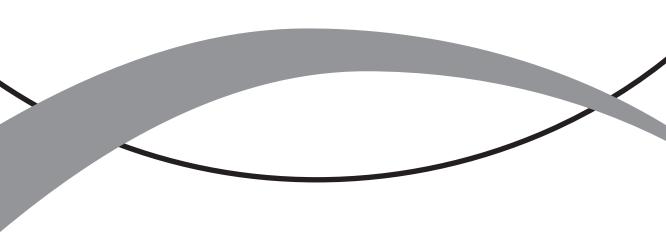
# UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES



### **EXTRACT**

## SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

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# Discipleship in a Multireligious World: living the Jesus Way and loving within the Trinity's embrace

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#### **Abstract**

This essay has two parts. The first section briefly evaluates two unhelpful theological models and then suggests how the Trinity can be creatively utilized as a Christian template for working out a spacious yet faithful theology of religions. The second section focuses on a pragmatic question: What would Christian discipleship look like in our multireligious world when we commit to generous compassion for all God's communities with a singular passion for Christ? The balance between spacious universality in the Triune One and God's particularity in Jesus Christ offers a productive means to passionately proclaim the Christian gospel while compassionately engaging with neighbours from other religions. The essay concludes by arguing that Christian discipleship in an interreligious world can be reimagined by uniting Christian embassy and interfaith hospitality.

#### Introduction

This is an explorative paper that will help us think differently together. Thus, it is provocative, creative, suggestive, and invitational. It also challenges our embedded and almost-settled theology. Because this essay calls for our willingness as disciples to stretch our God-endowed minds as Christians and extend our hearts to our God-given religious neighbors, it is best to start with a prayer of commitment:

Oh gracious, living and loving Triune God,

We remember your ask of Moses to "take off his sandals, for he treads upon holy ground."

In our desire to be passionately Christian and become compassionately interreligious,

we, too, offer to take off our footwear to love God

and our religious neighbors as ourselves.

In our continued journey on the Jesus Way, we remove:

our sandals of prejudice against the religious other,

our shoes of religious ignorance,

our slippers of easy misrepresentation,

our sneakers of flighty judgment and

our boots of misplaced spiritual pride.

We do this in the blessed expectation that the Spirit invites us

into abundant life in you and with each other. Amen

What do we need to help us be passionately Christian and compassionate interreligious disciples in our multi-religious world? We need two things. First, we need a theology of religions, which lays out a Christian understanding of other religions that affirms the overall providence of a universal God. And second, we need a vocation for a Christian mission that is fruitful even as it is respectful. This will allow Christian disciples to be confident yet humble about our witness and mission. Spacious theology and gracious mission in our interreligious world must hold together a singular passion for Christ and generous compassion for all God's differently-graced communities. After all, mission-shaped Christian disciples are God-centred, Christ-modelled, Spirit-driven, world-transforming, other-loving, poor-embracing, wisdom-serving, and kingdom-escalating.

# Two dominant theological models when thinking about other religions

Several distinct models have emerged in the theology of religions. For this essay, let me avoid the temptation of a professional theologian. I will steer clear of the nuances of the respective arguments and the perplexity of the unique jargon inherent in such models. Instead, let me briefly describe two theological bookends Christians have inherited concerning their relationship to other religions. One is exclusive in its commitment to be passionately Christian, while the other overreaches in its effort to be compassionately interreligious. I believe a more balanced model is needed. Mediating between these two, I will sketch the outlines of a third theological option that enables us to correlate our passion for Christ with interreligious compassion.

#### The Christianity over-and-against other religions model

Acknowledging the broad brush strokes and bold contrasts being used, I suggest Christians have tended to adopt two theological models when thinking about other religions. At one end, there is the model of *Christianity over-and-against other religions*. At the other end is the model of *Christianity alike and one-with other religions*. The Christianity over-and-against model magnifies differences and erases commonality. There are two limitations to this theological framework for living in an interreligious world. First, by focusing solely on Jesus Christ, this model does not do justice to the universality of God for the one human family God created in love. Archbishop Desmond Tutu makes this point well in a book entitled God is Not Christian and Other Provocations. He says,

