CHRISTIANITY ENCOUNTERING WORLD RELIGIONS

The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century

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What is the Christian responsibility to people who already believe in and belong to another religion? How should Christians witness to people who are Buddhist, or Hindu, or Muslim, or members of some other religion?

We believe that Christian responsibility begins with giving witness to what God has done through Jesus Christ to offer us the gift of salvation. We believe that “giftive mission” is the form that witness should take in the twenty-first century. This book is an explanation of and an argument for giftive mission. This approach is necessary because our culture at large gives radically different answers to the question of what the Christian responsibility to people of other religions is.

At one end of the spectrum of these answers is the “do nothing” response. According to this view, Christians should do nothing regarding the spiritual disposition of nonbelievers. If Christians have any responsibility to adherents of non-Christian religions, it begins and ends with concern for the simple requirements of human well-being: food, water, clothing, shelter, peace, and justice.

At the other end of the spectrum of answers is the “wipe them out” response. Christians should spare no energy in eradicating the non-Christian religions of the world. Non-Christian religions and the people who follow them are demonic. We are fully justified in using whatever means necessary to accomplish this goal, including political power and warfare.

Like most end-of-the-spectrum answers to such questions, there is little subtlety to either the “do nothing” or the “wipe them out” responses. Some mission organizations offer more subtle versions of these responses, and many if not most take positions well distanced from either extreme. We will explore many of these positions in this book. But what is surprising, even alarming, in
today’s climate of tension among religions is that extreme, end-of-the-spectrum answers increasingly seem to be considered plausible by more and more people. Intellectually these positions may seem to be reductive stereotypes. Empirically, however, they are not. People believe them and act on them, to little positive effect and a growing list of negative effects.

We Christians desperately want to think we are still having a positive effect with traditional mission efforts. And it is not hard to produce evidence that seems to support that belief. Never before have more missionaries been sent to “foreign” fields: American missionaries, European missionaries, Korean missionaries, Indian missionaries. Tens of thousands of people convert to Christianity each year as a result of these efforts. Christianity is still the largest religion in the world, with almost two billion members.

But what do these numbers mean? Consider: never before have more Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim “missionaries” been sent to “foreign” fields. Tens of thousands of people convert to Buddhism and Islam each year as a result of these efforts. Islam grew faster than Christianity in the twentieth century, and Buddhism has become a viable religion in both Europe and North America.

In fact, when Christian growth numbers are considered as a percentage of world population, for the last one hundred years the results of the Christian mission movement have remained stagnant. According to David Barrett and Todd Johnson in *World Christian Trends*, in the year 1900 Christians made up 34.5 percent of the world’s population; in the year 2000, Christians made up 33 percent of the world’s population (2001, 4).

And what do we do about these realities? We talk about the places Christianity is still growing and ignore those where it is either stagnant or in decline. We wax eloquent about growth that can’t be measured or confirmed—house churches in China and background believers in the Muslim world—and pretend we don’t notice the closing of national borders to Christian mission workers across the 10/40 window.

The growth of Christianity in the so-called southern world is indeed a wonderful story. But the status quo state of Christianity in the Middle East, North America, and Europe is a scandal. The lack of growth in Asia and South Asia is a nightmare. In those places where people have embraced an enduring world religion other than Christianity, we have had and are having little mission success.

Consider just one aspect of the nightmare: the Buddhist world. The Christian mission movement has failed in cultures with a dominant Buddhist element. Let’s generously define failure as at least a century of mission effort that has resulted in less than 25 percent of the people in such cultures coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

No predominantly Buddhist culture has ever been a Christian mission success, that is, with more than 25 percent of the people in the culture embracing Christianity.

8
Korea has come the closest. The most recent figures for South Korea have between 25 and 30 percent of the population identifying themselves as Christian. But if you add North Korean figures, the figure falls below our failure threshold. Other Buddhist countries don’t even come close. Consider nine other Buddhist countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% Buddhists</th>
<th>% Christians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar (Burma)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total the figures for these Buddhist countries, and you find that the Christian mission movement has resulted in an average of less than 5 percent of the population in these countries embracing Christianity, despite almost two centuries of mission efforts.

Lest we think that this is the norm for Christian mission efforts, compare it with the results from two other heavily missionized parts of the world, Oceania and Africa. The first Christian mission workers went to Africa in the seventeenth century, and by 1900, 10 million Africans knew Christ, that is, 10 percent of the population. By the year 2000, 360 million Africans had become Christian, 46 percent of the population.

The first Christian mission workers went to Oceania, the South Sea Islands, in 1843. By 1900 an astounding 76 percent of the population were Christian (5 million people), and by the year 2000, 83 percent professed Christ, 25 million people.

A word about what “failure” means when we talk about Christian missions is in order. To make our point, we have chosen to define success and failure in terms of the number of people who become Christian. There are other important ways to talk about the success or failure of Christian mission, ways that, were we attempting to make other points, we would prefer to embrace. Those other ways can be handily summarized by the word “faithfulness.” Thousands of Christian mission workers have gone to Buddhist cultures and “succeeded,” if by “success” we mean they were faithful to their calling and proclaimed the gospel.
Also, although we define success in this book as numerical success, we must bear in mind that there may be many reasons why people have not come to Christ in significant numbers in Buddhist cultures. Political conditions may not be right. Perhaps it has not been in God’s good timing that the gospel would take root in these cultures. If those are the reasons that mission efforts have “failed,” then missionaries can do nothing but continue to be faithful.

