

Conversion or Christianisation and Mission from the Margins: Interrogating the Foundations of Mission Thought and Practice

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Abstract

The face of Christianity in the world has changed dramatically since the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, as the burgeoning number of Christians, churches, missionaries and mission agencies in Africa has upended many of the old assumptions about the place of Africa in world Christianity. Much of this growth is the fruit of the 19th century missionary movement, whose evangelical ethos continues to impel the church towards reaching the 'unreached'. Not only was this movement rooted in particular social, political, cultural and economic realities that no longer exist, but most mission thought and practice is based on long-standing beliefs about the nature of Christianity, about the meaning of conversion, and about the differences between the 'reached' and 'unreached' that obscure the shared primal spirituality that unites them. These assumed differences often undermine the aim of mission and increase the marginalisation of those we hope to reach with the gospel. In this paper, I explore some of the historical and cultural roots of this problem and discuss possible ways to reframe our understanding of key concepts that may lead to more effective mission engagement with those on the margins.

Keywords: Mission, Conversion, Christian Vulnerability, Mission from the Margins

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Introduction

"From Earth's wide bounds, from oceans' farthest coast, through gates of pearl stream in the countless host; singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost 'Alleluia, Alleluia.'" This line from the hymn, "For All the Saints," a hymn that invites the church to celebrate and honour the blessed departed. It resonates with the vision of John in Revelation 7:9, "After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." It is a profound hymn, and a stirring vision that captures the *teleios* of the missionary endeavour.

The church is perhaps closer now in resemblance to the kaleidoscopic Revelation 7 image of the people of God than it ever has been in its history, and certainly closer than it appeared to be at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. At that conference, Africans were entirely marginalised, as indeed, at a conference intended to spur mission to Africa (and other places), indigenous African voices were entirely absent.¹ At that time, people of European descent comprised the overwhelming majority of the world's Christians, who were in what were then termed "Christian lands", and Africa was considered by most missionaries to be a mission field with extremely poor prospects. This is no longer the case. The face of Christianity in the world has changed dramatically since 1910, as the burgeoning number of Christians, churches, missionaries, and mission agencies in Africa makes clear. Much of this growth is the latter fruit of the 19th century missionary movement, whose evangelical ethos continues to impel the church in Africa and elsewhere towards reaching the 'unreached'. The growth of Christianity in the non-Western world generally, and in Africa particularly, has upended many of the old assumptions about the place of Africa in world missions.

The 19th century missionary movement that planted Christianity in Africa was rooted in distinct social, political, cultural, and economic realities that no longer exist. The European missionaries who ventured to Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries not only believed that the call to spread the gospel was bound together with the assumption that "Christianity would assimilate Africans to a European style of life,"² but worked actively towards that goal. They believed that "since the technical and cultural achievements of Europe" were the "fruits of Christianity," if Africans were to experience salvation through Christ, they must be given the total package of Christianity and (European) civilisation.³

This imposition of European cultural norms as an integral component of Christian faith exemplifies the profound entrenchment of the notion of Christendom and, indeed, highlights the considerable distance perceived between the Christian faith and other religions. Though it is true that "throughout Christian history so far, the overwhelming majority of new Christians have come from the primal religions,"⁴ that is, those often considered to be on the margins, it is also true that adherents of these religions have often been looked down upon as degraded, crude, barbaric, and the "farthest removed from the Christian faith."⁵

¹ Ebenezer Yaw Blasus and Joshua Settles, "The 'Surprise' in Mission History: Prospects for African Cross-Cultural Mission to the West," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 45, no. 4 (2021): 350.

² Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 93.

³ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the 2nd Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 228.

⁴ Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, xv.

⁵ Gillian M. Bediako, "Primal Religion and Christian Faith: Antagonists of Soul-Mates," *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (June 2000), 14.