For those interested in a basic bibliography that takes seriously some basic Protestant, Roman Catholic, Pentecost, and Orthodox theological voices in this field of theology of religions, the following are my suggestions: Gavin D'Costa, Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives (InterVarsity Press, 2023); Marianne Moyaert, Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality (Rodopi, 2011); Peter Phan, The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey (Orbis Books, 2017); Raimundo Panikkar, The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973); Raimon Panikkar, The Intrareligious Dialogue, Rev. edition (Paulist Press, 1999); Alan Race, Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times (Fortress Press, 2015); Alan Race and Paul Knitter, Ed., New Paths for Interreligious Theology: Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity (Orbis Books, 2019); John Thatamanil, Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity (Fordham University Press, 2020); Anastasios Yannoulatos, Coexistence, Peace, Nature, Poverty, Terrorism, Values: Religious Perspectives (WCC Publications, 2021); and Amos Yong, Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions (Wipf and Stock, 2003). Also, note the books by Mark S. Heim, who has greatly influenced my thinking on this matter, in a later footnote.

To claim God exclusively for Christians is to make God too small and in a real sense blasphemous. God is bigger than Christianity and cares for more than Christians. He has to, if only for the simple reason Christians are quite late arrivals on the world scene. God has been around since even before creation, and that is a very long time.<sup>2</sup>

Second, an "over-and-against model" does not gel with our everyday experience of other religious neighbours, nor is it useful for peaceful living in our flatter, smaller, and more organic world. Boundaries that have allowed us to spawn suspicion have been erased in a new global context of intense, many-sided flows and exchanges between various peoples with their own distinct cultural and religious worldviews. In my journey with Christ into the sacred spaces of other children of God, I have experienced these religious folk as fellow pilgrims rather than contending competitors. I am reminded of the passage in the Gospel of Mark when the disciples tell Jesus they saw someone casting out demons in his name, and they tried to stop him because he was not following them. Jesus was plain in his response. He said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mk 9: 40). In line with this instruction, we must insist that oppositional models of vilifying other religions are counterproductive to peaceful living in our world of intermingling religious worldviews and communities. I quote from the Introduction to a copious collection of World Scriptures:

Granted the integrity of each religion, it is significant for believers of one faith to find in other faiths common teachings and common attitudes towards life, death, and ultimate ends. First, there is the discovery that the transcendent Reality that the ground of life in one's own faith is also grounding the spiritual life of other people whose faith stems from different revelations, different revealers. Second, the discovery that people of other religious faiths are leading spiritual lives similar to one's own can promote tolerance of, and respect for, other faiths.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Christianity alike and one-with other religions model

However, jumping to the other extreme may not be the most appropriate theological solution. The Christianity *alike and one-with other religions* model magnifies commonalities but erases differences. Let me point to two limitations of this theological framework for living in an interreligious world. First, while celebrating the universality of God, this romantic model does not do justice to the particularity of Christianity. This also means it overlooks the same claim to particularity in other religious traditions. Suppose we respect other religions as we want to be respected. In that case, we must resist the temptation of using the contours and colours we are familiar with to paint their respective portraits. Being respectful of religions means being willing to accept their claims of particularity. It allows us to celebrate our own affirmation of the particularity of Jesus Christ.

Second, this "alike and one-with" model also does not seem true of the impressive and disturbing differences noticeable in the world's religions. One example that we encounter that bespeaks radical differences concerns the religious goals of various religions. For example, while Hinduism talked about the end of the religious journey as moksha, which is a merger with God, Buddhism espoused nirvana or extinguishment of life as the goal. Both can be contrasted with Christianity's goal of salvation, which looks forward to a reconciled

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, God is Not Christian and Other Provocations (HarperOne, 2011), 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Andrew Wilson, Ed., World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts, (Paragon House, 1991), 3.

state of everlasting life in blessed harmony with God and each other. Prothero exaggerates differences among religions, but he makes a useful point:

One of the most common misconceptions about the world's religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not. Only religions that see God as all good ask how a good God can allow millions to die in tsunamis. Only religions that believe in souls ask whether your soul exists before you are born and what happens to it after you die. And only religions that think you have one soul ask after the 'soul' in the singular.<sup>4</sup>

#### An alternative Trinitarian particularity-in-spaciousness model

So, we need to leave these simplified but unhelpful theological models behind. Is there an alternative, though? The challenge is to find a theological model that retains the particularity of Christ, who has embraced us graciously while respecting the spaciousness of the divine, which generously harbors other children of God. I suggest we look to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to help us determine this mediation between the particularity of grace gifted in Jesus Christ and the spaciousness of grace contained in the Triune One. I recall Apostle Paul's words in I Corinthians 4: 1: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." In conformity with this statement, I submit that a Christian theological model for our interreligious context needs to correlate what it means to be servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. The singularity of our calling to be servants of Christ must go hand in hand with our vocation to be stewards of the spacious mysteries of God. We might call this Trinitarian theology of religions option the particularity-in-spaciousness model. It reconciles communion with difference through love, which also characterizes the relationship of the Christian trinity.