But perhaps we should consider other ways to present the gospel to Buddhist peoples—and to Hindu peoples and Muslim peoples—that may have a better chance of numerical success. Perhaps we need a new way, one that will indeed serve people’s physical needs, a clear requirement of the gospel, but that will also show them the Way taught to us by Jesus Christ.

The idea presented in this book is a simple one: Mission to peoples of historically resistant religions could be made easier and more productive with the addition of a biblical metaphor for mission, the metaphor of free gift. Giftive mission, as we choose to call it, means that we are more than conquerors of other peoples, more than harvesters of souls, more than winners of metaphysical arguments: we are the bearers of gifts. We bring to the world the greatest of all gifts, the story of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ.

Seeing our mission work through the lens of this metaphor changes more than one might think. Giving a gift is a different kind of activity. In fact, the history of Christian mission at its best is better seen through the lens of gift giving: bringing the gifts of medical care, of education, of Christian community, as tangible expressions of the Gift that is Jesus Christ. And where mission efforts are achieving success in the most difficult parts of the world today—China, India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East—it is when, in addition to medicine, education, and Christian community, they are bringing the gifts of English-language instruction, business expertise, and fresh water development, among others, again, as tangible expressions of the Gift.

Many good things happen to us when we begin to see our commitment to building God’s kingdom through the lens of gift giving:

- We read the Bible better. Isn’t the root metaphor of God’s activity among us the metaphor of God’s grace? We do not earn our salvation through fighting the devil or because of good deeds. We are given it by God. Grace. It is a gift (see chapter 2).
- We express ourselves better in our own culture and in our relationships with other religions when we replace the marketplace metaphor—the managerial competition with other religions—with the metaphor of bearing and receiving gifts (see chapter 1).
- We develop better theologies that are culturally sensitive but, more importantly, biblically faithful to the commands of witness when we see them through the spectacles of gift giving (see chapter 3).
INTRODUCTION

- We do the work of mission better, without succumbing to the temptations of power and manipulation and triumphalism, when we ratchet down our pride and become gift givers and gift receivers rather than mini-saviors of the world. Wherever and whenever faithful mission has been done in the past two thousand years, it has been with a focus on certain gift-giving practices to the exclusion of others (see chapters 4–15).

Conversely, when Christian mission has been done poorly, it is because good practices were ignored in favor of bad ones. To give readers an idea of what we mean by bad practices, each of the practice chapters contains an “antimissionary” sidebar illustrating a bad practice, an example of how not to do mission.

We argue that by the simple emphasis of this biblical metaphor for describing mission we can better see what God expects us to do in today’s world. Although giftive mission does not invalidate the other biblical metaphors for mission that have been used in missiological discussions for centuries (see chapters 22–24), global conditions today make it imperative that we bring our understandings and expectations of mission more in line with God’s graceful actions toward us. We must become more than imitators of God’s actions in developing personal lives of holiness; we need to imitate the way God acts toward the world in our mission activities. Jesus said that as the Father sent him, so he sends us. God sent Jesus as a bearer of the free gift of grace. We are also the bearers of that gift. More precisely, we are the bearers of the news of that gift.
What resources do we have for answering the fundamental question: What is a Christian’s responsibility to people of other religious traditions? We cannot just make up answers that seem to make sense. As Christians, we need to ground our answers in something that goes beyond human opinion.

One of the “givens” of answering this question is the world context in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like all historical contexts, our time and place is unique. There has never been—and never will be again—a time exactly like this. Context is so important because any given context determines the problems we face. It would not be hard to make a list of the problems Christians face these days: Muslim jihadists, Asian religious competition from Hindus and Buddhists, the creeping rot of materialism in Western Christianity itself; these issues have become all too familiar, and each of them raises the fundamental question of this book: what should Christians do about other religions?

Of course, our primary resource for answering the questions set by our context is the Bible, a text that Christians the world over regard as sacred and holy. The Bible is not exactly an answer book. It was written at a time when the fundamental questions were somewhat different from those we face today, and it is obvious that the answers in the Bible were aimed at slightly different
Context, Text, and Pre-texts

targets—at Osirian mystery religions, at first-century gnosticism, at Roman warlords. That does not mean that the Bible loses its place of primacy for us, however. We must interpret to arrive at longed-for answers, but the biblical text is the final guidance, the first and last resort for the Christian in any context. We go to it first for wisdom, and we go to it last to check our theories and strategies against what the text says.

The development of those theories and strategies depends on how we shape the issues our cultures present to us. They depend on the presuppositions our theologies steer us toward. They depend on very basic things like the personalities of the decision makers and how those subjective elements work together for God’s glory. These pre-texts, the values and thought forms we bring to our reading of the biblical text, may seem like minor things when compared with the mighty acts of God in history—and in the focus of the big picture, they are. But we don’t always see the big picture very clearly, and we have even less chance of seeing it if we neglect to factor in the unique gifts and desires we bring to the table of interpretation and understanding.

