

**VOICES FROM THE THIRD WORLD ON EPISTEMOLOGICAL
SHIFTS IN THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES:
THE CASE OF THE WORLD MISSION CONFERENCES
OF MEXICO CITY AND BANGKOK**

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Abstract

The pre-1960 mission conferences arranged under the auspices of the International Missionary Council (IMC) have undoubtedly contributed greatly to the worldwide body of missiological knowledge. Very creative and innovative theological thinking has gone into issues like the relationship between the church and mission and inter-religious dialogue. More often than not, though, these theological-missiological constructs have not responded to the particular contexts of Africa, Asia and Latin America; this explains why in the post-1960 conferences, immediately after the integration between the IMC and the World Council of Churches (WCC), participants from these continents forced an epistemological shift upon the WCC. The shift had to do with how we know what we know in Christian mission and Missiology. Third World Christians insisted on an epistemology where the experiences of people on the ground and their stories of suffering and hope, oppression and struggle for liberation would inform Christian mission. This article shows how the input of Christians at the Mexico City and Bangkok conferences indeed brought about a quest for a new understanding in and of Christian mission. The moratorium debate about mission in the 1970s is highlighted as an African issue, impracticable and controversial as it was, that has given great impetus to the search for a new epistemology.

1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of the study is to show how the World Council of Churches mission conferences of Mexico City (1963) and Bangkok (1973) saw shifts in epistemology mainly through the participation of Christians from the Third World. The pre-1960 mission conferences, under the aegis of the International Missionary Council (IMC), saw major theological shifts, particularly in terms of an understanding of church and mission. The 1910 conference in Edinburgh was, in a sense, still stuck with the legacy of the Enlightenment in terms of which the missionary enterprise was driven by mission agencies rather than the church. The abounding optimism that prevailed at Edinburgh was, to a large extent informed by the belief that the mission agencies would be successful in evangelising the world quite rapidly (Edinburgh Assembly 1910). The issue here is simply that there was a separation between church and mission. Skipping the Jerusalem 1928 conference and focusing on Tambaram (India) 1938, it would be fair to say that the separation between church and mission found healing at Tambaram. A new problem, however, arose. As much as the church and mission were healed at Tambaram, a church-centric interpretation of mission emerged.

At Willingen 1952, the church-centric understanding of mission was turned upside down. Although the technical term for mission, *missio Dei*, did not feature in the official documents of the conference, its emergence can be traced back to the theological thinking of Willingen. There was an understanding that mission belonged to God rather than to the church. A break with a church-centric understanding of mission in favour of a God-centric interpretation came about. Mission was understood to be something which emanates from the heart of God in sending His Son and the Spirit (Willingen 1952:189). Ironically this new understanding of mission resulted in a somewhat ineffective understanding of the role of the church in mission.

The 1960s saw a rediscovery of the church in mission with a flurry of activity in World Council of Churches (WCC) circles. The 1960s saw some very fine theological reflection on the missionary nature of the church or, more correctly, the fact that the church is missionary by its

very nature. The names of Blaauw and Hoekendijk come to mind. One should also not forget that Vatican II contributed tremendously to the understanding that the church is missionary by its very nature.

The purpose of this very brief excursion is simply to say that there have always been shifts in one way or another within the missionary movement in general and the WCC in particular. The very brief excursion on church and mission merely serves as an illustration.

I would like to argue that the shifts indicated above, important as they were in their creativity, were still neatly within the Enlightenment paradigm. By that I simply mean that these were rational and theoretical constructs that were not necessarily responding to the world context in terms of the prevailing political, socioeconomic and cultural realities.

The purpose of the article is to show that some of the shifts which occurred at the post-1960 conferences were indeed quite thorough and lasting. In fact, I will argue that in the case of the Mexico City and Bangkok conferences it would not be an overexaggeration to speak of an epistemological shift. Such a shift came about mainly through the participation and input of Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

I wish to organise the article in the following manner. First, a brief note will be made on the understanding of epistemology. Second, before proceeding to an analysis of the two conferences, I will take one step back and focus briefly on the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 which to my mind was an important scene setter for what was to follow in the WCC as far as the search for a new understanding in Christian mission was concerned. Third, the two conferences will be looked at analytically on the basis of the following question: Does what transpired there constitute a shift in epistemology? Individual voices, conference statements and messages will be pressed into service to achieve the objective of the study. The moratorium question will be picked up as one of the issues clearly showing the search for a new way of knowing in Christian mission and a new mode of doing mission. In a concluding paragraph, I will look at whether or not a study of the

mission conferences from the perspective that is advanced here, is relevant.

