

Missiology After Bosch: Reverencing a Classic by Moving Beyond

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In a famous though possibly mythological moment in the history of theology, Albert the Great, preaching at the funeral of Thomas Aquinas in 1274, is supposed to have declared that all theology henceforth would be nothing but a footnote to his student's massive body of work. In the 1960s Vatican II is still urging that dogmatic theology be "exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas."¹ In so many ways, therefore, Albert was right: all theology after Aquinas would be inspired by him.

In another sense Albert was wrong, and especially wrong when we consider today that theology is not so much a content to be understood as a process to be entered into, a conversation in which Christians engage not only with the content of Scripture and tradition but also with the context in which they live.² No one can write a universal theology, not even Thomas Aquinas. As Dominican theologian Thomas O'Meara puts it so well: "Aquinas' thinking offers insights and principles but it does not give final systems or universal conclusions. . . . The future of his thought lies with us."³

There is and there must be real theology done after Aquinas, even though it will always be with his inspiration. Successors like Luther, Calvin, Las Casas, Barth, Gutiérrez, and Ruether have contributed more than their share from perspectives that Aquinas could never have imagined. Theology continues today to be much more than a footnote to the past, no matter how brilliant and normative that past has been.

A Footnote to Bosch?

We mention Albert's famous prediction about Aquinas's theology because we believe that, in a roughly analogous way, it might be claimed as well that, after the twentieth century, any missiology can be done only as a footnote to the work of David Bosch. Particularly in his 1991 work *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*,⁴ Bosch offered—as Leslie Newbigin wrote on the book's back cover—"a kind of *Summa Missiologica*" that in his opinion would "surely be the indispensable foundation for the teaching of missiology for many years to come."

With immense learning, great breadth, and deep theological insight, Bosch suggested that only by understanding the rich diversity of concepts and approaches to mission down through the ages can one propose a definition of mission that might be adequate for the church in the final years of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Accordingly, he first presented the biblical foundations of the church's mission and argued convincingly that, in Martin Kähler's apt phrase, mission was the "mother of theology" and that "Christianity is missionary by its very nature."⁵ Bosch then proceeded to present a sweeping history of mission through the patristic era, the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment, explaining the divergences in theology and practice by the use of Thomas Kuhn's and Hans Küng's concept of paradigms.

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Perhaps, however, the book's greatest contribution to the theology of mission is in Bosch's massive chapter 12, where he sketches out thirteen "elements of an emerging missionary paradigm," elements that represented the "state of the question" with regard to mission at the end of the twentieth century. One of his key convictions is that dialogue "is not opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility—or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses . . . ; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord." Another central point is Bosch's insistence that mission is to be the perspective from which all theology begins and toward which it is oriented.⁶

As magisterial as *Transforming Mission* is, several scholars have indicated that it is by no means the last word in missiological reflection. Norman Thomas discovered as he was preparing his companion volume of original sources that, while Bosch "provided some coverage of emerging thought in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, it is contained mostly in his chapters on contemporary paradigms of mission as justice, liberation, and witness to people of other living faiths."⁷ Otherwise, his primary dialogue was with European and North American scholars, and one looks in vain for the contribution of women scholars.⁸ In fact, we found only twenty-four bibliographical entries by Third World authors and only four by women. In addition, Bosch's history was written basically from a Western perspective. It is not what Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist call a "history of the world Christian movement,"⁹ and it does not take into account the important fact that Christianity's "dominant phase in the West, as impressive as it was, was never more than part of the story."¹⁰

Andrew Kirk reports being surprised that important topics that have become more and more central to missiological reflection (e.g., peacebuilding, ecojustice, and partnership) are not covered in Bosch's work.¹¹ In addition, Robert Schreier has identified reconciliation and globalization as crucial issues for mission today,¹² but neither one appears in Bosch's index. We should note, however, that the first of Schreier's studies on reconciliation appeared only in 1992,¹³ and the bulk of Bosch's book was certainly written before the momentous changes of 1989 and the beginning of the "new world order."