So to answer our question, we must begin by understanding the context, text, and pre-texts that inform and influence us all in one way or another. Once we have accomplished that task, we can move on to the work at hand.
Christianity has always been in contact with the world’s other religions. The earliest Christians wanted to distinguish their faith from Judaism. Roman Christians in the first century both fought against and borrowed from the mystery religions of the day. Gnosticism of one sort or another seems to have prompted several of the apostle Paul’s letters to the young churches he planted in Asia Minor. As Christianity spread throughout the Greek and Roman world, contact with Buddhism in the East, Islam in the Middle East, and indigenous religions such as the Celtic faith and other pagan belief systems in central and western Europe always led to vigorous Christian mission efforts among adherents of these other religions (Neill 1986). In one sense, Christianity has always existed in a religiously plural context.

Yet the religiously plural context in which Christianity exists today differs markedly from that of our forebears. Radical changes in the political, economic, and cultural configuration of the world’s nations make interreligious interchanges today different in both quality and quantity. Christianity engages the world’s religions on a playing field leveled by a global economic market, relative religious freedom, and a communications network that makes the whole world a virtual neighborhood. In most places today, Christianity not only confronts the world’s religions, but it also coexists with them. Hindus,
Buddhists, Muslims, and Confucians are no longer strangers in our midst but residents in our neighborhoods—and, increasingly, we reside in their neighborhoods (Muck 1992).

These changes in the world’s religious configuration are the occasion for this book. Both the context and the goal of Christian missions vis-à-vis the world’s religions have either changed or been modified in important ways. Three idea clusters define this new mission context: we exist in an increasingly free marketplace of religious ideas; we do missions in a nexus of competing evangelisms resulting in what we might call reflexive evangelism; and the mode of Christian interchanges with other religions is to both compete and cooperate with them.

**Free Marketplace of Religious Ideas**

An extraordinarily powerful and pervasive metaphor consumes our thinking and behaving these days. It is the metaphor of the marketplace. The marketplace is not just a metaphor in a literary sense, a helpful way of describing a complex idea (although it is that). The marketplace metaphor is a reality in

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**Sidebar 1.1**

**How to Utilize the Context in Mission**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify Both the Gospel and Culture.</th>
<th>Determine the Form of Mission.</th>
<th>Act, Knowing That Mission is Rooted in Community.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giving: Do not take the gospel “out there” but determine how the gospel and culture enter into conversation in our own lives.</td>
<td>If people are hungry, give bread.</td>
<td>Needed change can be fostered by allowing a fresh relationship with Christ to show the way in new situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving: Hear the gospel in a new way in each culture by asking how the culture can become a mission to us as the church.</td>
<td>If people are sick, offer healing.</td>
<td>Surrendering the old may be necessary to let new life be born in the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving: Follow Christ in radical love.</td>
<td>If people are despairing, bring comfort.</td>
<td>Find new directions for mission in painful or divisive experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing: See each context as a chance to hear the gospel again for the first time.</td>
<td>If people are confused about the meaning of life, speak words of salvation.</td>
<td>Imagine the Holy Spirit as the presence and power of God in the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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every sense of the word and influences human interactions from the macro level of international politics to the micro level of interpersonal relationships. We literally think of the world as a huge shopping bazaar, and we act as if everything in our lives runs according to the “laws” of buying and selling.

So pervasive is the dominance of marketplace thinking that one could say the world is run by an ideology of economism, and the marketplace is the central metaphor of this ideology. Economism influences every aspect of our lives, including the way we look at the interactions among the world’s religions. Religions have become commodities like any other, and religious people behave more like consumers than congregants. We buy a religion—and continue to purchase it—if it works for us. If it doesn’t meet our expectations, we choose another religious or denominational product.

**Marketplace Dynamics**

This religious bazaar has been created by three influential dynamics: globalization, freedom of religion, and negative tolerance of religious ideas. Each of these dynamics has important implications for the way the world’s religions interact with one another and the way Christian missionaries do their work.

*Globalization* has many definitions, but it usually refers to the idea that most of the world participates in a global culture (among others) connected by better and better worldwide communications, an increasingly interdependent economic system, a common way of thinking patterned on the scientific method, and a growing championing of democratic pluralisms as the default political form, a politics that relies on some form of capitalism as the economic system.

In the face of these dynamics, religion also becomes globalized. Although the development of a common world religion is unlikely, a common religious form is emerging that makes many aspects of the various religions less distinct. Religions now *look* more alike. As politics and economics become homogenized, the role religion plays in those cultures also becomes homogenized. No matter what the difference in the teachings of religions, people in our globalized culture increasingly look to their religions to be the meaning makers in ever more secularized cultures. Christians in America look to their religion to make sense out of senseless school shootings and other acts of gratuitous violence. Buddhists in Sri Lanka look to their religion to provide some sense of meaning amid a civil unrest that has consumed their country’s energies for several decades. Religious people everywhere look to their religions to make sense of dilemmas in their world.