2 HOW WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

The simplest definition of epistemology is to say that it has to do with how we know what we know. The etymology of the concept shows that in its root can be traced back to two Greek terms, namely *episteme* which means knowledge or science and *logos*, meaning word, speech, discourse, account or explanation (Newall 2004; Wikipedia Encyclopedia; Encyclopedia Britannica). In broad terms, according to Newall (2004), an epistemology is the theory of knowledge concerned with the nature, sources and scope of knowledge.

In as much as an etymological tracing of the concept “epistemology” is interesting and helpful in understanding the root metaphor a little bit, it is not really helpful in going beyond a mere static interpretation of the theory of knowledge.

Heylighen (1993) suggests that we need to develop an historical perspective on epistemology when he writes: “When we look at the history of epistemology, we can discern a clear trend, in spite of the confusion of many seemingly contradictory positions. The first theories of knowledge stressed its absolute, permanent character, whereas the later theories put the emphasis on its relativity or situation-dependence, its continuous development or evolution, and its active interference with the world and its subjects and objects. The whole trend moves from a static, passive view of knowledge towards a more and more adaptive and active one”.

Due to a lack of space, no serious discussion on the perspective given by Heylighen is offered here, except to mention the trends identified by him. He starts with the Greek philosophers in their understanding of knowledge as ideas or forms existing independent of any subject trying to apprehend them. The next phases he identifies are that of empiricism or the reflection-correspondence theory, in terms of which knowledge is perceived to be the product of sensory perception, and rationalism, which sees knowledge as the

product of rational reflection. Turning to what he defines as pragmatic epistemology, Heylighen describes it as not giving a clear answer to where knowledge or models of knowledge come from. He sees constructivism as a radical form of pragmatic epistemology in the sense that all knowledge is constructed from scratch and in context by the subject of knowledge.

The mission conferences of Mexico City and Bangkok in chronological order will be interrogated on the basis of an understanding of epistemology that is context-dependent and activity based. It is an understanding of knowledge creation that is not so much concerned with a sterile analysis of things, but much more about the change of things.

3 EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFTS

The main thrust of the article is to show that the two conferences under discussion have been characterised by a shift in epistemology. It is interesting to note that the Mexico City conference of 1963 happened only one year after the appearance of the very influential book by Thomas Kuhn (1962) entitled *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Kuhn's basic thesis is that a scientific revolution occurs when anomalies are encountered which cannot be explained by the universally-accepted paradigm within which scientific progress has been made up to a certain point (Wikipedia). The Wikipedia Encyclopedia further shows a number of other uses of the notion of a paradigm shift in the sense of "a major change in a certain thought-pattern - a radical change in personal beliefs, complex systems or organisations, replacing the former way of thinking or organising with a radically different way of thinking or organising".

In the social sciences, Handa (in Wikipedia) is said to have developed the concept of a paradigm shift for sociology. In introducing the idea of a social paradigm, Handa focuses on the social circumstances giving rise to a paradigm shift. In theology in general and the discipline of Missiology in particular, the notion of a paradigm shift was popularised by Küng (1989) and Bosch (1991). In his opus magnum, the latter introduces a number of historical paradigms which include the Enlightenment paradigm and the quest

for a postmodernist understanding of Christian mission and Missiology. In his proposal for an Emerging Ecumenical Paradigm, Bosch deals with the issue of an epistemological shift in broad and general terms by developing 13 elements of such a paradigm. In this article, I would like to bring sharply into focus the specific contributions of Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America and look at the shifts that came about in the ecumenical movement by investigating the cases of Mexico City and Bangkok. I will assume that the prevailing paradigm espoused by Western missionaries, mission agencies and the church during the 1960s and 1970s – which was basically the Enlightenment paradigm in its understanding of ready-made, universally-valid knowledge – did not adequately respond to the challenges faced by Christians from the South. A new way of arriving at knowledge of an instrumentalist nature had to be found.

4 THE NEW DELHI ASSEMBLY OF THE WCC AS SCENE SETTER

Before proceeding to an analysis of the conferences themselves, it is important to take one step back and to look at the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC in 1961. The integration between the IMC and the WCC at New Delhi represented quite a shift in healing the separation between church and mission, while also symbolising unity in mission. The New Delhi Assembly also saw the WCC taking a major step in overcoming the dichotomy between witness, service and unity. There were strong indications of the need for a new understanding in Christian mission.

In his introduction to the preliminary report on the New Delhi Assembly, Bilheimer (1962) makes a number of references to the challenge confronting the WCC. He states that the WCC needs “to consider anew the meaning of the Gospel for the message, the life and the witness of the churches in the contemporary world”. Indications are that the new challenge was triggered by the “fastest growing element in the World Council of Churches (45 Asian and 26 African among the 197 member churches)” (Wright 1962). The Asian

and African churches were emerging from contexts which, in Bilheimer's description, were "a revolutionary world which challenged many traditional concepts of the Church's witness, service and unity. On every hand, there was abundant and eloquent testimony that new concepts of the life and mission of the Church are needed if the churches are to speak with relevance to the needs of men in our time".

For the New Delhi Assembly, the challenge was to contextualise the theme of the Assembly, namely, "Jesus Christ the Light of the World" by means of witness, service and unity. The context in which this was to happen is elaborated upon in the Message of the Assembly to the Churches:

All over the world new possibilities of life, freedom and prosperity are being actively, even passionately, pursued. In some lands there is disillusionment with the benefits that a technically expert society can produce, and over all there hangs the shadow of vast destruction through war. Nevertheless mankind is not paralysed by these threats. The momentum of change is not reduced. We Christians share men's eager quest for life, for freedom from poverty, oppression and disease. God is at work even when the powers of evil rebel against him and call down his judgment (Bilheimer 1962:9).

The section in the report on witness continues to describe the world of 1961 in graphic terms, such as "interdependent world" and "an age of revolution in which immense changes are taking place in every sphere of human life" (Bilheimer 1962:13). Following on the description of the world in these terms is perhaps the clearest indication at New Delhi of the need for a new understanding in mission. The little word "new" features several times in the following citation, and clearly shows the importance of the WCC of finding a new paradigm:

Today the task of evangelism must be performed in new situations and therefore in new ways. The Church in every land is aware that new situations require new strategies

and new methods, an adventuring into new forms of human social relationships with appropriately new ways of approach and understanding, a renewed sympathy with all men in their aspirations and sufferings and a fresh determination to speak to men the truth of the Gospel in the actual situation of their lives (Bilheimer 1962:14).

There is no need to labour the point any further since the brief exploration was merely intended to illustrate the strong sense at New Delhi that something new was required. For this reason, it can be stated that the New Delhi Assembly was a forerunner of the shifts in epistemology witnessed at the conferences arranged under the auspices of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the WCC between 1961 and 1981.

5 MEXICO CITY (1963)

5.1 Is God at work outside the church?

An important shift at the Mexico City conference is captured by the question posed by Gort (1980:7) in his analysis of the mission conferences: “How can the Christian congregation discover that which God is doing outside the Church?” For Gort the issue was, however, not simply a discernment of where and how God was at work in the world, but rather the relationship between God’s activity and the mission of the church or stated more clearly, the creative tension between the *missio Dei* and the *missio ecclesiae*.

In terms of Gort’s interpretation, the response Mexico City formulated was to acknowledge that the church should take the world and the prevailing situations of injustice, want and distress seriously. In addition, the church was to “take up its stance within these situations outside the gate and keep its eyes open for signs and signals of the liberating work of God taking place there” (Gort 1980:7).

To do this, Mexico City resolved to undertake thorough study of the missionary structure of the congregation. The intention was clearly not merely to recycle a reductionist understanding of the church in

mission, but to reflect on ways and means for the church to become involved in the transformation of structures.

5.2 Mission in six continents

Although the above-named issue indicates an important shift at Mexico City, what really made the conference famous was the construction of the notion of mission in six continents. The very simple concept constitutes in itself a major shift on two counts. First, it constitutes a radical break from the understanding of mission as a movement from the West to the rest, because the best is in the West. Second, epistemologically, it represents a break from the universalising tendency to regard missiological knowledge from the West as an export article to the rest. The correct understanding of mission, according to Gort (1980:7), is “if it is perceived as mission in, to and from all six continents. God’s mission is singular and undivided and therefore cosmic and inclusive; it is relative to the whole of creation: all peoples, places, times and situations without exception”. The official report on the Mexico City conference has rightly been titled “Witness in six continents”.

5.3 On social analysis

The systematic incorporation of social-analytical mediation in the theological method that has made Latin American liberation theology world famous emerged only after the Mexico City conference. The social analysis introduced by two Latin Americans at the conference should, therefore, not only be seen as quite remarkable, but in a sense also as a precursor of what was to come in the late 1960s and 1970s. The deliberate and conscious use of Marxist tools of analysis is not reflected in the analysis of Castillo-Cardenas (Mexico City 1963:29-36) and Sapsezian (Mexico City 1963:37-47), since the issue for them was not the display of sophisticated tools of analysis, but rather what could be and should be observed by everybody.

Castillo-Cardenas and Sapsezian describe the Latin American scene as a location where revolutionary changes were taking place. The understanding was that these changes were demythologising the concept of Latin America as a religious continent. Dechristianisation

and secularisation were the order of the day. There was an awakening of the collective conscience to the unjust manner in which society was organised. Castillo-Cardenas spoke of the determination of the masses to sacrifice their lives not for the preservation of social order but rather the radical transformation thereof. He also alluded to the rise of a new nationalism at the time, which he saw as the struggle of people to find themselves.