The *Christianity over-and-against other religions* model is a deficient theology. It focuses completely on "the scandal of particularity," which lifts high the "Jesus only" means of truth and a "Christians alone" election for salvation. Thus, it is so Christ-confined that it fails to take seriously the spaciousness of the mystery of God. Similarly, the *Christianity alike and one-with other religions* model excessively conforms to a forced and simplistic unitive theology. It focuses solely on "the surplus of divinity," which celebrates an "anything goes" truth and an "everybody wins" mantra of salvation. The orthodox Christian affirmation of the Trinity may reconcile both extremes in a blessed conciliatory model that allows us to cultivate a theology of religions that mediates between the "scandal of divine particularity" and the "surplus of divine spaciousness." Let me say more about each of these poles within the Trinitarian model that I am holding up as a third option.

When I invoke the term "the scandal of particularity," I am pointing to the assertions by Christians that God emptied himself in grace through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is only because of this event that Christians can talk about God. It scandalizes because it is so confined to the specificity of Jesus Christ. It grounds our life of witness to God. Raimon Panikkar expresses this particularity for Christianity in the following manner. "Christ is the parameter for speaking about God. For Christians,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Stephen Prothero, God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World (Harper Collins, 2010), 24.

God has pronounced one and only one word: Christ." Nevertheless, this particularity is only one pole of the Trinitarian model.

The "surplus of divine spaciousness" is the other complementary pole in the Christian theology of religions. I use the terms "surplus" and "spaciousness" in the divine to capture the abundance of mystery and the copiousness of love generated by the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. It communicates the inexhaustible riches hidden in the fullness of God that interflow between the Abba God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit even as it overflows onto all creation. Rowan Williams says that the mystery built into God is often experienced in interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue, he suggests, "is one of the many means that God gives us to sink more deeply into the infinity of God's work, presence, and purpose."

This third option presents us with a more complex yet quite orthodox model for interreligious engagement that weaves together a passionate commitment to Jesus Christ and compassionate acceptance of our fellow pilgrims sheltered by a spacious God. On the one hand, we need to attest faithfully and joyously to the claim of "the particularity of Jesus" in a world of many religious figures of revelation. This is no doubt a kind of scandal to the world of many religious communities. Christians passionately live from and witness to the grace of Jesus Christ, our pathway to being forgiven and reconciled with God and each other. The particularity of Jesus Christ as God's offer of Good News cannot be hidden. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:15 is clear: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." On the other, we also need to accept humbly and lovingly that our faith is in the Trinity that posits Jesus alongside the Creator (God the Abba) and the Sustainer (God the Holy Spirit). There is much divine roominess in this house of God, which has many mansions. This more than "Jesus only" manner of thinking allows for the spaciousness of love and grace in the fulness of the Triune God. The divine surplus in God allows God to be God for all human creation, even as Christ is all for Christians. It is because of such "surplus in the divine" that we, as passionate Christians, are also emboldened to take off our sandals as we enter other sacred spaces, recognizing the traces of the divine in such strange locations and among different peoples. All God's children, thus, might grow in knowledge, spiritual practice, and theological wisdom through interreligious pilgrimages.

#### Mission responsibility of living out the Trinitarian particularityin-spaciousness model in our multi-religious world

As we prepare to enter the real world of many religions as passionately Christian and compassionately interreligious, in the rest of the paper, let me address the mission responsibility of living out this model as disciples of Jesus Christ in a multi-religious world.

Let me start with the spacious Trinity generously overflowing outward in love for the life of the world. In the first instance, the Triune God can be conceived of as three movements within God involving intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love. This intra-flow is the blessedness of the Divine life. In the second instance, this divine tri-figuration shares the blessedness of life enjoyed within the Trinity with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of The Mystery* (Fortress Press, 2006), 68 or 69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, "Dialogue is a Means of 'God-Given Discovery" in Current Dialogue, 54 (July 2013): 7.

those made in the image of God (imago Dei) while extending it to all creation. This overflow of the divine life becomes a blessing to all created by God to reflect the joy of intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love, even if in a fragmented and fragile way. This blessing of the overflow of blessed Trinitarian inter-flow beckons us to be theologically receptive to the open-ended mission of God that is inclusive of and cooperative with the whole human family.

