

Theological Agendas for Engaging Asia's Religious Contexts: Issues for Further Research

Tan Kang San

Romans 8 as a Framework for Engaging Asia's Religious Contexts

What is the nature and role of the church in Asia with regards to participating in the mission of God? In a multi-religious society, can we develop a biblical approach which does not compromise our faith in Jesus and yet enable Asian Christians to bear witness to Jesus in the midst of competing faiths? This paper seeks to explore a biblical framework for a Christian view of the global challenge faced by the church in Asia. It has implications for Christians in other regions as globalisation, migration and internet introduce new opportunities and challenges of interfaith witness and increasing intersection between different faiths especially in global cities. I will organize my paper along a tripartite framework that is focused on three inter-related questions: (i) What is the biblical view of creation and people of different faiths (Rom. 8:17-22)? (ii) In what ways would the incarnational calling of the church as she joins in the "groaning of creation" challenge our thinking on the role of the church in Asia's as a witnessing community (Rom. 8:23-25)? And finally, (iii) how would such an understanding of mission fit and fulfil the overarching work of the Holy Spirit in restoring and renewing the whole creation, particularly in the context of responding to the challenges of alternative living faiths (Rom. 8:26-28)?

The term "Asia" is problematic because there is no cultural or historical unity; instead one encounters significant regional and sub-regional differences between the nation states in Asia. Asia, as a political entity of over 50 nations, is the most populous continent with over 60% of the world's population. In 2013, the population of Asia is estimated at 4.299 billion, with China and India having over a billion people in each country. Regional studies can be a useful sociological framework for missiological enquiries because it recognises the interconnected and evolving contemporary developments of migration, trade and politics in each of the specific Asian regional

blocks such as South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Association of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Tensions, nevertheless exist when missiologists engage in cultural interpretation of scripture, theological traditions and contextual analysis, as it reflects not only the complex nature of missiology as an interdisciplinary study, but also the difficulty in arriving at some integrated theological conclusions or responses.

The Christian church in Asia must develop its own theological self understanding of a being witnessing community in the midst of major Asian religions. Even in this aspect, bearing witness in Pakistan poses different challenges from Malaysia, even though both are responding to issues in an Islamic context. Therefore, generalization (in the form of theological agendas) offered in this paper must be contextualized and further adapted to each community, each country and each context. The history, culture, and economic realities between countries are vastly different which makes it difficult to speak of a common “Asian reality” or common theological agendas. Despite these diversities, the church seeks to articulate theological analysis and responses due to our common faith, derived from a certain Evangelical convictions (eg., mission convictions as derived from Lausanne Covenant), as well as common features such as “the multiple Asian religious world.” Despite globalization and growing secularism, the three major religious traditions of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism continue to shape Asian identities and represent unique context for Christian mission. Therefore, within the limitations of this paper, I have chosen to reflect theologically on my pilgrimage growing up as an Evangelical believer in the context of Asian religiosity and using Romans 8 as a biblical framework to suggest potential theological agendas for Christian witness in Asia.

Demons, Ghost and Radical Discipleship?

When I was converted from Buddhism to Christianity as a teenager, my pastor counselled me to burn all amulets and Buddhist scriptures, and forbade me from any participation in temple activities. We were taught that demons reside in these temples, and in order to grow spiritually, a good Christian must make a radical break from past religious traditions. We should avoid walking along roads which have temples and pray for spiritual covering each time we inadvertently pass through them. Whenever we do

mission among people of other religions, our approach is to bind the evil spirits in these religions that have blinded them from seeing the truths of Christ. By contrast, having lived and taught in Britain for seven years, I also encountered Western Christians who no longer believe in the ontological reality of demons. For them, demons do not exist ontologically, but are products of human imaginations and superstitions. As scientific knowledge progresses, my friends claimed that Asian societies will find less and less need for reliance on the spirits. For example, demon possessions, which are common occurrences in Asia and Africa, rarely happen in the West. Between these two polarities of prevalent demonic activity on the one hand and the dismissal of the existence of demons on the other, we have the two dominant views that regards the different religions of the world as either vehicles of goodness and salvations or domains of the demonic. If we consider other religions as equal paths for salvation, then we relate to members of other faiths differently than when we consider them as vehicles of falsehood, or worse, as demonic domains. What then is the role of demons within non-Christian religions?

This paper is not an attempt at a detailed study on the identity, nature and concept of demons in biblical or Christian theology; rather it seeks to explore how the tendency to demonise people of other faiths could be overcome. In the Old Testament, the use of the term “demon” is complicated as there does not seem to be a single term in biblical Hebrew which can be consistently translated as “demon.”¹ In addition, the English term is used to refer to two very different concepts: evil spirits on the one hand, and neutral “anonymous gods” or spirits (*daimon*) on the other; both of these have been applied by scholars to Old Testament usages. Examples of more neutral usages include: natural phenomena as demons, plagues as *deber* in Hos. 13:14; Hab. 3:5, Ps. 91:6, or beings associated with the underworld, such as *mawet* as death in Isa. 28:15, 18; Jer. 9:20; or *debar beliya'al* (a thing of belial) in Ps. 41:9, and *melek bal-lahot* (King of Terrors) in Job 18:14.

In the New Testament, “demons are portrayed as powerful enemies of humankind, who are effectively removed (exorcized) by the power of God at work in Jesus.”² It is sufficient for our purpose to state that the New Testament acknowledges the presence and activity of demons, and presents demonic activities as opposing the ministry of Jesus (e.g., Mark 3:23-27; Luke 11:17-22). Jesus’ overcoming the power of demons is seen as demonstrative of the power and presence of the kingdom of God

invading into this world order. Jesus' authority over demons is passed on to his disciples, but the ensuing conflict with demonic activities continues between the forces of darkness and the sons of the kingdom of God. While such wars and conflicts against demons are clearly portrayed in the Bible, this paper seeks to argue that the uncritical equation of demons with other religions, or the tendency to simply demonize Islam, Buddhism and other religions could be problematic. In missiological study, there is also the vital need to study the use and understanding of "demons" in other religious contexts. For example, a study of "ghosts, spirits, and divination" in Chinese religions would be vital if we are to undertake a meaningful comparison and analysis of Christian participation in religious rituals associated with Chinese folk festivals.

Religion is not a one-dimensional evil manifestation of demons; it is rather "a set of institutionalised rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines."³ There are three criteria for classification of a religion: (1) a belief in some Ultimate Reality, whether God or eternal truth that transcends the here and now; (2) religious practices directed toward understanding or communicating with this ultimate reality; and (3) a community of believers who join together in pursuing this ultimate reality. Following popular nomenclature, the word "religion" is used in this paper as referring particularly to major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. When Christians demonise other religions, it becomes problematic for meaningful dialogue because the religious person is more than a religious being, and interfaith engagement is not purely a religious interaction. As Edward Said suggests:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. . . . No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections be-

tween things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the 'other echoes [that] inhabit the garden'.⁴

Beyond the question of the role of demons, this paper has a wider missiological purpose, and draws insights from the theology of religion. I concur with missiologists such as David Bosch, Eric Sharpe, Gerhard Anderson, Terry Muck and Harold Netland who have all identified the challenge of religions as one of the most important missiological issues or problems to be explored. "No issue in missiology is more important, more difficult, more controversial, or more divisive for the days ahead than the theology of religions" (Gerhard Anderson); "the encounter between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and the Christian evaluation of other religions, acts as it were as an epitome of mission theology" (Eric Sharpe); and "the *theologia religionum* [or "theology of religions"]... is the epitome of mission theology" (David Bosch).⁵ David Bosch considers the articulation of a theology of religions as "the largest unresolved problem of the Christian church".⁶ Netland asserts,

One of the more urgent sets of issues confronting the global Church today concerns the question of gospel and culture. Responsible theology in the decades ahead cannot afford to ignore the complex and highly controversial debates over contextualization and religious pluralism. Furthermore, given the global nature of the Church, serious discussion of these issues must include Biblical scholars and theologians from Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as western scholars.⁷