Sapsezian, for his part, pointed to the Brazilian quest for national integration and identity and the ongoing struggle for a more just social order. According to him, Marxist philosophy and Afro-Brazilian religions were seemingly offering more comprehensive and more immediate answers than the Christian Church.

Once again, these snippets of analysis can hardly be regarded as systematic and coherent enough to be part of any serious theological method. Yet, they were important enough at Mexico City to inform the reflection on Christian mission in that day and age with particular reference to secularisation.

The need to understand the context in which the Gospel was to be communicated, was also clearly expressed in the presentations of Thomas (Mexico City 1963:11-19) and Visser't Hooft (Mexico City 1963:24). In his opening address entitled "The World in which we Preach Christ", Thomas (Mexico City 1963:11-19) addressed the issue of the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

If this communication is to be effective as communication it is important that we seek in each generation to know the world in which men live and to understand their basic thoughts, hopes, aspirations, and the urges within which they become aware of self and God.

Although the call for a shift in epistemology is not found *expressis verbis*, it is quite clear that a new hermeneutic in communicating the Gospel was needed. It is the kind of hermeneutic that understands the relationship between the Gospel and the world in which people live, and their thoughts, hopes and aspirations as circular rather than linear. In clearly contradicting the notion of knowledge that is

universally valid, Visser't Hooft (Mexico City 1963) argues that the Word of God is not bound by contending:

A Church may have great missionary fervour and yet fail to be truly apostolic, because its missionary work consists in the exporting of its own culturally conditioned brand of Christianity and in imposing of that brand on another people. If so, it has not grasped that the Word of God cannot and must not be imprisoned in any human form of expression but claims the sovereign right to make its own forms of expression.

5.4 A struggle hermeneutic

The Mexico City report shows some examples where the notion of “struggle” was invoked for an understanding of mission. One such example is the statement by the Youth Delegation at the conference. In it, the hermeneutic of struggle was used in the following manner as the young participants felt challenged as follows:

Enter into the struggles of our time and work against misery, hunger, social injustice, racial hatred and political tyranny (Mexico City 1962:176).

The understanding at Mexico City was that such activity could take the form of solidarity with the labour unions, involvement in the student movements and participation in the work of political parties. The youth also reflected on how to interact with those espousing secular ideologies and living by what was perceived to be a practical atheism.

This was new stuff, new language – not that theological statements on issues of a political and socioeconomic nature were not previously issued by the WCC. The shift here had clearly come about as a result of active participation in the ongoing struggles of people from the perspective of Christian mission.

5.5 A dialectical interpretation of secularisation

At the pre-1960 conferences, under the aegis of the IMC, an entirely negative understanding of secularisation emerged. At the 1928 Jerusalem conference, to mention one example, secularisation was viewed as a great danger to Christianity and was identified as a sign of the times. Formulations like “our enemy is not civilization, but secularism; not science, but materialism” reveal the utter suspicion with which Jerusalem looked at secularisation. Wind (1984:74), in commenting on the mission conferences, argues that Jerusalem failed to differentiate between secularism as a closed system and secularisation as a dynamic reality which requires a more dialectical interpretation.

A shift occurred at Mexico City precisely because delegates looked at secularisation dialectically rather than reductionist. The dialectic is indicated, for example, in the message to the churches issued at Mexico City (1962:176):

Our world is changing faster than it has ever done before. New patterns of life are taking form for the whole of mankind. In this revolutionary change, science and technology play a decisive part. This means two things: it makes possible for masses of people greater freedom, greater security, more leisure and more truly human life; but it poses a great question - is technology to be the servant of man or his master? It is a question of life and death.

The attempt at Mexico City to grapple with secularisation from the perspective of Christian Mission, is seen by commentators as a clear sign that delegates were looking for a “new theological understanding of mission” (Bassham 1979:65). It was, however, never clear cut. In describing secularisation in terms of “ambiguity”, Scherer (1987:109), sees it as a process which opens up possibilities for both human freedom and human enslavement. In his critique of the conference, Scherer points to the inability of Mexico City to discern a clear vision of the missionary task in a secular world.

What cannot be disputed, however, is that an effort was made to break new ground and to arrive at a new understanding of mission in the context of far-reaching secularisation. If nothing else, the following statement from Mexico City proves the point that there was an awareness at least that in the world of 1963 it could not simply be a matter of “mission as usual”:

Christian witness participates in the common agony and hope which men experience in the process of secularization. It should articulate questions and answers from within the modern world and take up the points of decision which God himself provided through secularization. Thus we can come to deeper understanding of the presence of Jesus Christ in the world and communicate the Gospel ... The Christian message to man in the secular world is not only the proclamation of a transcendent God who reigns as the Lord of nature, but also the proclamation of God as the Lord of world history who became a man in Christ. His divinity has become visible in his true humanity, as he emptied himself to be one of us so that men might fulfil the tasks to which they were ordained in creation (Mexico City 1962:153-154).

