

## TERMINOS Y CONDICIONES

Gracias por adquirir estos ensayos digitales de Misión para el Tercer Milenio.

1. Hacer solo una copia de este archivo para tu backup.
2. Imprimir UNA copia de este archivo digital para tu uso personal.

Todos los derechos reservados.

Ninguna parte de este ensayo puede ser reproducido de ninguna manera sin el permiso por escrito de

**Misión para el Tercer Milenio,**  
excepto en el caso de breves referencias, citando la fuente y el autor.



[www.misiontercermilenio.org](http://www.misiontercermilenio.org)

[sam@cueva.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:sam@cueva.fsnet.co.uk)

# **Interpreters on Trial: The Challenge of Local Hermeneutics for Cross-Cultural Mission**

Steve Griffin

An Open Lecture, Given at  
Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada  
November 10, 2005

## ***Introduction***

The year is 1972. The place: a small-town Protestant church in the State of Veracruz, Mexico. The church is full, since a band of travelling short-term missionaries from the U.S. is in town. Except for the flowers on either side of the stage area, the inside of the church is unadorned. On the front wall, for the congregation to read, is a short Biblical text: "The Lord is my Shepherd", or maybe "God is love". A side door leads to a small office and washroom, in which there lives, in a cage, a parrot who is quite a chatterbox. In the pulpit, a man in his 20s from Texas is telling the story of his conversion to Christ after a reckless life. Standing beside the pulpit is his interpreter -- an American boy of about nine, who is too short to stand *behind* the pulpit. The congregation is attentive.

At about the mid-point in his narrative, the Texan, enjoying a relatively immediate relationship with his audience up to this point, gets to the part about getting stoned. His young interpreter hesitates for a few seconds, but then, knowing his Bible stories fairly well, translates "stoned" as "pounded with rocks". The audience is puzzled, but then bursts into laughter. *All eyes are on the interpreter.* In tears, the boy heads for the side door, and straight into the washroom. His dad, perhaps more embarrassed than him, follows behind him and lets him know everything is going to be ok, and that he can come back out to finish the job. The boy -- it happened to be me -- says, in nine-year old language, *under no circumstances*. I don't recall whether the parrot offered any words of advice. My mom tells me that after that missionary journey with my dad I announced that I would never interpret again!

I've related this little episode to draw attention to myself -- that is, to myself as an *interpreter*, because the lesson I learned there applies, I believe, to the church today as it lives out its missionary task. That lesson is this, in a nutshell: try as it may, the church can never run offstage -- it can never leave the Gospel that it serves and its host culture staring at each other, as it were. You may ask: how is it doing *that*? Well, that's what I intend to explain this morning. But the main way it does that is by imagining that once the Bible has been translated into a new language the interpretive task is more or less over. We're witnessing a shift in missionary thinking: If we used to err on the side of imagining that the church in mission was quite transparent to the gospel (in other words, we thought our hosts were hearing a "pure" gospel through our preaching), we're now inclined to think that we can turn the Bible loose, as it were, on our hosts, so that the Holy Spirit can work immediately and directly in and among our host culture, as if to bypass our interpretive work.

The problem is aggravated by the great skill of professional interpreters. Think of a United Nations session, for example, where professionals are paid a lot of money to sit in cubicles, removed from the main arena, to do simultaneous interpretation in which the speaker and hearer enjoy a virtually immediate relationship. But the church as a community of interpreters simply can't facilitate that. Its work is never that of automatic translation

(which skilled UN interpreters come close to achieving). The Scriptures didn't drop from the sky that way, dictated mechanistically. God speaks through interpreters, and this fact safeguards two things: the interpreter and God are never to be confused, but neither can the interpreter ever sit down or get out of the way. The Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip -- recall from Acts chapter eight: "How can I understand what I'm reading [here in Isaiah] unless someone explains it to me?"