Globalization makes the generic category of “religion” a viable one for the first time in history. In the past, the abstract category of “religion” never made sense to people for whom religion could mean only one thing: Christianity if
you lived in the United States or Western Europe, Islam if you lived in most countries of the Middle East, Hinduism if you lived in India, a particular tribal religion if you were a member of a particular tribe, and so forth. With globalization, however, has come a pluralism of religions within each and every culture, and the general category of religion has taken on a descriptive meaning that makes sense. One can be religious, but religious in many ways, even within a single culture.

Freedom of religion is the concept that has made this globalization of religion possible. Without freedom of religion, a free marketplace of religious ideas would not work, and a global category called “religion” would be meaningless. Historically, people have insisted that everyone around them share their religion and have fought to the death to make it so. It has only been

**Sidebar 1.2**

**Freedom of Religion: Sovereignty of God, Separation of Church and State, Human Rights**


**Bible:** Psalm 2:1–2, 4–5: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. . . . The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’”

The rationale here is that God is the ultimate power in the universe, not nations, not individuals. Because God is sovereign and made individuals free to choose God (Gen. 1:27), no state power can usurp that freedom by demanding religious uniformity.

**United States Constitution:** The First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law establishing religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The rationale here is realpolitik. The separation of church power and state power creates a balance of religious interests that makes it impossible for any one religion or religious group to dominate.

**United Nations Declaration of Human Rights:** Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The rationale here is that human beings have certain inalienable rights. These universal rights must be protected by all governments of the world.
in the past two hundred–plus years that this has changed (except in isolated instances), and it changed with a novel concept promulgated by the framers of the United States Constitution. The authors of the Constitution were fresh from the wars of religion in Europe (intra-Christian wars, actually) and were seeking a way to inoculate their new nation-state against similar interreligious battles. They rightly ascertained that the problem was not with religious belief alone but with the volatile mix of religion and political power: whenever a religion gained political power, it usually used that power to impose its beliefs on others. Separate the passion of religion from the power of politics, and peace would reign—so thought the framers of the Constitution. They acted on this belief by writing the First Amendment to the Constitution, which says, “Congress shall make no law establishing religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

This separation of the power of religion from the power of politics has worked reasonably well. Although there have been conflicts over religion in the United States, they have not led to ongoing, violent confrontations, at least compared with religious conflicts in many other parts of the world. The freedom to choose one’s own religion as mandated by a strict separation of church and state has proven to be a godsend for religious people in America. And it has been a godsend for the other people throughout the world who have adopted the freedom of religion principle and its corollary, the separation of religion from political power.

Freedom of religion is not universal. Much of the Islamic world still considers Islam not only a religious ideology but also the basis of a political system to be imposed on all citizens. Parts of the socialist world, such as China, still struggle with the concept of religious freedom, as do many smaller totalitarian regimes. But increasingly, religious pluralism and separation of church and state are becoming the approach used throughout the world.

This freedom has many good effects. Religions are thriving. The largest world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam—are all growing at phenomenal rates (Barrett and Johnson 2001). New religious movements proliferate. When governments endorse religious freedom within their boundaries, there is no shortage of religious innovators who step in with new ideas and new combinations of old ideas. Even indigenous religions normally restricted to a tribe or an ethnic group are experiencing revivals of their old teachings. In one sense, religions have never had it so good.

In another sense, however, globalization and freedom of religion have created a kind of negative tolerance of all religions that has the overall effect of minimizing them all. This negative tolerance develops in this way: Religion is a very powerful force, and people tend to be passionately religious. Religious conflict often occurs because people believe their religion is so important and so persuasive that they insist on its truth and uniqueness to everyone around them. If we are to have religious freedom and religious peace, this passionate
character of religious belief must somehow be controlled. Whether intended or not, the free marketplace of religious ideas seems to reduce the overall value level of all religions. If no single religion is the ultimate truth, then all are less important. A relative approach to truth inevitably reduces commitment to a single truth.

The only test of a religion in such a marketplace is its performance. Religions are usually measured not on truth value alone but on their capacity to satisfy individual and social spiritual needs. Global citizens are free to choose whatever religion satisfies their individual needs. Religions are not life-and-death matters that hold sway over us but commodities to be chosen according to their utility. The invisible hand of the marketplace replaces the mysterious hand of God.

**Missiological Contexts**

What are the missiological implications of the free marketplace of religious ideas with respect to the world’s religions? There are many, but let’s briefly consider five.

1. We must recognize the dominance of the marketplace metaphor and use it to our advantage, rather than act as if we can totally rise above it. Whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or whatever, we cannot place ourselves outside culture and escape the thought forms that dominate us. What we can do, however, is clearly identify the common metaphors of the age and by so recognizing them, ensure that the essences of our religious teachings are not lost in the virtual ideas of a complex metaphor. Christian missionaries, for example, would be foolish to think they can avoid the implications of economism in their work. This is how people think. It is how missionaries themselves think. But even as we think in that way, we must show how the essence of the gospel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Tolerance: Tolerance to Survive</th>
<th>Positive Tolerance: Accept Real Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Trade-off: Tolerate views of others so that your views will be allowed expression</td>
<td>• Appreciation of disagreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quid pro quo: I’m OK, you’re OK</td>
<td>• Courage to critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Results: Relative truth</td>
<td>• Results: Reflexive evangelism/mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leveling of truth claims: If all views are equally tolerated, no one view can be absolutely correct.</td>
<td>• Mission that respects difference: If real differences are appreciated, mission can happen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney,
can both participate in this way of thinking and at the same time supersede it (see, for example, Paul’s view of the marketplace, sidebar 1.4).

