s there were about 17 million refugees and asylum seekers in the world, 20 million internally displaced peoples, 30 million 'regular' migrants, and another 30 million migrants with an 'irregular status. The combined total of 97 million persons represents a doubling of the global migrant population in the space of five years." Jehu J. Hanciles, "Migration and Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27, no. 4 (2003): 146.



example, mosques now outnumber Episcopal churches in the United States while statistics highlight the decline in the percentage of Western Christians in comparison to their non-Western Christians in the Latin American, Asian and African continents. What are the implications for Western Christians if close to 65% of all Christians now live outside of Western nations, and if increasingly significant numbers of non-Western Christians are migrating to the West? How might it alter our hermeneutical approach to the scriptures?

Segovia acknowledges his debt to liberationist criticism of the socioeconomic type that first emerged in Latin America in the 1970s, and affirms it is impossible to understand recent developments in biblical criticism without acknowledging the importance of liberation theology.<sup>29</sup> At the same time his own experience of diaspora moves him to contest the monolithic character of liberationist critiques, and its unwillingness to acknowledge “the complexity and diversity of the Bible in matters social, political, and economic ... it was not a text to be challenged, but a text to be followed.”<sup>30</sup> Because of what a postcolonial interpretation identifies as the monolithic character of liberation theology, Segovia argues that the more nuanced postcolonial recognition of diversity within the text, and among the readers offered by postcolonial criticism offers is today more appropriate.

This legitimation of diversity, of different voices, and Segovia’s own experience of diaspora, an experience increasingly shared by millions of others means that he is concerned to demonstrate the importance of the bible in and for diasporic communities. Those who live in situations of exile, either imposed or chosen, have both positive and negative experiences of otherness. They experience alienation as they are often not accepted by members of the dominant culture of their host country and at the same time they are no longer part of their country of origin. They are belong to two distinct worlds – that of their sending and host country. As American-based, Chinese born Malaysian Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan writes: “The reality of such a way of life creates a situation where diaspora people exists as ‘permanent strangers’ in their present world or home (where they are viewed as the ‘the undesirable other, the ones who do not fit’), and as ‘permanent aliens’ to their former world or home (a world that is not easy and most often impossible to return to).”<sup>31</sup> In order to survive “a liberating reading of the Bible requires a diaspora hermeneutics that recognises and engages critically the otherness of the text, reader and readings.”<sup>32</sup>

Segovia argues for interpretative processes that recognise that both texts and readers are always historically, socially, and culturally conditioned. He is heartened by the contemporary plurality of readings and interpretations that such a position entails. According to Segovia, a hermeneutics of diaspora is grounded in a reading strategy of intercultural criticism, which on the one hand, recognises the particular cultural, even strange, environment in which the biblical text came to birth, while on the other hand, it recognises and affirms that the reader’s own social and cultural location impact on

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<sup>29</sup> See Segovia, "Liberation Hermeneutics: Revisiting the Foundations in Latin America," 129.

<sup>30</sup> Segovia, "Liberation Hermeneutics: Revisiting the Foundations in Latin America," 128.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, "Diasporic Reading of a Diasporic Text: Identity Politics and Race Relations and the Book of Esther," in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, *The Bible and Postcolonialism* 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 200), 164.

<sup>32</sup> Luis R. Rivera-Rodriguez, "Reading in Spanish from the Diaspora through Hispanic Eyes," *Theology Today* 54, no. 4 (1998): 484.

their interpretation of the text.<sup>33</sup> Or as Segovia writes elsewhere, “cultural studies bring fully to the fore the construct of the real reader: the flesh and blood reader, always positioned, the question of social location [of diaspora] and interested (the question of social agenda.)”<sup>34</sup> When social location and culture are prioritised, a plurality of interpretations follows.