Long-standing beliefs about the nature of Christianity, about the meaning of conversion, and about the differences between the 'reached' and 'unreached' obscure the shared primal spirituality that unites them. These assumed differences often undermine the aim of mission and increase the marginalisation of those we hope to reach with the gospel. Although Christian mission should have as its aim the "conversion of cultures, the turning to Christ and turning over to Christ of all that is there in us, about us and round about us,"⁶ this aim has all too often been conflated with Christianisation, that is, the imposition of the sociocultural norms of a presumably 'Christian' civilisation.

As Christianity grows new roots in the heartlands of Africa against the backdrop of flourishing primal religious perspectives and is described by Philip Jenkins as "a very exotic beast indeed, intriguing, exciting, and a little frightening,"⁷ it is more important than ever to reflect theologically on the historical roots of the Christendom idea and its implications. This reflection may provide keys to understanding the contradictions and enhance the mission of the church. In this paper, I explore some of the historical and cultural roots of this problem and discuss how reframing our understanding of mission may lead to more effective mission engagement with those on the margins.

I begin with a cursory examination of the early history of Christian mission within the Roman Empire and Christian engagement with Greco-Roman culture. I then consider the processes of conversion and Christianisation during the period when Christianity was becoming the state religion, ultimately leading to what became known as Christendom. Finally, I offer theological reflections on the nature of Christian conversion and its implications for contemporary missions.

The Early History of Christian Mission within the Roman Empire

When Jesus was asked about his identity and mission by Pontius Pilate, he responded, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18.36, NKJV). His response implies that the kingdom Jesus intended to establish and the mission arising from his ministry functioned on a different basis and through different methods than those Pilate was accustomed to. It was to be inspired by Jesus' vulnerability, as he would willingly submit to brutal execution by the Roman authorities the next day.

Despite this model, the history of Christian mission is laced through with contradictions, characterised by genuine efforts at authentic cultural engagement on the one hand, and efforts to impose Christianity and 'Christian culture' through

⁶ Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition," *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 4, no. 1 (June 2001), 2.

⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220.

forceful means on the other. The roots of this may be found in the earliest days of Christian mission within the context of the Roman Empire.

Christian mission may be said to have begun with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2, on a diverse crowd that included Jews from diaspora communities within and outside Roman territory. These communities had a long history, extending back to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and “though careful to maintain their religious identity, assimilated much of the culture of the society around them.”⁸ They were largely Hellenised and urbanised populations, used Greek as a *lingua franca*, and the educated amongst them would have been conversant with the currents of Hellenistic thought. Philo of Alexandria is one notable example of such scholars who were “well abreast of his gentile contemporaries in his knowledge of the literature and thought of the Greek world.”⁹ The apostle Paul is another.

The earliest Christian missionaries to the Gentiles likely emerged from among these multi-lingual Hellenised Jews.¹⁰ Acts 8 records how some early disciples were scattered due to the persecution that arose following Stephen’s martyrdom, probably into the pre-existing network of Jewish communities throughout the urban centres of the Roman Empire, which “provided the framework and perhaps also the model for the earliest Christian missions.”¹¹ By Acts 11:19-20, we find these disciples have spread as far afield as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching only to Jews. But two groups hailing from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch “preaching the Lord Jesus to Greeks also,” and won many to the faith, prompting the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to investigate further.

The increasing number of Gentiles joining what had been, till then, a predominantly Jewish movement raised important questions about the nature of conversion. Proselytism was not new to Judaism. Matthew 23:16 records Jesus’ scathing words of condemnation towards Pharisees who “travel land and sea to win one proselyte,” and we read in Acts 6:5 of Nicolas, who was “a proselyte from Antioch.” That this new Christian sect had “embraced some non-Jews” would “not be astonishing to anyone.”¹² Andrew Walls has noted “Israel’s long missionary tradition whereby Gentile proselytes had been welcomed into the fold of Israel.”¹³

⁸ R. A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 16.

⁹ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 16.

¹⁰ Daniel von Allmen, ‘The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the Dynamic Element in the formation of New Testament Theology’, *International Review of Mission*, LXIV, no. 253 (January 1975), 38.

¹¹ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 21.

¹² Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 18.

¹³ Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 5.