For example, Christian missionaries from the West have sometimes been accused of attempting to buy converts by providing food and medical services for the disadvantaged. If true, this would surely be an example of economism determining mission strategy. The proper response, however, is not to discontinue providing food and medical services to the disadvantaged in order to

**Sidebar 1.4**

**Paul’s View of the Marketplace**

In 2 Corinthians 2:12–17, the apostle Paul gives what amounts to a critique of the marketplace as a metaphor for doing mission. He says, "Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sellers of Religious Goods</strong></th>
<th><strong>Paul’s Message to Corinthians</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Aroma of incense sold in markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peddlers of God’s word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Desire to profit from sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>Sale of religious goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales influence religion of Corinth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Application of Paul’s Use of the Marketplace Metaphor to Today’s Context**

- **Activities**: The Holy Spirit creates around Christians a smell that draws some and repels others.
- **Attitudes**: The influence of rationality and scientific method in our context makes it difficult to accept Paul’s aroma theory. Yet some are drawn to the beauty of Christ’s aroma; some are repelled by its goodness.
- **Effects**: In doubting the influence of Christ’s aroma spread through our lives, we fail to see the signs of Christ’s influence in our world.
show people who cannot interpret such actions in other than economic terms that their materialistic charges are not true. Rather, we must simply make our motives clearer: we are not attempting to “buy” converts to Christianity, and we are not doing these works because we are a social-service agency. We are doing them because the Bible charges us to show compassion and mercy to the less fortunate.

2. As mission workers we can no longer count on the help of cultural carriers such as political powers and economic forces to aid us in the task of spreading the good news. Not only are most of the world’s political and economic forces thoroughly secularized but most also espouse values that are thoroughly antireligious. Not only have the powers-that-be opted out of explicitly promoting specifically religious values but most also do not even espouse implied religious values such as peace and justice. For such powers, the separation of church and state has been a license to let their main interests (power for politics and profit for economics) reign unmitigated by any concern for human well-being except that which increases power and profit.

3. People are much more sophisticated about the world’s religions, and this sophistication demands a more nuanced mission approach. There was a time when one could simply mention other religious systems to people of a certain religion and expect from them very little knowledge of those other religions and thorough approbation of them. Neither expectation can be assumed any longer. Globalization and freedom of religion have resulted in extensive knowledge of other religions for many of the world’s religious people and very complex attitudes toward those religions. Increased sophistication on the part of global Christians toward other religions means that increasing sophistication on the part of the missionary is required (Muck 2006).

4. In an age when religion in general has been devalued to commodity status, the mission task is often twofold: to rearticulate the proper role and status of religion in general and to talk about the teachings of Jesus Christ in particular. Religion is not psychotherapy or sociology or philosophy, although too often today it is reduced to one or the other—or all three. On the contrary, religion refers to the transcendent dimension of being human. Religion is, of course, vitally interested in human well-being, but it is primarily interested in serving as the human focal point for the interests of the gods. There was a time when all human beings understood this, but today few do. Our first task is to relocate and redefine the role of religion in general. Only then do the teachings of any specific religion, Christianity included, relate to their major focus: the ineffable transcendent.

5. The current conditions of religious freedom lead to a better understanding of human nature, the imago Dei, but also to more competition for the hearts and souls of humankind. Better understanding of human nature comes from recognizing that true religion prospers only when it is freely chosen by individual human beings and the communities they form. This forces us to be
content when people make religious choices of which we do not approve. This better anthropology allows us to disagree with other religious teachings but requires us to approve and defend people’s freedom to choose any religion they wish. Yet even as we defend as a Christian principle the right of free choice in religious matters, we are implicitly endorsing the right of other religions, of all religions, of our religion, to do mission—or religious self-advocacy. This means that the missionary of today will be faced with stiffer competition than ever before in history.

These are just some of the implications of the free marketplace of religious ideas.

Reflexive Evangelism

Anyone involved in Christian work of any kind knows that other religions are forces to be reckoned with. Christian pastors and missionaries are not the only ones attempting to promote a religious idea in this free marketplace of religious ideas. In their own ways, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Confucians, Native Americans, Scientologists, and many others are also promoting their beliefs to cultures that are unusually hungry for spiritual ideas. In the rush hour of the gods, we have the phenomenon of a rush hour of spokespeople for the gods.

This competition takes many forms, but let’s look at three.

1. *Competition in the Church-and-State Sphere.* At one time, even though the United States government was not supposed to advance the cause of any single religion, Christianity included, it did support the prevailing Protestant Christian hegemony. The pledge of allegiance to the flag and the Lord’s Prayer were used to start the school day. School textbooks, such as the McGuffey

Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney,
*Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century,*
Readers, used biblical passages and references to teach reading and comprehension. Teachers assumed their students were Christian and taught about the Christian implications of holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The First Amendment proscription of not supporting any particular religion was interpreted to mean that the government would not endorse any particular Christian denomination at the expense of another.