Mexico City seems to have argued that the fundamental theological rationale for treating secularisation dialectically is the incarnation and kenosis of Jesus Christ. The divine-human nature of Jesus Christ is the theological-Christological basis for affirming the good that is happening in the world as well as contradicting the bad. Elements of secularisation like human freedom, human advancement and creativity would surely find affirmation with the Gospel, whereas the enslavement by technology would be contradicted.

6 BANGKOK (1973)

The analysis of the Mexico City conference reveals more of an implicit shift in epistemology than an actual one, unless one interprets the break with the traditional understanding of mission and the response to secularisation, for example, as shifts in themselves.

An analysis of Bangkok shows the extent to which that which was strongly hinted at Mexico City, resulted in a major shift at Bangkok. Before proceeding to a number of illustrations on the epistemological shift that occurred at Bangkok, I would like to comment briefly on some responses to Bangkok from Evangelical circles. There were indeed a few very nervous responses to what transpired at Bangkok that were showed, albeit negatively, that something major had happened at Bangkok. This is not to say that some of the criticisms should not have been taken seriously. Reputable Evangelicals like Winter, McGavran, Tippett, Glasser and Beyerhaus contributed to a 1973 publication entitled *The Evangelical response to Bangkok*. It is quite interesting to note the centrality of the “two billion” syndrome in the Evangelical response to Bangkok. Beyerhaus (in Winter 1973:109), for example, accuses the CWME of the WCC of losing sight of the “pre-eminent goal of Christ’s great commission, the eternal redemption of the unsaved ‘two billion’ who by their sin, superstition and ignorance are separated from God, the fountain of life”. Another example where reference is made to the “two billion” in response to Bangkok is with Glasser (in Winter 1973:148). In his interpretation, these were the people who were yet to hear the “salvation today”.

The objection of some Evangelicals to Bangkok seems to be what they viewed as a reductionist theology of salvation. There was a feeling amongst Evangelicals that perhaps the debate on salvation was opened too widely, which resulted in Christian salvation losing its Christian distinctiveness. As Beyerhaus (in Winter 1973:120) understand it, the distinctiveness of salvation lies in “Christ’s universal salvation for all sinners who believe in him”.

In an almost ironic way, the nervous responses from Evangelicals are an indication that something major emerged from Bangkok. Instead of listening carefully to their Christian brothers and sisters from the South in their quest for authenticity in terms of a contextual response to the Gospel, some Evangelicals tried to impose their universally-valid theological ideas upon others.

6.1 Context of mission, mission in context

In a sense the scene for the shift that came about at Bangkok was set by Potter (Bangkok Assembly 1973:51-63) in his report to the conference. He introduced the concepts of “context of mission” and “mission in context”. This was new language and a clear break from the trend of understanding mission as one-way-traffic from the West to the rest of the world. In analysing the world as “one world”-“divided world”, Potter shows the ambivalence of a world drawn together through science, technology, rapid communication and the mass media, while simultaneously being divided politically, economically and racially. In his critique of the Mexico City conference, he refers to the fact that no attention was paid to the march on Washington in 1963 to demand civil rights for black people and nothing was said about the emergence of liberation movements in Southern Africa. According to him such issues should not to be divorced from mission and evangelisation. He drew attention to the notorious fact that the period of Western mission was also the period of European and American political and economic imperialism.

The importance of understanding mission as mission in context is also strongly suggested in the analysis offered by Verkuyl (1973:14-25) on the situation in Thailand in 1973. There are three issues of great significance in his analysis. First, with ninety-four per cent of the population belonging to Thera-vada Buddhism, Verkuyl questioned whether Buddhism in Thailand was experiencing an identity crisis in the light of the global modernisation. The question raised was: How should they participate in modernity without losing their identity? The second issue is that by 1973 Thailand had never been under colonial domination. The “land of the free” as the name Thailand quite symbolically means, had never been colonised either by the West or Asia. The question, however was, how free was the land really? Verkuyl argued that factually the country was dominated by America, especially during the “thirty years war” in Indo-China. Third, by 1973, the Christian Church in Thailand was numerically very small with about one hundred and fifty thousand Catholics and thirty-five thousand Protestants. Apart from the analysis of the local context, Verkuyl has done some analysis on the wider context of South East Asia, which for lack of space cannot be elaborated upon.

The important point here is that the reflection on the meaning of salvation in relation to mission and evangelisation would be almost senseless if the local and regional contexts were not taken into consideration.

