

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 67:3/4

July/October 2003

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The Challenge of Confessing and Teaching the Trinitarian Faith in the Context of Religious Pluralism

A. R. Victor Raj

Michael O. was raised in Kenya during his formative years. Growing up in that part of Africa, Michael had little hands-on encounter with the Christian faith. He knew that Christians were followers of Jesus Christ, and they worshiped on Sundays in a church. Michael graduated from college and held a job with the department of education in his home state. On his way to and from work he would regularly walk past Christian churches; and in the community and in his place of work he would have the opportunity to interact with Christian friends and neighbors. One Sunday morning, on his own, Michael boldly stepped into a church and sat through the worship service. He stayed on and attended the adult Bible class as well. There was enough in this new religion that fascinated Michael. He took adult instruction lessons and was baptized and confirmed in the Christian faith.

To be sure, the Christian education Michael received from the pastor helped him answer many questions he had about the new faith. Yet, questions concerning the Trinity of the Christian religion kept lurking in his mind, for most of which no one ever provided a satisfactory answer. "How can God be One, in three persons, and yet not three gods?" Besides, "How could Christians begin and end their worship in the Name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and still claim that they are not worshipping three different gods?" Disturbing as they were, these questions, nevertheless, did not deter Michael from joining the church and believing what the church was teaching. All religions have within them their own mystery, Michael surmised, and mysteries are believed rather than interpreted, he reasoned. He would sing with Christendom, and with no uncompromising assurance, "Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name you, Though in essence only one; Undivided God we claim you And, adoring, bend the knee While we own the mystery."¹ Michael would later study at a seminary and become a minister in the church. Soon it would be his turn to help other new Christians who would be wrestling with questions such as the ones he had, while he was still exploring the chemistry of the Christian Trinity.

¹*Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), #171, stanza 5.

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Some twenty-five years ago in my hometown in Trivandrum, South India, I went shopping for an Ashoka brand name razor blade. The shop I stopped by did not carry the brand I wanted; instead, the shopkeeper offered me the Aloka brand. Aloka surely was Ashoka's look-alike, in form and in shape including its orange-white-and-green, tri-color jacket. But I wanted Ashoka, not Aloka, I insisted, to which the shop owner responded, "Both are the same, sir." I said, "No, they may be *similar*, but they definitely are not the *same!*"²

My task in this essay is not so much to explain what actually constitutes the Trinity in Christian theology, but to engage the challenges of confessing and teaching the trinitarian faith in the context of religious pluralism. I will begin with an appraisal of what the very sounding of the Christian trinitarian dogma communicates to those *outside* the christocentric trinitarian monotheistic faith, particularly as we find them all around us in a plural-cultural and poly-religious world, and explore some possibilities of addressing that challenge with a view to witnessing the Christian Gospel in such contexts.³ This paper will more reflect some of these challenges than it will propose ways to confront them.

For the present purposes I will proceed with a working definition that "theology" is the truth about God, and "confessing" is proclaiming a theological truth as witness or testimony.⁴ In this vein, a Christian theologian engages the task of proclaiming and affirming the theological truth of the Trinity as witness to those outside the Christian faith, underscoring that his task is to present to his new audience in the least complicated and most understandable way the weightier matters of faith, such as the Trinity, never making matters of faith either simplistic or unduly sophisticated. Arguably, a teacher and confessor of faith may be certain and confident of what he confesses and sets out to teach. But that does not mean that his audience hears

²As is well known, in recent years several words and phrases, especially from the English language, have become commonplace in other languages and easily understood without interpretation in other cultures. For example, in most cultures English words like "blade," "paper," "bulb," "car," "bus," etc., are understood without translations in ordinary conversation. In many instances, people have preferred the English original to their equivalents in the mother tongue for common usage.

³I owe the phrase "christocentric trinitarian monotheistic" to Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 28. In the context of Christianity encountering the world's religions, Braaten says "Christian faith is like language: you either learn to speak Christianese or you don't, and no rational natural theology about God and religion will help you do it" (19).