A number of diasporic biblical scholars have turned to the bible in order to reinterpret it in ways that speak to their situations. Two examples will show how such scholars are reinterpreting texts from their social location of diaspora. First, Cuban born Garcia-Treto finds in the story of Joseph (Gen 39-41) who journeys from marginality to the centre, and who encounters temptations and dangers on that journey, insights into his own reality.<sup>35</sup> He writes, “for me the story is also a story of survival and success, of reunion and reconciliation, in a word, of salvation. Stories such as this remind us also that ‘José’ is a human being and not a stereotype, who, given a chance, may contribute considerably more than we can imagine to our common good.”<sup>36</sup>

Chinese-born Sze-Kar Wan offers an enriching interpretation of Galatians as he explores the advantages and disadvantages of espousing universality as a solution to the pain of a diaspora situation. Wan begins by addressing what he calls the argument for Christian universalism located in Gal 3:28,<sup>37</sup> and argues that it can be a code for assimilation. Did God intend to that fidelity to circumcision and “the right to exist as a separate group” would be now denied to the Jewish people? Wan’s argument follows that of Jewish scholar, Boyarin,<sup>38</sup> and Wan asks how we can “insist on maintaining cultural specificities without falling into the trap of racism?”<sup>39</sup> Boyarin argues that the cost of preserving Jewish particularity in a diaspora situation is to accept minority status in the dominant culture.<sup>40</sup> While recognising the attraction of Boyarin’s thesis, and its affinity with the Pauline notion of *kenosis*, Wan is less than enthusiastic about the idea of the permanent powerlessness of minority groups within the dominant culture. The theologies of Paul and Philo of Alexandria, both diaspora Jews, were not a rejection of Israel’s identity as a covenanted people but a change in the nature of that covenant because of the new situation in which Israel found itself in the intertestamental period. The Abrahamic covenant had been predicated on three important elements: nationhood, land and blessings to all people. Both Philo and Paul

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<sup>33</sup> See Fernando F. Segovia, "Towards a Hermeneutics of Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," in *Readings from This Place. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 57-73.

<sup>34</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as a Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from this Place. I. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1-17.

<sup>35</sup> See Francisco Garcia-Treto, "A View of Genesis 39-41 from the Cuban Diaspora," in *Interpreting beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, *The Bible and Postcolonialism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 134-145.

<sup>36</sup> Garcia-Treto, 144.

<sup>37</sup> Sze-Kar Wan, "Does Diaspora Identity Imply Some Sort of Universality? An Asian American Reading of Galatians," in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, *The Bible and Postcolonialism 3* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 115.

<sup>38</sup> See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Segovia too refers to his indebtedness to Boyarin in Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Interpreting beyond Borders*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, vol. 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 11-34.

<sup>39</sup> Wan, 117.

<sup>40</sup> See Boyarin, 235.

recognised that land could no longer be considered a constituent element. Paul retained the idea of blessings for peoples and as Gal 3:6-9 makes clear, these were understood to be Gentiles. In other words, Paul has re-interpreted the notion of covenant, not repudiated it, and so Galatians emerges as “a covenantal document describing the pedigree of the believers (continuity with the Abrahamic Covenant), the formation of the covenantal community (the presence of the eschatological Spirit in midst of the Galatians), and the fundamental character of the community (love).”<sup>41</sup>

In this perspective, Paul does not repudiate his Jewishness. Rather he is interested in bringing to birth a new community that signifies his indebtedness to Jewish tradition. Therefore we ought to read ‘in Christ there is no Jew or Greek’ as “an attempt to erase *power differential* in the new discourse,”<sup>42</sup> rather than ethnic differential. In other words, Paul is committed to a universalism that requires an affirmation of cultural and ethnic particularities. Wan suggests that Gal 3:28 should read “in light of a postcolonial Asian-American hermeneutics is – paradoxically – ‘You are *both Jew and Greek, both free and slave, both male and female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>43</sup>

The importance of Wan’s argument is that it does not deny either particularity or universality but instead shows how Galatians, interpreted through a postcolonial optic allows us to recognise the creative tension demanded by multiculturalism that affirms universalism, a modernist concept and particularity, a postmodernist concept.