6.2 Epistemological discontinuity

In raising their voices at the Bangkok conference, participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America brought about a definite shift in epistemology. A new theological method emerged. A new way of doing mission came to the fore. A manner of constructing missiological knowledge that was different from the mainly deductive method from previous mission conferences appeared on the scene.

Bassham (1979:93), for one, alludes to Africans, Asians and Latin Americans introducing the “action-reflection” model or the “experience-centered” approach.

They ascended upon Bangkok with their stories of their experiences of racism, social injustice, economic exploitation as well as the hopes and struggles of Third World people. In a sense, one can say that at Bangkok the “we think therefore we know” epistemology was substituted by a “we experience, we suffer, we struggle therefore we know” epistemology.

To avoid any criticism I have quoted Bassham out of context here, I hurry to indicate that he feels that the particular method applied at Bangkok made it difficult to achieve any serious theological reflection, thereby reducing the amount of probing theological analysis (Bassham 1979:93). Perhaps the point needs to be made that the use of the action-reflection method and serious theological reflection, whatever is understood by that, should not necessarily be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the two should be mutually reinforcing.

Verkuyl (1973) and Witvliet (in Verkuyl 1973:63-73) have commented extensively on the new method that found application at Bangkok. The former draws a comparison between the method used in conferences before 1973 (e.g. long well-prepared speeches, studies undertaken and extensive reports written on diverse issues in

mission and evangelisation) and the method followed at Bangkok. Here there was only one presentation made by Thomas and, for the rest as Verkuyl puts it, the method of group dynamics was applied in the study groups. This method facilitated the participation of everybody. In answering the question why this particular method was used, the answer, according to Verkuyl, is simply to avoid dominance by Western theologians. In Verkuyl's interpretation, the objective was indeed achieved, because never before was the contribution of participants from the Third World so clear and so decisive.

In his reflection on what transpired in section II at Bangkok, which dealt with the issue of Liberation and Social Justice, Witvliet offers a razor-sharp analysis that is extremely helpful in grasping something of the quest for a new epistemology. One of the central questions at the time was what participants in the Bangkok conference were doing about the bombardments on Hanoi in Vietnam. There was a proposal by another Dutch delegate to the conference, Van der Veen that a contingent from the Bangkok conference should go to Hanoi to directly experience the bombardments and in so doing, apply pressure on Nixon to bring about peace. Witvliet expresses deep disappointment that the march on Hanoi never happened. Anecdotal as the little story might seem, it illustrates the search for a new way of doing theology. Even the European participants sensed that something entirely new was needed, because the prevailing paradigm of rational, neat and elaborate reflection was not really meeting the challenges confronting Christian mission.

In Witvliet's reflection on Bangkok there is reference to an interesting participant from Africa, namely, Neto from the MPLA, a member of the liberation movement in Angola who was struggling against Portuguese colonialism at the time. Neto had his own story to tell about the massacre of at least one million Angolans since the start of the struggle for liberation in 1961.

Many more stories were told at the conference. At Bangkok, in Witvliet's interpretation, these stories were as important as the theological reflection on liberation and social justice.

In a very sharp missiological perspective on the work of section II at Bangkok, Witvliet shows what a reading of the classical Luke 4:16-21 can be like when text and context are taken as sources of theology. In simple terms, mission on the basis of a new epistemology is to be present when people suffer injustice, oppression and exploitation. Furthermore, mission takes place where Christians participate in the liberation movement of the Messiah by consciously choosing against social and political injustice and by being inserted wholeheartedly into movements which struggle to improve the quality of human life. What is more, if the church purports to be participating in all of this, it should be liberated itself. In section II of the report, this issue was clearly accentuated: Without the liberation of churches from their entanglement with the interests of the ruling classes, races and countries, the church will never be a liberating church.

And indeed, in a letter from the Bangkok Assembly to the churches, the commitment to do mission in terms of an involvement in the praxis of liberation is well articulated:

... we commit ourselves more fully in the struggle against everything that oppresses men and women today, not only the sin that is in them but also that is in societies. The scandals of racism, of social injustice, of economic and political oppression, the tragic shame of the tragic shame of the Indochina war or the bloody suppression of liberation movements, the dehumanization of technological civilization and the threat that it poses for the future of humanity, all these challenge Christians urgently to express in action the salvation of Jesus Christ (Bangkok Assembly 1973:2).