⁴Commenting on the purpose of Christian theology, Robert Kolb writes, "Theology exists as a discipline in order to interpret God's word in the Scripture for the changing human scene. . . . For the theological task demands listening to voices from every field of human endeavor in order to bring God's Word to all the corners of His world" (*Speaking the Gospel Today*, 2nd edition [St. Louis: Concordia, 1994], 8).

and understands what he says exactly in the way he has intended his message to be understood. In other words, while communicating the faith, the burden of imprinting upon the hearts and minds of the listeners what is being taught and confessed in its truth and totality rests heavily on the speaker rather than on the listener. What is confessed must therefore become clear and meaningful to those among whom it is confessed so that those who are being taught may become as competent as their teacher in what is being taught. As a result, the receptor will have imprinted in his heart and mind the *same* message that proceeded from the confessor's heart and mind, and not just a *similar* message.

What does *what* we confess mean for those among *whom* we confess? It is the design of the Triune God that He chose to communicate with His people particularly by way of speaking and writing. Oral communication is a distinguishing characteristic of the God whom Christians believe in, teach, and confess. The God of Christians speaks as He creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Verbalizing a message involves language. Words in any language are formed in specific contexts, and their meaning is best understood with reference to the context in which they are formed and used. And, "meaning is the cornerstone of any linguistic system and of any communicative act."⁵ Communicating the faith entails discourse. In order for discourse to accomplish its desired end, the speaker (narrator) selects (and utters) words in a certain sequence with the intent that such utterances impart to the hearer the specific meaning (message) the speaker has assumed or attached to the words he has selected and utilized. Meanings of words are, as it were, a two-edged sword. Meaning signifies that which is intended by the speaker, as well as what is conveyed to the listener in a given context.⁶

When making a speech, the burden is on the speaker to make clear what he speaks the best way he can to his audience. The speaker may mean well when he makes the speech intently and intelligently; however, that does not mean that the listener understands the speech the way the speaker had intended it. This is true even in situations where both the speaker and the listener have inherited a common linguistic background and share a common worldview.

⁵James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean*, 2nd edition (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 120.

⁶Voelz points out that the meaning of a word cannot be derived from an historical investigation of its earlier usage, and therefore language must be studied *synchronically* (at a cross section in time) not *diachronically* (developmentally through time). Therefore "when we communicate, we talk/write about persons, places, things, ideas, etc. (= referents), and we characterize them in certain ways; that is, we ascribe to them the features of the thoughts (= conceptual signifieds) which they brought to our mind and which now, in turn, the words (= signifiers) of our communication are to bring to the minds of those who receive them." See Voelz, *What Does This Mean*, Chapter 4, particularly, the diagram on Communications Model on 95.

Needless to say, insurmountable difficulties in communication arise in this connection if the speaker and the listener embrace completely different perspectives and associate completely different meanings with the same word.

The heart speaks when faith is confessed. Communicating the faith entails the impartation of faith from one heart (of the speaker) to another heart (of the listener). When the heart speaks, the inner being of the person, that is, his conscience, speaks. In this sense confessing the faith is transmitting what one person has embraced in his conscience to the conscience of another. And conscience speaks the mother tongue.⁷

The doctrine of the Trinity is the heart and core of the Christian faith. It is an expression of faith that flows from the heart of every Christian believer, one that encapsulates in one simple but pregnant word the one God in three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Every Christian believes in his heart and confesses with his lips this mystery. To be sure, the word Trinity had been in the making for almost three centuries before it became a commonplace usage in the Christian church, although the faith it signifies has been believed, taught, and confessed through the ages wherever and whenever the Gospel has been proclaimed, throughout the world.⁸ Thus, each individual Christian of any age, any place, and any culture who confesses this faith does so with the entire Christendom synchronically.

Christians teach and confess the Trinity, even in this age of pluralism, for the purpose of communicating the Gospel of salvation God brought about for the whole world uniquely in His Son Jesus Christ, witnessed by the Spirit. For

⁷Towe the phrase "*Das Gewissen spricht die Muttersprache*" to Dr. Won Yong Ji, professor emeritus of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. Dr. Ji is a first generation Korean immigrant to the United States, and the statement in German is a Ji original. I had doubted with him if this dictum might not be going back to either Freitag or Heidegger. Ji said that while that may be true in part (conceptually speaking), the line as it reads above is of Ji's own coinage, one along with eleven others like it he cherishes as his own legacy. He further explained that language is relational, and even if others in previous generations may have said the same thing, it can still be considered a Ji original. After all, universal truths such as the above cannot just belong to one person or one generation. There is no way of knowing if others before Heidegger may have said the same thing.

