

‘QUO VADIS MISSIOLOGY?’

A RESPONSE

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- The first issue raised by Dr Simon concerns the place and role of Missiology within the theological curriculum. As a matter of fact, this is not a new question. It is rather the resurgence of a long-standing debate within theological education/training which did receive lengthy treatment in several introductions to theology.¹ The same is true of all introductions to Missiology (Science of Mission) which all attempted to clarify the place of their discipline within the theological curriculum.² However, what seems to be clear from all these presentations is that the position of Missiology was seldom clear. Due to this uncertainty the discipline often had to alternate between Church History, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology. Depending on the self-indulgence or expansionist fever of the hosting discipline, Missiology could retain something of an own character in a relationship of twin disciplines or more negatively almost disappear in a number of obscure fragments. It was not until late in the 19th century that Missiology gained the status of a full-blown sixth discipline in the theological curriculum. The direct result was an explosion in the number of chairs in Missiology all over the world.

Regrettably this heyday for Missiology did not last for a full century. We saw already in the latter part of the 20th century a saddening decline in the number of Missiology chairs at universities. Although many factors may account for this development a significant one was the rise and impact of secularism. On the other hand it seems as if there was an increasing uneasiness (guilt feeling) with a discipline openly connected to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people of other faiths or religious orientation.

- Against the background of all these changes of content and views Dr Simon’s paper offers a timely plea for an Integrative Contextual Missiology as a directive for the future. This proposal wants to safeguard Missiology from being phased out altogether. On the other hand it does not argue for the discipline’s continuation as an independent and isolated entity within the theological curriculum. The plea is for a properly integrated place and role among the other disciplines. Therefore the paper foresees a dynamic interaction between Missiology’s four subdivisions (theology of mission;

* I would like to thank the Faculty of Theology and its organising committee for the privilege to be part of this conference. A further word of thanks goes to Dr Simon for his stimulating paper. I think that the issues which he has raised in his speech are of such importance that they deserve in-depth attention from the faculty in its rethinking and restructuring process. Due to the time limit I can hardly do more than highlight some of these issues and offer a few comments for further discussion and consideration.

¹ Cf. JA Heyns & WD Jonker 1974. *Op weg met die Teologie*. Pretoria: NGKB; IH Eybers, A König, JA Stoop 1982 (3rd Revised and Enlarged Print). Introduction to Theology. A contribution by DJ Bosch on Missiology pp. 263-284. As will be evident from the next note, there is large number of publications which deal with this issue.

² JH Bavinck 1954. *Inleiding in de Zendingswetenschap*. Kampen Kok (Also available in English: Introduction to the Science of Mission); JA Verkuyl 1978 *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 1-88.

history of missions; theology of religions, practise of mission) and all the other theological disciplines. Such a relationship should safeguard Missiology's particularity and integration. Perhaps a quote from David Bosch may suffice to put the argument in perspective. Bosch writes: "Missiology is not just another subject, but a dimension of theology as a whole, an indispensable dimension that must protect the Church from becoming parochial."³ However, this does not mean that Missiology seeks to change all theology into Missiology. It only argues for a place in the theological curriculum in its own right.

Furthermore, Missiology needs this interaction not only with the other disciplines in theology but also with non-theological disciplines like the social sciences. It is only within such an integrative relationship that Missiology can be informed properly to fulfil its role in the theological curriculum of the future. The speaker foresaw as one of the significant outcomes of such an integrative contextual approach the development of a missionary hermeneutics.

- Another factor which should be considered is the major political and ideological paradigm change which has taken place in the South African society since 1994. Previous to this date Christians prided themselves as living in a so-called "Christian" society/country and enjoyed the privileges they were entitled to. However, according to South Africa's new Constitution it has become a "secular and liberal democracy"⁴ with all the implications attached to it. One of the immediate questions that flows forth from this recognition is whether a faculty of Christian theology and particularly a department/discipline of Missiology can expect to be accommodated and financially supported by a secular state at its academic institutions? We should have noticed by now that the previous privileged position of the Christian faith in many areas had to make way to a pluralistic approach in religious matters. According to the state all religions are equal and entitled to the same rights and privileges.

