

[Voices Loud and Clear (October 2024), pp. 59-76]

Chapter 6

The Voice of Truth in the Christian Encounter with World Religions (Ivan Satyavrata)

Introduction

The history of the Jesus Movement is a story of ongoing encounter with various pre-existent religious traditions over time across various geographical regions and peoples across the globe. While plurality of religions and cultures have been integral features of life since time immemorial, modernisation and globalisation have brought about a mingling of peoples and cultures without parallel in the history of civilisation. Contrary to the predictions of secular prophets of the previous generation who anticipated the demise of religion, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have also seen the revival and global expansion of the world's living religions.¹ Life today is marked by unprecedented multiculturalism and religious plurality and, as various religions passionately assert the supremacy of their truth claims, the potential for communal conflict is greater than ever before.

Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the continent of Asia, the cradle of human civilisation with a five-thousand-year history; a rich mosaic of traditions, cultures, and civilisations; home to all the living religions of the world, including Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and Zoroastrianism. Surrounded by deeply entrenched ancient religious traditions, in many parts of Asia the Church is regarded as a foreign presence and viewed with suspicion as a vestige from the colonial era.

¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Religionquake: From World Religions to Multiple Spiritualities", in Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, Eds. *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 79-89; Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001): 9-15.

Although Asians have, for most of their history, tolerated their neighbours of other faiths, some countries have recently witnessed rising communal tensions and conflict.² At a time when nurturing a culture of tolerance remains such a pressing need, Christian missionary activity is seen as needlessly provocative, stoking communal passion and religious conflict by pitting the claims of one faith against another.

Followers of Christ today thus find themselves on the defensive, having to think afresh and pray through questions that strike at the jugular of the Christian faith: what attitudes should we cultivate towards the diverse faiths of our neighbours amidst the growing multiculturalism of our times? If every religion claims to be the only true one and sees its mission as converting those of other faiths, will that not inevitably intensify religious bigotry and communal strife? Amidst an increasingly multi-religious and culturally diverse society, can followers of Christ share the good news with neighbours of other faiths without provoking social unrest and religious conflict? For Christians who live under a prophetic mandate to be “the Voice of Truth,”³ this presents a serious missiological question but one with burning existential implications as well.

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

The most formidable challenge to “the Voice of Truth” today is the growing influence of the ideology of religious pluralism. This ideology constitutes an unofficial orthodoxy in much of academia, is firmly entrenched within the entertainment and media elite, and finds wide acceptance in popular culture—even among some sections of professing Christians.

² Jehu J. Hanciles, “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first Century Church”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27(4), (October 2003): 146, <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693930302700401> {last accessed 13th August, 2024}

³ A phrase based on the title to represent the gospel as expressed within the biblical-historic Christocentric trinitarian faith tradition.

Several years ago, the gauntlet was thrown in an article entitled “The Real War,” published in the immediate wake of 9/11, in which columnist, Thomas Friedman, blames all faiths coming out of the Mosiac tradition (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) for all the religious conflict in our world. He accuses these faiths of what he provocatively terms “religious totalitarianism” – “a view of the world that my faith must reign supreme and can be affirmed and held passionately only if all others are negated”.⁴ Portraying this caricature as the real enemy of global peace and harmony, Friedman strongly advocates pluralism as an alternative that embraces religious diversity and fosters tolerance. Citing Rabbi David Hartman in support of his view, Friedman asks:

Can Islam, Christianity and Judaism know that God speaks Arabic on Fridays, Hebrew on Saturdays and Latin on Sundays, and that he welcomes different human beings approaching him through their own history, out of their language and cultural heritage? Is single-minded fanaticism a necessity for passion and religious survival, or can we have a multilingual view of God – a notion that God is not exhausted by just one religious path?⁵

Pluralism thus holds that no one religion can claim to be somehow normative and superior to others: all religions are complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to the one divine reality. People must celebrate diversity of religious experience and expression as something good and healthy and acknowledge salvation (enlightenment or liberation) as present and effective in its own way in each religion.