⁸In his book on *Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), David Carpenter compares the writings of the fifth century (A. D. 450–500) Hindu Vedic philosopher Bhartrhari with those of St. Bonaventure. According to Carpenter, for Bonaventure the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of God and the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity is "the mystery of life itself." He further writes, "the entire universe, together with its history, is conceived as a revelation of the Trinity, and this revelation, in all its breadth and variety, is grounded in the three Persons of the Trinity" (92).

it is God's desire that all people must be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. The Trinity we confess is not as Father alone, Son alone, and Holy Spirit alone, but one God alone, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The uniqueness of the Christian understanding of the trinitarian God hinges on the fact that the transcendent God becomes immanent to humans through His actions. Thus the mystery of the trinitarian God unfolds in His manifold actions as He creates, redeems, and calls people to faith and keeps them in the faith. The very God who gives all men breath and life and everything else redeems His fallen creature from sin and its consequences and recreates him for a new life. The God who creates everything by His word (speech) also chooses to put on human flesh (incarnate) in order to redeem a fallen world. And He sends His Spirit to call everyone unto Himself by faith.

Teaching and confessing trinitarian faith in an age of pluralism, and in the context of the plurality of world religions is perhaps the greatest scandal of the Christian religion. If on the one hand, the religion of Islam hinges on Allah's transcendence, on the other hand, a religion like Hinduism emphasizes both the transcendence and the immanence of its deity by interpreting it as both transcendent and immanent. The Hindu deity is the ultimate reality, the wholly other, and the unfathomable mystery without shape or form. Brahman in the absolute is not so much a person but an IT, and therefore non-personal. At the same time, IT manifests in a myriad ways including in human, animal, and inanimate forms.

As an inclusive religion, meant for all people at their different levels of knowledge, assent, and faith in God, Hinduism has argued the meaning of worshipping 330 million gods (and goddesses) and, at the same time, converging these gods, humanity, and the rest of the universe into one cosmic, monistic whole. As the Indian philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observed, it would be unfair to take the toys away from the children. Children learn ideas and values by playing with toys. Philosophical Hinduism proposes that as people mature in their thinking they may be able to ponder the mysteries of life and the abstract nature of God without external means. The plurality of persons and the fragmented understanding of the ultimate will diminish as the human mind grows and matures into the full awareness and comprehension of the absolute, supreme consciousness (silence) or abstractness (pure science) of the ultimate reality.

In sharp contradistinction to the Christian way of the fallen human race being brought to an unending fellowship with a personal God by God's own initiative, Hinduism, at best, proposes the merging of the individual soul (self) into the eternal (cosmic) soul. In the end, fusion with the ultimate, and not fellowship with God, is what Hinduism offers.

Hinduism has been described as a "welter of beliefs," and as such it

includes practically every type of religious dogma that may be met with [in] the numerous religious traditions of the world; likewise, on the practical side it has tolerated, if not encouraged, practically every form of propitiation and worship of God and gods, and almost every style of meditation and spiritual discipline, from fetish-worship to *yoga* or mystic contemplation that may have prevailed in any age of man's history, and in any part of this planet.⁹

Perhaps "welter" is also a fitting adjective that encapsulates the amorphous nature of the Hindu understanding of God. In its long history of interpreting the ultimate and its relationship with the created order, Hinduism has employed phrases such as dualism, non-dualism, monism, and qualified non-dualism.¹⁰ There are three kinds of reality within the Ultimate Reality, that is, god, soul, and matter. According to this way of thinking, Brahman carries a plurality within itself. This plurality allows room for building relationships. Followers of the Hindu way find their way to connect with the Ultimate through excelling in their knowledge, good works, and devotion to the deities.

Confessing and teaching the Trinity must serve a soteriological function, as the trinitarian God desires the salvation of all human creatures and their coming to the knowledge of the Truth. As the vast majority of the world's religions do not either understand or interpret salvation the way Christianity does, it is practically impossible to establish a common ground among religions in matters of salvation when Christians enter into dialogue with people of other faiths. Nevertheless, many Christians who are directly involved in the pluralism project recognize that "salvation has a distinctively Christian content: transformation in Christ with a view to ultimate communion with the triune God. Even where other religious communities employ the term 'salvation,' their conceptions of the aim of life differ from one another and from that espoused by Christian communities."¹¹

⁹N. K. Devaraja, *Hinduism and the Modern Age* (Bombay: Current Book House, 1975), ix.