Were these Gentile followers of Jesus to be treated “as enlightened Gentiles had always been treated in Israel,” as “proselytes, stags that had chosen to graze with the sheep”?¹⁴ Or were they something else? The question was one of proselytisation versus conversion, and the answer would have profound ramifications for the nature of Christian faith and identity.

The Jerusalem council documented in Acts 15 appears to have resolved the matter by decisively opposing proselytism; Gentile believers would not be obliged to adopt Jewish customs in order to be recognised as Christians. Despite this seemingly clear decision, the question of identity persisted: “Was Christianity a way of being a Jew or was it something else?”¹⁵ Though the cultural content of the question has changed over time, the essential question about the nature of conversion and thus of mission persists to the present.

Christian Engagement with Greco-Roman culture

Early Christianity was a largely urban affair, and there it existed chiefly among the lower classes. As Paul said, “not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth,”¹⁶ though some, of course, were. In these early years, Christianity “was held in contempt by the vast majority of the cultured citizens of the Empire.”¹⁷ The same cultural elites that despised Christianity similarly disdained the countryside. For them, “civilization and culture were to be found exclusively in cities” and even apart from the elites, “most towns people...looked upon the rural peasantry with mingled disgust, fear and contempt.”¹⁸ Christians too, immersed as they were in urban Roman civilisation, imbibed similar attitudes; “the culture of the Christian community was a culture it shared with the cities.”¹⁹ Those who inhabited the countryside were on the margins and considered “beyond the pale, a tribe apart, outsiders,” and consequently “the countryside simply did not exist as a zone for missionary enterprise.”²⁰

The rise and spread of Christianity raised new issues for the increasing number of higher class and educated Greco-Roman converts to the faith. The church had become predominantly Gentile and in breaking with Judaism had created for itself an identity that was “essentially a religious one, not national, nor cultural, nor social.”²¹ These converts felt the need to vindicate their new Christian faith in terms that seemed faithful both to Christian teaching but also to their cultural tradition. Some writers like Tatian and Tertullian embraced a “radically exclusivist perspective...on the relation

¹⁴ Walls, “Converts or Proselytes?”, 5.

¹⁵ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 22.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:26 (ESV).

¹⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 193.

¹⁸ Richard Fletcher, *Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371 – 1386 AD* (London: Fontana Press, 1998), 16.

¹⁹ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 78.

²⁰ Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 16.

²¹ K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 36.

of Christian teaching to the [Greek] philosophical tradition... underpinned by a conviction that the latter amounts to merely human speculation.”²² Accommodation with the cultural pretensions of the Greco-Roman culture were far from the minds of those who remembered that “the Gospel had after all been preached as foolishness to the Greeks.”²³

Others, however, whose approach would ultimately triumph, chose to emphasise the commonalities between Greco-Roman culture and Christianity. One unfortunate outcome – indeed one diametrically opposed to the perspective of early apologists who saw Christianity as “the vindication of the worth of Barbarian self-identity”²⁴ – was the development of a tendency on the part of Christian theologians to embrace “typical Hellenistic feelings of superiority, particularly toward the *barbaroi*.”²⁵ In other words, the apologists, by seeking to “vindicate the Christian faith in ways” that were “faithful to the tradition of Christian teaching and... consistent with...the cultural dynamics of Graeco-Roman civilisation” unintentionally cemented the unofficial link between Christianity and Romanism, with all its cultural pretensions.²⁶ The church, even before the conversion of Constantine, “had begun to be a bearer of culture and a civilising presence in society.”²⁷ This is the background against which Constantine’s conversion and the later adoption of Christianity as the state religion must be seen.

Conversion and Christianisation in the 4th and 5th Centuries

The close of the 3rd century saw the last major state-sanctioned persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire occur under the reign of Emperor Diocletian. The famed (and disputed) conversion of his successor, Constantine, marked a significant and permanent change in the relationship between Christianity and the Roman state. Although Constantine “did not make Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire,” he did “make the Christian church the most-favoured recipient of the near-limitless resources of imperial favour.”²⁸

Converts, both genuine and fake, poured into the church and “Christians suddenly found themselves part of the ‘establishment’.”²⁹ This revolutionary change meant that for the first time, state power and more importantly cultural power was on the side of the church and Christians interpreted their newfound status as a sign of divine favour and responded by building on the accommodating approach of earlier apologists and repaying the generosity of the emperor in the coin of sacred legitimisation of the

²² K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 45.