Friedman’s case is strengthened by the observation that fundamentalism in any religion appears to generate hatred, suspicion, fear, and violent rejection of the “other” expressed in religious terrorism.⁶ Pluralism thus offers an attractive irenic alternative at a time when there are

⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; The Real War,” *The New York Times*, 27th November 2001, [Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/27/opinion/foreign-affairs-the-real-war.html>], [Last accessed: 18th March 2024].

⁵ Friedman, “Foreign Affairs.”

⁶ Some studies have documented a close connection between religious fundamentalism and terrorist violence in most of the world’s major religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

increasing curbs on religious freedom in many regions of the world in which Christ followers in erstwhile colonies struggle under the burden of the cultural imperialist legacy of the colonial era, and where many also live in fear of violent opposition from extremist and militant religious organisations.⁷ Pluralism, however, poses a serious threat to Christian mission and to the Christian faith itself: it strikes at the nerve centre of Christian faith at three crucial points.

First, pluralism insists that tolerance towards other religions requires that the holy scriptures of people of other faiths be accepted as possessing the same authority as the Bible. Furthermore, it undermines the central constitutive claim of the Christian faith – that Jesus of Nazareth was not simply one of many, or even the greatest of all human religious figures, but the decisive self-disclosure of the eternal God himself. Pluralists regard this claim as imperialistic, an unnecessary hindrance to interreligious harmony: Jesus may be the Saviour for Christians, but he is not the only Saviour for all peoples. A third problem in pluralism is its belief that different religions represent many different paths leading to the same goal. Pluralism holds that different religious traditions are responses from different contexts within which humans experience essentially the same salvation/enlightenment. This perspective clearly undermines the grounds and motivation for Christian mission.

Pluralism has been thoroughly weighed in the scales and found to be biblically ungrounded, theologically flawed, philosophically vacuous, and logically untenable.⁸

⁷ In this context, Asian voices such as Peter Phan call for abandoning Christian claims of Christ's decisiveness: "[T]he heightened consciousness, ever more widespread since modernity, of the necessarily relational and historically embedded character of all exclusive and absolute claims, including religious ones, [is] a feature that seems to render [...] exclusive and absolute claims problematic if not impossible." Peter Phan, "Cultural Diversity and Religious Pluralism: The Church's Mission in Asia", *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 1(2), (2019): 90; [Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/reader/286139530>], [Last accessed: 18th March 2024].

⁸ A detailed critique of pluralism is beyond the scope of this presentation. In brief, pluralists have two major problems: (a) they have to contend with the problem of conflicting truth claims, given the incredible diversity and mutual incompatibility of beliefs in the various religions; and (b) the pluralist vision rests on a logical inconsistency that there is no privileged religious tradition, even though pluralist philosophical presuppositions and truth claims

Nonetheless, it continues to present a serious challenge to Christian witness in the twenty-first century due to its emotional appeal and the Church's response, a crucial test of its future survival.⁹

Beyond Exclusion and Eclecticism to Embrace

The gospel does not exist as something Christians have invented but is rather a “pearl of great price” (Mt. 13:45)¹⁰ entrusted to our stewardship. This gospel affirms that all humans are sinners in need of redemption; that God desires the salvation of peoples of every race, culture, and religion; that God's salvation comes to us through a particular person, Jesus Christ, the decisive self-disclosure of God, who made atonement for the sins of the world by his death and resurrection; and that only by faith in him can human beings experience restoration to a right relationship with God.

God has called his people to share this gospel with courage and conviction and to do so with gentleness and respect (Eph. 4:15; 1 Pet. 3:15).¹¹ The critical question remains: can we trust the Holy Spirit to show a way to share Christ that remains faithful to Christ and biblical truth and yet reflects a posture of sensitivity and respect towards our neighbours of other faiths?

The good news is that an approach to other faiths exists that has an impressive vintage,

are also inevitably tradition specific. See Ivan Satyavrata, “Jesus and Other Faiths,” in Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (eds), *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019): 225-29.

