



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Should the Pedal Point Always
Bring Dissonance Back into Harmony?
Interrogating Missio Dei from an Asian American Perspective**

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Part of
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez

His tongue,
his one underground worker perhaps,
bound by a sentence
pronounced in the West,
occasionally broke out
in a rash of yowls
defying the watch-towers of death,
police dogs:
a river of wild statistics;
or in riddles
crafted for cell-mates
aspiring to doctorates
from the Universities
of Texas, Bogota, Bombay,
perspiring
students of socio-linguistics.¹

Introduction

The concept of “missio Dei” has been a dominant missiological paradigm for several decades and has come to govern missiological thinking and theological self-understanding. In this sense it has functioned as a “pedal point” or underlying motif over against which all discussion of missiology has had to contend. This contribution questions this way of thinking and posits an understanding of mission as mission “to” God which opens up new and fresh ways of thinking, belief, and praxis, including the Asian and Asian American contexts. I have spelled out the implications of what such an understanding means in my contribution to a major initiative undertaken through a collaborative effort between the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, New Jersey, and the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, the fruits of which

¹ Adil Jussawalla, “from *Missing Person*,” in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 135.

were published in two volumes entitled, *News of Boundless Riches: Interrogating, Comparing, and Reconstructing Mission in a Global Era*.² In my article I asked:

What are the contours of talking about the implications of a missiological understanding of *our* mission to God? For those of us who have a deep and abiding commitment to the exploration of theological issues and themes that we believe are crucial in the present context of pluralism and disparity, religious and economic, the question regarding our mission to God holds both promise and frustration. Promise, because we can now own responsibility for our actions and truly attempt to translate our commitment to both inter-religious understanding and missiological praxis in a world of competing claims and counter-claims regarding how the divine is conceived and understood; frustration, because such an endeavour is fraught with the possibility of motivations being misunderstood and propositions and proposals being misattributed, with motives being implied.³

Interrogating ‘Asian’ and ‘Asian American’

In the Preface to the two volumes, the present Director of the Center of Theological Inquiry, William Storrar, noted that:

This is a unique two volume collection of essays on Christian mission in the era of globalization, looked at through the prism of India and the Gospel’s encounter with the peoples, cultures and religions of Asia. It offers informed contextual insights from that great continent for all those around the world, who are engaged in the practice of cross-cultural mission and inter-religious dialogue. It also provides critical theological perspectives on mission that addresses such complex theoretical issues as post-colonialism in the global South, the end of Christendom in the global North, the missionary nature of other world religions, and the challenge of religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence in all parts of the globe.⁴

² Volume I, eds. Max L. Stackhouse and Lalsangkima Pachuau, and Volume II, eds. Lalsangkima Pachuau and Max L. Stackhouse (Delhi: ISPCK/UTC/CTI, 2007). My contribution is found in Volume I, as J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “Interrogating *missio Dei*: From the Mission of God toward Appreciating our Mission to God in India today,” 26 – 44.

³ Sebastian, “Interrogating *missio Dei*,” 42.

⁴ In both Volumes I and II, vii.

The project itself was a fine example of a sustained and serious effort to constructively and creatively work on missiological issues and themes collaboratively, something that ought to be emulated in many more fields of the theological and missiological enterprise, given the fact that many scholars in the West do not valorize work done predominantly in the so-called third world context, unless such work happens also to be published in the Western academic circles. This has consequences for thinking about Asian and Asian American theological initiatives, where very often the “Asianness” serves as an overarching label, without taking issues of the other side of the hyphen, the American, seriously enough.