²³ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 45.

²⁴ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 67.

²⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 193.

²⁶ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 48.

²⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 193.

²⁸ Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 19.

²⁹ Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 22.

Roman state: "Constantine was the culmination of God's marvellous saving work...the head of a unitary Christian society, with a divine mission to rule it as the vicar of Christ and to extend the sway of the Gospel among men."³⁰

In this formulation, conversion to the Christian faith was seen as part of the mandate of a Christian ruler and the Roman Empire as the "divinely sanctioned socio-political vehicle of Christianity."³¹ Constantine's conversion and the later adoption of Christianity as the state religion brought about an alignment between Greco-Roman culture, Christian faith, and the Roman state. Thenceforth, to be Roman was to be Christian and even more importantly, to be Christian was to be Roman. Christianity, and thus Christian mission, had moved decidedly from the margins to the centre.

This conflation of Roman and Christian identity was to have significant implications for mission and for the concept of conversion. For one thing, it meant that, as early as the 4th century, it was assumed that "the Roman and the Christian worlds were coextensive" in both territorial and cultural senses. Those outside the bounds of Roman civilisation were therefore presumed to be outside the Christian orbit and "could be as effectively de-humanized by the educated minority as were the peasantry."³²

Culturally sensitive evangelisation could scarcely be deemed proper or even possible among those thought to be scarcely better than animals. Gillian Bediako notes that questions such as "What place would God have in a savage world?" and "How could Christian witness survive among barbarians?" were common, indicating the degree to which these cultural biases had taken on religious significance.³³

Most significantly, Christian mission inevitably came to be seen as "a movement from the superior to the inferior," with the implicit goal of supplanting the culture of the latter inferior group with that of the former superior one.³⁴ The confusion of Roman and Christian identity also meant that Christian conversion became less a matter of utter renunciation, as in the tradition of prophetic religion, and much more a matter of conformity to the externalities of rite and ritual.

Here we see the seed of the idea of mission as a civilising endeavour wherein missionised groups were expected to adopt the cultural rites and rituals of the missionaries. Thus, one sees that the inter-linkages of Church, Roman (and later and more broadly European) culture, and Christian mission, combined with a sense of

³⁰ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 98.

³¹ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 141.

³² Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 25.

³³ Gillian M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and his Heritage* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 22.

³⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 193.

civilisational superiority, were well established long before the final collapse of the Roman Empire.³⁵

Christendom and Christian Mission

The barbarian invasions and consequent collapse of Western Roman society led to the emergence of the idea of Christendom, a society led by a Christian elite sharing in a common culture, under the rule of a Christian monarch and paying allegiance to one Church. Christendom should therefore be understood as both a geographical expression, denoting those territories under the rule of Christian monarchs, and a cultural one. In this new setting, the Western Christian aristocracy saw themselves “as an elite...an elite called to provide the lead and inspiration in its world, the moral force to dominate its society with a right to impose its will on the recalcitrant.”³⁶

Under Christendom, mission became equated with territorial expansion, the bringing of non-Christian lands under the rule of Christian monarchs, by force if necessary. The Crusades reinforced this idea; territorial conflict between Christian and Islamic polities meant that the forcible imposition of Christian laws and the cultural trappings of ‘Christian’ societies upon conquered people was an accepted practice, and defined mission. The same attitude prevailed during the discovery and conquest of the Americas.³⁷

The Christendom model eventually collapsed under the pressure of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. What remained were ideas of Christian civilisation, Christian identity and Christian mission that retained the same assumptions. Christianisation, the taking on of the ritual observances of the Christian faith and the culture of supposedly Christian societies, took precedence over conversion. Within the Christendom framework that came to characterise Western Christianity, conversion was mostly understood not as a response to the call of prophetic religion, but as an adoption of the cultural norms and forms of Roman and later European Christian civilisation.