Therefore, our focus on the role of demons within non-Christian religions as a missionary problem is not merely a relational and community issue, but has a deeper missiological root and purpose. *For over two hundred years, the Evangelical approach of trying to replace other religions with Christianity has not been successful.* Compared to Christian expansion in Europe, North America, Latin America, and Southern Africa, Evangelical missions in Asia does not have a good record of conversion. Writers such as Terry and Frances Muck argue that Evangelical missions have a long history of ineffectiveness.⁸ Another indicator that the challenge of replacing religions is a far more complicated issue is the fact that the *percentage of the world's population that is Christian has changed little over the last hundred years*, declining slightly from 34.8% in 1910 to 33.2% in 2010. Unless there is a significant change in global mission understanding, Todd Johnson and colleagues projected that the world will likely

be 33.8% Christian by 2025, and 35% by 2050.⁹ Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism have existed for millennia in Asia and would undoubtedly continue to command allegiance. Could it be that what the church needs to do is to look for new ways of being a witnessing church? The confrontation, demonising and replacement modes have not worked in the past. It would soon become clear that our concern is not so much for the numerical growth of the church alone. Rather, we seek to share in God's concern that all humankind will enter into a reconciled relationship with him, which is part and parcel of God's design and purpose in human history.

Co-Heirs with Christ of the Whole Creation

In Western enlightenment thinking, we find certain teachings that Satan does not exist, and that all religions are good and are equal paths to salvations.¹⁰ To pluralists who believe that all religions offer valid paths to salvation, Christians should not seek to witness about Christ and his actions against demonic forces of darkness. Western theologies tend to deconstruct beliefs that demons are real and are active today. On the other hand, we often hear fundamentalist Christians in Asia equating non-Christian religions primarily as demonic systems of beliefs, with the result that they are unable to engage dialogically with the real struggles and religious aspirations of their non-Christian neighbours. Training in evangelism has by and large been focused on binding territorial spirits rather than on listening skills, studying the scriptures of the different faiths and learning how to bring the gospel to impact core religious beliefs.

Against the polarities of the world as totally good or evil, the apostle Paul encourages a more nuanced biblical view in Romans 8 that the whole creation is

- good but incomplete (v 19);
- good but at present in bondage (v 20);
- good but awaiting liberation (v 21); and
- good but pregnant with the future world (v 22).

The metaphor for hope is “a groaning creation” that is pregnant and in labour pain, and about to give birth to a new order of existence and a new way of being human. It is out of the current decaying creation, with all the failures of human cultures and religious traditions, that a new heaven and new earth will be recreated. We highlight

two implications. First, instead of viewing the “outside” world’s systems, cultures and religions as something to be eventually wiped out, the Pauline hope is for the final restoration within these systems of the world when Jesus Christ will be acknowledged as Lord of “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). Paul’s metaphor of the *groaning creation* challenges the church as to ask: what *really* is our view of the vast human cultures and civilisations outside the church that we seek to serve? If we view the religious systems of the world outside the church, especially non-Christian religions and ideologies as primarily demonic, then our mission goal is to replace and wipe out these competing worldviews. If the religions and cultures of this world are regarded as evil, then world evangelization becomes a programme to defeat other competing religions. In the process, our discipleship becomes more focused on being set apart from the world’s cultures rather than on transformation from within those cultures.

Second, under the erroneous assumption that we can separate what is religious from what is cultural, we build Christianity from outside culture, without any reference to local and indigenous materials, resulting in the gospel being viewed as foreign and of little connection with the majority of non-Christians. We fail to understand that “culture” is a universal reality in which every human being takes part and to which every person contributes. We also fail to recognize that for the gospel to transform human cultures, it has to be done subversively from within cultural and religious contexts. The apostle Paul invites us in Romans 8 to appreciate the vision of a God working “inside out” from within his creation. In response, our initial pedagogical assumptions must include at the least learning and journeying together with people of different faiths in a *mutual process*, so “that mission is not just a matter of *doing things* for people. It is first of all a matter of *being* with people, of *listening* and *sharing* with them.”¹¹