⁹ “This [Christian witness to people of other faiths] appears to be the most crucial missiological question facing Christians at the end of the twentieth century.” See Lalsangkima Pachuau et al., “Theme Two: Christian Mission among Other Faiths”, in Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), *Edinburgh 2010-II: Witnessing to Christ Today* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010): 34, <https://www.ocms.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Witnessing-to-Christ-Today-final-WM.pdf>.

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

¹¹ For illustrations of such approaches, see: Benno van den Tooren and Kang-San Tan, *Humble Confidence: A Model for Interfaith Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022); Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

firmly rooted in the New Testament and which we can trace all through the history of the Church. Derived from Jesus's attitude to Judaism in Matthew 5:17, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them," this response is commonly referred to as the fulfilment approach. The theme in its original New Testament context applied primarily to the fulfilment of Jewish messianic expectations in the incarnation of Christ, but resources for a secondary application to other non-Christian cultures may be found in certain New Testament evangelistic texts: the concept of *Logos* in the prologue of John's Gospel, the addresses of Paul to Gentile audiences in Acts 14 and 17, and Paul's creation theology in Romans 1 and 2.¹²

Paul's address to the Greeks at Athens (Acts 17:22-31) is a unique New Testament illustration of the fulfilment model applied to the gospel culture engagement outside the Jewish context, which we now consider briefly.

Paul's Areopagus address¹³ serves as a sample of Paul's proclamation to cultured pagan audiences, a *praeparatio evangelica*. He avoids any direct reference to the Old Testament and uses several concepts clearly of pagan origin.¹⁴

- (1) The inscription on *the altar to the "unknown god"* – This was one of several such altars at Athens and an integral aspect of the religious consciousness of the Athenians.¹⁵ It served as a point of contact, a text Paul used to launch his speech.

¹² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970): 65-66, 79-81; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995): 102-108; F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990): 379-80, 354-56, 381-85; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988): 57-58, 71, 105.

¹³ The literature on this speech is vast; for a fairly detailed bibliography of the more important works on the subject, see Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 379-80.

¹⁴ Paul Hacker, *Theological Foundations for Evangelization* (St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1980): 28-30; for historical and cultural background of Acts 17, see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1989).

¹⁵ Ample evidence exists in ancient Greek literature attesting to the existence of such altars in Athens and the surrounding region, Bruce, *Acts*, 380-81.

Although the ignorance rather than the worship is underlined, Paul clearly was making known to them this “unknown god” who they worshipped in ignorance.¹⁶

- (2) Paul employs *two consecutive quotations from Greek poets* to illustrate his argument: “in him we live and move and have our being” traces back to the sixth century B.C. poet, Epimenides the Cretan, and “for we are indeed his offspring” is a citation from a third century B.C. poet, Aratus of Cilicia.¹⁷ Not only are quotations from non-biblical religious texts extremely rare in the New Testament, but this combination represents a unique occurrence.¹⁸
- (3) Paul also alludes to *Stoic philosophy* in the expression, “men should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him”. In accepting the merit of the truth inherent in the Stoic conviction that God is “not far from each one of us”, however, Paul does not thereby approve the pantheistic framework of Stoicism within which this truth was embedded.

In summary, we see Paul’s clear intent to affirm some measure of *continuity* in his acknowledgement of *elements of truth* within the Athenian god-consciousness.¹⁹ The inculturation/contextualisation²⁰ impulse guides him in his selection and employment of specific concepts familiar to his Gentile audience. In their original context, none of these expresses an

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987): 356; cf. Lucien Legrand, “The Missionary Significance of the Areopagus Speech”, in G. Gispert-Sauch (ed), *God’s Word Among Men* (Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 1973): 67-69.

¹⁷ Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 116-118; Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 384-85.

¹⁸ Lucien Legrand, “The Unknown God of Athens: Acts 17 and the Religion of the Gentiles”, *The Indian Journal of Theology* 30(3-4), (1981): 158, n.1.

¹⁹ Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 118.