This was brought home to me recently at the fourth Asian Theological Summer Institute, organized since 2007 under the guidance of Dean J. Paul Rajashekar at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. This is an annual mentoring program for doctoral students of Asian heritage supported by the Henry Luce foundation and brings faculty mentors into intensive interaction with Asian and Asian American students from all over the country. During the time they are together, apart from benefiting from comments from mentors and peers, students from a variety of academic settings and disciplines bond over matters of mutual concern and interest. For me, coming from almost two decades of teaching in the Asian context and now teaching in the United States, certain cultural assumptions I have made about underlying “Asianness” have been called into question. As someone coming from India I can say that when two fellow Indians meet a normal conversation involves the recalling of names of people one knows and polite exchanges about whether the other perhaps also knew the same people. At the summer institute when I met two Asian American students whose ethnic background was from one of the Asian

countries, I told them about the time I was a doctoral student in Hamburg, Germany, and how I had a classmate from that country, and asked politely whether they perhaps had heard of him. The immediate, frank response was, “There are millions of people in our country, and you are asking whether we know one of them!” This was indeed telling, and while this may be a simple example, it marked a cultural difference between being Asian and being Asian American that is important to note in any discourse of Asian American theology or missiology. For instance, drawing on the work of Jung Young Lee, Peter Phan summarizes that “[a]s Asian Americans, Asian immigrants are both Asian and American. To stress in-bothness means first of all affirming one’s racial and cultural origins; for an Asian this means affirming ‘yellowness,’ like the dandelion. Being on the margin, however, prevents this affirmation of ethnicity from being exclusive, since the margin is where worlds merge. Thus to stress in-bothness means, secondly, affirming American-ness....”⁵ The question remains as to the outcomes when worlds and worldviews merge. Just as there is no homogenous “Asian-ness” there is no common “American-ness,” and the growing literature in the field of ethnic congregations in the United States bears ample witness to the complexity of this phenomenon.⁶

At the same time, one must not overdraw the line between Asian-ness and Asian American-ness, for as a perceptive commentator (writing about the East Asian context) remarks, American-ness is never far away in Asia. Noting that “[t]hroughout the region, U.S. institutional

⁵ Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 113.

⁶ One example that looks at both the Buddhist and Christian traditions and examples is Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Chen writes: “Becoming religious is a way that immigrants address the practical problems that they face as new members of American society. But none of these problems are necessarily ‘religious,’ nor do they warrant religious solutions.”(53)

forms have been copied,” he writes that the “power behind the culture of U.S. imperialism comes from its ability to insert itself into a geocolonial space as the imaginary figure of modernity, and as such, the natural object of identification from which the local people are to learn.”⁷ If this is the case and the immigrant imagination has already been shaped by Americanness even in their home countries, then the reality when seeking to set down roots in a new context is certainly multilayered and complex. As a review-blurb for a recent book, dealing with the realities encountered by ethnic congregations in the United States, I wrote:

Immigrant communities have always faced a variety of challenges in the new cultural, economic, social, and religious contexts in which they find themselves. The quest to retain as well as redefine one’s religious identity – personal, familial, and community-based – has never been easy and unproblematic. Ways of believing and belonging are constantly in the process of being negotiated. The collection of essays in this volume serves several important functions: it provides ‘snapshots’ of the Indian-American-Christian communities and offers glimpses of congregational life in process; it addresses issues of how identity is both problematized as well as navigated; it tackles inter- and intra-generational challenges; it raises issues of ecumenical importance, including questions of shared worship space and pastoral and worship leadership within the wider community. Long-held ways of what was considered to be normative; time-tested structures of leadership; cherished patterns of worship; and confessional centrality have all had to reckon with the impatient winds of change that are blowing all around, emerging not just from dominant societal and cultural norms from without, but also from the new-found freedoms that immigrant communities have to reckon with within. Fences can be built and windows boarded up, but the winds cannot be wished away. The process of coming to terms with the existence of these new realities can be painful and abrasive, and immigrant worshipping communities have had to find ways and means to prepare not only a whole new generation of leadership but also support the present leadership in the process of recognizing what this means in practice. It is in these processes that this book makes an important contribution and I warmly commend it not only for study, but also for reflection on what gifts immigrant communities bring to the multicultural mix that makes

⁷ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 177.

the religious pilgrim experience in the United States vibrant, exhilarating, and also challenging, especially at the crossroads of life.⁸

In terms of on the ground mission realities one should not forget that such communities have engaged in “mission from the rest to the West,”⁹ and this too has implications for our consideration of the distinctive ways in which Asian and Asian American missiological discussions can lead to the interrogation of the assortment of ideas, events, partnerships, and even intrusions that happen under the banner of mission.