In a review of *Transforming Mission*, Bevans pointed out that Bosch gave rather short shrift to the reemergence of Catholic mission within what he calls the Enlightenment paradigm in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ This was a time of immense interest and activity in missionary work on the part of Catholics. Bosch, however, focuses much more on Protestantism at this time and its amazing commitment to mission. In a similar vein, William Burrows suggests that Bosch would have done well to include a "Catholic Inculturation Paradigm." Such a paradigm, says Burrows, "follows and modifies the Medieval Catholic Paradigm. It antedates and then runs parallel with the Protestant Reformation Paradigm. It had its own encounter with the Enlightenment."¹⁵ Far too little was said in *Transforming Mission* about the evangelization of Latin America, Africa, and Asia and about the work of people like Las Casas, Lavigerie, Valignano, Ricci, and de Rhodes.

The last flaw we will mention in Bosch's magnum opus is his neglect of Pentecostalism, particularly its incarnation in the

African Initiated (or Independent) Churches (AICs). Pentecostalism—today the fastest growing type of Christianity—finds no place in his index, and when it is mentioned, no historical context is provided. Similarly, one looks in vain for key figures of the Pentecostal movement. Given Bosch's South African roots, one is a bit surprised that the movement of AICs hardly receives a mention outside of a footnote.¹⁶

Bosch has presented us with a masterful synthesis of missiology that never existed before and that will be normative in some ways for many years to come. He was able to present a scriptural reflection that went far beyond proof-texting; his history and theology of mission is detailed, ecumenically open, and theologically rich. His thirteen paradigms have virtually set the agenda for theological and missiological reflection far into this new twenty-first century. One hears the voice of a deeply convinced Christian who has learned that mission can be done only in "bold humility." Like the theology of Thomas Aquinas, David Bosch's vision of mission will not and cannot simply be replaced. It can only be built upon and nuanced. The only way we can do missiology after Bosch is to do it under his inspiration, as new insights emerge and new situations develop.

Missiology After Bosch

In the various critiques of Bosch's work cited above, one can get a sense of some of the issues that either Bosch did not treat directly in his own writings or that have emerged in the years since the completion of *Transforming Mission* and his untimely death. Andrew Kirk's discovery of the need to include issues like peacemaking, ecology, and partnership within his missiological writing has led to seminal contributions to a missiology that is nourished by Bosch's genius but that responds to current issues. Similarly, Robert Schreiter's insistence on the centrality of reconciliation is a perspective that needs to shape missiological praxis. In *Mission in Today's World*, Donal Dorr begins with a chapter on mission as dialogue, mainly because "it provides a corrective for the very one-sided notion of mission which people took for granted in the past."¹⁷ There has been discussion, especially among Asian theologians,¹⁸ that mission is essentially dialogue. Indeed, although there is much debate today within the Catholic Church about the relationship between dialogue and proclamation, magisterial documents certainly affirm the fact that "dialogue is . . . the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission."¹⁹

A major area in which missiology has developed since *Transforming Mission* is the emergence of the "new church history."²⁰ As Karl Rahner and Walbert Buhlmann pointed out decades ago, we are now living in a "world church" where the vast majority of Christians are members coming from the "third church" of the South, or the "Two-Thirds World."²¹ David Barrett's statistical studies have basically confirmed this shift, and Philip Jenkins has predicted that by 2025 fully two-thirds of Christians will live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. One may not agree, as Peter Phan emphatically does not (nor do we), with all of Jenkins's interpretations of the implications of this epochal demographic shift, but scholars are fairly unanimous in acknowledging the accuracy of the facts.²² The "average Christian" today is female, black, and lives in a Brazilian *favela* or an African village.