Inherent in the framework is a denigration of other religions and cultures and an implicit belief that these cultures lack the capacity to correctly interpret and embody the Christian faith. Mission and conversion have therefore been believed to entail the embrace of Western culture, the acceptance of Western value-setting for the faith and an assumption that pre-Christian non-Western cultural and religious understandings can at best have only a very limited value in the apprehension or practice of

³⁵ Technically speaking the Western Roman Empire continued under the auspices of the Holy Roman Empire into the early 19th century when it was dissolved by Napoleon. The Eastern Empire lasted even longer if one considers that the Russians Tsars, who claimed to be its inheritors, were only deposed in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

³⁶ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 166.

³⁷ For more on this see Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 83-91.

Christianity. This model carries within it the idea of forcible imposition – of a superior supposedly Christian elite establishing by force, if necessary, conformity to the Christian faith. Christianisation may perhaps be the best term to describe the Christendom model of conversion. This has led to distortions in the understanding of what conversion, and thus mission, means and obscures the underlying primal spirituality that is fundamental to Christian faith.

Theological and Missiological Implications of the Christendom Model

It is easy in hindsight to condemn the conflation of Roman culture and Christianity and the Christendom model that emerged from it. Yet, one must consider the radical nature of the new situation Christians faced in the 4th and 5th centuries. After centuries of existence as a barely tolerated minority and especially after the Diocletian persecution, the conversion of Constantine and the sea-change in the fortunes of the church doubtlessly left Christian believers feeling “like those who dream” with mouths “filled with laughter and tongues with singing” (Psalm 126:1-2). The whole world, “Asia, Africa and Europe...represented and united in the Roman Empire,” seemed to have been brought under the rule of Christ.³⁸

It was not only natural but necessary for Christians to develop a theology that responded to this new state of affairs, and believers may be forgiven for having perhaps gone too far. One may also note that the Christendom model preserved the notion that all spheres of life—political, social, cultural and religious—are to be brought in subjection to Jesus Christ, emphasising that there is no fully non-spiritual space. It was a total view of life and of the implications of conversion. Furthermore, Christians, by “stepp[ing] into the legacy of classical civilization,” preserved the heritage of Greece and Rome, including the Latin language, thus presaging the eventual role Christians were to play in cultural and linguistic preservation throughout history.³⁹

Having said that, it becomes clear that the Christianisation approach to conversion eventually led to considerable distortions in both theology and mission that continue to affect mission to date. In the first place, it diluted the radical and prophetic nature of the call to Christian discipleship, such that, very early in the development of Christendom, one sees a dissociation of Christian identity and Christian conduct, with the former becoming a matter of inherited status and the latter frequently a matter of indifference.⁴⁰ Whilst it is impossible to prove, one wonders if this early dissociation

³⁸ G. M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, 24.

³⁹ Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World*, 140.

⁴⁰ For example, the nominally Christian Frankish aristocracy who supposedly converted under Clovis in the late 5th century held appalling low standards of morality. See Roland Bainton, *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilisation*, Vol. 1 - *From the Birth of Christ to the Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 147-48.

of identity and conduct sowed the seeds of brutalities like the trans-Atlantic slave trade being perpetrated by 'Christian' Europe many centuries later.

The early church and the early apologists took pains to establish that the "basis for Christian self-definition was to be essentially a religious one"⁴¹ that is one taken on in response to the truth claims of the Christian faith, but it has all too often proven to be one that is based on nominal faith commitments disconnected from praxis – a reality that one may credibly argue characterises much of Africa. This is a far cry from the kind of discipleship envisioned by Jesus in John 8:39-40, where he draws a distinction between inherited religious identity and that based on response to the claim of truth upon one's life.