¹⁰These are but a few of the philosophical constructs Hindu thinkers, particularly the Vedanta philosophers since the seventh century A. D., have developed in order to deal with the relationship between the seen and the unseen. Underlying all these interpretations is the claim that the empirical world is a "phenomenal" world, never existing, never non-existing! If this way of thinking alludes to the passing nature of everything, it also affirms the eternity of everything. Both atoms and souls are indestructible.

¹¹J. A. DiNoia, "Christian Universalism: The Nonexclusive Particularity of Salvation in Christ," in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 39. DiNoia further observes that pluralists make salvation an all-encompassing designation for the variety of aims that religious traditions espouse and commend.

Ominously, some of the most popular verbiage in inter-faith dialogue, such as inclusivism and pluralism, is the creation primarily of the late twentieth-century Christian theological enterprise as Christian theologians themselves have initiated such projects.¹² Nevertheless, trinitarian Christians enter such conversation with the ultimate goal of publicly confessing the salvific significance of the person and work of the One God in three persons, but not three gods. Hinduism in its philosophical form may be abstract, but Hindus for all practical purposes are spiritual people, craving to build a "saving" relationship with the ultimate, which they call "God."¹³ Hinduism may be polytheistic, but Hindus can also relate to One God who creates, sustains, and preserves them. This "unknown god" may be a point of contact with which trinitarian Christians might find their way into the Hindu mind in order to bring to them the saving message of the trinitarian God. A pluralism project that does not project the one and unique salvific act of God in Christ for all human creatures might as well be called a "polytheism" project, because it also allows different definitions for God and for salvation.¹⁴

The religion of Islam does emphasize the transcendence of Allah. For Muslims there is no God in existence other than Allah. Allah is one person, a strict unity, who is the creator of the universe and the sovereign of all. This does not mean, however, that Muslims "remain silent on the topic of God . . . because God is a revealing God Who has spoken in His Word. It is also practically impossible [to remain silent about God] because the subject of God must be taught to children and explained to the world."¹⁵

The ninety-nine names Islam ascribes to Allah may be called his attributes, that is, the distinctives that religion has attributed to Allah. No doubt, Allah is the Wholly Other in Islam. If the deity of Islam has relational qualities, they are attributed to his power to create, to his majesty, glory, rulership, providence, and mercy. Neither in his essence, nor in terms of his attributes,

¹²"There is a range of definitions of pluralism and inclusivism, and the relation between the two obviously depends on these definitions. . . . inclusivism is the view that sees truth and salvation in other religious traditions but understand these as manifestations of the truth and salvation that are known normatively in one's own tradition. Pluralism is the point of view that holds all the great religious traditions to be roughly equal in regard to truth and salvation; furthermore, pluralism maintains that no one religion is superior to or normative for others" (Owen C. Thomas, "Religious Plurality and Contemporary Philosophy: A Critical Survey," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 [1994]: 197).

¹³Philosophical difference among religions aside, at the practical level any religion of work-righteousness may be classified under the broad umbrella term Hinduism. Indeed Buddhism began as a reform movement within Hinduism.

¹⁴For example see S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

¹⁵Rolland E. Miller, *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 41.

does the god of Islam redeem. There is no atonement in Islam other than a sincere confession of sin and repentance by the sinner. Forgiveness of sin is obtained by Allah's grace without a mediator. Islam is a religion for those who strive for salvation on their own. Jesus for Muslims is a very great prophet, second only to the last and final prophet Muhammad. Jesus is not the Son of God (God cannot have sons). Jesus certainly was not divine, nor was He crucified.¹⁶

It has been said that the fascination of Islam is its simplicity. It is a religion of community and equality with no specific priestly hierarchy. The brotherhood of Islam signifies that those who submit to the will of Allah are brothers (and sisters) and their racial and national origins do not stand in the way of partaking in the Islamic brotherhood. Most Muslims might acknowledge that they behave badly, but that does not mean that their religion is bad.

