From Subjects to Instruments:  
A Post-Colonial Reflection on Mission and Ecumenics 

Raul Fernandez Calienes*

At the eve of what the West calls the third millennium we live in a complex, convoluted world, far distant from the simplicities of the past. Today, our world is an ever smaller place. The "emerging unipolar hegemonic power" of globalization brings us ever nearer to our once-far-off neighbours from around the planet. Major elements of the so-called "Second World" are collapsing around us, bringing closer together the peoples of the so-called "First," "Third," and "Fourth world." And, on this small and shrinking planet, there are more and more people: the United Nations reported that on 12 October 1999, the population of the earth reached a staggering six billion people. Perhaps more tellingly, studies show that the number of slum dwellers is "mushrooming at a current rate of 89,000,000 each year."

In the area of geo-politics, we see the establishment of the unrepresented nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), based in the Netherlands; the formation of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the European Union (EU); and the birth of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In the arena of economics, we witness the launch of common currencies like the Eurodollar, as well as the rise of large, (relatively) cohesive trading blocks such as APEC (the Asia Pacific Economic Council), the EEC (European Economic Community), and MERCOSUR (the Mercado Cono Sur, or Southern Cone Common Market, in Latin America). In the field of technology, we watch the explosion of international and transnational media, such as computers, email, the internet, the world wide web, and LEO (low-earth orbit) satellites.

In the area of ecclesial and ecumenical relations, we see drastic changes. Gone are the days of "we" in the "First World" sending missionaries to "them" in the "Third World." Gone are the days of large, powerful mission-sending bodies, with unlimited human, financial, and material resources. Indeed, gone are the days of the "receivers" of mission being the "subjects" of mission.

Today, in the Christian churches, we see formerly missionized Peoples organizing themselves around their own understandings of mission and ecumenics. This is evident in

* The Rev. Racel Fernandez-Calienes, Ph.D. (candidate), is an ordained minister with dual standing in both the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) and the United Church in Australia. Currently, he is in mission service with the United Theological College, Bangalore.
many different ways, from the formation of unique ecumenical and mission organizations to the establishment of cutting-edge ecumenical theological institutions.

How did these changes take place? What happened to the world of the missionaries, the world of the colonial masters? What happened to their outlook, their legacy?

Following are a few brief examples of how some of these changes have taken place in various regions of the world, including both historical and contemporary developments.

**Historical Missions**

In the past, the Christian Church conducted mission hand in hand with the State and, therefore, in nation after nation all around the world, missionization paralleled colonization and the path of destruction followed them both. Everywhere from Africa to the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, indigenous peoples were invaded and colonized. And, if the soldiers failed, the fail-safe weapon was deployed: the missionary. In case after case, records show that the missionary succeeded in peacefully “disarming” possible and actual resistance, and winning over Elders or other community leaders. The strategy worked beautifully. In Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean, for example, one need only look at the collusion and complicity between church and State in the abominable history of slavery. In Aotearoa and Australia, we see similar institutional Church-State “Cooperation” in the systematic dispossession and deculturalization of the Indigenous Peoples. In Asia, Church and State worked together in large-scale politico-economic subjugations of nations such as India. The same was true in the Pacific, with exploitative Church-State power over economic and trade relationships creating dependencies that last to this day. These histories are repeated over and over again all around the globe. In short, throughout the world, First Peoples were “savaged” by the so-called “civilized” societies and their brands of Christianity (Sic)

Yet, contrary to the expectations of a world greatly influenced by such absurdities as phrenology, social Darwinism, and “Doomed Race” theories Indigenous Peoples and other Peoples of colour survived and, indeed, flourished. They took the best of the Gospel message, and applied it to their own lives, and to the shock of the “North” and “West” their Christianity is flourishing.

**Contemporary Mission**

In contemporary times, mission has undergone tremendous changes. The 1960s, for example, brought about enormous upheavals in social fabric, political movement, and even ecclesiological and missiological expressions. Strategic shifts in mission that already has been taking place “in the field” began to appear in conference reports and publications. In 1961, the World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly, meeting in Nairobi, pointedly separated “Christ Culture.” For its part, the Second Vatican Council “affirmed the importance of all culture.” And, in 1969, the periodical then known as the *International Review of Missions* published a seminal editorial entitled “Dropping the S.” That piece not only marked an actual change in the name of the oldest ecumenical journal in its field, but also pointed out the important shifts away from the centuries-old biases of “north” and “west,” and toward more holistic emphases on mission as a central part of Christian witness for all Peoples.
More recently, the 1990s have seen another major shift, with the worldwide ecumenical focus on Gospel and Culture. The 1991 WCC Seventh Assembly in Canberra, for instance, had the significant participation of Indigenous Peoples of Australia, which in many ways forced the issues onto the ecumenical agenda. From the mid-1990s, the WCC promoted Gospel & Culture forums in many nations, and published a series of Gospel & Cultures pamphlets that covered many different groups and perspectives from around the world.

Noted Latin American church historian, Professor Justo L. Gonzalez, summarizes the changes.

The surprise of our generation has been that the younger churches have provided insights into the meaning of the gospel and the mission of the church that the older churches sorely needed. From Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as from ethnic minorities in North America and in other places, and from ethnic minorities in North America and in other places, and from women all over the world, have come stunning visions of the meaning of the gospel, and a number of theologians in the traditional [Western] centers of theological learning have seen the value of these insights. The dialogue that has resulted means that theology will never be the same again.

Today, the Christian Churches are affected by these changes in many different ways. Some still conduct mission by using the methods of the past: mission “to” and mission “for.” Others have learned from their mistakes, listened to the people to whom they reached out, and begun to develop mission partnerships that is, mission “with.”

In Africa, for example, Christians from different nations are cooperating ecumenically, and scholars are cooperating internationally with their African American sisters and brothers. In the Americas, Indigenous Peoples are reassessing mission histories, and re-evaluating the relationship between traditional Indigenous religions and Christianity. African Americans are challenging “classical” theologies, and introducing exciting new hermeneutical approaches and at a popular level, introducing new Afrocentric religious celebrations. Latinos/as also are attempting new approaches to theology, as well as innovative forms of theological education, and ecumenical and mission outreach. In the Caribbean, people are exploring the relationship between theology and culture.

In Aotearoa and Australia, Indigenous Peoples are beginning to writing down their oral traditions and understandings of Christian theologies and ecclesiologies. In Asia, theologians are “daring” not only to question mission from postcolonial perspectives, but also to propose contemporary links with ancient cultural traditions.

In the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians are not just proposing, but also enacting ecumenical initiatives thought impossible in the past. In the Pacific, Christians are actively renewing their links to traditional practices, and reassessing their relationship to Christianity. And, from throughout the globe, indigenous women and women of colour are meeting and publishing on women’s concerns, sexism, racism, womanist perspectives, theology, and praxis. At long last, some of the Christian Churches have left the mission of Christ to the People of Christ: Indigenous and “Two-Thirds World” Peoples “doing it for ourselves.”
Recent developments in this vein cover a wide variety of areas, from Indigenous theologies, to ecumenics education, and mission. Indigenous theologies are emerging from such ecumenical gatherings as the various Encuentros-Talleres Latinoamericanos sobre Teología India (Latin American Encounters-Workshops on America-Indian Theologies). 37

Regional ecumenical bodies include the Caribbean Conference of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia, 38 the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (Latin American Council of Churches), the Middle East Council of Churches, the Pacific Conference of Churches, and others. 39 Within regions, we are seeing the formation of distinct and more culturally appropriate ecumenical bodies at the nation-state level, such as the Te Runanga Whakawhanaunga I Nga Haahi O Aotearoa (the Maori Council of Churches), and the Aboriginal & Islander Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia. 40 Others are putting energies into regional mission conferences, such as the numerous gatherings to date of the Congreso Misionero Latinoamericano (Latin American Mission Congresses). 41

Ecumenical theological institutions and organizations include the innovative Te Whare Wananga O Te Rao Kahikatea in Aotearoa, as well as the Association of Theological Schools of South East Asia, the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, and others.

These are only a very few examples of the many that could be given. Together, all of these initiatives reveal something very new and very different.

The New Face of Mission

Church’s Ministry in the Third Millennium

The change from “subject” to “Instrument” has many profound implications for the Church’s ministry in the Third Millennium.