### **Conclusion**

In assessing the significance of postcolonial interpretations for contemporary missiology and missionary practice, it is apparent that we can ask at least two questions and draw three related conclusions. The first question asks what is the relationship between popular and critical readings of the text for diasporic communities? Both anecdotal evidence and study suggest that diasporic communities tend to be not only more religiously fervent than the Western Christian communities in their different host communities, but also more theologically conservative. My second question is that postcolonial critiques favour ethical outcomes, for example, new arrangements of power relationships that recognise and affirm their minority status. While not denying the importance of the biblical word in promoting such ethical shifts and values, my question is how this affects the spiritual life of the believer. My own experience of contact with diasporic communities, admittedly limited, is that while in discussion groups, there is often an enthusiasm evinced for an interpretation of a text that speaks into their cultural and socio-economic situations, when it is time prayer together, vocalised prayer often reflects a spirituality that is grounded in a certain fundamentalism, in a spirituality that identifies their present reality of disenfranchisement with that of Jesus, and to be accepted as God’s will for them. In other words their inability to make connections between postcolonial hermeneutics and their spirituality, learned from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century missionaries, is noticeable.

A number of conclusions or at least, important signposts for the future of missiology and missionary practice emerge from a critique of postcolonial hermeneutics. First,

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<sup>41</sup> Wan, 123-124.

<sup>42</sup> Wan., 126.

<sup>43</sup> Wan., 127.

because contemporary biblical scholarship tolerates, indeed encourages, a diversity of approaches to the biblical text, ranging from historical-critical through to diasporic, missiologists and missionaries can no longer depend on their motivation being grounded in a single text or idea. Neither Matthew's Great Commission nor Luke 4:16-19 can be regarded as normative for many contemporary missionary situations, depending on whether one's basic stance is best categorised as evangelical or liberal. Postcolonial criticism suggests that the relevance of a text lies not simply in its original meaning, nor in its contemporary context but in the ongoing conversations between the historical and contemporary contexts. Nor should the contemporary context be restricted to the academic. It must include the contexts of the colonised or neo-colonised and diasporic communities, usually marginalised and economically poor.

Second, postcolonial hermeneutics make it clear that the great meta-narratives of the modern era have lost their potency in a postmodern world where the particular is prioritised over the universal. This suggests that missiologists themselves are required to take more seriously not only the interdisciplinary nature of missiology drawing and integrating as it does insights from biblical, historical, theological and cultural studies, but also recognise and critique the ever increasing variety of hermeneutical processes characteristic of the different disciplines.

Third, diasporic hermeneutics make it clear that it is impossible to understand mission through a geographic lens only. The influx of "third world" peoples and also peoples from the former Soviet Empire presents a challenge to the "first world" churches that they appear to face sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes reluctantly. This would suggest that an important missionary priority for "first world" churches is to more effectively educate themselves as to the appropriate ethical and theological response that such an influx demands. As Philip Jenkins points out: "Very generally, and with plenty of obvious exceptions, Southern Christianity, in terms of both theology and moral teaching, really is more conservative than its Western or specifically American version. Obviously, Western reformers do not like this fact – James Carroll has complained that 'world Christianity [is falling] increasingly under the sway of anti-intellectual fundamentalism' – but the cultural directions are hard to ignore."<sup>44</sup>

The new demands that postcolonial critical theory makes on the missiologist may be considered as either alarming or challenging. Certainly they can disturb positions that are important for us who identify ourselves as members of the "western" or "first world," but that is not sufficient reason for ignoring them or reducing them to a sub discipline that does not require a rigorous re-assessment of those formerly privileged positions. If our task to be part of the process whereby a new heaven and new earth are born, we ignore such developments at our peril.

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Jenkins, "After 'The Next Christendom'," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28 (2004): 20.

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