²⁰ The terms *inculturation* and *contextualisation* are used interchangeably in their broadest sense to denote the means by which the Christian faith takes on indigenous expression in any given culture.

exclusively “Christian” truth, but Paul recognises elements of truth within them which he then uses to relate the Christian gospel to their worldview.²¹

On the other hand, Paul’s strategy does not make him overlook points of *discontinuity*: in his view, the religion of the Gentiles represents a mixture of truth and aberration.²² While he affirms the legitimacy of the Athenians’ quest for God, he goes on to explicitly indicate his disapproval of their mode of worship (Acts 17:24).²³ Likewise, Paul’s acceptance of truth in the allusions to Stoicism does not imply his acceptance of the Stoic pantheistic framework.²⁴

Paul’s fulfilment strategy identifies elements of truth on the basis of Christological criteria, frees them from their original context, and reorients them towards his message of the good news in Christ. He then goes on to share specific new and transcendent elements of the gospel message.

Based on their reading of the New Testament, the early fathers also adopted the fulfilment approach in their apologetic engagement with the culture and religion of the Greek world.²⁵ Various expressions of this approach later came into prominence in the crucial period of modern missionary engagement with the religions of the East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We observe these emerging simultaneously in various majority world non-Christian contexts across the globe as well. A detailed discussion of the fulfilment view is obviously

²¹ Hacker, *Theological Foundations*, 29-30.

²² Legrand, “Unknown God,” 166; cf. Hacker, *Theological Foundations*, 30.

²³ J.R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990): 278-79.

²⁴ Hacker, *Theological Foundations*, 29.

²⁵ Chrys Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy: A Patristic View of Non-Christian Religions* (Rome: Las, 1984): 158-86; Hacker, *Theological Foundations*, 35-50.

beyond the scope of this treatment;²⁶ nevertheless, we need to highlight four key aspects that relate to this article's thesis.

- (1) ***Inculturation/Contextualisation Impulse*** – The fulfilment approach is the solution that consistently emerges in response to the contextualisation strategies in the gospel-culture encounter. This impulse assumes and works on the premise/principle of the *cultural translatability* of the gospel, essential to any mission engagement with non-Christian cultures.
- (2) ***Continuity-Discontinuity*** – The fulfilment approach is dialectical in that it recognises *continuity* within *discontinuity* in seeking to bridge the gap with people of other faiths. Accordingly, it employs Christological criteria to identify points of contact in the truth, goodness, and beauty but also judges aspects of falsehood and evil at variance with Christian faith.
- (3) ***Bridges, Not Walls*** – The fulfilment approach uses points of contact as bridges to present Christ as the fulfilment of the deep-seated hopes and aspirations of people of other faiths (or no faith).
- (4) ***Christocentricity*** – The fulfilment approach is unapologetically Christocentric. It sees other religions as having some value in preparing pre-believers for the gospel, but only as expressing human anticipations of something fuller only found in Christ.

²⁶ For a more detailed description and evaluation of this approach with a focus on its expression in the experience of Hindu converts in nineteenth and twentieth century India, see Ivan Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011).

We now turn to this crucial question: how does dependence on the Holy Spirit's empowerment enable Pentecostals to fulfil their prophetic calling to be "the Voice of Truth" and to share the gospel with neighbours of other faiths respectfully and sensitively?

Spirit-Empowered Engagement with World Religions

Pentecostals have been at the forefront of global mission and consequently at the frontiers of engagement with non-Christian religious cultures over the last century. Some of the strange religious beliefs and cultic practices Pentecostal missionaries first encountered in the regions beyond led them to believe that the non-Christian world was totally dark and evil, devoid of any truth or goodness. Most early Pentecostals thus followed their fundamentalist theological predecessors in approaching people of other faiths with a confrontational posture. Despite that posture, Pentecostals experienced phenomenal results, with vast numbers of people turning to Christ all across the globe.²⁷

In the following analysis, I suggest that, at a deeper level, effectiveness of Pentecostal engagement with the non-Christian world is due to some features of fulfilment that they were led intuitively to use in their approach to neighbours of other faiths. The Holy Spirit's empowerment has always been at the heart of Pentecostal belief and spirituality as its hallmark. This aspect of the Pentecostal ethos connects naturally with the dominant religious traditions, most of which are steeped in spirituality.

Two Pentecostal theologians who have given the most attention to the development of a Pentecostal theology of religions are Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen and