

# AN APPLICATION OF PLURALIST THOUGHT TO THE MISSIOLOGY OF THE INDONESIAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES\*

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I start with a quotation from Paul F. Knitter's "Foreword" of the book he has edited:<sup>1</sup> "[W]e mean by pluralists those who do not regard their own religion as the one and only 'true' faith and way of 'salvation', uniquely superior to all others." The "pluralist model" which Knitter consistently defends is also the model I adopt for understanding and responding to the reality of religious diversity. I completely agree with Knitter's strongly pluralist position. I think this model will be the only plausible model for the world's religious future. I also think that Knitter is on the right track when saying that "all the religions possess the resources within their own traditions to adopt the pluralist model". Everyone, I expect, would also agree with Knitter's statement that "pluralism does not imply relativism."

Because I am in full agreement with most of Knitter's pluralist thought, in what follows is not a criticism of Knitter's thought, but an initial attempt to apply pluralist religious thought to the missiology of the Indonesian religious communities. I define missiology as a theory or a doctrine of how and what to act responsibly as a religious believer in this world in order to influence and change the world so that it can become a good place for every creature to live in now. Missiology is thus connected with ethics. I shall present ten perspectives of how to construct a missiology from a pluralist viewpoint for religious communities in the pluralistic context of the present-day Indonesia.

## 1) **The starting point: "From below" instead of "from above"**

A pluralist missiology for the present-day religious communities must start not "from above", that is, not from any absolute doctrine about God living "above" in heaven, which is accepted generally by a religious community to be applied to human life here below in this world. It must also begin not with a doctrine about the Word of God or the Scriptures which should in a normative way govern and control over the life of a religious community and the world. Neither should it commence with authoritative religious traditions passed on from one generation to the other. This deductive approach of using an old doctrine about God, Scriptures and traditions should be replaced by the inductive one. The former approach hinders any attempt of contextualizing theology; with this approach being used, what we can find is only a "diffusion", not a contextualization, of an old theological idea.<sup>2</sup> With this approach, the form of a theological message can change (for example, by using different languages), but its content is still one and the same.

But, with the inductive approach being employed, a theological reflection starts "from below", that is, from the real and factual daily life in which the poor of this world

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Religious Superiority. A Multi-Faith Exploration* (Faith Meets Faith Series) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> On diffusion which is in opposition to contextualization, see Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: 1990) 29; referred to by Martha Frederiks, "Congruency, Conflict or Dialogue: Lamin Sanneh on the Relation between Gospel and Culture" in *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 24:2 (June 1995) 123-134.

could easily be victimized and exploited.<sup>3</sup> This is a *missio humanitas* that a pluralist missiology should carry out. A pluralist missiology must start “from below”, from a critical deep engagement of a believer in the reality of life lived by the poor and oppressed of this world. This hermeneutical and missiological approach is shared universally by theologians of the Third World known as liberation theologians.<sup>4</sup> In this inductive approach, the present reality of life should be recognized and then analysed critically and socially, employing insights and models derived from social sciences. Congar, cited by Gustavo Gutiérrez, asserts, “Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history”; and Gutiérrez himself contends, “A theology which has as its points of reference only ‘truths’ which have been established once for all... can be only static and, in the long run, sterile.”<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate truth will be found only after a religious community is involved meaningfully and empathetically in the struggle of the poor and oppressed for liberation and social, economic and ecological justice. A real social context raises social questions and challenges social actions. A dialogue between concepts, meaning and values derived from social engagement and experiences and the Word of God will result in a knowledge of truth. Social action renews theological reflection, and the renewed theological reflection will affect social action; and this hermeneutical process will continue once it started. This “hermeneutical circulation” marks every attempt of doing contextual missiology. The knowledge of truth is thus socially, contextually and Scripturally constructed and celebrated. Because of its being bound to a context (that is, because of its contextuality), the truth that is found will be different from that which is previously maintained and petrified.