I know how quickly a class hour can go by, so let me explain my subtitle before getting to the substance of my lecture. As North American Christians we're a fairly practical bunch. We're good at addressing the *how tos* of church -- how to *grow* a church, how to run successful programs, how to exploit this or that technology -- but often not so alert to our basic assumptions about the church's nature and mission. But an on-going debate about local hermeneutics -- at least where I'm working now in the Philippines -- is forcing us to wrestle with those. As you know, hermeneutics is the study of meaning and interpretation, broadly speaking. By *local* hermeneutics I'm referring to ways in which *particular* cultures receive or interpret texts -- in this case the Gospel. My concern is this: At present we're collectively embarrassed about all the excess colonial baggage that missionaries have taken to the far off mission field. We're especially alert to ways in which we export our own culture along with the message we're eager to carry abroad. I recall how a visiting Evangelist in Ukraine told his audience that what they needed to get their hands on was some deodorant. Remarks like these get zero marks for cross-cultural sensitivity, and can only backfire. But in our shame we're getting very worried about imposing our own local hermeneutics -- our Western ways of handling Scripture -- on our host culture. So we're in search of ways to get out of the middle. A statement put out by an Evangelical Anglican network put it this way: The Gospel needs "to be earthed deeply in local cultures, so that people feel at home and that they know that the good news comes from God, *rather than from another country*".<sup>i</sup> I want to remind us that if we insist on forcing a choice here -- it's either from God or from another country -- then we've missed the marvelous paradox which we've learned in Psalm 127:1 -- "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain." I'll illustrate our present malaise with five examples, taken mostly from the Asian context, then outline a way forward before I invite your reactions. Please feel free to ask for clarification along the way.

### ***Raimon Panikkar and the "Unknown Christ" of Hinduism***

Panikkar is the son of a Hindu father and Christian mother who has sought to remain faithful to both religious traditions. In fact he defends that desire with an appeal to the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ's dual nature, that is, that Jesus is fully man and fully God, without confusion and without separation. By analogy, Panikkar claims to be both Hindu and Christian in such a way that he is not a mixture of the two ("without confusion"), nor a person somehow split in two ("without separation"), but one Raimon Panikkar, fully Hindu and fully Christian.

As one born and raised in Mexico by foreign missionaries, I find this intriguing, and even promising, since the way of hyphenation -- that of imagining myself as a sort of mixture of two cultures -- has had a way of uprooting me from *both* identities, so that I become monocultural in effect. But just how consistent is Panikkar's use of the Chalcedonian logic? Let me state his proposal positively: instead of *inculturation*, he calls for *interculturalization*. That is, instead of a primarily propositional type of evangelization which involves introducing a neat package into a host culture (perhaps with a new wrapping), he calls for a way in which the two religions can remain intact while relating to each other at a deep, existential, level.<sup>ii</sup> He finds support for his more mystical approach in Scripture: "In the wake of St. Paul," he

writes, “we believe that we may speak not only of the unknown God of the Greeks, but also of the *hidden Christ of Hinduism* – hidden and unknown and yet present and at work because ‘he is not far from any one of us’”.<sup>iii</sup> In other words, we can thank Paul for recognizing true worship in the Athenian altar to the unknown God, because on that basis we can say that Christ is already in the deep experience of Hindu religion.

Panikkar’s vision calls for the kind of dialogue which “is not a strategy for making one truth triumphant, but a process of looking for it and deepening it along with others”.<sup>iv</sup> But notice the choice we are required to make: if truth is to come from God it must not come through any *particular* tradition, but only from below, as it were. Panikkar is clear about this: “It would only be a proof of colonialism to pretend that one religious message, like the New Testament, has the right and the duty to inculturate itself everywhere, as if it were something supra-cultural”.<sup>v</sup>

According to Panikkar, then, what sort of interpreters are called for as Hinduism and Christianity meet one another? Well, the kind that belong equally to both, in principle. But is this possible? While a person can enjoy dual- or even multiple-citizenship, and carry more than one passport, to which world view does the interpreter basically belong if he says, as Panikkar does, that the Christian ought not to speak to the Hindu of Jesus of Nazareth, but instead of “the risen Christ” who is already there in Hinduism? The possibility of truly belonging to both traditions is finally thrown into question when Panikkar expresses his vision of the ultimate synthesis of the two: “Nobody knows how Christianity will look,” he writes, “when the present Christian waters and the Hindu river merge into a bigger stream, where the peoples of the future will quench their thirst – for truth, for goodness, for salvation”.<sup>vi</sup> In this way, today’s Hindu-Christian or Christian-Hindu does not exist primarily to safeguard the integrity of both traditions, but as a sign and first fruits of a marriage. But what happens as two religions are displaced and a third one emerges? Interpreters are laid off. Well, all except for one. We still need one who can explain to us what’s going on – in this case to tell us that religions are, fundamentally, destined, slowly but surely, to merge. But *that* would be a local conviction or insight which, according to Panikkar’s own principles, ought not to try to inculturate itself everywhere.