Raimon Panikkar, a Roman Catholic theologian speaks of cosmotheandric reality, whereby the world, the divine, and human realities all belong to interpenetrable and irreducible realities.¹² These three realities are not one (monism); nor are they separate (dualism). The earth is not inferior to humanity even though we are created as the “crown of God’s creation.” By the same token, we are inseparably related to Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists at a deeper ontological level as people sharing in a common humanity, rather than just as representatives of different religions. Therefore,

our hopes and longings must not be separated from the hopes and longings of this current earth with all its inhabitants, including religious ones.¹³

Religions as Complex Systems of Identity and Interaction

Religions are complex systems of identity, and our inter-religious engagements must not only take into account “spiritual” conversations but must also be cognisant of the deeper historical, social and religious milieu of the persons involved in such inter-religious engagements. A few years ago, a Singaporean pastor made some disparaging remarks about Buddhism during a sermon, which turned viral and caused deep hurt among Buddhist communities. Here is an example of a failure to take into account the multi-religious cultural milieu of Singapore.

Using the Malaysian context, I would like to offer a case illustration on the complexity of inter-religious living to underline the inter-related and complex engagements required in mission thinking. Malaysia is a multi-religious society where the racial composition of major ethnic groups in 2010 include 60.3% Malays, 22.9% Chinese, 7.1% Indian and 9.7% of tribal and other races.¹⁴ Because religion largely coincides with ethnicity, interreligious relations are greatly affected by individual racial perceptions of the other ethnic groups. This sharp division is most pronounced when it comes to the relationship between the Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia. Relations among the races become more complicated when they function not only as a sociological or religious category, but also as “a tool of the state for resource allocation and political control.”¹⁵ Within such a framework, the Malaysian government implemented the New Economic policy (NEP), a social engineering programme that was enacted to achieve the twin goals of eradicating poverty and restructuring society. In a word, the Malay-Muslim identity was “materially reinforced.”

In addition, political parties draw their support along ethnic constituents, making communalism a key political issue since the independence of the country. Though the Chinese and Indians are part of a political alliance in the government, the Malays are in control of the political process. The conjunction of ethnicity and political power (from where economic interests are inevitably linked) deeply polarized not only the issue of race, but also the religious commitments of the people in Malaysia. If a Malay were to decide to convert to another religion, that person would lose not only his or her ethnic identity, but also his or her social, political and economic privileges.

The complex relationship outlined above, where ethnicity functions as a tool for resource allocation and political alliances, was further complicated when Islam was enshrined as the state religion in the Malayan Constitution of 1957. In return for the recognition of Malay's special rights and Islam's special position, the immigrant communities were accepted as citizens with equal rights. Furthermore, two legal strictures that have been used to restrict the freedom of religion are the federal Law and the state Law. Many state laws clearly restrict the freedom to propagate religion. For example, section 156 (2) of the Malaccan legislation states,

Any person, whether or not he professes the Muslim religion, who propagates any religious doctrine or belief other than the religious doctrine or belief of the Muslim religion among persons professing the Muslim religion shall be guilty of an offense cognizable by a Civil Court and punishable with imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or a fine not exceeding Three Thousand dollars.¹⁶

Muslim sensitivities are now legalized in such a way that any attempt to share the Christian faith with Muslims can result in imprisonment without trial. Various legislations were introduced not only to define the Muslim's religious responsibility but also to curtail directly any activity among non-Muslims perceived as challenging the superior position of Islam vis-à-vis other religions. Malaysians are reminded often of the Twelfth Schedule of the Federal Constitution, whereby a Malay is defined as someone who (i) habitually speaks the Malay language, (ii) *professes the Muslim religion*, and (iii) conforms to Malay customs. Malay ethnic identity becomes inseparable with its social, religious, material and legal categories, thereby creating an extreme polarization between the Malays and non-Malays in the country. That division also unites the non-Malays as a category, with Christianity strongly associated with the non-Malay grouping. In a society of extreme pluralism and polarization, the Malaysian Church, as a reconciling community, has the responsibility to seek creative ways to bring about spiritual renewal and racial reconciliation.

It could be argued that the Malaysian case study demonstrates similar complexities in other Asian countries whenever religion is strongly identified with particular ethnic groups. A reductionist view of religions as primarily demonic domains severely undermines the church's ability to engage with the complexity of religions.