In theological terms, the association of Christian conversion with the cultural hegemony of the West, and now by extension with the culture of any already 'reached' group, obscures the vulnerability that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Andrew Walls has argued that there is "some inherent fragility, some built-in vulnerability...engraved into the Christian foundational documents themselves," a vulnerability he links both to translation of the Scriptures and to the incarnation.⁴²

That is, the incarnation is what distinguishes Christianity from other religions in that it opens not only the possibility but indeed the necessity of deep engagement with culture and entails significant risk. The gospel message may be misunderstood or, indeed, rejected. This is indeed the pattern demonstrated in the life of Jesus himself.

More commonly in Christian history, though, has been the emergence of diverse expressions of Christianity, each reflecting the linguistic, cultural, and indeed theological influences of the host culture. As a theological principle, therefore, the imposition of the norms of a particular culture as part of the package of mission inverts the gospel, for at the very centre of the gospel is the reality that "God [places] himself in a position of extraordinary vulnerability vis-à-vis his creation."⁴³

The conflation of European and Christian identity has resulted in the particularised, contextual theology that emerged in Europe masquerading as *the* only properly Christian theology and being exported around the world, where it is still taught as such. Such culture-bound theology can be nothing other than a stagnant pool, largely irrelevant to the concerns of a dynamic global church, especially since "the vital

⁴¹ K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 36.

⁴² Andrew Walls, *The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 29.

⁴³ Joshua D. Settles, 'The Gospel, Translation and the Inherent Vulnerability of Christianity: Implications of Acts 2 for Contemporary African Christianity', *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 23, No. 2 (December 2020), 3-9 (4).

centres of Christian life are no longer in the West and the dynamic theology that has relevance for the mission and the life of the church is coming from the South.”⁴⁴

Even within the European context, conversion would likely have gone deeper and had greater impact if the Christian faith had “enter[ed] into vernacular culture and interact[ed] with it” rather than simply being superimposed atop the pre-existing culture.⁴⁵ Such an interaction would necessarily have entailed risk but would likely have brought with it an earlier recognition that all Christian expressions and theologies can only ever be provisional.

Moreover, the Christendom framework that came to characterise Western Christianity distorted the idea of mission so that it came to be understood as an adoption of the cultural norms and forms of European Christian civilisation. Inherent in this framework was a denigration of other religions and cultures and an implicit belief that embrace the missioniser’s culture, and the acceptance of the missioniser’s value-setting for the faith are necessary concomitants to conversion. Any existing primal cultural or religious understanding could have at best only a very limited value in the apprehension or practice of Christianity. At worst, they were considered demonic.

It is this idea of mission(s) that has remained implicit in mission practice throughout the centuries and that continues to animate much of it even today, even as non-Western Christians are increasingly engaged on the front lines of mission. While these believers may not consciously perpetuate Western value-setting for Christianity, they often do so implicitly by associating conversion with the adoption or rejection of certain cultural norms, values, and practices that have no intrinsic connection to faith in Christ.

In fairness, the sharper edges of this approach have been dulled over the centuries, but there is still much in mission practice that presumes the superiority of the culture of the ‘reached’ as over against the ‘unreached’. This may partially explain the way unreached people groups sometimes view Christianity, which they may see either as a threat to their sense of identity or as a means to acquire the higher social status associated with Christianity rather than their traditional religion. This may be part of the reason why so many people choose to identify with the Christian faith whilst bearing little evidence of genuine faith.

The denigration of cultures underlying the Christendom approach to conversion continues to shape the interpretation and understanding of the Christian faith and influences the caution with which Christian missionaries engage with primal cultures and worldviews. A missiology that views non-Christian and especially African cultures as inherently deficient and perhaps even demonic cannot appropriately

⁴⁴ Gillian. M. Bediako, ‘Changing the Centre of Gravity: Reflections on Christian mission from the vantage point of contemporary Africa’, *Rethinking Mission*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), 17-23 (18).

⁴⁵ Walls, *The Cross Cultural Process*, 29.

engage such cultures with the gospel. It therefore becomes difficult for Christians, whether in Western or non-Western contexts, to take indigenous cultures and religion seriously on their own terms, as nothing of value is perceived in them.