## 2) Christology “from below” rather than christology “from above”

Literally and originally, christology is understood as the doctrine about (Jesus) Christ (= Messiah, the Anointed One, God’s Chosen one, God’s Messenger), about who he was/is and what he has done for humanity and the world. This term however (may I suggest?) could also be generally applied to other founders of world religions: who they were/are and what they have done for humanity and the universe. A religious community could imagine and believe in a superior and otherworldly founder of its religion, a religious person of the past believed as having come down from the divine realm above to the world below through incarnation. Or they can imagine this-worldly but superior founders of their religions, founders depicted as powerful conquerors of the world. Or a religious community can imagine the founder of their religion as the only and most enlightened personage of the past. This type of christology is called christology “from above”. Any pluralist missiology can no longer employ such a triumphalistic christology. Instead of employing a christology “from above”, a pluralist missiology must promote a christology

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<sup>3</sup> Concerning the hermeneutics “from below”, see, a.o., Robert Mc Afee Brown, *Theology in A New Key: Responding to Liberation Theme* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978) 50-74. Although the socio-political, military and economic situation and condition of our contemporary world (2006) is not exactly the same as those in the Cold War era, this book of Brown, in my judgment, is still and can always be relevant to be referred to in any attempt of doing theology “from below”.

<sup>4</sup> In the book most recently published on Christian missiology, the missiological paradigm that is used and developed is the liberation theology paradigm, together with the liberal model; see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004) 61-72 [35-72] and Part 3.

<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001<sup>13</sup> [1973<sup>1</sup>]) 9.

“from below”. Christology “from below” means that the founder of a religion is depicted not as a spiritually or politically triumphalistic and superior figure of the past nor as a divine figure who defeats once for all any other founders of religions and whose sacredness exceeds that of others, but as a holy figure of the people, of the poor and the oppressed of this world. Living within the horizon of this “low” christology, a religious community, together with other ones, will involve in the socio-political struggle for the liberation of the poor and the downtrodden. Speaking to Christians, C.S. Song says, “our faith and theology must be *Jesus-oriented*”,<sup>6</sup> namely, must be the historical Jesus-oriented, the Jesus of the Jewish people-oriented, not the powerful, triumphalistic and divine Christ of Christian Orthodoxy-oriented.

### 3) Relational uniqueness instead of exclusive uniqueness

The clear logical consequence of adopting christology “from below” is that we can no longer consider the founder of any religion as the one and only unique figure of the past sent by God either to give law, peace and grace to humanity and the world, or to save the whole world and humanity through his pain and agony, or to spiritually enlighten every human being and creature. A pluralist missiology rejects the idea of exclusive uniqueness of the founder of any religion. “Exclusive distinctiveness” means that the founder of “my” religion is the one and only unique figure of the past, none is of the same rank with him/her, so that only this figure can spiritually be meaningful for the salvation and wholeness of human beings. This notion of exclusivity negates any salvific value and meaning of the founders of other religions. A pluralist missiology develops the notion of relational uniqueness<sup>7</sup>: each founder of any religion, in his/her own right, is unique, and his/her uniqueness does not eliminate the uniqueness of others; as a unique figure, he/she needs other unique figures to relate and cooperate for the unveiling of the fullness of God (or the Ultimate Reality) which cannot be grasped completely by any holy figure of the past. Paul Knitter stresses that “All the religious traditions, in varying ways, recognize that the ultimate reality or truth that is the object of their quest or discoveries is beyond the scope of complete human understanding.”<sup>8</sup> The notion of relational uniqueness thus opens the way for honest and critical on-going dialogue among religious communities. Paul F. Knitter is right when stating that “There will be no real and effective dialogue among the religions if each religion continues to make its claim of superiority!”<sup>9</sup> As the result of inter-religious dialogue, which is called by John B. Cobb as “beyond dialogue”, there will be “a mutual transformation” on the part of religious communities, in doctrines and practices.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 63.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the notion of relational uniqueness as a comprehensive and promising christological model for honest dialogue, in contrast to exclusive uniqueness, see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999<sup>10</sup> [1985<sup>1</sup>]) 171 ff. ; idem, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) 61-101 (chapters 4-5).

<sup>8</sup> See the “Foreword” of the book edited by Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*.

<sup>9</sup> Knitter intends this statement to be a complement to the famous dictum of Hans Küng: “There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions; and there will be no peace among religions without greater dialogue among them.” See Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) xv; and the “Foreword” of the book edited by Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*.