Interrogating *missio Dei*

At this point I want to thank Max L. Stackhouse¹⁰ and Lalsangkima Pachuau, the editors of the two volumes on missiology mentioned earlier, for recognizing that one of the problems in the Western context is that of accessing and using material published in other contexts and giving me permission to reuse my article in other publications, thereby supporting my hope that the contributions made would not only reach a wider audience, but that at least some people would

⁸ Back cover of Anand Veeraraj and Rachel Fell McDermott, eds., *Pilgrims at the Crossroads: Asian Indian Christians at the North American Frontier* (Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity and Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, 2009).

⁹ Title of an article by Peter Vethanayagamony, “Mission from the Rest to the West: The Changing Landscape of World Christianity and Christian Mission,” in Ogbu U. Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony, and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, eds., *Mission After Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 59 – 70.

¹⁰ In his major essay, reflecting on the project as a whole, Stackhouse writes: “Today, as we live with the awareness of a new context, a globalizing one that disrupts and comprehends all local contexts and offers the fragile possibility of a global civil society that could become a very complex world civilization, our missiology must not cease, but take upon itself the quest for ways to structure this new fabric with an inclusive justice, one that brings the various offices and powers of life to their proper purpose and into interdependence with the wider fabric of life.” Max L. Stackhouse, “‘All Things to All People’: Mission and Providence in a Global Era,” in Pachuau and Stackhouse, eds., *News of Boundless Riches*, Vol. II, 250 – 275, here on pages 274 – 275.

think about the politics of publishing and scholarship. I will draw on that article¹¹ to ask the question “should the pedal point always bring dissonance back into harmony?”

Faced as we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a plethora of mission theologies, combined with major efforts to think about the need and necessity of mission in a globalized context, the question regarding the relevance and understanding of the term “mission” is a pressing one. An entire issue of the *International Review of Mission* was devoted to the theme “Missio Dei Revisited Willingen 1952 – 2002.”¹² The issue contains a wide range of articles that look at the concept from historical and contextual perspectives. Writing from a contemporary Korean perspective, one of the authors points out that the concept has “broken down barriers, but it has also created new ones: barriers between conservatives and progressives, between evangelism and humanization, between saving souls and social involvement,” and goes on to say that such barriers are only “gradually disappearing.” This article raises two important questions as a conclusion; firstly, the relationship between *missio Dei* and money, and secondly the relationship between *missio Dei* and other religions.¹³

¹¹ In this section since I am using a part of my article, I will not refer to it as such since it is already cited in footnote 1. Also, I have removed some of the elaborate footnotes that appear in the original article.

¹² *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XCII, No. 367 (October 2003).

¹³ Soo-il Chai, “Missio Dei – Its Development and Limitations in Korea,” in *IRM* (October 2003), 548 – 549.

This paradigm, that of understanding mission as *missio Dei*, has dominated missiological thinking for the last fifty years at least,¹⁴ and has been enormously influential and generated a rich assortment of theological, ecclesiological and missiological contributions.¹⁵ However, for various reasons, not the least of which is connected to my engagement with the issues and themes raised by a pluralistic and post-colonial approach to the missiological questions of our time, I have increasingly become uneasy with the concept of *missio Dei*. It is not that I believe the concept has not made a significant contribution to our understanding of mission and missiology, but I have come to believe that we need to interrogate this concept and offer a theological critique of how this concept has played out in empirical terms in order to provoke and stimulate other possibly more productive and more relevant ways of thinking and acting in this religiously plural and culturally globalized world. My discontent resulted in the following

¹⁴ David Bosch, in his magisterial *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), explores the background of the emergence of this term, pointing out how the idea emerged at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952 where the influence of Karl Barth “on missionary thinking reached a peak,” and where the “classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world” (390). Bosch goes on to explore how this term has had important implications for the *missiones ecclesiae* and indicates the processes by which nearly all Christian denominations have welcomed and used this term (389 – 393).

¹⁵ See, for example, the contribution of Arthur F. Glasser, in *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), who interprets the goal of *missio Dei* as that of incorporating “people into the Kingdom of God and to involve them in his mission.” He also deplores the “non-involvement in mission on the part of the church,” because involvement is necessitated by the reality that “the Father is the Sender, Jesus Christ the One who is sent, and the Holy Spirit the Revealer ...” (245). This is to be read within the conviction of the writer that “at every level of the biblical evidence conversion demands commitment to conduct that is reflective of the coming Kingdom of God.” He goes on to ask: “Is it not also true that persons who are not born again may on the day of judgment wish that they had never been born at all?” (358). The influential Indian Jesuit thinker, Michael Amaldoss, in his article, “The Trinity on Mission,” in Frans Wijzen and Peter Nissen, eds., *‘Mission is a Must’: Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 99 – 106, writes that, “To contemplate the Trinity, our mission in the world is a freeing experience, so that we can carry on our own mission without aggression and anxiety, conscious that we are making a real contribution to the realization of God’s plan for the world. We learn to be sensitive to what God is doing in the world and to coordinate our own mission with God’s mission” (106).

proposal, made during an international consultation sponsored by the World Council of Churches. (The theme of the consultation itself is symptomatic of the wider concern with the issue of missiology and relevance, missiology and credibility.) At this meeting¹⁶ I suggested that:

[A] re-examination of the *missio Dei* paradigm is necessary, because what is needed today is a mission paradigm that affirms our mission to God. Having gone through the consequences of theological thinking regarding the mission of God, and having explored human responsibility in this task, a reversal of the direction in trying to take seriously the human experience of both variety and difference in God/divinity, and what this means for the question as to whether there can ever be an understanding of a *common* mission of humankind, becomes an urgent theological task.¹⁷

Naturally such an affirmation provoked concern and a desire on the part of the participants to probe into the source of such discontent as well as a genuine bewilderment that such a mode of questioning had even been thought necessary. If the Indian theologian Arvind Nirmal was right in his famous assertion that God does not read or write theology and that “theology has nothing to do with God,”¹⁸ can we transpose this theological point to the field of missiology and ask in what sense we can make the claim that mission is *of* God? If mission is not *of* God, then what mission are we talking about? We have not been afraid of coming to terms

¹⁶ “Believing without Belonging: In Search of New Paradigms of Church and Mission in Secularized and Postmodern Contexts,” Northelbian Centre for World Mission/ Christian Jensen Kolleg, Breklum, Germany, 26th June – 2nd July, 2002.

¹⁷ This has been published as J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “Believing and Belonging: Secularism and Religion in India,” *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XCII, No. 365 (April 2003): 204 – 211, quotation on page 211.

¹⁸ See the provocative questions and incisive probing in Arvind P. Nirmal, “Theological Research: Its Implications for the Nature and Scope of the Theological Task of the Church in India,” in Gnana Robinson, ed., *For the Sake of the Gospel: Essays in Honour of Samuel Amirtham* (Madurai: T. T. S. Publications, 1980), 73 – 82.

with the reality that mission as a human enterprise has been flawed and problematic¹⁹ where it has been asserted that, “[a]long with gunboats, opium, slaves and treaties, the Christian Bible became a defining symbol of European expansion.”²⁰ Have we then tried to cover up for the harsh realities of how mission was organized and how mission was experienced by talking about something we could claim had a divine origin?²¹ If mission is both a divine and a human enterprise, then what? Why use binaries? Can binaries become so intertwined that disentanglement is not only impossible, but also unnecessary? Why not talk about a theandric mission; theandric seen not as the result of binaries being intertwined, but as the very nature of the being of the divine?²²