### ***Jeepney Hermeneutics***

A brief word about “Jeepney hermeneutics”. The Jeepney is a monument to Filipino resourcefulness: old U.S. Army Jeeps, left behind as a reminder of American occupation, were transformed from instruments of war (as the guns were removed from the front) into passenger vehicles with expanded seating in the back. The ones I’ve seen are colourful, and usually packed as they speed, swerve and stop abruptly along the streets of Manila. Apparently, there’s always room for one more passenger, since locals are good at creating space, or at offering a lap to a child. Structurally, since two long benches stretch from front to rear on either side, conversation is encouraged as passengers all face one another.

In his essay “Reading Philemon inside a Jeepney”, Filipino theologian Revelation Enriquez Velunta proposes a distinctively Filipino way of reading Scripture that tries to tackle the problem of colonialist readings which have dominated in his country, whether throughout the centuries of Spanish occupation or decades of American presence. Specifically, he appeals to the Filipino practice of “fishing” – not the kind with rod and reel, but that of “fishing out words or phrases from a stream of unintelligible discourses and proceeding to weave a relevant narrative that oftentimes has little or no relation to the discourse that produced it.” Just as the U.S. Army Jeep was “fished” out from its colonial context and put to creative Filipino use, so Jeepney hermeneutics proceeds as follows: it disregards imperial rhetoric as it makes way for local hermeneutics which involve Filipino myths, legends and

traditions, and it acknowledges that the Bible's answers "may even be wrong for the questions asked by many communities".<sup>vii</sup>

With sincere appreciation for my warm and easygoing Filipino hosts, I must say that Velunta's proposal is self-defeating. It is one thing to be attentive to the questions asked by a local culture, but it is quite another to let those questions determine the meaning of the story being told. The implication that the Bible is a container for "unintelligible discourses" would only seem to promote a complete shift to the reader in hermeneutics: the reader's response is not *to* the meaning of the text, it *is* the meaning, as Stanley Fish has put it. In that case, the narratives of Scripture are scraps left behind by imperial forces that are to be honoured only in the sense that they are to be spun in a new direction. But according to Jeepney hermeneutics a cross-cultural interpreter like Philip, for whom the narrative in Isaiah about the lamb led to the slaughter was not unintelligible, is in principle unwelcome, since he brings a word from outside the resources of the eunuch's local culture.

### ***The Depth of the Riches***

You may say, at this point, Panikkar and Velunta don't sound terribly orthodox or evangelical. And you'd be right: neither would be comfortable, I expect, with those labels. So let me present to you three *evangelical* ways of working interpreters out of a job.

In *The Depth of the Riches* Mark Heim ventures a fairly creative proposal in the discussion about religious pluralism.<sup>viii</sup> Unlike Panikkar, Heim sees no need to speak of some essence to religion, as though the different world religions were manifestations of the same reality, or even of some mystical Christ who is secretly and savingly at work within a major religion such as Hinduism. Rather, the Gospel of Jesus is unique, *sui generis*, so that if the seeker is after the kind of Salvation that Jesus offers, then he or she should follow Jesus, and should not encourage the idea that this Salvation in the Christian sense of the term is to be found anywhere else.

At first glance, this may sound pretty reasonable. But as we stay with Heim we realize he comes through with an interesting innovation. He argues that God has not intended one *particular* religious end for all of his creatures -- whether that end is salvation as understood in the Christian tradition, or the one Panikkar has in mind when he envisions a synthesis of Hinduism and Christianity. Rather, God has *multiple* religious ends in mind for different peoples. This means, in effect, that the church is the way God has chosen *for Christians*, at least. Appealing to the postmodern distaste for meta-narratives, he says that we cannot judge religious pluralism "from above" the religions, but only "among" them.<sup>ix</sup>