<sup>10</sup> John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward A Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 47 ff.

#### 4) **Pluralism in place of exclusivism**

The meaning of “pluralists” has been given above by citing Paul F. Knitter. By “pluralism”, I mean the opposition of exclusivism. Exclusivism considers one’s religion as the only true and valid religion for salvation and the betterment of humanity and the world, completely eliminating other religions as valid and unique ways of salvations. Pluralism, by contrast, is the idea, conviction and way of life that sees all the religions in the world as valid and unique different divine vehicles to bring to humanity divine salvations (in the plural!) --- salvations that comprise many dimensions: spiritual and material, individual and social, anthropological and ecological, liberation and enlightenment, life here-and-now and life hereafter, earth and heaven, history and eternity, scholarship and piety. As has been stated, pluralism is not relativism. In pluralism, the identity and the distinctiveness of any particular holy figure are affirmed. Without particularity and singularity, there will be no plurality and diversity, and the other way round. Religious groups that do not wish to accept pluralism, have failed to see and understand sociological realities which very clearly have shown that the world of man is plural, multicultural, heterogeneous, not singular, monolithic and homogeneous. Pluralism is the basic concept, notion and way of life of a pluralist missiology which will lead religious communities to maturity and wholeness both in their interrelationship and in their impact on the life of human beings the world over.

#### 5) **The empowerment of the people as opposed to proselytization**

Pluralist missiology rejects religious proselytization as the target of missionary enterprise of each religious community. Witnessing with confidence to what one believes and the practice of proselytizing are two different things. “Non-believers”, and the poor and the downtrodden as “non-persons”,<sup>11</sup> are to be seen not as human beings to be converted to new religion. Non-believers, namely, people of other faiths and agnostics, are to be seen as partners in dialogue, not as the objects of proselytization. To be honest, we should say that the poor and the oppressed, under certain circumstances, can easily be converted because of their poor and inhuman condition of life. However, everyone who wishes to take part in the missionary undertaking based on a pluralist point of view must not try programmatically to convert the poor and the oppressed. Instead, they must be seen as human beings trusted by God to the hands of the believers to be empowered, so that they can in due course have self-confidence to build and design their own future and to change their own past. Believers are to be prepared to anticipate to see signs of the presence of God among the poor and the downtrodden, even before their own arrival in the midst of them.

#### 6) **The growth of life quality rather than quantity accretion**

Because in the missiology constructed on pluralism proselytization is no longer the aim of interreligious encounter, the quantity accretion is not the prime target of any missiological activity. Internal and external religious activities of any religious community then must lead not to a quantity development, but to the growth of life quality of its members. If life quality grows and develops on the part of the believers, they then will be able to see people of other faiths not as the targets of their proselytizing propaganda, but as fellow-believers who have the basic rights to live according to their own conviction and without interference and annoyance from people of different persuasion trying to

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<sup>11</sup> Concerning “non-believers” and “non-persons”, see Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in A New Key*, 62-64.

convert them. If a religious community increases quantitatively, this increase is only the by-product of the growth of life quality on the part of the community's members.

#### 7) **“Civil society” politics instead of “partisan” politics**

According to the missiology based on pluralism, the area where religious communities meet socially is the civil society of a nation in which they live. In civil society, they together will promote justice and civil rights for all and will struggle for the betterment of human life and the liberation of the poor from their inhuman and degrading captivity. If religious communities should involve in politics, the politics they should adopt is therefore civil society politics, as opposed to partisan politics by which they promote only their own interest and struggle only for their own life and future disregarding any other religious community. The religious community's call to be critical of worldly power and nationalism are thus to be placed in a dialectical and critical relationship.<sup>12</sup>