Theological Agendas for the Incarnational Church in a Multireligious World? (Romans 8:23-25)

The apostle Paul recommends an incarnational approach toward non-Christian religions. While recognising that there are elements within other religions that contradict Christian beliefs or are even demonic, we must not miss those sources of wisdom and grace that are found in the different religions. The challenge for the church in multi-religious contexts is to first study the beliefs of different faiths on their own terms. Beyond academic study, it requires the willingness to get rid of our prejudices and to discern the religious aspirations of people of different faiths. We hear God's voice not merely from above but through mission engagements with people from below, identifying with their struggles and their sincere search for God. To do this, the church must constantly be engaging with the specifics of religious soils and aspirations. Global listening can only be authentic as we listen to the ground, primarily through the voices of people from different faith traditions. We learn from the Red Indian chief who puts his head to the ground to listen for the sound of horses coming or where fresh living waters are in the soil. Listening is a far more complex process because it involves our willingness to be rid of our prejudices and filters, to be rebuked and challenged, and to genuinely welcome painful changes.

Secondly, we need also to listen to God through serious theological reflection on the developments in Evangelical mission understanding. Mission begins with God for God has remained committed to his creation from the beginning of time. God *is* mission among people of all kinds of religions. At his deepest being and self, God hears the call of the Minaret, Temple chants, Buddhist prayers as human aspirations for relationship with the divine. The Christian message is that Jesus is the human face of God welcoming all true religious aspirations even as he asserts at the commencement of his ministry and kingdom work: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). However, and rightly so, Evangelicals are reminded that Jesus' message of love did not win him the acclaims of the world but brought him to the cross instead. His death is the beginning of the mission of the disciples and the church. The mission of God begets the church, whose birth was marked by the groaning of the cross. The church suffers persecution as she

witnesses to the lifestyle of the cross in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; 11:18). Mission calls the church into being, such that it is not so much that the church has a mission, but mission has a church. Generally, our understanding of God's mission has been moving along the following significant theological agendas:

- Witness and proclamation of the Gospel are central and foundational to Christian mission. What has changed is a greater awareness of the complexity and significance of inter-religious dialogue. The proclamation of the gospel needs to take place, not in a vacuum, but in contexts of genuine and respectful relationship, demanding full engagement with the whole person.
- From an understanding of church-centred mission to the mission of the Triune God, resulting in a mission-centred church. A mission-centred church is not focused on herself but on building bridges across religious divides.
- From a focus on evangelism and personal discipleship to a fuller, re-conception of “Five Marks of Mission” (witness and proclamation, challenging unjust structures, creation care, interfaith and reconciliation/peace building), whereby the whole church brings the whole gospel to the whole world. The role of the church in interfaith relations moves from pure evangelism and apologetics to learning how to relate genuinely with Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist neighbours in all their many dimensions of faith within concrete social realities.
- From a theology of obedience and duty to a theology of worship, joy, co-being and co-journeying with God, whereby mission is regarded as sharing the best of Christianity and the best of Jesus in a spirit of “giving and receiving” all good gifts that come from above, and rejecting falsehoods which contradict biblical truths and teachings.
- From metaphors of missionaries as pearl sellers to treasure gatherers, because the Holy Spirit has preceded the missionary, and has been actively revealing God's truth in all cultures, including some of the religious teachings in different religions. For instance, Christians can learn from the wisdom found in

Confucianism and Taoism while being careful to compare them with biblical truths.

- From viewing religion purely in terms of its essence of truths to a greater appreciation of religions as a complex interplay of social and functional systems which reflects aspirations from human civilisations, divine and demonic sources.