Muslims claim that the Christian church, and the church fathers have tampered with the Christian Scripture. As a creation of the early Christian church, the Christian Bible contains more than what Jesus said and did. Furthermore, even in the very Christian Scripture, Muslims do not find the Jesus that Christians teach and confess. The general response from Muslims to any claim on the Christian uniqueness may be summarized in Hesham El-Essawy's words: "I believe it is the Christian Creed, not the teachings of Jesus, that stands between Christians and Muslims. I understand from the reading of the Gospels only that Jesus is Unitarian, not Trinitarian."¹⁷ El-Essawy further writes:

With the Muslim view of God as strictly Unitarian, I think it demeans Jesus to think of him as a sacrificial lamb and it demeans God to think of him as requiring what is essentially the pagan practice of human sacrifice in order to be satisfied to the degree of showing mercy and compassion. It is abhorrent to the concept of Justice, be it human or divine, to take one person's life for the sin of another. Yet, these rather confused and ungodly concepts are exactly what the Church promoted for many centuries, as I understand its teachings.¹⁸

The defenders of Islam have left no loopholes for their critics to attack them. Nevertheless, the Muslim faithful boldly come to the pluralist religious roundtable with their own unique claims. At least here Muslims are amicably

¹⁶What is said here has specific reference to the following Suras of the Qur'an: 15: 26-27; 6:61-62; 4:157; 9:30; 5:17, 75; 4:157; 75:12.

¹⁷Hesham El-Essawy, "An Islamic View of Spirituality," *Interfaith Spirituality: The Way Supplement* 78 (Autumn 1993): 74.

¹⁸El-Essawy, "Islamic View," 74f.

disposed to Christians, assuming that they are of a monotheistic faith, although distorted, but in close proximity to the ultimate religion that is Islam. "For to God, there are only two religions: belief and unbelief. God calls the Jews, Christians and the Muslims, The People of the Book, not of the books. The Book of God is one. The people of God are one. To God, the religion of a true Jew or Christian is Islam."¹⁹

Any discussion of the trinitarian God is dependent on our understanding of who He is and what He does. If in the practically polytheistic Hinduism and in the philosophically Unitarian Islam (representing two strands of the world's major religions) there are no strong parallels for the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, contemporary western popular, as well as philosophical, thinking on God also does not make the authentic confession of the biblical Trinity either feasible or practicable. In a word, the American civic religion is itself a representation of a shared commitment to pluralism and inclusivism. What is more, perhaps with a view to creating a common ground for all religions around the table, the West has of late shifted its God-talk from a personal God to a God Principle, The Thing as Such, The Energy, The Truth, The Force, The Ultimate Concern, Wholly Other, Ground of Being, The Ultimate Reality; and in the context of inter-faith dialogue "The Most Holy One."

Making theology of any religion subservient to the pluralist and inclusivist agenda produces a strange, interesting, but ultimately inchoate outcome whose credibility founders on the question of authority. As Charles Arand observes, ". . . to believe that God blesses us and does good things is not necessarily a Christian distinctive. . . . The critical question centers on the identity of God. . . ."²⁰ The New Testament witnesses testify to the identity of God in Jesus Christ as His ultimate revelation. The God of the Bible is a God who creates, saves, and sanctifies. Bearing witness to that God is nothing less than witnessing the Trinity. Thus, in Christian witnessing, and in the Christian engagement with the world of religious pluralism, it is never too late or never too early to introduce the doctrine of the Trinity.

Confessing the Trinity in our world today is more caught than taught, as it is a gift given to human creatures by God the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian Christians therefore are begotten, not made, begotten of water and the Holy Spirit. Confessing the Trinity is expressing in words the mystery of God revealed uniquely and exclusively in Christ, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Teach and confessing Christ, if done right, will result in the confession of the trinitarian God.

¹⁹El-Essawy, "Islamic View," 75.

²⁰Charles P. Arand, *That I may be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 164.

