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MISSION AFTER CHRISTENDOM¹

(FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE 2002)

DAVID SMITH, WHITEFIELD INSTITUTE, OXFORD

At the beginning of this third millennium the National Gallery in London mounted an exhibition of Christian art with the title 'Seeing Salvation'. In the introduction to the catalogue, the Director of the Gallery, Neil MacGregor, observed,

All great collections of European painting are inevitably also great collections of Christian art. In the National Gallery, London, roughly one third of the pictures – and many of the finest – are of Christian subjects. This is hardly surprising, for after classical antiquity, Christianity has been the predominant force in shaping European cultures.²

However, MacGregor immediately goes on to acknowledge that while a substantial proportion of the pictures in the collection are Christian, 'many of our visitors now are not'. A growing awareness of this fact provided the motivation for mounting the exhibition since MacGregor realised that thousands of visitors, whether tourists belonging to non-Christian religious traditions, or Europeans who are no longer biblically literate, view these great canvasses uncomprehendingly and so focus their attention on the technical aspects of the art, rather than on the Christian *meaning* intended by the artists.

If the inability of many of the visitors to the National Gallery to recognise and interpret Christian symbols can be taken as evidence of the declining salience of the biblical story within the culture of the Western world, it is interesting to note that in the closing year of the twentieth century there was parallel evidence concerning the erosion of the other great meta-narrative which has shaped the culture of modern Europe, namely, that of the Enlightenment. Writing in the programme for the 1999 BBC

¹ This lecture will appear in a revised form as the first chapter in a volume with the title *Mission After Christendom* to be published by Darton, Longman & Todd.

² Neil MacGregor, *Seeing Salvation* (London, 2000), p. 6.

Promenade Concerts, Michael Ignatieff pointed out that some of the great works to be performed during the season, including Beethoven's Choral Symphony and the 'Resurrection' Symphony of Gustav Mahler, could not be understood apart from 'the Enlightenment faith in human reason and endurance as the secular Providence of modern history'. However, living at the end of a dark century, Ignatieff said,

We are no longer certain that we can believe such stories. There is enough barbarism close at hand to make us doubt that our species is marching together along a path toward civilisation. Indeed, in a Proms season of music devoted to the Ascent of Man... *it is easy to feel that we are listening to the music of our lost hopes and illusions, reaching us like the last light from extinguished stars.*³

Taken together these two turn-of-the-century witnesses reflect very clearly the unmistakable 'sense of an ending' that pervades the culture of the Western world at the present time. Ignatieff's jeremiad serves to confirm the conviction held by many thoughtful Christians that the Enlightenment project was built on wholly inadequate foundations. The bells which ring out at the end of Mahler's magnificent symphony may suppress secular *angst* for a few hours but they cannot disguise the fragile basis of the hope they seek to express, the desperate longing to feel that one has not 'vainly lived and suffered'. Michael Ignatieff acknowledges that even this limited, secular affirmation has become difficult in our own time and he wonders how we can discover resources to continue 'this grand musical tradition of affirmation that seems to leave the language of praise all used up?'⁴

In a cultural context like this questions concerning the future of the Christian mission are unavoidable since, whatever the precise nature of the connection between the modern missionary movement and the Enlightenment, it is clear that the great age of Christian expansion, the period described by Kenneth Scott Latourette as 'The Great Century' in the history of the Christian mission, occurred at precisely the time that European economic and political power was being extended across the world. Indeed, when Andrew Walls analyses Christian history in terms of six successive eras in which the Christian faith has been transmitted across major cultural barriers, he describes the period that has witnessed the modern missionary movement as *the age of expanding Europe*. During this phase, he writes, 'The population of Europe was exported to other

³ Michael Ignatieff, 'The Ascent of Man?' in *BBC Proms '99* (London, 1999), p. 8 [emphasis mine].

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

continents and the dominance of Europe extended, until by the twentieth century people of European origin occupied, possessed, or dominated the greater part of the globe.⁵ Moreover, throughout most of this period Christianity was the professed religion of almost all European peoples with the result that mission became inextricably linked with the expansion of Western influence and civilisation.