In order to engage with the religious other adequately, Asian Christians need a theological paradigm that is comprehensive and capable of engaging with the different dimensions of religions. Such openness to other religions however must not compromise the authority of the Christian Gospel and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In his lecture, “The Authority of the Gospel and Interreligious Dialogue,” Peter Beyerhaus introduces *a tripolar view of religions*.¹⁷ A *monopolar* view of religions presupposes religions as originating from either a human, divine, or a demonic source. Thus we have atheists and secularists who deny that God exists, and view religion as a purely human psychological creation. A *bipolar* view of religions espouses the origin of religions as coming from both divine and human sources. Religions exist throughout the world because there is a *divine* source. The Christian believes that there is a creator God who created humanity in his image and puts conscience as an operating principle in all human civilisations. Despite some clear differences between Christianity and non-Christian religions, we could enter into meaningful dialogue with our non-Christian neighbours because we acknowledge that there are glimpses of truths within these religions which originate from God’s own general revelation and the Holy Spirit’s working through ancient philosophies and wisdom. A *tripolar* view, however, espouses that there are demonic sources which manipulate religions to manifest dark and extreme evil. Christians believe that Satan is real and is actively turning religions from their civilising aspirations into falsehood, and influencing them against God. Even the history of Christianity itself contains those periods of crusades, imperialism and Christendom which one could only infer as not coming from a divine source of goodness. Likewise, there are demonic sources working in different religions giving rise to religious violence, inter-religious wars, or false worship. However, a simplistic view which treats all religions as purely demonic or purely good is unbiblical, and it has limited the Christian’s ability to engage with the complexity of religions.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit to the Church in Mission (Romans 8:26-27)

Over the last few decades, missiologists have come to recognize the ontological relatedness between creation and church, between people of other faiths and Christians, and that the invitation to union with God is rooted in the very *being* of God himself.

In other words, *God's very nature* is to be in dialogue: Holy Mystery (“Father”), Son and Spirit in eternal stance of openness and receiving, a total giving and accepting, spilling over into creation and calling creation back into communion with Godself. Relationship, communion and dialogue, therefore, is the ultimate goal of all existence.¹⁸

Evangelical mission is a mission engaging with the powers. The real enemy is Satan, not the church; neither is it the state nor resistant people groups, and certainly not Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. Our priority to be with the poor, the lost and the least of the Kingdom of Heaven means that there is a commitment to suffer and identify with the struggles of the majority of religious people living in poverty or deep within certain religious identities. The way for meaningful inter-religious engagement is not to be self-centred and focused primarily on the church. More than drawing attention to the failure to understand the complex role of non-Christian religions, this paper argues that the tendency of demonising religions limits our ability to engage with truths found in different religious systems which may not be incompatible with Christian faiths. These truths within Islam or Confucianism are rich resources for contextual witness and the development of authentic Asian Christian theology. Theologically, Christians could and need to be encouraged into scholarly study of these truths because we recognise that the Holy Spirit is actively at work throughout human cultures, which include some aspects within the different religious faiths. We need to be clear that truths in other religious traditions do not bring salvation, which Christians believe is found in Jesus Christ alone. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of Groaning, the Spirit of Holiness. God has not left himself without a witness outside the church. The Holy Spirit often works within other religious structures through dreams, or general revelations or human consciences and aspirations. Although such glimpses of truths of the Holy Spirit outside Christianity may not be considered salvific, Christians could ap-

proach people of different faiths with humility to learn from different religious teachings. In reality, there would be aspects of other religious traditions that we need to judge as unbiblical; and there would be other aspects that we can discern as compatible with biblical teachings.

What about our view of God? We have assumed for too long that we know God, and we know what the word “God” means. This passage holds a startling picture of God as creator AND as one who is at work to bring healing and hope within the world, who in the midst of that suffers and dies, and rises again as the beginning of the new creation. Paul’s picture of God is very much a Trinitarian picture of God the Father and Son and Spirit at work together. So, God IS mission; not that God HAS a mission, because God is infinitely and intimately in relation with the world in all her sufferings and religious aspirations. As we think about this God, we must repent from our superficiality in conducting our religious activity without really allowing the true God to embrace us.