In our world of pluralism and competing ideologies perhaps Paul Tillich's observation that "the questions arising out of man's estrangement are answered by the doctrine of Christ and the symbols applied to it" might prove useful for a dialogue with people of other faiths. The proposition that Christ is the Reconciler of the world unto God is certainly the message that soothes the ears of estranged ones. For Tillich the Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – speaks directly to the problem of man's finitude, estrangement and ambiguities of life, as he writes, "The questions arising out of man's finitude are answered by the doctrine of God and the symbols used in it. The questions arising out of man's estrangement are answered by the doctrine of Christ and the symbols applied to it. The questions arising out of the ambiguities of life are answered by the doctrine of the Spirit and its symbols."²¹

Confessing the Trinity begins with confessing Christ as Lord and Savior. The Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, is the Christ who by His death and resurrection earned for humanity the forgiveness of sins and salvation from death. As much as the intent of confessing the Trinity is the salvation of souls, such confession must begin with the introduction of that person of the Trinity who bears the name "Savior." If the immediate goal of confessing the Trinity is conversion, then it may be that its ultimate goal is communion and fellowship with the Triune God.²²

Witnessing the Gospel in the Twenty-first century

The primary witnesses of the New Testament church begin and end with the specific, uniform statement of the Gospel of salvation. The four Gospels portray Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as calling all people to repentance and faith and promising them the forgiveness of sin and life forever. Just as Jesus came to the world to "save [His] people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21), He commissioned His followers to call all people everywhere to repentance and to announce to them Him and the salvation He offers in His name. Peter or Paul, James or John, the New Testament writers began and concluded their discourses also as witnesses to what Jesus said and did as His life and message were binding on the salvation of all people. If a book is judged by its cover, the cover must then be a true representation of the book's detailed content. If the Christian church is founded on the specific mission statement

²¹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 3:286.

²²At least as a starting point, it is to be noted that elements of Christian faith have similarity with the personal theistic faith of south Indian bhakti traditions and the Bodhisatva figures of Mahayana Buddhism. Although Islam rejects the deity of Christ, His intercessory role between the Transcendent God and the estranged humanity may be a point those Muslims who are the least assured of their eternity with God will consider worth exploring.

of the One who has sent her in mission, then by her very nature the church must strive to accomplish that mission for which her Lord has commissioned her.

No doubt, throughout much of her millennia-long celebrated history, the church has had her highs and lows in striving to be faithful to her Founder's mission on earth. As part of that undertaking from her inception, the church has identified constantly with the poor and pleaded the cause of the destitute and the underprivileged. She has triggered the transformation of many cultures and has also conformed to the patterns of other cultures. For centuries in certain parts of the world, Christianity had enjoyed a sense of triumphalism as it continued to be the religion of royalties, kingdoms, and world empires. The Christian church has acted as an arm of colonialism and fostered imperialism, slavery, and oppression. Nevertheless, in other parts of the world subjected constantly to tyranny, persecution, and dictatorship, the church has raised her decisive voice against such evils in favor of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the dehumanized. She has been the front-runner in lifting much of the human race from illiteracy, ill health, and slavery. If she has cultivated critical thinking in the human mind, she has also been subjected to the scrutiny and critical judgment of the enlightened mind. All her life the church has lived a life of paradox.

From age to age, and from generation to generation, Christian Mission has been subjected to redefinition. By rethinking her mission to the world, the church has also reformulated the implementation of that mission in the world. In all such attempts, nevertheless, an interpretation of either the very person of Jesus or of what He said or did has been the basis from which these new definitions have emerged. Thus, for those who understand Jesus as the harbinger of justice and peace, He has become the Liberator. In the opinion of others who envision human equality and social harmony as the goal of Christian mission, Jesus has been made the bringer of the new humanity. Yet others have seen in Jesus and in His mission a revolutionary model that empowers human beings to fight against discrimination, inequality, and violation of human rights. Jesus and His mission have in fact become all things to all people.

Although traditionally the words "mission" and "missionary" have been associated with that activity the Christian church does in the name of Jesus Christ, Christians no longer claim copyright over these terms or their cognates. Whether signifying the proclamation of an unique message, offering directions for spiritual living, inspiring followers for effectively engaging in the human struggle for peace and justice, or making a difference in people's lives, mission-related words are a part of the thesaurus of most of today's religious, secular, and social institutions. In this context, it is only appropriate

that Christians, particularly Lutheran Christians, look at *their mission* in the world in the twenty-first century and examine what should be distinctively unique about it. Further, we need to consider whether there are certain aspects of the Christian mission only Lutherans can accomplish, or at least bring about with a sense of personal conviction and commitment, while we partner with others in doing *everything* we can for various peoples, communities, and nations.