¹⁹ Reflecting on the biblical models of mission, Bosch writes that our missionary ministry “is never performed in unbroken continuity with the biblical witness; it remains, always, an altogether ambivalent and flawed enterprise. Still we may, with due humility, look back on the witness of Jesus and our first forebears in the faith and seek to emulate them.” David J. Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission,” in James M. Phillips, and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Towards the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission: Essays in honor of Gerald H. Anderson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 190. The idea of mission as emulating Jesus is expressed by Lucien Legrand, when he writes: “Many are the paths of mission. Ultimately, they all follow the way of Jesus: emerging, going elsewhere (Mark 1:38), they return to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32; cf. Luke 9:51), and from there, by death and the Resurrection, lead to the glory and the oneness of God.” In Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 163.

²⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

²¹ Paul G. Hiebert, in his *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), concludes by saying that “In mission, our central task is not to communicate a message but to introduce people to that person, Jesus Christ.” (116) However, several questions remain: How do we “introduce” anyone? Can there be an introduction without interpretation? Why and how are we motivated to introduce someone to “people”?

²² Slavoj Žižek, the ‘wild man of theory’ and provocative critic of culture writes in his *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 138: “Insofar as the ultimate Other is God Himself, I should risk the claim that *it is the epochal achievement of Christianity to reduce its Otherness to Sameness*: God Himself is Man, ‘one of us.’ ... The ultimate horizon of Christianity is thus not respect for the neighbor, for the abyss of its impenetrable Otherness; it is possible to go beyond – not of course, to penetrate the Other directly, to experience the Other as it is ‘in itself,’ but to become aware that there is no mystery, no hidden true content, behind the mask (deceptive surface) of the Other.”

If “life is always *on the way* to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story,”²³ then has the *missio Dei* concept reversed the direction and tried to shape a story out of its own understanding of the narrative, a narrative not woven on the way but offered ready-made one-size-fits-all to those on the way? The prophetic and provocative “Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity” notes that the “life of the church...calls for continuous critical sifting and reconstruction of human identity. Elements that constitute our differences must be questioned, judged, reconciled, and reconfigured within the unity of the body of Christ...”²⁴

In one sense this concern was also the concern of the one who did more than anything else to put the concept of *missio Dei* at the forefront of ecumenical thinking – Georg F. Vicedom. It was dissatisfaction with the way in which mission had been justified on the basis of “missionary thought in the Bible,” as being “possible and necessary among the nations,” as “being derived from the church as a secondary assignment,” or as part of the spreading of “Christian culture.” For Vicedom the *missio Dei* derives from the reality that “the Bible in its totality ascribes only one intention to God: to save [hu]mankind.”²⁵ One is justified in asking whether Vicedom is right in ascribing the desire to save as being the only intention exhibited by

²³ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 133. Italics in original.

²⁴ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), section 23, page 28. The document goes on to note that “our churchly identities lack the winnowing and transformative power of the gospel. Our missions in a particular place all too easily enter into complex collusions with divisions of class, culture, ethnicity, or status already present there. Rather than reconciling the divided, the gathering of men and women into churches may reinforce their divisions.” Section 33, p. 34.

²⁵ Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 4.