However, the linkage between mission and European civilisation must be traced back long before the dawn of the modern era since the basic presuppositions underlying this model of mission came to birth with the emergence of Christendom. The arrival of Columbus in the New World in 1492 was without doubt an event of enormous significance, but rather than marking the commencement of what we might call an 'imperial' model of mission, it merely represented the attempt to extend that model beyond the confines of Europe *where it had held sway for centuries*. The origins of the concept of a Christian empire, sometimes denoted by the phrase *Corpus Christianum*, are usually traced back to Constantine or Theodosius and the conversion of the emperor was clearly a watershed event in the history of the church. In the words of the Swiss theologian Walbert Buhlmann, 'Having Christianized the Roman Empire from within, having become a state religion, having received privileges and lands, the Jesus-movement... became an institution. The open city placed on a mountain (Matt. 5:14) became a fortress, with walls and moats.'⁶

However, perhaps the crucial factor in the growth of a form of Christianity in which the profession of faith became bound up with the possession of territory is to be discovered during another great cultural transmission of the faith as vast numbers of Barbarian peoples from Northern Europe accepted Christian baptism. The cultural and religious background of these peoples was significantly different from that of Rome or Greece in that their traditional, primal religions made it impossible for them to distinguish the realms of the sacred and the secular. Thus was born the concept of a people united by a single body of belief and of Christianity as a territorial religion. From such obscure beginnings, Christendom grew and developed over a very long period of time to become a religious ideology that has proved amazingly resilient. While the Reformation led to the fragmentation of Christendom it retained many of its fundamental assumptions so that the *spirit* of Christendom has persisted across the centuries, reflected in phrases and slogans that still remain in use

⁵ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 21.

⁶ Walter Buhlmann, *God's Chosen Peoples* (New York, 1982), p. 67.

today to describe the task of evangelism and mission. Thus, when Western Christians deplore the refusal of public institutions to identify Christ with Christmas, or when Jehovah's Witnesses are treated with contempt or disdain, or even when evangelists in Northern Nigeria enter Muslim areas to announce a forthcoming 'Crusade', we realise that the shadow cast by Christendom is a very long one indeed.

Nonetheless, it is quite clear by now that this particular model of the Christian mission has lost its credibility and cannot survive. In fact, the erosion of the Christendom concept commenced as soon as the attempt was made to transmit the faith beyond the confines of its European heartlands. Thus, from the sixteenth century onwards, and with ever-increasing momentum during the period Latourette called the 'great century', a form of Christianity thoroughly acculturated within Europe 'had to extend its consciousness, its vision, and eventually its theology, to cope with the realities of the world beyond Europe'.⁷ Christendom's division of the world and its peoples into two great blocs – *here* a culture shaped by the gospel; *there* a realm of ignorance and darkness (a categorisation that continued to inform the Western mind in various secularised reworkings) – has increasingly seemed to be incredible and unbelievable. In Buhmann's words, 'until recently the world was divided in two: the church and the missions.... The church was the centre, the missions were its periphery. We had the model over here, the copy over there.' This schema will no longer work, he says, since we have witnessed a historic shift in which the 'centre of gravity' of the Christian movement has now been transferred to the Southern hemisphere.⁸ Meantime, the barbarism, which has all too frequently disfigured the culture of Europe, combined with the steady and accelerating recession in the influence of Christianity in its traditional heartlands, makes it impossible to continue to claim that European civilisation remains a 'Christian culture'.

Clearly, in a context like this, many questions arise concerning the future of Christian mission. Let me pose some of them in rather stark language. Does not missionary talk of the *conquest* of the world sound extremely discordant and offensive in an age when people have become rightly suspicious of such terminology? Can we continue to talk of the *future* of mission in the language of the past, as though the world in which it must be done has not changed? And, given a culture in which

⁷ Andrew F. Walls, 'Christianity in the Non-Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion', *Studies in World Christianity* 1 (1995), pp.1-25.