Mission-shaped discipleship thus points to the possibility of enjoining human agents who are already drawn into the working of God in the world in every local situation. This is a theological rather than an anthropological premise. We often succumb to the temptation of some version of 'chronological modalism,' which tends to think of the Trinity as coming to us in three kairotic historical periods. We thus largely ignore the theological affirmation, which holds that the Trinitarian nature of God is from "everlasting to everlasting." (Psalm 103:17) If the primordial nature of God is continuously characterized by its sending movement, then God has, is, and will always be known by God's already-always outward reach, flowing from the inward dynamics of Triune love onto the life of the world, including the whole human family. The eternal overflow of love at the heart of the Triune One, which saturates creation for the sake of life, is constant. It is within this Divine vitality, which spans from alpha to omega, that all creatures live, move, and have their being. Taking a cue from Raimon Panikkar, I am inclined to invoke the language of the Triune movement and energy to create theological space for thinking inter-religiously. Re-conceptualizing the Trinity as an everlasting movement that encompasses all creation, he suggests, "Relations within the bosom of the Trinity are dynamic relations, in constant movement. The Father never ceases to engender, nor the Son to be engendered, and the Spirit is the permanent expression of this dynamism. We participate in this dynamism of begetting inasmuch as we too are begotten. We cannot be simple spectators."7

#### Missio trinitatis: spacious God as embracing daring openness

When we talk about *missio Dei*, we usually confine all our thinking to the reality of Jesus Christ, obscuring the fundamental Christian theological affirmation that God is a communion of Three-in-One and such a sending (flowing) out is always trinitarian (*missio trinitatis*). The faith on which we stand involves such a foundational trinitarian credo. I believe that much of our thinking will be roomier if we consider whether God operates in the world through other religions after accepting the implications of our trinitarian faith. To put it modestly, the space generated by the trinity opens many possibilities for moving away from the constriction imposed by our "Jesus only" mission-thinking pattern. One need not sacrifice Jesus Christ. One is merely invited to extract mileage from the expansive relational possibilities inherent in the surplus potential of the Divine Trinity. Risking Jesus for God's sake may, in fact, be the Christ-way to fullness of life for the whole world. The relationality between the three persons of the Trinity have much promise for providential divine surplus of gracious, loving, and sanctifying synergy overflowing from the heart of God to quicken new life for all God's beloved children. Mark Heim makes an interesting point that is relevant to this way of thinking. He suggests that there is room within the Trinity to contain the mission

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Panikkar, The Experience of God, 81.

goals (salvation/healing/peace) expressed by all religious traditions. These goals may not be the same as Christians as gifted in Jesus Christ, but we need not think of them as outside the fullness of the Triune God.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of religious plurality, what this means is that there are kingdom agents alongside and sometimes prior to Christian disciples' witnessing to the particularity of God in Jesus Christ. Boff's words are fitting. "The missionary always comes late: the Holy Trinity has already arrived, ever revealing itself in the awareness, the history, the societies, the deeds, and the destiny of peoples." Of course, such openness to being formed and informed by the working of the Trinitarian God is not only an abstraction. We experience this routinely in actual religious and nonreligious neighbours. There are gracious bodies and caring spirits providentially placed among us as neighbours who are also [co]missioned by the dynamic love nurturing new life nourished by the Triune God. These agents, too, are sent in kingdom-power and with kinship-spirit. On their arrival, they often receive Christian disciples to enhance God's compassionate mission for the welfare of suffering human beings and the well-being of afflicted creation.