What Bishop Lesslie Newbigin outlined early in the last decade as a triangular pattern of tension in mission, I believe, may serve as a basis for our consideration of the challenges and opportunities the twenty-first century poses for the common task. Of teaching and confessing the Christian faith Newbigin described this triangle consisting of (1) the pull of traditional culture with its normally powerful religious components, (2) the pull of modernization involving science, technology and politics brought about by the enlightenment, and (3) the pull of the call to faithful discipleship of Jesus Christ.²³

In a Lutheran approach to mission, the first and third "pulls" (that is, the pull of traditional culture and the pull of the call to faithful discipleship) may be taken together. The "powerful religious component" of Lutheranism has a direct bearing on the "call to faithful discipleship of Jesus Christ." The Lutheran tradition of letting Scripture serve its normative function in doing theology applies also to a Lutheran missiology. With that affirmation, the other *solas* of the Lutheran Reformation (Christ, grace, and faith) also become normative when Lutherans engage in mission in any century and in any culture. Such a position superimposes nothing on the mission agenda the Lord of the church set for Himself and for His mission. His mission was to *call* people to repentance, and to *gather* them around the greatest treasure of the church, i.e., the Gospel. Luther proposed the same scheme in the first and sixty-second of his Ninety-five Theses: (1) "Our Lord and master Jesus Christ, (when he said, *poenitentiam agite*) willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance," and (62) "The true treasure of the church is the Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God." Lutheran involvement in mission therefore cannot be considered holistic without openly sharing with the world the Church's *true treasure*.

When thinking mission in the twenty-first century, it is good to recall that historians have called the nineteenth century the "great mission century." The great mission century thought so greatly of the Great Commission that several Christian movements envisioned the evangelization of the whole world a task

²³Lesslie Newbigin, preface to *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Philips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

that would be accomplished fully in their lifetime. But, as common knowledge has it, that noble and sincere wish of our mothers and fathers in the faith still remains unfulfilled, although by means of their diligence and earnestness the aroma of the Gospel has filled much of our world today.

To be sure, throughout the twentieth century, particularly during the past fifty years, Christian mission has assumed a much broader definition. Perhaps the second “pull” of the Newbigin triangle (of modernization involving science, technology, and politics) has played a major role in the development of this new, inclusive, definition of mission. *Definition* calls for a definitive statement on a term or concept and hence sets boundaries to it. Since mission—yes Christian mission—today covers a vast expanse of topics and thus defies definition, we would rather describe it than define it. I will highlight therefore three of the many details of a description of mission. These may be viewed as challenges as well as opportunities.

(1) **Globalization:** Christianity is the first major world religion that from the very beginning forged ahead with a structured and intensive global agenda for mission in an ongoing manner. It is true that the religion of Buddhism that preceded Christianity by a few hundred years moved from its home base India toward China and to the far East as a missionary enterprise. Nevertheless, Christianity’s movement from Palestine to the West has been significant particularly because the West soon became the base of operation for this new religion that was first conceived in the [middle] East. Rooted already in the new home [away from home], the Christian religion saturated Western culture with a new set of vocabulary, values, and perspectives on life. Her new home provided for her a Western appearance and built for her a Western edifice to the extent that the uninformed non-westerner still finds it extremely difficult to see the distinction between Christianity and Western culture. If numbers prove a point, historically the vast majority of Christian missionaries were also raised, trained, and sent out to the rest of the world from the West.

However, the axis of Christianity has been shifting gradually from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, and South America. In fact, today, there are more Lutherans in Africa alone than in all of North America. While many in the West are becoming more and more inquisitive about discovering their pre-Christian roots, others from the traditionally Christian Western households, for the sake of discovering their own true and authentic selfhood, are turning to the East and to eastern religions as a better alternative to Christianity. Conversely, in many non-western countries masses are converting to Christianity in spite of the persecution and hardship inflicted on them by their own countrymen in the name of religion. If many nations these days are closing the door against Christian missionaries, native

Christians of these lands are devising indigenous ways to witness the Gospel to their friends and neighbors.