God in the Biblical testimony. Nevertheless, what emerges is a sense of dissatisfaction with what passes for mission in his context and his desire to remind the church that “God Himself does mission work.”²⁶ It is interesting that Vicedom concludes his work with a section on the “church of suffering” and writes that the “suffering of the congregation culminates in the redemption which is bestowed when Jesus Christ ushers in His Kingdom. With this God concludes His *missio*.”²⁷ What happens when the *missio Dei* is trumpeted and reinforced by churches and structures which have moved a long way away from suffering, however cleverly suffering is defined?²⁸

²⁶ Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 51. This affirmation leads Vicedom to explicit and heavy Christological concentration when he writes: “The special *missio Dei* begins with Jesus Christ, for in Him God is both the Sender and the One who is sent, both the Revealer and the Revelation, both the Holy One who punishes and the One who redeems. Through His Son in the incarnation and enthronement God makes Himself the very content of the sending. . . . The work of providing the content of the sending is completed in Jesus, and thus meaning and goal have been given to every sending. Beyond Jesus there is no further revelation of God. Even the Holy Ghost derives His message from the things of Jesus and in this way leads all men into all truth. Since Jesus died and rose for the salvation of men, any redemption apart from Him is impossible, even though men ever and again strive to classify Christ among many figures who try to indicate a way of salvation. Whoever places Christ’s ‘once-for-all-ness’ in question also places the one God who has sent Him in question. . . . Apart from this *missio Dei* in Jesus Christ there can be no further sendings today” (52 – 54).

²⁷ Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 142.

²⁸ One must also note the suspicion that postmodern thinking has generated among some missiologists. Much of it is based on a stereotypical, narrow and caricatured understanding of the promise and attraction of postmodern thinking to those who see in its varieties stimulating new ways of orientation and thinking. An example of this suspicion is found in the book by Paul Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), where he writes: “The mission of the Christian Church cannot collude with the acids of post-modernity. We used to use the expression ‘the acids of modernity’, but modernity now looks comparatively benign. Christian theology can recognize common ground and common interests with modernity, even in the absence of a common framework of beliefs and values. . . . Above all, Christianity cannot baptize the post-modernistic dissolution of the self, of community and of reason. . . . Post-modernity knows no accountability. Individual or group self-expression is self-authenticating. The rainbow of spiritualities invites no boundaries or bonds. But these constraints are indispensable, nevertheless.” (94) It is ironic that modernity is upheld as some kind of benign bulwark against the permeating “acids”! In addition all talk about “constraints” is problematic, especially when seen from the point of view of those who have been constrained in various ways, not least theologically.

Darrell Guder, whose contribution to the two-volume missiology project is entitled “The *missio Dei*: A Mission Theology after Christendom,”²⁹ provides us with a fine summary laced with critical insights on recent thinking regarding this concept.³⁰ Among many other things, Guder points out how the understanding of *missio Dei*

- critiqued the previously existing mission models and helped the move from an ecclesio-centric model to a Trinitarian model in the mission enterprise
- has been the object of criticism by influential theologians, even from the Western tradition
- also provides for an understanding of the *missio hominum*
- generates a variety of responses in face of pluralism, diversity and hope

Of interest at this point is the Princeton doctoral dissertation by Ken Miyamoto.

Miyamoto in his impressive work reminds us of several important points, including the assertion that the Trinitarian understanding of *missio Dei* quickly moved to an exploration of how this matters and has consequences when one affirms the reality of this world as the arena of God’s activity and God’s mission. It also offers a nuanced and critical reading of the emergence and use of this idea in the ecumenical movement and in the Asian setting.³¹ Miyamoto has revised and summarized part of his thinking in his contribution to the noteworthy book edited by Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ecumenical Missiology*.³² Here he writes that “ecumenical Asian

²⁹ Darrell L. Guder, “The *missio Dei*: A Mission Theology after Christendom,” in Stackhouse and Pachuau, eds., *News of Boundless Riches*, Vol. I, 3 – 25.

³⁰ As a supplement to this, also see, Darrell L. Guder, “From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology,” in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, New Series (2003): 36 – 54.

³¹ Ken Christoph Miyamoto, *God’s Mission in Asia: A Comparative and Contextual Study of This-Worldly Holiness and the Theology of Missio Dei* in M. M. Thomas and C. S. Song (Ph. D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999).

³² Ken Christoph Miyamoto, “This-Worldly Holiness and the *Missio Dei* Concept in Asian Ecumenical Thinking,” in Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ecumenical Missiology: Contemporary Trends, Issues and Themes* (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 99 – 128. The various articles in this book raise a variety of questions and probe a range of issues.

theologians have almost always used ‘*missio Dei*’ with a world-centric connotation. They have appropriated this Western term as the symbol that provides a focus around which this-worldly holiness in the Asian churches is given a coherent expression.”³³ Questions abound: How does one link “this-worldly holiness” and the commitment to justice and social transformation? The respected ethicist Gustafson offers us sharply pointed questions regarding our understanding of God’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed:

If God prefers the poor, why am I, my family, and countless others so fortunate? If God prefers the poor, is the destitution, the pain and suffering of those millions whose plight draws our compassion due only to the human fault – sin? Or is much of it the outcome of historical and natural conflicts and forces beyond the capacity of any individual human, or any government, or any nongovernmental organization to alleviate, not to mention eliminate? If God prefers the poor, is God impotent to fulfill that preference? Or is it up to Christians, and non-Christians who often better marshal their powers, to actualize God’s preference for the poor?...It is clearly the Christian mission to prefer the poor and oppressed. But if that is a purpose of the Almighty, the Almighty is not Almighty.³⁴

These poignant questions serve in raising more questions. Is *missio Dei* the only authentic way of valorizing mission? Must we regress into the infinite depths of the heart of God in order

³³ Miyamoto, 118. Miyamoto goes on to point out that the understanding of the *missio Dei* “has not been limited to this function,” and that several Asian theologians have used this concept to contribute creatively “to the emergence of contextual theology in Asia.”

³⁴ James M. Gustafson, *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 105.

to find a source for mission? In other words, as Richebächer asks, is *missio Dei* the “basis of mission theology or a wrong path?”³⁵

And so – what about missiology and the pedal point in the Asian American context?

This is not the time to quote from the constructive part of my article where I sketched out an understanding of *missio Dei* as *missio humanitatis qua itinerarium in deum*. Please note that I didn’t forget to make a comment on the “Latin captivity of mission”! Rather this is the time to ask, given the questions that I have raised about *missio Dei*, what implications this has for Asian American theology and missiology in the present day context.

In the important and vibrant *A People’s History of Christianity* published by Fortress Press, Minneapolis, an attempt has been made to answer a fundamental question: What will history look like if it is written from the perspective of those on the margins and fringes, “from below?” The General Editor writes:

[T] his seven-volume series breaks new ground by looking at Christianity’s past from the vantage point of a people’s history. It is church history, yes, but church history with a difference: ‘church,’ we insist, is not to be understood first and foremost as the hierarchical-institutional-bureaucratic corporation; rather, above all it is the laity, the ordinary faithful, the people. Their religious lives, their pious practices, their self-

³⁵ Wilhelm Richebächer, “*Missio Dei*: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?” in *IRM* (October 2003), 588 – 605. Richebächer concludes by pleading “for a more precisely defined formulation based on the original meaning and function, viz. that of *missio Dei Triunius*, for the sake of the invitation to believe and the dignity of all religions.” (599) Jacques Matthey, in his article “God’s Mission Today: Summary and Conclusions” (*IRM* (October 2003), 579 – 587), reflecting critically on the 50th anniversary of Willingen conference where the papers in the special issue of *IRM* were presented, asks whether one can “continue to use the *missio Dei*, or do we need a different paradigm?” He cautions us against trying to go “deeper into any analytical description of inner-trinitarian *processiones*”, and asks: “Who are we to know the inner life of God? We could easily fall into the temptation of transferring to God our vision of the ideal community or society.” He also reminds us that “If we were to lose the reference to *missio Dei*, we would again put the sole responsibility for mission on human shoulders and thereby risk, missiologically speaking, believing that salvation is gained by our own achievements.” (582)

understandings as Christians, and the way all of this grew and changed over the last two millennia – *this* is the unexplored territory in which we are here setting foot.³⁶