# *Missio trinitatis*: specificity of Jesus and embracing discerning [en]closure

At the same time, one cannot drown Christian particularity (the Jordon River) in spacious universality (the World's Oceans). Christians have been embraced and freed by the specific person and presence of Jesus, who is the point of intimate and joyous contact to the overflow of the Trinity. We can only authenticate the specificity of God's mission to reach out to touch, save, and heal in Jesus. This singular testimony is our Christian gospel...the Good News. Compassionate disciples knit together with other religious and non-religious neighbours are also specifically called to passionately witness in word and deed to the cruciform way of Jesus that transforms death zones into organisms of life. Such openness to the working of the always-already movement of the Triune God is correlated with the concrete affirmation of being embraced by Jesus Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, a mission-shaped Church is compassionately inclusive of co-missioners affected by the overflow of the divine energy of life, love, and communion. On the other hand, a mission-shaped Church is also passionately committed to effectively circulating the concrete gift of Jesus as the divine embodiment of the blessed overflow of intimate communion, gifted difference, and mutual love. M. M. Thomas uses openness as a feature of the Church:

The Church of Jesus Christ cannot, therefore, be open to God in Christ without being open at the same time to the world where God is at work...Openness is the very fundamental characteristic of the Church of Christ, and its form should be such as makes this double openness in Christ to God and the world an abiding reality.<sup>10</sup>

But all this language of openness veils an inevitable and truthful partial [en]closure dictated by the gestalt of Jesus Christ made attainable by the power of the Spirit. The concrete theological movement and property

S. Mark Heim, Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion (Orbis Books, 1995); Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); and The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2001).

Leonardo Boff, New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> M. M.Thomas, "The Open Church," in *The Church: A Peoples' Movement*, ed. Mathai Zachariah (National Christian Council of India, 1975), 62.

of Jesus Christ set loose by the power of the Spirit determines the contours of this openness, almost as if it proffers a limited [en]closure. A phrase almost as a *koan* results: all openness is half closed, and all closeness is half open. This leads to my final assertion. Mission-shaped Church is constrained by and in conformity with the cruciform life, teaching, and praxis of Jesus set in motion in the world by the lifegiving power of the Spirit.

The challenge of being a mission-shaped Church in our 21st-century context, where religions are coming together in geographical proximity, is mediating between our partial openness to accepting religious others as co-missioners and formulating our own mission invitation as a fruitful and honest partial [en]closure. I have already extolled the virtues of missiological openness with a brief commentary on the theological capaciousness of the divine Trinity. It is thus also crucial to extract some benefits from the specificity of the Christian invitation to all the children of God in the world. I do this by circumscribing the Christian particularity of the mission of the Trinity within the chosen placement of Jesus Christ among the peoples of the world as the inconsequential Other and the accompanying power of the Spirit to transform such situations of impending death into resurrected instances of life.

Christian discipleship, by submitting to becoming shaped by the cruciform life, teaching, and praxis of Jesus set in motion in our contemporary world by the life-giving power of the Spirit, attests to its vocation as an incarnate organism rather than a bureaucratic organization. The Trinity is not allowed to remain intangible and abstract so that it becomes the smoke screen for the powerful, strong, and vested power brokers of the world to peddle illusion rather than hope to the poor and the sinner, delusion rather than wholeness to the weak and the sick, and pathological servitude rather than therapeutic liberation to the oppressed and forsaken. The weakness of emphasizing the fluidity, capaciousness, and generosity of the Divine tri-figuration without a reclamation of the concreteness, specificity, and prophetic criticism of the suffering-liberating incarnate Jesus Christ leads to a mission that is not informed and formed by its Lord.

The life and witness of Jesus as the divine self-giving one among 'the crucified people' eventually finds its way to the cross. In Jesus Christ, we see a presence, a message, and a medium of compassionate self-giving that seeks to bring actual freedom, liberation, and wholeness among concrete others that were rejected, crushed, and broken. He goes out and encounters and mediates social, economic, and religious otherness with purposive love to spawn new life. Rather than moving away from and separating from such others, Jesus draws closer and relates more meaningfully with them as he offers them the fullness of life. This also involved learning from others not thought of as having elements of knowledge and truth by the religiously learned of his day: children, women, gentiles, sinners, Samaritans, and the poor. Jesus' mission thus involves a relocation with the least and the lost in the world. The site of God's mission is not the hub of safety but the margins of erasure. Jesus brings the workings of God for the fragmented and dispossessed of the world rather than for the secure and self-assured well-being of the church. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Mark 2: 16-17)

In many Gospel narratives, Jesus must be followed outside the gates to keep pace with his path. The cross, which we are asked to take up to follow Jesus in the end, is pitched outside Jerusalem. Accepting Jesus also means being willing to travel with him onto the hill far away, where he was glorified on an old, rugged cross. The partial [en]closure of the cruciform mission implies a peculiar opening to a special collective of people pushed to a unique location.