#### 8) **Orthopraxis in place of orthodoxy**

Pluralism as an idea, a concept and a way of life has questioned many tenets of religious orthodoxy, for example the orthodox claim that there is only one true religion in the world, that there is only one unique God's messenger sent to the world. It is true that many religious believers would wish to lay down their own life in order to defend, guard and protect the orthodoxy of their own religions. For religious warriors, orthodoxy matters. For pluralists, however, there are many names, many God's messengers, many sons of God, many enlightened holy figures, through all of whom God spoke to the world and wishes to save humanity and the whole world. New horizons in christology (see point 2 above) and soteriology (= the doctrine of salvation) contended by pluralists have been made possible to emerge only after they involve in the real life of human beings of other faiths. For them, social engagement is the first step in doing theology or missiology, the first step to be trodden if one wants to eventually find truth. Social engagement gives birth to a new understanding of old doctrines or renews or even replaces them. The renewed understanding leads one to the renewed social action. This circular process of movement from action to reflection, and from reflection to action again, is called praxis. For pluralists, orthopraxis is thus more important than orthodoxy. Robert McAfee Brown states, “[T]here is no true theology without engagement; theology must both *issue from* engagement and *lead to* renewed engagement.”<sup>13</sup>

#### 9) **Realized eschatology as opposed to apocalyptic eschatology**

One of the concerns that stimulates dialogue among people of different faiths is the social one, that is, the social, economic and political problems of the modern world. In dialogues, religious communities are encouraged not only to exchange their religious ideas and put them under scrutiny, but also to motivate them to involve in the struggle to cope with the problems of the modern world. Because the pluralist model treats all the religions and their adherents as equal, their social vision and program are thus to be seen in the same way. Together they must concentrate on efforts to bring the world into harmony with their common religious and ethical ideals which are to be realized here and now. Consequently, the missiology based on a pluralist vision has to encourage its proponents to embrace realized eschatology rather than apocalyptic eschatology.

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<sup>12</sup> A number of books on the relationship between religions in Indonesia and the state has been published; one concerning the encounter between Christianity in Indonesia and nationalism is Zakaria J. Ngelow's book, *Kekristenan dan Nasionalisme: Perjumpaan Umat Kristen dengan Pergerakan Nasional Indonesia 1900-1950* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> McAfee Brown, *Theology in A New Key*, 70.

Realized eschatology is concerned with the task of religious communities to bring down heaven to earth now, not in the future, by their scientific knowledge as well as by their social and political efforts. In contrast to this ethical eschatology, apocalyptic eschatology teaches men to inactively wait for God's intervention in the future to put the present chaotic condition of human life in order.

#### 10) **Self-reliance in matters such as theology, human resources and fund**

To do a pluralist theology is to do something outside the borders of Orthodoxy; this means, to do something for which autonomy in matters such as theology, human resources and fund is an essential prerequisite. In the context of the Christian churches, Orthodoxy very often means the domination of old Western theology, Western theologians, and Western fund over those of non-Western origins. That is why to do something outside Orthodoxy means in the first place to achieve this threefold independence. In the context of the churches in Indonesia, this threefold self-reliance has long been the matters for the accomplishment of which the Indonesian churches must struggle very hard again and again.<sup>14</sup> Other religious communities in Indonesia, I think, ought to do the same. The time is now coming to do theology "with a third-eye perspective", namely, the perspective of Asia, of Indonesia. Choan-Seng Song has said, "Theology in Asia can no longer be a repetition of what we have inherited."<sup>15</sup> McAfee Brown also says the same thing, "[A] mere repetition of the past will not suffice."<sup>16</sup> Song even says that the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century was carried out in accordance with the German spirit, not in accordance with Asian or Indonesian spirit. He states firmly, "Those who are not endowed with German eyes should not be prevented from seeing Christ differently. They must train themselves to see Christ through Chinese eyes, Japanese eyes, Asian eyes, African eyes, Latin American eyes."<sup>17</sup> In relation to other holy figures of the past (e.g., Moses, Gautama Buddha, the Prophet Muhammad, etc), other religious communities in Indonesia, I think, should do the same thing and should take the same orientation. ♦

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<sup>14</sup> On this threefold autonomy the churches in Indonesia have to achieve, see the documents of the CCI (Communion of the Churches in Indonesia), *Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja. Keputusan Sidang Raya XII PGI, Jayapura 21-30 Oktober 1994* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1996) 85-99.

<sup>15</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Believing Heart*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> McAfee Brown, *Theology in A New Key*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1980) 11.