First, the former “Subjects” of mission now are the ones carrying out mission. Just two basic sets of statistics will illustrate the point. First, in the year 1900, there were 7.7 million non-white Indigenous Christians in the world; in 1970 there were 59.7 million (or eight time more than in 1900); in mid-1998 there were 264.8 million (or 34 times more); and, by 2025, there will be 491.5 million (or 63.8 times more). 42 Second, in 1900, there were 8.7 million church members in Africa and 59.5 million in Northern America (a ratio of 1 to 6.8); in 1970 there were 120.2 million and 169.1 million respectively (a ratio of 1 to 1.4); in mid-1998 there were 329.8 million and 223.4 million respectively (an inverted ratio of 1 to 0.68); and by 2025, there will be 703.6 million in Africa and 273 million in Northern America (a ratio of 1 to 0.39). 43 The figures do not lie: White, “First World” Christians already are a minority, and their numbers are decreasing rapidly. And, the numbers of Christians “of colour” (non-White Christians) are exploding.

Second, mission now has become a two-way path. There are Indian missionaries in the United Kingdom, South African missionaries in the Netherlands, Latin American missionaries in Germany, Korean missionaries in the U.S.A., and so on. Indeed, mission now has become a multi-directional, multi-lane highway, with very complex traffic patterns. There are Tamil-speaking Indian missionaries from Fiji in Australia, and French-speaking U.S.A. missionaries from Cuba in India, and English-speaking Korean missionaries from the U.S.A. in Brazil, and
so on. It truly can be stated that mission has become a global enterprise.

Third, the ecumenical world has been unmasked. Perhaps the clearest example was the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Canberra, Australia, in 1991. During that Assembly the indigenous Australian Peoples played a major role not only in “presence” but also on “content.” Far from being “the entertainment” via only presentations of traditional Aboriginal and Islander cultural dances and music, the Indigenous Peoples also were delegates, observers, and official visitors, and presented and family systems, and so on. Professor Anne Pattel-Gray comments that Assembly Delegates were horrified, and began to ask very serious questions. “When Australia had been a part of the ecumenical movement from the very beginning, why had Australian Delegates to ecumenical conference the world over not ever raised such issues and concerns?”

Yet, it is not only the only the Church’s ministry that is affected by the changes.

**Implications for Theological Education**

The change “from subject to instrument” also has many profound implications for theological education.

First, we must incorporate the change “from subject to instrument” in the way we teach mission and ecumenics. No longer can we deny the vast pluralities that exist in our world: spiritual, religious, social, political, economic, ideological, ethical, and so on and, therefore, no longer can we teach mission and ecumenics from racist, ethnocentric, exclusivistic, triumphalistic, or universalistic perspectives. We must acknowledge the changes, and adapt, grow, and even learn along the way.

Second, in mission and ecumenics, we must be “learners” as well as “teachers.” Noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has much to offer in this area. Conscientiza <o (conscientization) is not just an educational or academic theory to be “taught,” but a reality to be lives. It is a key to understanding the world around us, the lives we touch, the Peoples we encounter.

Third, in mission and ecumenics, we must continue to unmark the flaws of the mission era. We must not be afraid of offending “the good name and intentions” of honest, committed missionaries of the past for they would acknowledge the excesses of the era, recognize limitations of misguided policies and practice, and empathize with the terrible pain and suffering caused. We also must not remain silenced, in fear of contemporary mission funding agencies cutting off our resources because we dare question the past, for a true commitment of mission fears not truth, repentance, and justice. The words of John 8:23 remind us: “…and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”; thus, we can know, and believe, that truth can be the freedom of us all.

Rather that cowering in fear or silence, we must stand boldly on the integrity of Christ. We must be free to state our experiences both positive and negative. We must express our faith and proclaim our understanding of the Gospel message, in our own way, on our own terms. If we truly believe that we all are equal in Christ and “There is no longer male or female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:28), then we must stand together in Christ to proclaim our equality.

In mission and ecumenics, we must move from being subjects of mission and
being crucified by oppressive secular and ecclesial authorities committed to the *status quo*, to becoming instruments of mission for Christ and committed to becoming a *statusquorum* for Christ, to validate and activate the mission of Christ in our world in the next millennium.

NOTES


3. The author acknowledges that there are significant problems with using the categories of "First," "Second," "Third," and "Fourth" worlds; they are used here because reference is being made to both historical and contemporary periods, in which all of the terms have been variously celebrated as well as derided. Cf., Julian Burger, *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).


RAUL FERNANDEZ CALIENES


numerous official and unofficial protests, and almost caused a literal split in the ecumenical movement when several Orthodox Churches threatened to withdraw from membership of the WCC.


41. A sixth COMLA meeting, scheduled to take place in late 1999, will widen the focus to include more of the AmericasNand, actually, will be the first Congreso AM ricano de Misi-n.


43. Ibid.


45. Pattel-Gray, Red Ochre Theology, op.cit.