While Heim is right to challenge Panikkar's form of pluralism, does his conviction that a standard for religious pluralism can only come from *among* the religions put us back on the right track? One conclusion that Heim has reached is that a non-Christian religion "is a true and valid path to the religious fulfilment it seeks".<sup>x</sup> But how do we know *that*? Have we reached the end of our discernment process, compared notes with one another, and now concluded this? Somehow I doubt it. Would it not be safer, at this stage of the "dialogue", to say -- at very least -- that we just don't know whether the religions deliver the goods they promise to their adherents. But Heim *does* provide a standard from "above": Romans 11:33 becomes the pillar text for his claim that God must have in mind multiple religious ends for all his people. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" But this is the kind of norm whose validity Heim has undermined in principle. We're left asking: Why should this standard be more compelling than any other? Or why -- to push the point a bit further -- if God has ordained multiple religious ends for different *peoples* (in the plural), why not multiple religious ends for different *individuals*? It becomes hard to see how a strict

privatization of religion, which leads, of course, to the death of interpreters, is not the end result (and perhaps even a guiding principle) of Heim's thesis.

### ***Ethnohermeneutics***

Let's get back to the Asian context, and to the specific question of local hermeneutics. As one seasoned missionary in the Philippines, Larry Caldwell, argues, it's time for theological education in multi-cultural Asia to free itself from the domination of western hermeneutics (that is, the *historical-critical* method of Biblical interpretation, which gives priority to understanding how the text was received by its original readers or hearers). To sustain that tradition here, he claims, is both impractical (resources are hard to come by, especially once local leaders have returned to their home provinces) and prone to be elitist, since methods of interpretation are, after all, merely cultural (unlike the Bible). Instead, Biblical interpretation must be conducted with a new openness to local interpretive tools (he mentions animistic, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist hermeneutics in our Asian context). While that gets underway, he does not allow his seminary students to use anything other than the Bible and says, with some enthusiasm: "It works!"<sup>xi</sup>

While we would welcome the prominence Caldwell gives to Scripture, we note that he is not completely successful at getting out of the middle (that is, from between the Bible and his host culture), since he admits that he tosses in insights from the western approach as needed. He also recognizes that local readings cannot be given absolute license to establish the meaning of the text, since, for example, the Cotobato Manobo's "understanding of dreams as the only source of divine revelation must, of necessity, be expanded".<sup>xii</sup> So the missionary who was hoping only to be a sort of theological midwife to his hosts is required, in the end, not only to interpret insights from outside his host culture, but to hold it to some standard.

But this, of course, begs the question. Which insights are to be offered, and according to what rule will the host's understanding of revelation be expanded? It's acknowledged, in the end, that a standard under Scripture is necessary, for insights are ultimately scrutinized by the church at one level or another (local, regional, national and international) to "carefully decide on whether or not the new meaning is allowable or not".<sup>xiii</sup> But subordinate standards (like confessions in our Reformed tradition) have been threatened at the outset with a view of inspiration and Scriptural authority which attempts to bypass interpretive traditions.

All along, Caldwell insists that Asian Christians need to free themselves from their dependence on "interpretational dogma of Protestant scholars and /or upon a scholarly priesthood trained to interpret the Bible for us".<sup>xiv</sup> With due respect for a senior co-laborer in that mission field (and I hope he senses this when I develop some of these ideas at a conference we'll both attend in February!), I think that Caldwell is guided by a somewhat uncritical approach to culture, including our own North American one. He finds it hard to question those things that "work," or that appear to be "relevant" (a term which is used frequently in his essays). In a modern mega-city like Manila, where we both live, he simply takes the shift from a textual and temporal mode of interpretation to a visual and spatial mode for granted, as though it were a new reality to which the messenger must simply adapt to stay relevant. "What are the underlying hermeneutical methods at work in the MTV culture," he asks, "and how can we use these for gospel presentation and teaching the truths of the Bible?"<sup>xv</sup> The question of how the gospel might challenge culture in this respect is not raised. That would be to introduce a foreign theological tradition, and that's precisely what he's encouraging us to avoid.

### ***Insider Movements***

For my fifth illustration of the urge to get "out of the middle", finally, let me say a few words about "insider movement" theory as it pertains to Islam. You may have heard of the capture

of the Burnhams, a missionary couple in the Philippines some years ago, by the Abu Sayaf, a militant Islamic group in the southern part of Mindanao. Stories like these point to the deep hostility on the part of some Muslims for the outsider -- whether Spanish Roman Catholic or Evangelical North American, in the Philippine setting -- who bring to them the story of Jesus.