Demographic changes in the composition of the United States population have altered that interpretation of the First Amendment in dramatic ways. Since 1950 the non-Christian religions in the United States have grown significantly. Today there are more Muslims than Presbyterians in the United States, more Buddhists than Episcopalians, more Hindus than Congregationalists. Remember: Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists were the three dominant religious groups in colonial America. This growth of non-Christian religions has not been lost on lawmakers (senators and members of Congress) and law interpreters (judges and courts). Both groups have reinterpreted the First Amendment to cover all religion, non-Christian groups included. The government is no longer interested in supporting the religious freedom of Christians only but also seeks to ensure fair and equal protection of all religions (Barrett and Johnson 2001).

Some examples: United States military chaplains now include Muslim and Buddhist chaplains as well as Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish ones. Chaplains in prisons now routinely provide Muslim worship services.

On the public school front, several active issues involve religious freedom: the question of whether children should be allowed to begin the day with a prayer of their choice is hotly debated; religious groups are constantly testing the waters regarding whether they can meet on school property; religious holidays and religious dress are issues of importance in public schools.

In terms of governmental policy, Muslims have active lobbying groups in Washington, DC, who argue for foreign policy favorable to nations dominated by Islam, in ways similar to those practiced by Jewish lobbyists for years regarding Israel. The Dalai Lama and his associates have lobbied the government for support of Tibet, often basing those arguments, in part at least, on religious freedom for Buddhists. Native American groups seek rights for Native Americans that often include religious issues such as the location and sacredness of burial sites and holy mountains and other landmarks.

Even though avowed Christians still make up approximately 80 percent of the United States population, promoters of Christianity can no longer assume that the government and public officials will implicitly support their faith as the American civil religion. If the United States government supports a civil religion, it is one based on the teachings of the First Amendment, a two-item creed (“Thou shalt not endorse any specific religion” and “Thou shalt defend all legal religious practices”) that is becoming increasingly absolute in American public life.
This development in America is not unique. Because the United States has had a longer history with this particular idea of religious freedom, Americans may be more active in promoting it. But many other countries have embraced some form of the separation of church and state and are also experiencing this form of public religious competition. The issue of proselytizing is a hot political topic in Russia. Public school dress restrictions, particularly the matter of Muslim girls wearing veils in public school classrooms, have reached the French courts for adjudication. Workers’ rights in Germany are heavily influenced by religious identity. Religious freedom issues have brought to power, and toppled, several recent governments in India.

2. Neighborhood Ethics. A less formal form of competition is taking place in neighborhoods across America and around the world. Indeed, even to call this phenomenon “competition” is perhaps to stretch the meaning of the word too far. More cooperation among the religions of the world exists today than ever before, and much of it is occurring in neighborhoods. These interchanges involve family life, general living conditions, and public school education.

Perhaps the most volatile of these neighborhood ethics issues concerns the various situations that arise when children of different religious backgrounds interact: playing together, going to one another’s place of worship for life-transition events, and (as the children grow older) dating and intermarrying. Parents of Christian children today often face questions of how to instruct their children about interacting with Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim neighbors. Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim parents, of course, face the same spectrum of issues.

Many public issues that sometimes reach the court system are dealt with and resolved at the neighborhood level. Many neighborhoods, for example, have formed groups of concerned parents that include representatives of the religions to deal with problems such as drugs, religious holidays in the schools, teaching about religions in the schools, coed physical education classes, and religious dress in schools. Some school administrations use these groups as sounding boards for setting school policy regarding matters that have religious implications.

Many workplace issues are dealt with and solved on the neighborhood level. Muslims, for example, often need a place and a time for the prayers they say five times a day, two of which fall during traditional working hours: noon and late afternoon. In many workplaces, a space is provided for these prayers, and Muslims say them during their lunch hour and afternoon break. Religious holidays are another example. Jews sometimes need time off for the High Holy Days in the fall, including Yom Kippur. Businesses often make special provisions for these holiday needs by providing comp time or, if enough workers need them, making them official holidays for the entire company.

So common are these kinds of competition becoming that a pattern can be discerned in their solution. First comes the problem, which often takes the form
of a seemingly intractable conflict of interests between members of two different religious groups. Second, a group of people representing all the interested parties is formed to discuss the issues. Third, a compromise solution is often found that satisfies everyone. When these competitions follow this pattern, more is achieved than just the solution to a particular problem (although that would be achievement enough). Often the negotiation itself sets a pattern of interaction that makes future situations much easier to handle.

3. Competition in Missions Proper. Some of the competition among religions is mission-and-evangelism competition pure and simple. The religions of the world have adopted increasingly common methodologies for promoting their teachings, which are more frequently taking the form of an economic marketing model. A particular religion identifies its teachings as a product to be sold to a spiritually hungry world. This spiritual product is shaped to conform as much as possible to the perceived and expressed needs of the people of the target culture. Sometimes the service offered to the public is a new one, so a need must be created or brought to consciousness among the people of the culture. After the spiritual product is tested and ready, people must be made aware of it. Ways of publicizing this valuable product are devised: radio, television, newspapers, fliers, and word of mouth are common mediums for this advertisement. Spiritual salespeople, both professional and lay, are trained to sell the product. “Stores” are set up as centers to sell and dispense it. Sometimes comparative advertising is done, extolling the virtue of one spiritual product over against another.

Just as there are many ways of selling secular products, spiritual products are also sold very differently, giving the spiritual marketplace a rich texture. Some see their products as suitable for only a certain segment of the culture, and they adopt very restrained, elitist methodologies; sometimes they do little or no advertising and make the scarcity of the product a major feature of its attraction. Others adopt mass-marketing approaches. Still others segment the market along economic, ethnic, racial, or nationalistic lines.

The bottom line (to continue the metaphor) is that we live in cultures where we see increasing competition for religious market share, and even as some religious groups are becoming more chary of the historical excesses of such missions efforts, more groups are using the powerful marketing tools available (such as the Internet) to market their religions even more aggressively.

In the face of such a situation, how are Christians called to act? In two ways: First, we must recognize that we cannot opt out of the competition. Under current world conditions, one way of opting out of the competition would be opting out of the marketplace. Given the ubiquitous nature of the marketplace described above, this option would require withdrawing from mainstream society. Most religious groups are unwilling to do this because they see public engagement as at least part of their mission. Another way
of opting out of the marketplace, however, is to behave as if one has a monopoly on the marketplace. This option also has serious drawbacks because it requires a profoundly revisionist view of the religious demographics of the world. Christians do not have a monopoly on the world’s religious scene and, if the parable of the sheep and the goats is to be taken seriously, never will have. There will always, until the end of time, be both Christians and non-Christians in the world.

Thus, given the current world situation, Christians have little choice but to engage in the marketplace of religious ideas. The parable of the talents teaches that Christians are not to bury their talents in the sand and withdraw from engagement but should invest their talents in the world’s marketplace. Christians must engage. The only question involves choosing how to engage in this religious competition. Two principles seem especially important.

First, Christian love as described in the New Testament demands a powerful, unconditional love for the other. Jesus, John, and Paul all wrote of a radical love for the world’s people. Early Christians took a traditional Jewish teaching about hospitality for the stranger in their midst and extended this teaching to include not just hospitality for the stranger but love for everyone. Love your neighbor, they said. Love your enemies, they said. Love your neighbor as yourself, they said. Love of God and neighbor, they said, sums up the whole of the law by which we are to live.

Given this very clear teaching about love, its application to world religion would be something like the following: Love your neighbor; love your non-Christian neighbor; love Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and others as yourself, even as you engage them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In one sense, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Adherents in 2000</th>
<th>Conversions per Year</th>
<th>Rate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>1,999,563,838</td>
<td>2,501,396</td>
<td>1.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
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<td>865,558</td>
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<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>359,981,757</td>
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</table>

Barrett and Johnson (2001, 4)
marketplace encounter is simply the occasion for this next step of loving everyone even as Jesus loved everyone. One feature of loving one’s neighbor is telling him or her about Jesus. But there are many other features, as 1 Corinthians 13 points out, such as being kind, patient, and protecting. It means realizing that our knowledge is imperfect and always will be, but that love endures. Love means we cannot opt out of the competition, but it also means that Christians compete in a very unusual way, at least when measured against the standards of competition set by our business-centered and sports-focused culture. Competition means “playing the game with full gusto” but leaving the winning and losing to God. Given our everyday understandings of what competition means, this is a difficult concept to grasp.

Second, the competition changes not just the person of the other religion; it also changes the Christian. The engagement with the other may change the Christian in many ways. In part 3, we will discuss in more detail how this change takes place. We will call this explanation the hermeneutical circle.

Refractive evangelism takes into account the marketplace of religious ideas, globalization, freedom of religion, and negative tolerance and carries out the biblical mandates to preach the gospel, but in a way that shows them the unique nature of God’s love and the absoluteness of our commitment to the well-being of God’s creation.

**Cooperate and Compete**

Current world conditions have also given a new nuance to the goal of mission and evangelism. The shorthand way of describing this new goal is to say that it is cooperation and competition instead of conversion. Unfortunately, this shorthand description has a good chance of offending almost everyone interested in Christian missions and evangelism. First, it sounds as if we are doing away with the idea of conversion altogether, and that is not the case. Second, as we showed in the last section, it is jarring to hear competition mentioned as an ongoing goal because many people think that it is precisely the competitive nature of traditional mission and evangelism to the other world religions that is the problem. Third, others hear the word cooperation and think it means giving up the traditional goals of mission and evangelism altogether. So the shorthand way of describing the “new” goal needs quite a bit of explanation (Martinson 1999).

Let’s start with the conversion issue. Many traditional missionary models begin with the necessity of conversion. William Carey’s great call to missionary arms, for example, is titled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1988; originally published in 1792). It is clear from these and many other early missionary writings that converting the “heathen” was the singular goal of all Christian missionaries.
In a world built on an economic model, however, beginning with the necessity of conversion may not be best for two reasons. First, the marketplace metaphor tends to reduce conversion to a function of the marketplace, rather than a transcendent, God-initiated act. Conversion becomes equivalent to making a successful sale. We articulated the product, advertised it, made our sales pitch, and the customer bought, that is, was converted. Customers who choose not to buy are not converted. This reduction of conversion to fit the marketplace model is not unavoidably necessary, of course. Indeed, much of what Christian missiologists attempt is to maintain the integrity of conversion as something that the Holy Spirit, not we, accomplishes. But the application is just too easy, and when conversion is seen as the first and last goal of missions, the marketplace metaphor seems to take over.

Second, using conversion as the single, unambiguous goal of missions and evangelism runs the risk of oversimplifying what happens when the gospel is heard by people of other religions. It narrows the vision of what the gospel can do for the world and its people. When the marketplace metaphor dominates, it is difficult to separate Christian conversion from political, economic, and cultural forces. Or, conversely, it is tempting to reduce political, economic, and cultural forces to nothing and consider just the oversimplified spiritual reality. In either case, a disservice is done to the reality and complexity of what becoming a Christian means.

Yet it is too simple to embrace an anticonversionist model. We are not anticonversionist by any means. Conversion happens if and when we understand the complex dynamics of interreligious interaction better, which enables us to get out of the way and see God in action. To do this we need a more complex model.

Thus we offer a model that we think more adequately addresses the complexities of the global context. Call it (for now, at least) the compete and cooperate model. We must develop the capacity to both compete and cooperate with the world’s religions.

**Competition**

Why compete? Because it is the very essence of the gospel to announce to the world the good news of what God has done through Jesus Christ. The Bible argues for competition on several different levels. On the emotional level, it is selfish to hide the light that radiates from the hope that is within us. On the theological level, it is disobedient to reject the call to teach and preach to all nations. On the philosophical level, it is arrogant to reduce all religions to a common-denominator rationality that denies equally the reality they all claim. Christian revelation demands competition. Buddhist dharma demands competition. Human rationality demands competition.

Yet this competition demanded by the biblical texts has a distinctive, chastened feel to it. It is hard work divorced from the fruits of its labors. It is playing
a game often without the assurance of ever knowing what the outcome will be. It is attempting to succeed with a determination not to let the prospect of either successes or failures sabotage the relationship with the other person.

Further, it is competition that needs a complement. Vegetarians are familiar with incomplete proteins, proteins that need components from two different kinds of food to be fully satisfying nutritionally. Competition by itself is like an incomplete protein in need of something to round it out. Put even more strongly: in the modern context, competition alone, without the complement of cooperation, ceases to live up to the scriptural ideal.

**Cooperation**

Why cooperation? There are two main reasons, one traditional and one contemporary. The traditional reason is the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself. This teaching is not a minor or isolated theme but a major motif of biblical teaching. As we noted in the last section, Jesus took the basic law of Middle Eastern hospitality for strangers in our midst and expanded it into a universal ethical injunction. “Love your neighbors,” Jesus said. “Love your enemies,” Jesus said. “Love your neighbors as much as you love yourself,” Jesus said. This is the whole of the law.

The contemporary reason for cooperation is the role religion plays in the world today. Put simply, religion is perhaps our last hope for civilized, humane cooperation among the peoples of the world. If part of the gospel is to support and even create just social systems, then cooperation with other religions to the extent that they contribute to those systems is a gospel requirement.

This is a relatively new phenomenon. There was a time when religions interacted with one another as they were carried by political and economic forces. Religions were coextensive with a tribe or a nation. Americans were Christian; Indians were Hindu; Chinese were Confucian. In such a system of relative religious homogeneity among tribes and nations, the cooperation requirement inherent in all religions could be carried out at the national or tribal level. Justice, although rooted in religious requirements, could be entrusted to politics and institutions of economic betterment.

Of course, governments and merchants carried out these functions very imperfectly. The nation-states’ dismal record of colonialism and imperialism is well documented. Religions too often were partners in these imperfect attempts at establishing so-called justice. Still, the idealism of the world’s religions managed to impose their requirements on their cultural carriers with enough force that justice to some extent was served.

Conditions have changed. Justice cannot be served through traditional political and economic systems. Change has occurred because tribes and nations are no longer religiously homogeneous, even relatively speaking. In the face of growing religious pluralism within cultures, religions can no longer...
count on political and economic systems to serve as their conduit for justice, that is, for loving one’s neighbor. And for their part, nations, in the face of growing religious pluralism within their constituencies, are increasingly choosing the course of strict separation between political/economic functions and religious ones.

Although this separation has some good features (namely, the reduction of religious conflict within societies and the abuses of colonialism and imperialism), the negative side to the development is that neither governments nor economic systems are leavened by religious values. Governments operate according to the rules of power, and economic systems operate according to the rules of profit. The requirement of justice, that is, the promotion of human rights regardless of power or profit, is thrown back directly on religion.

In such a climate, to love one’s neighbor as oneself when that neighbor is not of one’s own religion takes on new, more radical meaning. Religions are the primary agents in the world that are still committed to human well-being as a part of their agenda. Realpolitik and transnational corporate greed have made justice almost purely a religious matter.

Without doubt this complicates the missiologist’s task when it comes to relating to other religions. Many people of other religious persuasions have effectively addressed issues of peace and justice on a global scale—and continue to do so. They are good people, concerned with human well-being in ways compatible with similar Christian concerns. The question for Christians is how to relate to these people of other religions and their civilizing activities. The answer to this question (that is, learning to both compete and cooperate) is the subject matter of this book: how Christians must engage world religions in the twenty-first century.