The task of the church, in summary, is to live through this process of prayer, of longing and the groaning of authentic living among neighbours of many faiths, and then to seek to create the structures, the environment, the ministries through which the church can truly be the Church between the Temple and the Mosque. The church must believe not only that our inarticulate groanings are brought up to God, but also in the God who enters into our groaning. When we approach people of different faiths, we are in a sense on holy ground because God has gone ahead of us in revealing truths, in convicting both Christians as well as non-Christians to worship the true God, maker of heaven and earth. We have then a God transcendent beyond creation, who is not only living and active deep within creation, but also, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, at work now within the hearts of men and women, regardless of their religions, calling them to be worshippers of the true God. The church then comes to share in the pattern of the life and death and resurrection of her Lord Jesus Christ through incarnational witness. When those in the church look out on the darkness and ask why they have been abandoned, at that very moment they share the agony of the Son, so that the complaint of God’s absence becomes paradoxically God presence. And the Creator, referred to in Romans 8:27 as the heart searcher, knows and hears because the Holy Spirit is interceding for God’s people in mission and for

all religious seekers of the truth that is found ultimately through Jesus Christ, Saviour and Lord of the whole world.

Lausanne Movement and the Future of Interfaith Engagement

A subtle but significant shift in evangelical recognition took place at the Cape Town 2010 Lausanne Congress when evangelicals gave tacit recognition to forms of dual belonging:

We recognize that all followers of Christ experience the challenge of *dual-belonging*: we are Christians who belong to Jesus, and we find ourselves within some culture to which we belong by birth or circumstance (and such cultural belonging may be static or fluid and changing through life). The challenge is that while we cannot escape the fact of such dual-belonging, we are called to single covenantal loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ (Lausanne Theology Working Group 2010; italics mine).

For the lay evangelical Christian, this may not sound controversial, most likely because they apply the idea of “dual belonging” to *cultural* rather than *religious* matters. They treat these two categories of religion and culture as watertight systems which can be easily separated. But the Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement *The Whole World* observes correctly that,

the distinction between religion and culture is far less clear than often portrayed. For all religions exist within cultures, permeating and shaping them. For that reason religions also share in the radical ambiguity of all human cultures” (Lausanne Theology Working Group 2010).

My central thesis is that for authentic Asian Christian theology to fully mature, dual-belonging is not an option, but rather a necessary evangelical imperative for those from Asian religious traditions. I suggest that the last frontier of mission is the meeting of religions, and the great theological agenda for Asian Christianity is to develop a robust evangelical theology of religions that enable Christians to dialogue, witness and demonstrate the whole gospel. I conclude that the time has come, and is possibly

long overdue, for representative evangelical theologians from non-Christian religious backgrounds to explore, experiment with, and construct theological self-understandings that participate in the task of bringing every religious belief system under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If evangelicals are to see any significant progress in the heartlands of Asian religious communities, then mission as interfaith engagement, albeit difficult and controversial, must become a vital and serious mission agenda.

(5,923 words)

Endnotes

¹ Joanne K. Kuemmerlin-McClean, "Demons: Old Testament," in *The Anchor-Yale Bible Dictionary*, 2139; electronic edition of Logos Bible Software.

² David George Reese, "Demons: New Testament," in *The Anchor-Yale Bible Dictionary*, 2140; electronic edition of Logos Bible Software.

³ For a discussion on the definition of a religion, see Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1981), 15-25.

⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 336.

⁵ Gerhard Anderson, "Theology of religions and missiology," in Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds. *The Good News Of The Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 200-208; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991); Eric Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-religious Dialogue," in J. Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1994), 77-95.

⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 476-477.

⁷ Harold Netland's review of Kwok Pui-Lan's *Discovering the Bible in the Non Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); see:

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199809/ai_n8819152/] [accessed 1st November, 2011].

⁸ See Frances and Terry Muck, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

⁹ David Barrett, George Kurian and Todd Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ For example, Paul Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹¹ Donald Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 16.

¹² Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 149-152.

¹³ Longing of the sons of God is a co-longing of the groaning creation. In the same way, the eager expectations of creation are tied to the revealing of the church.

¹⁴ "Demographic Transition in Malaysia," Department of Statistics Division, Malaysia.

¹⁵ Susan Ackerman and Raymond Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Honolulu Press, 1988), 4.

¹⁶ See, "Malaysia," <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171657.pdf> [accessed 2 August 2012].

¹⁷ Peter Beyerhaus, "The Authority of the Gospels and Interreligious Dialogue," address given at a colloquium sponsored by the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 13 June 1996.

¹⁸ Stephan Bevans and Roger Schroeder, "We were Gentle among you: Christian Mission as Dialogue," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 7 (June 2006), 7.