In hopes of greater peace and a more generous attitude toward Islam, some Evangelical missionaries are now speaking about a messianic movement within that religion. The basic strategy they are adopting is as follows: point Muslims to *Isa-al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah), study the Bible with them, but avoid prescribing how they ought to view Islam. These missionaries note that the term “Christianity”, for Muslims, is synonymous with Crusades and imperialism, and that it would be desirable for their new friends not to have to leave their own culture behind. So the missionaries speak hopefully about the Muslim who decides to follow Isa without abandoning outward Muslim religious practices.<sup>xvi</sup>

Missionaries that have shared this hope with me are surely well-meaning. But I do have concerns about the theological implications of their strategy. Without getting into the particulars of the encounter between Christianity and Islam -- since that would be the topic of a separate study -- I would only raise the question I've been asking all along: Where are the interpreters in the encounter, and what is assumed to be their role or task?

At it appears, proponents of the insider movement adopt the assumptions of ethnohermeneutics theory. Once the Muslim has been introduced to *Isa-al-Masih* and to the reading of the *Injil* (the New Testament), the missionary is required to get out from the middle, as the messianic Muslim community seeks guidance from the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the missionary is unable to remain strictly neutral with respect to Islam, since he ends up prescribing a desired course of action, which is for the Muslim to remain within Islam. He (or she) has a strong argument here: having turned to *Isa-al-Masih*, the Muslim follower of Jesus is in a better position to reach fellow Muslims since he is not an outsider.

Even where it is admitted that the insider movement may be a transitional one, the reason why a messianic Muslim might come out of the mosque is an internal one to Islam; that is, the Muslim community may eventually expel him or her, intolerant of the new sect within Islam (as it happened with the early Christian sect within Judaism). But the *external* reason that brought the Muslim to Jesus in the first place is not carried through to its logical conclusion. What do I mean by that? Well, having announced the message of Jesus, and having taken up Bible study with Muslim followers of *Isa*, it seems that external matters such as the sacraments, church order and confessions of faith have become matters of indifference, optional extras. But where is there assurance of salvation apart from God's covenant family? And what is that covenant family if not the company of those who gather through the ministry of Word and Sacrament and who remain in the teaching of the Apostles?

We might also ask about the kind of evangelism conducted by messianic Muslims: Assuming it would be proper for him or her to evangelize a Hindu, for example, we could ask: would the evangelist (a) invite the Hindu to join the fellowship of Muslims, (b) direct him or her towards a church, or (c) encourage him or her to initiate an insider movement within Hinduism? The simple fact that these questions do not appear to be on the horizon yet is an indication, I think, of the assumption that external matters matter little, and of the conviction, perhaps, that a relationship with Jesus is something more or less direct, immediate, pertaining to the individual soul.

### ***Way Forward***

I've been trying to show that interpreters, in each of the five cases above, have been worked out of a job in principle, but not consistently in practice. But where do we go from here? The fact of local hermeneutics remains a challenge, and we must formulate a response.

The first thing we have to recognize, I think, is that all interpretation is *local* interpretation. *What else do we have?* At the same time, we have to add that the fact that we come to know and understand things in particular ways, within particular cultures, does not imply that our knowledge must remain *merely* local or cultural. The problem is not with local knowledge -- it's with *localism*. We trust in a God who has chosen what is local and particular to reveal his universal will. Of course we have to admit that we have often *overtranslated* what he has told us to announce. We have not been terribly good at discerning those things that are *merely* cultural in our beliefs, lifestyles and forms of worship as we have taken the Gospel to other cultures.

But two basic questions remain: how do we *know* that God's will as revealed to his chosen people is intended for all? And how are we supposed to discern the things in culture -- whether someone else's or our own -- which are merely local? We have a real dilemma here. The basic grammar of the world view which is acceptable in the public arena includes the assumption that knowledge is merely local. That's why my Canadian friend Joe, who works with CIDA in the Philippines, could say to me not long ago, quite confidently: "I really don't know if there's a God who loves me. I just don't know if there's a God who has spoken or intervened in history. What I do know is what I see around me. Here and there I see love and concern for others -- and that concern has little or nothing to do with systems of belief." When I told him that I would personally be quite lost without answers to those questions, he said that he didn't feel any special need for them. In any case, he told me, it wasn't in our power as humans to have answers to such questions, since he compared our inability to know such things to the possibility that the fish below us -- as we made our way by boat to a snorkelling spot -- might come to learn about Toronto. Back at home, too, I found out that my teenage daughter Laura, who has friends who are Hindu and Muslim, has been wrestling with the same issue. The other day she asked me, quite frankly, "We invite others to trust in Jesus. How do we know we're right?"