Lamin Sanneh has drawn a close connection between these new Christian demographics and the emergence of a new way of conceiving and writing the history of Christianity itself. Sanneh writes that "those of us who stand today with a breathtaking view of the headwaters of the new world Christian movement

must demand fresh navigational aids. We must simply reject old assurances; reject attempts at projecting the old ideas, organization, control and direction into the future."²³ Sanneh's words appear in a volume entitled *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, which includes other important essays by mostly Third World scholars. They all call for a "new" church history, conceived as a narrative and told from many perspectives; as a narrative "of ordinary people, of worship and worshipping communities," not "of mainly synods and doctrinal development."²⁴

Another important volume of the last several years is Justo González's *Changing Shape of Church History*, in which—using the metaphors of geography—he calls for a new *cartography*, a new *topography*, and a new evaluation of *continental shifts*.²⁵ In the old church history (in many ways, Bosch's perspective), the center of the historical map was Europe. In the new church history, the map is the entire world. Second, the topography of the old church history was basically *orography* (i.e., the study of mountains)—the study of the prominent, the rich males who had influence and power. The new church history will attend to the entire terrain by listening to the voices of all people in the church, especially those on the margins: women, people of color, people involved in ordinary life. Third, more attention in church history needs to be given to hitherto neglected "continental shifts." In the past, church history was built around the conversion of Constantine, the patristic and medieval church of Europe, the Protestant Reformation, and the nineteenth century. In contrast, González believes, for example, that the second century will grow in importance because the minority status of Christianity then is similar to many situations today, and that the Reformation "will eventually take second place" to the evangelizing of Latin America in terms of the importance of events in the sixteenth century.²⁶

The scholar who may well be considered the dean of the new church history, Andrew Walls, has written eloquently of the fact that Christianity has developed through the ages, not in a triumphant procession of progress and expansion, but through a "serial process of recession and advance."²⁷ Not until around 1500, Walls writes, with the *conquista* in Spain and the end of Christianity in central Asia and Nubia, did Europe become "essentially Christian" and Christianity become "essentially European."²⁸ But now Christianity is receding in the West, with the future belonging to the non-Western world. The full story of Christianity needs to be told, not just the relatively short story of Western dominance. Also, the story of women in Christianity needs to find its rightful place.

Two prime examples of this new approach to church and mission history—both of which clearly go beyond Bosch's telling—are Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist's two-volume *History of the World Christian Movement* and Frederick Norris's *Christianity: A Short Global History*. Rather than beginning with the westward expansion of Christianity, Irvin and Sunquist's first volume begins with the church's growth in Syria and Mesopotamia and then highlights the church's early existence in India and Africa. Islam and the life of Christians under Islamic rule are treated extensively. Their second volume (in preparation) will describe Christianity in Africa, the Americas, India, and Russia before treating the Reformation. Norris's book brilliantly treats every period of church history through the lens of Christians' relationships to people of other faiths, of their dealings with the cultures in which they found themselves, and of their embodiment of core Christian values and doctrines. For Norris there is no distinction between "church history" and "mission history." Christianity

thrives as a religion that witnesses God's good news to the world; it shrivels in significance when it does not. This last point is something that Bosch would surely say; Norris, Irvin and Sunquist, however, have said it in a way that is more embracing of the *entire* church's history.

Constants in Context

Orbis Books has recently published our book *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Although we did not consciously start out to write a book in some ways comparable to Bosch's great work in length and scope, we have been alternately delighted and awed by the fact that several colleagues who have read it have made that comparison. We ourselves believe that our work does not have the depth or the breadth of *Transforming Mission*, but in many ways it does exemplify what we have reflected on in this essay. For us, Bosch's great work is our standard and starting point. But in several significant ways *Constants in Context* moves beyond Bosch. This is partly because the book was written in the tumultuous years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and partly because we were very conscious of some of the critiques of Bosch's work.

Our book developed as both a historical theology and a theological history of mission. From the outset we determined to write a history of mission that reflected the theological, cultural, and secular context of each particular period, and we wanted to finish the book with a proposal for a theology of mission that would emerge out of today's contemporary context. Central to our aim was to do missiology that was connected to systematic and historical theology, so that we might give an example of how theology might be done with a "missionary imagination."²⁹ We had no idea, however, that in the nine years that we would work on the book it would grow into such a comprehensive work of more than 500 pages.