⁸ Buhmann, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

institutional Christianity seems to be facing a supreme crisis and even the rumours of God are fading, where will we find the *resources* in personnel and funding to continue the kind of global enterprise we have associated with cross-cultural mission? These questions become urgent in the light of the findings of Wilbert Shenk that the study of the missionary movement since the 1920s leaves the impression that 'an ageing movement, increasingly unable to adapt to the times' has found its basic structures and assumptions rendered irrelevant and that 'with the end of the modern period in world history has also come the end of modern missions'.⁹

In a situation like this serious biblical and theological reflection on the future of Christian mission becomes an urgent priority. Indeed, just such reflection has been underway for some time now, boosted by the *magnum opus* of the late David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. In this influential book Bosch attempted to describe what he called the 'Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm'. He acknowledged that we are living through a time of deep uncertainty and confusion not unlike previous periods in the history of mission when Christians have faced major change in the church and in the world. Bosch observed that such transitions are always difficult to negotiate:

New paradigms do not establish themselves overnight. They take decades, even centuries, to develop distinctive contours. The new paradigm is therefore still emerging and it is, as yet, not clear which shape it will eventually adopt. For the most part we are, at the moment, thinking and working in terms of *two* paradigms.¹⁰

In the light of this comment I want to consider the actual or possible responses to this situation. How *are* Christians reacting to the current crisis in mission? Is it possible to begin to discern the contours of an emerging model of mission and, if so, what are its leading features?

CRISIS! WHAT CRISIS?

The first position I want to describe can be called the '*business as usual*' response. This reaction is found among Christians who have come to identify mission with one particular, passing paradigm. The conditional nature of any and all of our understandings of the missionary calling of the people of God is overlooked and one local expression of missionary

⁹ Wilbert Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (New York, 1999), p. 165.

¹⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (New York, 1991), p. 349.

obedience and practice is elevated to the status of an unchanging absolute and invested with all the authority of divine revelation. To abandon *this* position, it is argued, is to renege on the call of Christ to obey the 'great commission'. To other people it seems obvious that the particular model being defended is creaking at the seams, yet those who cling to it cannot face the prospect of its demise and so live in a condition of denial.

I suggest that this response is widespread among Evangelicals and can be detected in a great deal of missionary literature. For example, the seemingly unending series of programmes and strategies for world evangelisation which were promoted in the approach to the year AD 2000 had in common a steadfast denial of the realities of Western secularisation, combined with an approach to the non-western world which was, at best, paternalistic, at worst, neo-colonial. Thus, the founder of the DAWN project (DAWN stands for 'Discipling A Whole Nation') tells us that this movement, which offers techniques designed to lead directly to the completion of the Great Commission and the end of the world, has swept across England, enthusiastically endorsed by the leaders of all denominations, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Church of England is said to have been a staid and static church in terrible decline before the adoption of DAWN strategies, but is now revived and planting a new congregation every week. The upshot of all this is, according to the writer, that God is 'anointing the Church in England to *get back to its historic role* as one of the leading missionary sending nations in the world'.¹¹ Any doubt that such sentiments amount to a desire to turn the clock back are banished when we read that the Church in England could 'return to its former colonies' and pioneer a new strategy in missions.¹²

It is difficult to know whether to treat such descriptions as simply naïve wishful thinking or wilful blindness, but whatever the explanation, we are clearly dealing with an approach that ignores both the challenge of mission in the modern West and renders invisible the emergence of what Buhmann has called 'the Third Church' in the non-western world. Missiology of this kind involves an irresponsible flight from reality and a refusal to face the real challenge of discovering the true frontiers of the Christian mission in the third millennium.

However, it is important to notice that while the position just described may appear anachronistic, it is attractive to many Christians who find themselves confused and bewildered by the tensions and contradictions that exist in a time of transition. It is not easy to live between paradigms at a

¹¹ Jim Montgomery, *The End will Come* (Pasadena, 1997), p. 54.

¹² *Ibid.*

point when the old model no longer works and the new one has not yet emerged. A strategy of mission that assures anxious Christians that nothing has really changed, that Christian conquest of the world remains assured, and that with one final push we can actually precipitate the end of all things and the return of the Lord, obviously has power to reassure the troubled. Thus, when a highly respected missionary strategist writes that the 'tide of the gospel has risen and flowed over two thirds of the earth, and is lapping at the one third where the final bastions and citadels of Satan's kingdom have yet to be broken down',¹³ it is tempting to accept such an analysis since it confirms that nothing has really changed in the world and the inherited paradigm of mission can be retained. Sadly, analyses of this kind rest upon nineteenth-century assumptions that involve the presupposition that the contemporary West is an area *immersed* in the gospel tide, while peoples in the so-called 10/40 window are under satanic domination to a degree found nowhere else on the planet. The cities of Accra, Delhi and Beijing are thus classified as 'citadels of Satan'; London, Berlin, even Las Vegas, are not viewed as legitimate *missionary* territory since they are located in areas that have been 'evangelised'. Whatever else may be said about such an approach, it is difficult to see how it connects with the real world we know from daily experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