However, this development is not unique to South Africa. It is a worldwide phenomenon. The serious question for the faculty of theology and the churches involved in its programme is how this is going to impact on its future position? It may perhaps be realistic to assume that the first target in a tightening of attitude could be the discipline of Missiology! Therefore, my suggestion is that the faculty and the churches involved take this matter into serious consideration planning for the future. To take the present situation as a guarantee for the future may prove to be a fatal misreading.

- The inner dynamic of Missiology and the Christian mission finds excellent expression in David Bosch's dictum: *Mission is the church at the cutting edge*. The significance of these words is best excavated by a consistent and scientific application of the four classical questions of the Christian mission, namely What?, Who?, Where? and How?⁵ These four questions shed a penetrating light on past, present and future theological thinking on the goal and content of mission, the Church as bearer of the message, the widely differing and always changing contexts and the never ending search for and

³ David J Bosch. "Missiology" in: Eybers, König, Stoop referred to in note 1, p. 278.

⁴ Cf. Jaap Durand 2002. *Ontluisterde wêreld. Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika*. Wellington: Lux Verbi BM.

⁵ A successful utilizing of this fourfold question-scheme is the book by JJ Kritzing, PGJ Meiring and WA Saayman 1994. *On being Witnesses*. Halfway House: Orion Publishers.

development of effective methods of communicating the gospel of Christ by word and deed.

By persistently asking these questions Missiology fulfils a much needed critical function within a theological curriculum. It challenges every theological discipline with mission as its conscience. It challenges them to venture outside their comfort zones and parochialism and to realise that they should function consciously as “part of the Church at the cutting edge”. A further consequence of it is that theology in all its branches should start to rethink its concept of the Church. In all this Missiology should never act in a condescending manner because it knows itself all too well as a co-sinner and stumbling struggler.

- One of the major challenges for theological thinking and theological education is the big and complex issue of contextualization. As we have seen Missiology attempts to address it by its constant focus on the “Where”? in mission. However, this is a task in which Missiology needs the participation and input of all the other theological and even some non-theological disciplines. Contexts have an inner dynamic and are changing continually and therefore present theology with ever new challenges.⁶

According to my perception, limited as it may be, the two major challenges that the South African context put to Missiology are the plurality of religions and Africanisation. Therefore Missiology’s subsection: theology of religions should receive priority attention from the discipline as well as from the side of the faculty as a whole. It could become the *torch bearer of the Faculty of Theology*, rather it should be it!

Secondly, Christian theology is *in* (South) Africa. The question is: Does it differ from theology in Brazil, Indonesia, or Japan? What in our way of doing theology reflect the context we are working in? If we have ‘to arrive’ in Africa at last what should change? and why? and how? The plea for an integrative contextual missiology has landed the whole faculty in a situation of liminality. If we want to be at the cutting edge where the Gospel of Christ encounters the world, liminality is natural. What would be sad is to experience liminality while we are not at the cutting edge!

- When Missiology succeeds to involve every discipline in theology to be part of a dynamic search for a genuine service identity *at the cutting edge* then it has fulfilled its role as *Mother of theology*⁷.

⁶ To mention only a few: Max L Stackhouse 1988 *APOLOGIA. Contextualization, Globalization and ission in Theological Education*. Eerdmans; Robert J Schreier 1985 *Constructing Local Theologies*. Orbis; Lamin Sanneh 1989 *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Orbis; Charles H Kraft 1979 *Christianity in Culture. A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Orbis; David J Bosch 1991 “Mission as Contextualization” and “Mission as Inculturation” in: *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. 420-432, 447-457. Orbis.

⁷ M Kähler 1971. *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission*. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, p. 189, quoted by Bosch: ‘Missiology’ in Eybers op cit p. 278.