# The Holy Spirit interweaves daring openness and discerning [en]closure for life in God's kingdom

This same mission of animating new life through self-expending love is extended through the power of the Spirit. The Church takes its shape in conformity to this mission of Jesus and in continuity with this mission of the Spirit. Mission along this continuum is all about drawing close to the constituencies of death as exemplified by Jesus and claiming these as possible recipients for new life as inspired by the Spirit. This life force animates the Church into being mission-affected and mission-effective. It proclaims the truth that as Christians 'we believe in life before death." The power of cruciform love working toward new life in the world, as stated by Pope Francis, is nothing but God going "forth from himself in a Trinitarian dynamic of love." The Church, caught up in this "way of being and acting," he continues, "goes out to encounter humanity, proclaims the liberating word of the gospel, heals people's spiritual and physical wounds with the grace of God, and offers relief to the poor and the suffering." 12 Missio trinitatis (mission of the triune God) in cruciform love is the "way of being and acting" for the Church until the kingdom of God comes to the whole earth just as it is in heaven. Moltmann reiterates this point cogently: "Jesus didn't bring a new religion into the world. What he brought was new life...The eternal life which God's Spirit creates is not another life following this one. It is the power through which this life here becomes different...So Christian mission isn't concerned about Christianity; its concern is the life of men and women. And the Church's mission isn't concerned about the church; its concern is the kingdom of God. And evangelization isn't concerned about spreading the doctrine of faith; its concern is the life of the world."13

As Christians, we are invited to respectfully, compassionately, dialogically, and cooperatively join with other kingdom agents to enhance new life in our common and diverse world. At the same time, we are also moved to courageously, courteously, coherently, and passionately witness to the power of the gospel as we have experienced it concretely through the gift of new life in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. There is not an option to favour either one or the other. Both functions of the Church are needed to benefit love-informed, new life formations for transforming the whole of God's world. Let me drive home my point using the analogy of a community feast. Participating in the banquet of new life by selfishly eating one's own delicacies in the supposition that everyone is only entitled to one's own cuisine is like bringing a sealed food basket, with a key tied to the owner's key chain, to a clan picnic. Conversely, coming to such a banquet solely to feed the diverse multitude with one's own finest cuisine is like bringing the choicest beef steak, along with its complementary red wine, to a vegetarian and teetotallers' feast. The festive truth involves the blending of compassionate hospitality and gracious embassy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *The Gospel of Luke: A Spiritual and Pastoral Reading* (Orbis Books, 2021), 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, Mission of the The Spirit – The Gospel of Life" in Mission – An Invitation to God's Future, ed. Timothy Yates (Calver, Derbyshire: Cliff College Publications, 2000), 30-31.

# Christian mission blends passionate embassy and compassionate hospitality

I believe that the joyous proclamation of God's love in Jesus Christ set in operation through the Spirit for new life in the world is still needed and certainly necessary in a context of inter-religious living where Christians also cooperate with religious others in the overflowing energy of the *missio Trinitatis*. Nonetheless, all passionate proclamation works most effectively within the dynamics of compassionate hospitality. The way forward would be to interpret embassy from within the relationship and connectivity of hospitality. This can be biblically strengthened by an interpretation of Luke 10: 5-9, where Jesus appoints and sends out the seventy.

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

While copious leads are implicit within this commissioning of Jesus' disciples, I wish to note its implication for a mission-shaped Church mediating its witness in contexts of religious plurality. The primacy of peace saturates the motivation of Christian embassy. A categorical announcement, "Peace be to this house," are the first words, set within the *modus operandi* of face-to-face hospitality, which is reciprocal. This greeting, says John T. Carroll, "is more than a gesture of nonhostility; it is a prayer-wish for the house to enjoy the blessing of peace from God."14 The "Prince of Peace" commissions peace-makers to permeate the towns and villages. Disciples also learn to be receivers of hospitality offered by others. Humility is a disposition cultivated through hospitality. Third, Jesus' instruction about *remaining* is explicit: "And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide." Christian hospitality is sustained and long drawn out. Fly-by-night, overnight express, incarnation-free, and hit-and-run modes of good news heralding hardly affect organic transformation. Jesus reiterates his caution against flighty mission agents: "Remain in the same house...do not go from house to house." Fourth, it is important to notice that a proclamation comes after a peace declaration, mutual reception, sustained hospitality, and actual healing. The good news of the kingdom's immediacy is proclaimed within this configuration. "The exchange of peace for hospitality" is more than "balanced reciprocity (quid pro quo), because workers deserve their wages (10:7)." Rather, the mission of Christ's disciples is "to heal maladies and to tell the recipients, 'The βασιλεία of God has come upon you. (10:9)."15 Peace and healing that signify blessed wholeness (salvation) manifest the drawing near of kingdom, which is brought about by the grace-filled exchange of hospitality between guests and hosts. "The ancient key for avoiding missionary oppression, according to Jesus' original instructions to his followers," Elaine Enns and Ched Myers remind us, "is the ethos of hospitality – given and received." 16 Finally, Jesus' instructions seem to have sequential logic as he sends his disciples into the neighbourhood. The ordering of mission flow involves being sent, arriving with a peace-blessing, hospitality involving