6.3 Black theology

The appearance of black theology as one of the modes of liberation theology at Bangkok is perhaps one of the clearest indications that a new thing would begin to inform Christian mission. In the Bangkok report, the nature of black theology is explained to a certain degree. Instead of a very long citation, some elements of black theology raised at the conference will be mentioned here. First, as a contextual

theology, it includes reflection on the experience of the Christian community in a particular place and at a particular time. Almost perfect examples are the responses formulated by black Christians in North America and South Africa in a context of racial oppression. Second, black theology cannot be universalised, precisely because it is contextual in nature. Third, the black experience of suffering and oppression is the hermeneutic key for understanding God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Fourth, black theology identifies Christ as the brother of the oppressed who places himself unequivocally on the side of the oppressed and the powerless (Bangkok Assembly 1973:74).

The particular challenges posed by black theology to Christian mission, has been brilliantly worked out by Kritzinger (1988) in his thesis entitled *Black theology: Challenge to mission*. The thesis needs to be revisited.

6.4 Feminist theology

A further indication that a new mode of doing Christian mission was being sought is the featuring of feminist theology at Bangkok, albeit on a limited basis. The conference was confronted with new language in the form of "God's feminine voice". The issue was clear that God's voice will only be heard as women are enabled to make their own particular contribution to theological thinking and the whole of church life. Understanding this to be not only a philosophical matter, but indeed an issue of political power, the conference resolved that deliberate attempts should be made to bring women into positions of responsibility and decision making. This would entail a radical overhaul of structures, style of working and the format of conferences and meetings (Bangkok Assembly 1973:75).

Today, more than thirty years down the line, an audit on the issues mentioned here amongst the member churches of the WCC might reveal that patriarchy and the continued marginalisation of women in the church are still rife. Be that as it may, for a rare moment at the Bangkok conference, participants were challenged to view Christian mission from a feminist perspective.

6.5 Moratorium

The clearest indication from Africa that a new and better way of doing mission was being sought was the manner in which the moratorium issue featured at Bangkok.

The name John Gatu is inextricably linked to the issue. During a research tour for a project entitled *From moratorium to reconstruction* in August 1996, I failed to locate Gatu during a visit to Nairobi Kenya. In October 2004, I had the wonderful opportunity to interview Gatu extensively in Nairobi. What made it all the more remarkable is that the interview was conducted in the presence of Mugambi, the world-renowned theologian from the University of Nairobi, whom I was privileged to interview on tour in 1996. I shall also refer to conversations I had with Oduyoye and Chipenda on the moratorium issue.

For now it is necessary to provide a brief historical background on the moratorium debate. In 1971, in a presentation in New York, Gatu proposed the complete withdrawal of missionaries from Africa for a period of five years. He suggested that they be allowed to return to Africa after this period. This is in line with the understanding of moratorium as a “temporary suspension”. Only a few months down the line at the mission festival of the Reformed Church in Milwaukee, America, the call was radicalised when Gatu introduced the slogan: “Missionaries go home. Full stop.”

The interview with Gatu at Kolping Guest House in Nairobi, Kenya, was more narrative than structured. The concern was not so much with whether the technical requirements for an interview as a form of qualitative research were met, but rather the story of the moratorium call.

Gatu started with the accusation levelled against him at the time that he was anti-Catholic, that he was seriously jeopardising the catholicity of the church by calling for a moratorium. To this, he sharply responded with the question: Does the presence of missionaries make the church catholic? A major issue for Gatu in calling for a moratorium was the need to call a stop to the flow of information from one side only, where Africans are mere consumers

of Western information. Central to the clarion call was an understanding that both the receiving and the sending churches needed to find themselves. On the self-hood of the African church, Gatu still contends that this means not being a foreign body, but rather being its own body, developing its own ideas on the basis of the challenges facing Africa today. Turning to the issue of liturgy and theology, Gatu asserts that the Presbyterian Church in Kenya should not be worshipping God through Scotland. He hurries to say that a bending to Pentecostalism is also not the answer, since it is generally an American export article, but rather finding a home-grown method of worshipping God. Sadly for Gatu, he sees the same dependency of the 1970s coming back. For him, one of the biggest ironies in Christianity today is that those from parts of the world where the church is in decline, should do mission in areas where the church is experiencing dramatic growth. Instead of asking why the church in Africa is growing so rapidly or how do Africans understand the Bible, the response is rather to continue sending missionaries. The issue of self-reliance remains central to Gatu's understanding of the self-hood of the African church. Gatu relates with a measure of sadness the fact that the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, for example, is suddenly in debt with congregations not being able to pay their pastors. He attributes the lack of financial self-reliance in the African church to the lack of stewardship training.

My interpretation of where Gatu stands on the moratorium issue thirty years down the line is that the literal withdrawal of missionaries and funds is not really an issue, simply because it was not really practicable. The prophetic element of the call should be prolonged, however. The issues of the self-hood and self-reliance of the African church are still very much relevant in a context of globalisation and the concomitant new dependencies. Perhaps the issue of the Western church finding itself is even more of an issue.