The thesis of the book is that the church's mission must be, and in fact has been, carried out through an ongoing interaction between certain *constants*, on the one hand, and various changing and always-emerging *contexts*, on the other. By *constants*, however, we do not mean doctrines with certain contents. The constants, rather, are certain *basic questions* that, however they are articulated or answered, are always the same, the wrestling with which is always present if the church is to be true to its missionary nature. We identified six constants/questions in the history of the church in mission: Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture. By *contexts* we mean the varying cultural, historical, philosophical, and political situations wherever Christians find themselves, and in which they work to preach, serve, and witness to God's reign as those who share and continue God's mission and Jesus' ministry. Theological thinking and missionary practice always must grapple with the basic constants, and they always do so at particular times and particular places, and in particular circumstances.

To help interpret the various ways that the six constants have been interpreted across history, we chose as guides two theologians who have outlined three basic "types" or "paradigms" of theology as it has been expressed down through the centuries. In *Christian Thought Revisited*, Justo González delineated three "types" of theology: Type A, the spokesperson of which is Tertullian and which has a legalistic tendency; Type B, articulated originally by Origen and which is characterized by a concern for truth; and Type C, represented by Irenaeus of Lyons with his Antiochene roots and characterized by a concern for history.³⁰ The late Dorothee Sölle expresses somewhat the same

schema in her book *Thinking About God*, where she speaks of the "orthodox paradigm," the "liberal paradigm," and the "liberation paradigm."³¹ We end each chapter on the history of the church in mission by reflecting on which of these three types or paradigms is most operative in the various contexts presented during the period. We were convinced that a full understanding of how mission was understood and practiced in a particular time can be achieved only by reflecting on how the six questions posed by the constants were answered, and how these answers shaped theology and practice in turn.

Reflecting the insights of the "new" church history, we have marked six periods of the history of Christian mission with a rather different sets of dates. For example, our first period ends not with 313 and Constantine but with 301, the year that Armenia officially declared itself a Christian nation. Our second period ends with 907 and the fall of the Tang Dynasty in China, which reflects the fact that as Western Christianity was consolidating itself in Europe and spreading southward into Ethiopia and Nubia, the East Syrian Church was evangelizing India and China, only to have its efforts stalled in the latter country by a new dynasty unfavorable to Christianity. Moreover, our book has attempted to be as inclusive as possible regarding the expansion of the church in all parts of the world, the important contribution of women, the phenomenon of Pentecostalism and indigenous churches, and the movements of laypeople.

The last four chapters of our book move toward the proposal of a theology of mission for today under the title "prophetic dialogue." Three chapters trace three particular ways of understanding mission that have arisen since the "rebirth" of mission around the year 1975—the year after the Lausanne Covenant in evangelicalism, the year of the WCC's landmark Nairobi Assembly, and the year of the publication of Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi*. A first theology of mission goes back, admittedly, ten years earlier to the publication of Vatican II's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes*), which understands mission as participating in the very mission of the Trinity, the *missio Dei*.

Central to our aim was to do missiology that was an example of theology with a "missionary imagination."

This idea is paired primarily with official Orthodox documents on mission. A second theology of mission focuses on sharing and continuing Jesus' mission of preaching, serving, and witnessing to the reign of God. This perspective appears with particular clarity in *Evangelii nuntiandi* and the documents of conciliar Protestantism. A third theology is represented by John Paul II's *Redemptoris missio* and appears as well in documents issued by evangelicals and Pentecostals. This is a Christocentric perspective, emphasizing that Christ is the unique savior. In terms of González's typology, the first strand of theology basically reflects Type B, the second Type C, and the third Type A. While we believe that each one of these perspectives is valid in its own way, we also believe that today's context calls for a theology that synthesizes the best aspects of each.

A theology of mission for today is one that is, first of all, thoroughly dialogical, recognizing the goodness and holiness of human culture, and recognizing the presence of God in other

religious ways. Bosch was so right in speaking of mission being done in humility! But Bosch went on to say that mission should be done in *bold* humility, and this phrase led us to the phrase articulated by our own Society of the Divine Word, where mission is described as “prophetic dialogue.” Dialogue, yes, but *prophetic* dialogue.