These comments are certainly not meant to impugn the integrity or sincerity of Christians who continue to operate within a fading missionary paradigm. Indeed, such people often reveal a concern for God's glory and a deep compassion for the world that would put many of us to shame and in these, and many other ways, their commitment demands imitation rather than rejection. Nonetheless, precisely *because* we share such a concern for the glory of God in a rapidly changing world, we are bound to engage in a search for a new paradigm of faithful, missionary obedience in the third millennium. There is an urgent need to break out from a situation in which the relics of the lost paradigm 'hold us hostage to the past and make it difficult to create a new paradigm'.¹⁴ Meantime, as Loren Mead observes, many people react in this context with denial, depression and *anger*: 'I see it in the way people at all levels engage in civil wars or try to purge one another for one reason or another.'¹⁵ Which alerts us to the fact that the

¹³ Patrick Johnstone, *The Church is Bigger Than You Think* (Fearn, Rosshire 1998), pp. 215-16.

¹⁴ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Church for a New Missionary Frontier* (New York, 1988), p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

time between paradigms is likely to witness increased stress within the Body of Christ and is a situation in which there is need for greater vigilance than ever if we are to maintain the unity of the people of God.

BACK TO BASICS

The second position I want to notice can be called that of the *radical revisionists*. As long ago as 1951 Max Warren noted that we were living through the end of an age and that in both East and West 'the old landmarks are disappearing'. Warren commented,

In this testing situation it is essential that the particular form of the missionary enterprise shall be scrutinized afresh to see what, if any, are the elements of its past organization that can with advantage be carried over into the future.... Beyond this it is surely necessary to go even further and to ask the direct question – 'Have we reached the end of the missionary age in any shape recognizably continuous with the past?'¹⁶

In the middle of the twentieth century Warren had sensed that the changes taking place in the world were of such a profound and far-reaching nature that no mere tinkering with the structures of mission would suffice and he anticipated what we have come to know as a paradigm shift in the Christian mission. At the beginning of the third millennium it has become clear to many thoughtful observers that we have indeed reached the end of the era of modern missions and a growing chorus of voices can now be heard demanding a radically new approach. For example, the Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall wrote a book with the title *Christian Mission: The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* in which he sought to articulate 'a new understanding of our mission' that relates Christian witness to the realities of a culture in which powerful nations have entered into a covenant with death. Hall described the inherited model of mission as one that was fatally flawed by the concept of 'conquering for Christ' and he proposed a root-and-branch rejection of this imagery. The question of Jesus, 'What does it profit one to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?' could be applied to the church: what if the church gained the world, in the manner intended by the church-growth missiologists, and, in the process, lost its soul? The equating of missionary success with the expansion of the church subverts a basic principle of the gospel since, Hall said, 'By such logic, Jesus' own mission must be regarded as a failure....

¹⁶ Max Warren, *The Christian Mission* (London, 1951), p. 103 [emphasis mine].

But perhaps the logic of the cross must call into question the whole assumption that faithfulness to the mission means the expansion of the missionary community.¹⁷

Douglas John Hall believes that the new paradigm of mission he is advocating would involve a *return* to an apostolic model of the church in which a 'disciple community' loses itself in the service of the world and bears costly and prophetic witness to the God of life in a world in thrall to the idols of death. In Hall's words,

In the kingdom God is building in the midst of death's kingdom, systematic theology will not be queen, and the church will not be a great property-holding multinational, and Christian armies will not go off to glorious death.... All that... will exist for the church of the future only as the record of a bad temptation, rejected by Jesus and picked up by his church, which finally achieved little if anything of true significance thereby.¹⁸

There is much to be learned from works like this and it is impossible not to admire Hall's attempt to articulate a fresh vision for the Christian mission. His analysis of Western culture in the light of Isaiah 28:14-22, in which the nations refuse the God of life and enter into a covenant with death, is compelling. Moreover, he shows great courage in suggesting that 'many of the earth's billions today' regard North America as the source of the world's sickness and that this favoured continent may prove to be the vulnerable channel 'through which Sheol could one day spew its lava over the face of the green planet'.¹⁹ In other words, far from being a region immersed by the truth of the gospel, *the Western world constitutes one of the supreme missionary challenges of this, or any other, age.*