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> John T. Carroll, Luke: A Commentary (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012):235.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Robert L. Brawley, Luke: A Social Identity Commentary (T&T Clark, 2020): 114.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization (Cascade Books, 2021):137.

receptivity and humility, fruitful healing, and proclamation that these are the signs that the kingdom has drawn near. Thus, the passage ends with Jesus' succinct mission tutorial: "Whenever you enter a town, and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you."

Our twenty-first century is an age of wider, fuller, and more complex interreligious convergence and engagement. The grace that we proclaim has embraced us in Jesus Christ needs to be stretched graciously to embrace other children of God. The General Conference of the United Methodist Church put out a reflective and instructive mission statement (1988) entitled "Grace upon Grace" to emphasize the gift bestowed upon humanity by Jesus Christ. 'I Using the language of grace is central to mission in the world. Trinitarian grace, though, has and will always overflow to operate among the whole of creation, affecting other religious neighbours as well. Christian mission needs to be founded upon "grace upon grace" received through Jesus Christ but also grounded in the mission of the Triune God, which includes "grace alongside grace." I believe that the multi-religious coming together in the twenty-first century calls for a bolder step of acknowledging common grace dispersed among other faith and no-faith traditions (understood as differently graced), even as we respectfully share received grace that Christians have been gifted in Jesus Christ (understood as distinctively graced). Accepting common grace hidden within the surplus of divine trinitarian grace takes nothing away from the grace that embraces us in Jesus Christ. Instead, such a dynamic and free circulation of common grace honours the surplus of divine spaciousness captured by the inexhaustible riches within the Triune God. It accounts for the cloud of strange and different witnesses to grace scattered throughout the human family. I believe that compassion from the spaciousness of God's grace and passion from the particularity of Christ's grace will reshape our sense of mission responsibility in new and fruitful ways. Perhaps the term "grace upon grace alongside grace" best represents such a theology of grace that both embraces the particularity of Jesus Christ and celebrates the spaciousness of the Trinity.

Being encircled by the generous grace of the Creator, the distinctive grace of Christ, and the freeing grace of the Sustainer, I invite you to take leave from this paper's reflection with a concluding prayer:

Oh gracious, living, and loving Triune God,

Creator of the whole universe, father of all humankind, and mother of all creation:

Enable us to journey with Christ to all the earth's terrain that you have permeated with your graceful presence;

Help us to compassionately embrace all human beings in the binding power of the Holy Spirit, honouring the truth dispersed among all our "fearfully and wonderfully" made kindred;

But also strengthen us to carry your love and glory, gifted to us in Jesus, wherever you may send us. Respectful of the many names by which your children cry out to you from all over the world, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. AMEN

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The document was accepted in 1988 and published as Grace Upon Grace: The Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church (Graded Press, 1990).

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# **About Uniting Church Studies**

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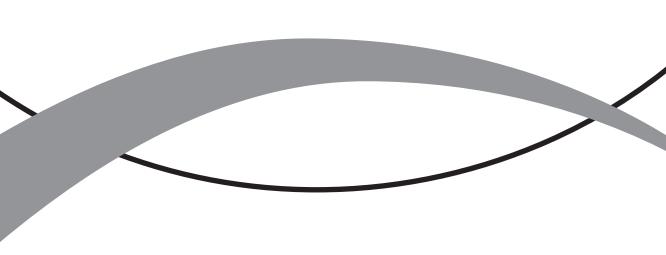
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