Mugambi (1996) and Oduyoye (1996) feel that the moratorium debate is no longer an issue. In my interviews with them in Nairobi (Oduyoye happened to be there for a conference of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians at the time), I was not at all surprised at their responses for the following reason. This was about the exact time that both of them have published very influential books

containing proposals on what they saw happening in the church and society at the time. In 1995, Mugambi added to his prolific list of publications with the appearance of *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War*. For Mugambi, the issue was crystal clear that the era of liberation was over, the exodus motif was not useful anymore and that the time of reconstruction had arrived. In fact Mugambi proposes reconstruction as a theological paradigm. Not Exodus, but Nehemiah, not political liberation, but rather socioeconomic and other forms of reconstruction should be the order of the day. Such reconstruction was to be located in the reality of a New World Order that came about with the termination of the Cold War. The encounter with Mugambi was, however, not only about serious theological discourse. I was taken by car to the outskirts of Nairobi by Mugambi where I was able to view the untouched and natural beauty of Kenya. It made me understand that there are new issues for Mugambi, such as ecology as an issue in and for theology in general and Christian mission in particular.

For Oduyoye (1996), there were pressing gender issues. These were issues relating to the ecclesial, cultural and religious bondages of African women. It is for that reason that in her brilliant book entitled *Daughters of Anowa* the African church in particular and theology and culture in general are called to account. If there were still an issue of moratorium, it would, according to Oduyoye, be the issue of a moratorium on patriarchy and male domination in the church.

To return to the Bangkok conference. In the report of the Committee dealing with the partnership question, reference is made to a motion by Setiloane (Bangkok Assembly 1973:24-25), one of the South African participants in the conference, that the material on the moratorium should be included in the report of the Committee looking at partnership.

There are at least five elements constituting the prophetic nature of the moratorium call as it emerged at Bangkok. First, the moratorium call should be interpreted first and foremost as a call to churches to work for their self-hood and identity. Second, those churches who are no longer in a position to send money and personnel were challenged to use their resources for educating people for mission back at the

ranch. Third, churches were challenged to give financial support to those who were struggling against unjust and dehumanising systems. Four, churches on both sides were challenged to develop “mature partnerships”. Five, the moratorium call was broadened to cover situations of political domination of a majority by a minority. An almost perfect example of this was the withdrawal of the white fathers from Mozambique under colonial rule.

Slightly more than a year after Bangkok, the Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) took place in Lusaka, Zambia, with Gatu being elected chairperson. The moratorium question featured strongly. There was a feeling that the continued presence of Western missionaries in Africa was detracting seriously from the search for self-hood.

Carr who was present at the 1974 Assembly in Lusaka, offers a fine prophetic interpretation of the moratorium call. He shows how the moratorium issue cannot be divorced from the global political and economic setting:

We speak of rich and affluent churches just as we speak of rich or affluent nations. Similarly we speak of “poor” churches and “poor” nations. The terminology passes over into our discussion on development, where we speak of developed and underdeveloped (Carr 1974:36-44).

Carr goes on to indicate that this type of language presupposes a vertical understanding of history, with the rich on top and the poor at the bottom. The notion of development, therefore, means nothing else but assisting the poor to climb towards the top. In Carr’s interpretation such an approach conceals what he calls the “essential inner-relation that binds both the dominated and the dominating in a vicious cycle of alienation” (Carr 1974).

The interpretation of Carr is supported by what emerged in an interview with Chipenda (1996) shortly before his retirement as General Secretary of the AACC.

Chipenda, like Carr, locates the moratorium call in a much broader context than merely the question of personnel and funds. He draws attention to the fact that the venue and the year of the Lusaka Assembly made for some interesting reading. The context was that of the ongoing struggles of the liberation movements for independence and national liberation. Lusaka was a very important centre for movements like the African National Congress of South Africa and ZANU PF of Zimbabwe. The issue was not simply whether missionaries should go home, nor the self-hood of the African church, but rather the liberation from all forms of political oppression and economic exploitation.

To conclude, it would be fair to suggest that the moratorium call at Bangkok, perhaps even more than any of the other issues emerging at the conference, definitely indicated an epistemological break. It was unfortunately not followed up properly in the ensuing years. The sometimes rather reactionary responses from the church in the West were also not helpful in keeping the debate in its proper perspective.

7 CONCLUSION

Is there any relevance in revisiting the mission conferences, albeit from the perspective advanced in this article? In answering in the affirmative, I wish to advance the following argument for doing so. The epistemology that was hinted at in 1963 at Mexico City and in 1973 at the Bangkok conference and worked out systematically in diverse modes of liberation theology in the 1970s and later, has assisted Christian mission greatly in dealing with context. I concur, however, with the sentiment that the particular epistemological approach should not detract from serious and deep theological reflection.

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