I could have explained to Laura that the knowledge we have of Jesus is just local, in which case she would have got the message that she and her friends have nothing substantial to offer each other. Or I could have told her that we know we're right *at least* when it comes to ourselves, in which case she would have learned that Jesus is *our* way of salvation, but we really can't be sure that Jesus' love is meant for our non-Christian friends. But instead I assured her that her question was a good one, and that we know that Jesus is the Truth because God himself puts that conviction in our hearts. How has he done this? As Lesslie Newbigin puts it, "through the words and deeds of the members of the believing community there come occasions when the Holy Spirit bears witness in the heart and conscience of a man or woman that the secret of life is to be found in the company of Jesus".<sup>xvii</sup> Notice the wonderful instrumental logic here: *through the words and deeds of believers the Holy Spirit witnesses...* This means that God is sovereign, and we can be confident that his sovereignty is in no way diminished because he uses human means to speak to those he has chosen.

It's this very instrumental thinking that provides the clue to our second problem of discerning, for the sake of the Gospel, those things within culture which are merely cultural. As evangelicals we've been known to claim, of course, that since the Scriptures alone are infallible only they can provide that norm or standard. But the examples from jeepney-, etho- and insider-hermeneutics suggest that God's Word is not to be encountered so immediately and directly that human interpreters are worked out of the process. The conviction that the Bible is the only source of revelation need not be undermined by the existence of interpreters -- *in fact we need them to interpret that very insight*. One way or another, interpreters will come to fill the space left open when we marginalise the ministry of subordinate standards (like confessions, catechisms, or liturgical traditions). Enriquez Velunta, for instance, implies that the subordinate standard is the collective experience of

believers, in the abstract, as it evolves. Caldwell implies a subordinate standard, under Scripture, without feeling obligated to name what that is. Defenders of the insider movement within Islam get out from between the Bible and Islam, and so implicitly trust that the subordinate standard under Scripture will originate within Islam itself. We must respond that subordinate standards are fallible summaries of Biblical doctrine, but it's *Biblical* doctrine nevertheless.

So how do I bring to my culture, or a host culture, a prophetic word? To bring Newbigin in again: by being a dual-citizen in a special sense, and by being open to the stranger God would send our way. You may recall that someone once challenged Newbigin with the remark that to utter a word from beyond your culture's own resources was like trying to move a bus while standing in it. He replied by saying that while we can't move buses while standing inside them, we *can* speak two languages: the language of our own culture, and the language whose grammar is the narrative of God's redemptive work in history.

On that score, the message of Acts 17 has been misconstrued in every case we've seen. For Panikkar, Paul's supposed recognition that there is true religion in Pagan worship means that the particular narrative of Jesus can be de-historicized, over-spiritualized into a lesson about a "cosmic" Christ who is more basic than Jesus. Within Jeepney-, ethno- and insider-hermeneutics, Paul is free to tell the Athenians the story of Jesus, as he does, but he will eventually need to get out of the middle so that they can encounter the Gospel directly, and not from him, since he's an outsider Jew. For Heim, Paul is bound to share his experience of the risen Lord with the Athenians, although he should not assume that Jesus is necessarily the religious end God has in mind for them as a people.



Against all of these attitudes, Paul proves to be our model cross-cultural interpreter. Considering the altar dedicated to the Unknown God in Athens, he does not say: “Let’s go inscribe Jesus’ name there” -- for that would have been to add one more God to the pantheon. He did not say that their worship was a good thing, or that the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” drew near to them through their religious observances. Rather, he announced the coming of the one who will judge all culture and all religion, and let them know that God does not live in man-made temples. In short, he did not let local knowledge determine the meaning of Jesus for them.

Let me conclude with some final words about the nature of dialogue. There’s a lot to be said for dialogue as a sharing of stories and experiences. But as long as we leave it at that all we have is a series of images. Take the following images of Jesus:

- i. the Orthodox Pantokrator, “ruler of the cosmos”,
- ii. the Mexican Christ who suffers with us and for us,
- iii. the Western ‘smiling’ Jesus.