The final chapter of our book sketches the contours of mission conceived as prophetic dialogue. Recognizing that mission is a “single but complex reality,”³² we propose that mission today might be conceived as having six discrete but interconnected elements, each of which has a dialogical as well as a prophetic dimension. Readers of Bosch will recognize many of his thirteen “emerging paradigms” among the six, but they will recognize also that we have taken into account contributions like those of Andrew Kirk and Robert Schreiter. We realize that these six elements are not the last word, but we find them the most adequate way of “unraveling” mission’s contemporary complexity.³³ They are (1) witness and proclamation; (2) liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; (3) justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; (4) interreligious dialogue; (5) inculturation; and (6) reconciliation. At the end of our reflections on each of these elements, we also reflect on how each of these elements answers the questions posed by the six constants.

Notes

1. Vatican Council II, *Optatam Totius*, Decree on Priestly Formation, 16, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbot (New York: Herder & Herder; Association Press, 1966), p. 452.
2. See Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 3–7.
3. Thomas O’Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 251–52.
4. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 9.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 489, 494.
7. Norman Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity: A Reader’s Companion to David Bosch’s Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), p. xv.
8. *Ibid.* See also Dana Robert, “American Women and the Dutch Reformed Missionary Movement, 1874–1904,” in *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch’s Work Considered*, ed. Willem Saayman and Klippiess Kritzinger (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 94–95.
9. Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001). For a survey of works that reflect this approach, see Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, “The ‘New’ Church History,” *New Theology Review* 16 (November 2004): 79–81.
10. Frederick Norris, *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2002), p. 282.
11. J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), p. 2.
12. Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).
13. Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).
14. Stephen Bevans, review of *Transforming Mission*, in *New Theology Review* 6 (February 1993): 106–8.
15. William Burrows, “A Seventh Paradigm? Catholics and Radical Inculturation,” in *Mission in Bold Humility*, ed. Saayman and Kritzinger, pp. 122, 131.
16. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 533–34 n. 21.
17. Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today’s World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 16.
18. As one example, see Peter Phan, “Christian Mission in Asia: A New Way of Being Church,” in *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia*

Have we moved beyond Bosch? Only our readers will be able to tell us, and we eagerly look forward to those conversations. We do believe, however, that if our efforts are to be a real contribution to the discipline of missiology, it must be grounded in Bosch’s classic work and do him the honor of moving his ideas into the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

If we may use the phrase, Aquinas and Bosch are the great constants in their respective disciplines. Anyone who engages in theology and missiology must wrestle with their voluminous published work, their formidable intellects, and their insatiable questioning. We live, theologize, and witness to the Gospel, however, in ever-changing and always-diverse contexts, and so, paradoxically, faithfulness to what is past always involves the possibility of change, adaptation, and posing new questions. Theology and missiology are living disciplines, and so while we honor the past, we honor it best by faithfully moving beyond it. Theology and missiology, therefore, need always to be done *after* Aquinas, and *after* Bosch. The future of their thought, to paraphrase O’Meara, lies with theologians and missiologists today.

19. Secretariat for Non-Christians, “The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission” (Pentecost, 1984), p. 29.
20. This section is based on Bevans and Schroeder, “The ‘New’ Church History.”
21. Karl Rahner, “Toward a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (December 1979): 716–27; Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977).
22. David Barrett et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002); Peter Phan, “The Next Christianity,” *America* 188 (February 3, 2003): 9–11.
23. Lamin Sanneh, “World Christianity and the New Historiography,” in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 113.
24. Gerald Pillay, “The Challenge of Teaching Church History from a Global Perspective,” in *Enlarging the Story*, ed. Shenk, p. 83.
25. Justo González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2002).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
27. Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 31.
28. Andrew Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again: The Task of Reconceiving and Re-visioning the Study of Christian History,” in *Enlarging the Story*, ed. Shenk, p. 2.
29. See Stephen Bevans, “Wisdom from the Margins: Systematic Theology and the Missionary Imagination,” in *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Fifty-sixth Annual Convention*, ed. Richard Sparks (Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 21–42.
30. Justo González, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).
31. Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).
32. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 41, in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading “Redemptoris Missio” and “Dialogue and Proclamation,”* ed. William Burrows (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 27.
33. See Stephen Bevans, “Unraveling a ‘Complex Reality’: Six Elements of Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27 (April 2003): 50–53.



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