However, there are dangers in this type of *revisionism* since it is possible that it leads beyond merely abandoning an outdated model of mission, to the loss of fundamental aspects of mission itself. It is, in other words, at the opposite end of the spectrum to the *conservationist* tactic discussed earlier. Hall's depiction of the received paradigm of mission as one characterised above all else by the motif of the *conquest* of the world in the name of Christ does scant justice to the records of humble and sacrificial service which fill the annals of missionary history. If after the holocaust, the entire heritage of cross-cultural missionary service must be repudiated (as Hall seems to suggest), what then happens to the coherence

¹⁷ Douglas John Hall, *Christian Mission: The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (New York, 1985), p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

of the Christian movement across the ages? It simply will not do to brand the entire effort with the charges laid against *conquistadores* and imperialists when the historical record reveals a far more nuanced picture. And while Hall's proposal that mission should in the future be focussed on 'the stewardship of life in the kingdom of death' merits careful consideration, we are bound to ask why he is so reticent about inviting people to *turn* from death and to *receive* the gift of life?

I am reminded here of the experience of the Gambian Christian convert from Islam, Lamin Sanneh. In an article entitled 'Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex', Sanneh recalls that when at the age of eighteen he approached an English Methodist missionary with a request to be baptised, he was invited to reconsider his decision! In this liberal Methodist tradition, he says, 'I first encountered the guilt complex about missions which I have since come to know so well after living for more than two decades in the West'.²⁰ Yet, as Sanneh points out, the stigmatising of the missionary movement as the religious agent of colonialism ignores the empirical fact that colonial power was 'irreparably damaged by the consequences of vernacular translation – and often by other activities of the missionaries'.²¹ In other words, modern missions, whatever their failings and shortcomings, formed the agency by means of which indigenous languages and local cultures were preserved and non-western peoples were equipped with a transcendent source of authority which enabled them to critique racism and imperialism and recover their own sense of worth and value.

So then, if neither the conservative *business as usual* response, nor the *radical revisionist* approach to the present crisis in mission is adequate, what path should we take as we seek for a new model of the Christian mission? Describing the *search for the new frontiers of mission*, Wilbert Shenk comments helpfully,

It is in the nature of mission always to seek the frontier where the struggle between faith and unfaith is most clearly and urgently drawn. The first essential of leadership, the one above all others with regard to mission, is to see the vision of the reign of God being established in these frontier situations and then to hold that before the church. All else is secondary.²²

²⁰ Lamin Sanneh, 'Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex', *Christian Century* 8 (1987), pp. 330-34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

²² William Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (New York, 1999), p. 183.

Most of the frustrations and dilemmas facing traditional missionary organisations and their supporters today arise from the fact that modern mission agencies came into existence in order to facilitate mission at frontiers far away in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The institutions and structures of mission designed to operate at these frontiers have remained in place at a time when the geographical, cultural and social location of mission has moved elsewhere. Not surprisingly, the traditional language used to report missionary activity often seems hollow and unreal. As Shenk puts it, *missions are today in search of mission*; agencies and institutions that once did pioneering work at the cutting edges of the Christian mission have too often been left facing in the wrong direction as the battle has moved on. In this situation they face a stark choice: either they engage in a radical re-formation, repositioning themselves to respond to the quite new challenges of the twenty-first century, or they are doomed to rapid and rather sad decline and extinction. A recent study of the crisis facing North American mission agencies concludes that unless they can break away from their essentially nineteenth-century, culturally modernist, mindset and embrace the new opportunities presented in the postmodern age, they will soon be known only to historians. Indeed, missions have need of penitence since they 'have infected a world church with the disease of modernity'. As a result, traditional agencies may be in danger of 'being judged unworthy to carry the mantle God once placed on North American missions'.²³

SEARCHING FOR THE NEW FRONTIERS

The disappearance of the traditional frontiers of modern missions is, quite clearly, related to the two major changes that have occurred within the Christian world in the course of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the massive growth in the churches of Africa, Latin America and many parts of Asia make it impossible to continue to speak of these areas as 'mission fields' in the sense that this phrase was understood in the past. Consider just one example, which has a particular significance in missionary history, the case of China. The expulsion of Western missionaries from China following the Communist revolution created a crisis of confidence for the missionary movement as a whole and there was anxiety in Europe and North America concerning the viability of the Chinese church in this situation. Indeed, by the 1960s Western Sinologists