The impulse becomes to supplant existing insights rather than build upon them. Successful mission therefore entails converts rejecting their own norms and cultural practices and adopt those of others that are presumable more in line with 'Christian' ideals. This further betrays a lack of consideration of how important engagement with primal religion is for the development and continual refreshment of Christianity as a vital faith. Fundamentally, this entails an understanding of Christian faith and practice that presumes the normativity and superiority of certain cultural norms and practices that may not, upon close examination, have any intrinsic link with Christian faith.

One example of this can be seen in church models that require believers to gather at a specific place, preferably a permanent structure, at a designated time, to sing hymns and listen to a chosen leader, usually a man. The specified location should be arranged with rows of chairs or benches where people sit, all facing a central point where the leader can be observed and from which he delivers an uninterrupted speech. Only he and a few designated others are allowed to speak during this gathering. Afterwards, the group typically gives money and then returns to their homes.

What has been described is a model of church that most people take for granted, but which is entirely at odds with the lifeways of nomadic groups like the Roma or the Fulani. It is also at odds with cultures that prefer sitting on the floor, for example, or sitting in a circle, or having everyone speak when gathered in an assembly. In short, it is a model of the church that, while not wrong, assumes a certain pattern of life and, in fact, insists on it. This is but one example of how cultural assumptions unconsciously influence our understanding of proper Christian practice. There are many others as well, but the point is made.

The genuine socio-cultural transformation envisioned by Christian conversion requires the translation of the gospel message into the thought patterns, worldview, and cultural assumptions of a society rather than simply the adoption of foreign practices and forms of thought. This necessitates an in-depth involvement with the pre-existing worldviews of these cultures. It was, in fact, Christian engagement with Hellenistic culture that gave the church its earliest and most universally accepted creedal statements. Just as indigenous knowledge systems have been demonstrably useful in the formulation of Christian doctrine, the same may be expected from an open-handed approach to missions that sees the 'unreached' as fellow journeyers towards God, with important and vital insights.

Redefining Mission through a Primal Lens

Properly understood conversion, and thus mission, is about turning to Christ and being transformed and thus conformed to the image of Christ. This is a matter of faith in Jesus at both the individual and community level and has nothing to do with the language or culture of the people being converted. Every language and culture have the capacity for receiving and expressing the Christian faith, and no language or culture is privileged in this regard.

Biblically speaking, the marks of authentic faith in Christ is the presence of the Holy Spirit evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and not participation in or abstinence from certain rites, rituals, or cultural practices. Indeed, Paul explicitly says that judgment based on such matters, eating or drinking, religious festivals, etc. (Colossians 2:16), is misplaced, as they are but a shadow of the reality which is Christ.

Paul's statement is a pointer to a fundamental reality that ought to underlie mission practice; that is, he points to the shared primal consciousness that makes mission possible in the first place. It is the primal recognition of the weakness and finitude of humanity, of malevolent and benevolent spiritual powers in the universe, of the need for spiritual resources for the fulfilment of human life in wholeness, of the continuity of life after death, and of the essentially spiritual nature of the cosmos that makes people open to the gospel in the first place.⁴⁶

These insights are often encoded and expressed in the very cultural forms that mission practice straightforwardly condemn, with little effort to understand, appreciate, or convert to Christ. This condemnation stems from a view of mission and of conversion that sees it as a movement from the superior to the inferior, from the greater to the lesser. However, this perspective is misleading because it does not recognise that Christ is already at work in, among, and through the people and through the cultures to whom we are sent.

Stated differently, in theological terms there are no entirely 'unreached' people groups, for God's spirit is already among them, reaching out to them through their primal consciousness, and drawing them to himself. God has not left himself without a witness (Acts 14:17) in any context or culture, for it is the "God whom, all along, Africa has guessed at and dreamed of... who is always and wholly present for every part of his creation."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Harold Turner's six-feature analysis of primal religion, H. Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and their Study" in *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1977), 38-48.

⁴⁷ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presences amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 193.