(2) **The missionary scheme of other world religions:** The ideal of a global village, as well as the idea of a melting pot, shall both be things of the past, perhaps in our own lifetime. If transportation and communication technology have drawn humans the world over ever closer, we are also seeing that more and more of us are striving hard to secure and safeguard our own private space. This attitude is ever more true in the religious sphere. Religions travel with their followers. They find their home wherever their devotees find their new homes. When new homes are built in a neighborhood there is every indication that the new residents have come to stay. Those who stay practice and propagate publicly the religion that came with them.

Furthermore, all religions are becoming conscious of their own identity *in* and mission *to* the whole world. In fact, like Christians, others also operate their own independent mission societies and devise their own missionary methods to share with the world their mission statement. Their missionary methods parallel mostly Christianity's, including websites that invite new believers to punch a key and say a commitment prayer. Other traditions – those that began as ritualistic and pedagogic – proudly trace their roots in history and make every effort at preserving and trumpeting them. Juxtaposed to the Lutheran separation of church and state, many religious traditions today operate with a political agenda, with the declared goal of stabilizing their own territorial identity, while offering another platform for raising national consciousness.

(3) **The Scandal of Particularity:** Theological explorations in syncretism and pluralism aside, Lutherans must learn to live with the "stigma" of what is sometimes called the "scandal of particularity." If the answer to the pluralist question, *No Other Name?* is an inclusivist *No Other Gospel!*, then there must be something special about that particular name, a name to which the New Testament witnesses have claimed a unique salvific component! Against that background of the Christian Gospel, and drawing full confidence from the Reformation *solus*, Lutherans must insist that there is no other Gospel and no other Name, the name by which God calls all people to salvation.

It is now thirty-five years since a landmark book on *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* was first presented to the students of world religions, with the assumption that Christ is at work salvifically in Hinduism. Although this work may have renewed the Christians' interest in studying other world religions, three decades hence there is no trace of any confession from Hindus or Buddhists on *The Unknown Krishna* or *The Unknown Buddha* of Christianity. If this is true, is it not also true that much of what Christians do with the good intention of discovering common ground and building healthy

relationships with other religions does not elicit the desired welcome from other religions themselves?

Lutherans face the challenges from the new multi-religious and therefore multi-scriptural context in lieu of their call to being faithful to the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation. As much as we purpose to share with the world what we believe to be the *true treasure*, the “hermeneutic” on which we encounter others cannot be confrontational but relational. We will do well to balance the biblical propositions that God has surely not left Himself without a witness (Rom. 1:20) and that He desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). We will balance our bold proclamation of the cross by which God draws all people to Himself with our strong presence in the world by doing good and offering lives especially for people who walk the edge of the poverty line, suffer injustice, and are subjected to oppression.

Boldly we must deal with global realities in the context of the global nature of the Gospel. Whether enacted by Jesus, stated by Paul, or brought to light by Luther, justification by faith was not meant to be a doctrine of a particular denomination, but one on which any person’s relationship with God stands or falls. When thinking mission, we must ascend constantly from the general Christian “God loves every one” mode to the specific “God saves everyone on account of the *grace* He lavished on all in Christ” mode. For that purpose, we will also benefit amply by balancing our study of Romans and Galatians with an equally careful study of 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. A broken world torn between cultures, personal preferences, and conflicts of interest will appreciate a word of reconciliation inasmuch as that word is rooted in the grace of God that saves all from all sins and all their consequences. Sharing that word will still be the mission of the community of faith gathered around the crucified and risen Christ in whom God has reconciled the whole world unto Himself. In Him all things cohere; in Him and for Him and through Him also His mission endures.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a formula of faith. A formula has behind it a history of formation. Formulae in any discipline result from a series of debates, experimentation, and reformulation, necessitated by the challenge of having to answer questions of relevance in that discipline. Once formed, such formulae assume specific, unique, and commonly agreed upon definitions that become normative for all subsequent discourses on the topic. The trinitarian formula is already at work wherever the Gospel of the Kingdom is proclaimed. Those who are drawn to the Kingdom by the hearing of the proclaimed word are so drawn by the power of the Holy Spirit who creates in them faith in their Savior Jesus Christ. And God desires all human creatures to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.