²³ James F. Engel and William A. Dryness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, 2000), p. 78.

had concluded that Christianity was doomed to die away in China because of its 'ineradicably foreign connections'.²⁴ And yet, something totally unexpected happened and scholars now talk about 'a flood of manifestations of the revival of religion, especially popular religion, which was nothing short of spectacular'. The number of Christians in China grew tenfold since 1949 and has been conservatively estimated at between twenty to thirty million. Even more significant is the fact that Christianity has now become a clearly identifiable Chinese religion 'and part of the Chinese social scene'.²⁵ Precisely in the absence of foreign missionaries, a process of genuine inculturation and translation took place, which resulted in the emergence of an independent Chinese church which, given the role China seems destined to play in the twenty-first century, is a phenomenon of incalculable significance.

What has just been described is, of course, one indication among many others of the emergence of what has come to be known as *world Christianity*. However, the transformation of the Christian movement worldwide has been made yet more complete by the fact that, just as the faith was expanding rapidly across the southern hemisphere, it went into freefall in its former heartlands, with the result that the previously secure base for mission began to crumble away. In Europe, and increasingly in North America as well, we are left with the shell of Christendom, while the majority of people find their spiritual needs met either by alternative religions, or in their devotion to the idols of a culture now dominated by economic values and symbols. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe the tragedy of the kind of Christian response to this situation which involves a denial of reality and the refusal of mission:

Like an ageing dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and penniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continued to think and act as if we were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid.²⁶

There is, however, another way of viewing this situation. It is possible to understand this moment in history as providing a unique opportunity to recover a truly biblical theology of mission and, in that process, to

²⁴ Daniel H. Bays, *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, 1996), p. vii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1989), p. 29.

rediscover not only the essential tasks of Christian theology, but also our own true identity as churches and as believers. Seen in this light, the collapse of Christendom and the emergence of the church as a truly multicultural community of faith represent not the end of mission, but the beginning of its latest phase, which may turn out to be the most amazing time in the long history of the Christian movement.

No one, I think, has better expressed the challenge which confronts the Western churches in this situation than the Cuban-American theologian Justo Gonzalez. In a remarkable study on the book of Revelation, which sets that work in the context of an age of cultural conflict similar in many ways to our own, he writes:

The fact is that the gospel *is* making headway among the many tribes, peoples, nations and languages – that it is indeed making more headway among them than it is among the dominant cultures of the North Atlantic. The question is not whether there will be a multicultural church. Rather, the question is whether those who have become accustomed to seeing the gospel expressed only or primarily in terms of those dominant cultures will be able to participate in the life of the multicultural church that is already a reality.²⁷

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude where we began, in the National Gallery in London. Interestingly, although the 'Seeing Salvation' exhibition was prompted by the awareness of increasing biblical illiteracy, the final room bore the title 'The Abiding Presence'. It contained a series of modern images of Christ, including famous canvasses by Holman Hunt and Salvador Dali and the sketches for the great tapestry of Christ in glory by Graham Sutherland, which hangs in Coventry Cathedral. It also included a huge canvass of Stanley Spencer's in which Christ is depicted carrying his cross through the artist's native village of Cookham in Berkshire. This painting was completed in 1920 when memories of the Great War were still fresh in people's minds. That terrible conflict, hints of which are to be seen in Spencer's painting, shattered both the belief that European culture was in some sense 'Christian' *and* the confidence of those who had trusted the process of evolution to ensure the continuing 'ascent of man'. In this situation, Spencer depicts a Christ who transforms a dark and despairing

²⁷ Justo L. Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Books of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (New York, 1999), p. 91.

world and gives hope and meaning to people in his village, including the most humble of folk. Spencer said that he had come to realise that the cross of Jesus made everything holy: 'The instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush was similar to my feelings. I saw many burning bushes in Cookham.' Perhaps one aspect of the emerging paradigm of mission will involve the discovery of burning bushes in unlikely places in our postmodern culture and the humble and grateful acknowledgement of the prevenient grace of God, which has always preceded the arrival of the ambassadors of Christ at every new frontier of mission.