This perspective is reiterated in the final volume dealing with global Christianity in the twentieth century where one of the contributors writes that “Christian history takes on a new vitality when historians embrace the multiple and ongoing stories of people all over the globe for whom Christianity is a living tradition. This kind of new history opens up the everyday realities of Christians that have been concealed by theological abstractions, all-to-neatly-framed timelines, typologies that suggest stasis rather than dynamism and unquestioned assumptions about what elements of Christian history are significant enough to record.”³⁷

This approach has many implications for the way in which we understand mission in the Asian American context:

- 1) In missiological discourse we need to take seriously both parts of the hyphen, “Asian-ness” and “American-ness” and see where the pressure on the hyphen lies. How has the Asian American imagination been shaped by this pressure? What has been carried and how has it been packaged? What about the generational shifts as communities settle and grow in a new context but in a context where “home” functions as a sounding board for better or for worse, leading in several cases to conflict regarding real or imagined values, and in other cases to enrichment and dynamism?
- 2) The link between existing ecclesial paradigms and structures and Asian American ecclesiology and missiology needs deeper exploration. In the past several years there has been a significant move away from paternalism on the part of existing communions of churches and the diasporic communities they helped foster. Has this led to a mutual appreciation and understanding of the challenges that various partners in mission prioritize? Questions of gender justice, gay rights, the persistence of poverty, race equations, immigration reform, and eco-sensitivity are all issues that have the potential

³⁶ Denis R. Janz, “Foreward” in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins – Volume 1: A People’s History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xiii.

³⁷ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Multiplicity and Ambiguity,” in Mary Farrell Bednarowski, ed., *Twentieth-Century Global Christianity – Volume 7: A People’s History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 1 – 31, here on page 29.

for collaboration as well as conflict. How have these been negotiated without shallow generalizations or uneasy compromises?

- 1) Increasing prosperity among diasporic communities has led them to make material and financial interventions in their countries of origin, supporting “mission” initiatives and functioning as catalysts of what they see as positive change. What is the ideology underlying such intervention? What is the role of the local agents in encouraging materialistic giving, and what is offered in exchange? How has this become part of the prosperity culture and to what extent does this foster dependence? How does one discern between various options, between individuals and the collective, between existing institutions and those that have sprung up to tap into such possibilities? What about the reality of corruption and nepotism at various levels and the easy link between materialism and blessing?
- 2) Given that modern communication methods and social networking tools are more and more the preferred means for the swift propagation of ideas, events, the spread of news as well as comments and interpretation of news items, astounding stories, feel-good snippets, scriptural verses, prayers and spiritual messages; how have the diasporic communities been able to discern wisely and judge appropriately between sensational and emotionally appealing versions of what mission should be (and is all about!) and more sober and reasoned analysis of what mission should look like in this globalized and interdependent world where hegemonic tendencies have not been quelled but are intensified?

These are only some of the issues that confront those of us concerned with the ongoing relevance and vitality of missiological engagement and praxis, not only at the level of theologians and missiologists, but at the level of congregations and communities. One should not forget that “[t]here is a growing recognition that Asian American theologies need to go beyond merely ethnocentric theologies that are narrowly confined to the needs of specific racial-ethnic Asian American communities, to theologies that would engage with, as well as challenge, the broader Christian world.”³⁸ In the name of harmony and resolution many paradigms, including that of the *missio Dei*, have functioned as ‘pedal points’ and tried to bring various voices playing

³⁸ Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 83.

above them into some form of uniformity and conformity. We should not hesitate to state that one possible way forward where Asian and Asian American theological and missiological interaction can make an impact in the academy, the church, and the wider community is through the sustained and informed interrogation of such paradigms. We need to question the pedal point of *missio Dei* in order that we may not only be faithful to our heritage but also prophetic and contextually relevant as we work together to shape and define our common future.