It is due to the primal recognition that the Creator, to whom they have always given reverence, “is now revealed in the translated Scriptures to be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” that Christianity is making its greatest gains amongst those peoples who were considered the furthest removed from the Christian faith.⁴⁸

It is no wonder too that mission is, and has been, most significantly hampered by approaches that place those who are ‘sent’ (missionaries) in a position of superior knowledge, understanding, and culture to those who are intended to ‘receive’ (the unreached), with the insistence that the latter adopt the knowledge, understanding, and culture of the former. The failure of this model is evident in the abysmally low numbers of indigenous followers of Jesus, and the ongoing struggles of many African Christians to reconcile their Christian faith with their cultural identity.⁴⁹

Mission must therefore be redefined to take cognisance of the primal apprehension of the Transcendent while laying aside the presumptuousness that has historically characterised mission practice. This requires a disentanglement of the gospel from the cultural, ecclesiological, and theological trappings of Christianity that have attended it, and from the idea that the task of mission is the replacement of an inferior, presumably non-Christian culture with another. Mekdes Haddis puts it thusly: “our work in discipling the nations is about finding out how God has already revealed himself in their culture,” so that “we can unburden ourselves from the heavy weight of reaching the ‘unreached’.”⁵⁰

I do not mean to suggest an end to the mission enterprise, or that holistic salvation may be found outside of Christ, or that all religions lead to God. The scriptural witness is clear: “there is no other name given under heaven or earth whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), that is, by the name of Jesus. Yet the Scriptures also enjoin us that “all we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6) – a statement that applies to the ‘reached’ as well as the ‘unreached’ and that makes no distinction between the cultures of the two groups. It is instead the primal recognition of our common humanity, our common need for holistic salvation, and our common desire for connection with God that must take precedence.

Concluding Reflections

I return to my earlier discussion about the nature of conversion and Christianisation, set against the backdrop of the rapid growth of Christianity and contemporary efforts to reach the unreached with the gospel. Christians at the 1910 Edinburgh conference

⁴⁸ G.M. Bediako, “Old Testament Religion as Primal Substructure of Christianity: Questions and Issues,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 12, no. 1 (June 2009): 5.

⁴⁹ Richard Twiss notes, ‘after 500 years of active missionary effort, only three to five percent of the Native population are born-again Christians’. Richard Twiss, *One Church Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You* (Ventura, California: Regal, 2000), 55-56.

⁵⁰ Mekdes Haddis, *A Just Mission: Laying Down Power and Embracing Mutuality*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 63.

did not expect Africans to become adherents to Christianity in large numbers since their animism was “the very antithesis of Christian faith...childish, immature and intellectually inadequate...materialistic and concrete, irrational and incapable of conceptual thinking...naturalistic as against ethical.”⁵¹

One hundred years later, Western Christians generally do not express their views in such terms and no longer explicitly uphold the notion of Christian civilisation as was held at Edinburgh. However, the contemporary understanding of Christian conversion and mission still remains influenced by these ideas. These ideas go back to the early days of the faith when Christian identity became so thoroughly associated with Roman civilisation as to make the two indistinguishable. As I have shown, this development has had and continues to have negative consequences for Christian self-understanding, for theological development, and for missions, whether within the church or outside it.

These ideas are deeply rooted and, to a significant degree, completely intertwined with Christianity as it is usually understood in the West and even in the non-Western world. However, Christians are faced globally with changes perhaps more profound than those presented by Constantine’s conversion. Just as the West can no longer set the theological agenda for the world church and the theological issues that dominate the Western academy are increasingly recognised as the parochial concerns they truly are, so too our understanding of conversion and thus of mission needs to be renewed.

Every area of theology is ripe for renewal and expansion as new voices contribute to the conversation, including the voices of the so-called ‘unreached.’ As the situation in the global church more closely parallels that of the early church, there is great potential for a renewal of the faith that is not rooted in the economic, social, or cultural power of those sent out for mission, but one that is, perhaps, more in line with the humility of Jesus.

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⁵¹ G. M. Bediako, “Primal Religion and Christian Faith,” 12.

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