We like to think that these complement and correct each other, so we bless the diversity that way. In inter-*religious* dialogue we even come close to saying that the object is not primarily to persuade, to compel other to come to the Master’s banquet, but to help others be true to their own religious traditions. And we leave religion in peace, which according to Karl Barth is the essence of mysticism. But images reflect *man’s* religious impulse. Only the Word, as it confronts us by the Spirit, can reorder culture and give images their proper place. Images of Jesus, then, stand under the judgement of the one Paul spoke of on Mars Hill: the Ascended Lord who will one day come to judge the world. If that is so, religions and cultures, including Christian ones, must also be confronted by that local community which carries, celebrates, and re-enacts the story of Jesus and his love in a particular place. So dialogue involves challenge. As Newbigin writes:

If the Gospel is to challenge the public life of our society . . . [it] will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ . . . <sup>xviii</sup>

Dialogue also involves a “listening mode”, of course. This is fundamentally the work of the Spirit preparing us to welcome the stranger that God would bring. It’s about a “preferential option” for the underdog, as we learn in Acts 17. There, the story about an obscure man, from some place far removed from Cosmopolitan Athens, was foolishness to many Greeks that day. But it was also the power of God for those who believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, and a women named Damaris. And so it was as it should be, if attention was not to be drawn to Paul himself, but only to Paul as interpreter of the Gospel.

We’ve come full-circle. Through my missionary upbringing, I was privileged to be what people are calling a “third culture” kid. I’ve struggled with the uprootedness and cultural fragmentation that’s bound up with that identity. But mostly, in recent years, I’ve come to find in it a special insight. On the personal level, I’ve found new strength to be an interpreter, to get back to the pulpit where the Texan is preaching. When it comes to the church, the insight is that the church, too, is called to be a “third culture” – called, first and foremost, to perpetual *outsiderhood* for the sake of the Gospel, since God’s Word always



comes to us from beyond our resources. That's why we should never grow too comfortable with any privileged, "insider" status as Christians, too cozy in our culture. On the other hand, we're special outsiders, since by grace the words we utter will persuade *as if* from within our host culture, reflecting the ministry of the One who was born of a Virgin and became man.

---

#### NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> 'Fulcrum Submission to the Lambeth Commission on the Anglican Communion', <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2004/20040528lambeth.cfm?doc=66>
- <sup>ii</sup> R. Panikkar, "The Unknown Christ of Hinduism", in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (Collins, 1980), 130.
- <sup>iii</sup> R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (New York, 1981), 168.
- <sup>iv</sup> R. Panikkar, "Eruption of Truth: An Interview with Raimon Panikkar." *The Christian Century* (August 16-23, 2000), 836.
- <sup>v</sup> Panikkar, "Eruption of Truth", 836.
- <sup>vi</sup> Panikkar, "Unknown Christ," 144.
- <sup>vii</sup> R. Enriquez Velunta, 'Reading Philemon inside a Jeepney', [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/religious\\_studies/RLST-109/philemon.htm](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/religious_studies/RLST-109/philemon.htm)
- <sup>viii</sup> S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2001).
- <sup>ix</sup> Heim, 6.
- <sup>x</sup> Heim, 31.
- <sup>xi</sup> L. Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics", *Journal of Asian Mission* 1/1 (1999), 29.
- <sup>xii</sup> Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline", 37.
- <sup>xiii</sup> L. Caldwell, "A Response to the Responses of Tappeiner and Whelchel to Ethnohermeneutics", *Journal of Asian Mission* 2/1 (2000), 144.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline", 40.



<sup>xv</sup> Caldwell, "A Response", 141.

<sup>xvi</sup> See [http://godlovesmuslims.8m.net/IJFM\\_articles/Messianic\\_Muslims.html](http://godlovesmuslims.8m.net/IJFM_articles/Messianic_Muslims.html)

<sup>xvii</sup> L. Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 97.

<sup>xviii</sup> L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 232.

Todos los derechos reservados. Ninguna parte de este ensayo puede ser reproducido de ninguna manera sin el permiso por escrito de **Misión para el Tercer Milenio**, excepto en el caso de breves referencias, citando la fuente y el autor.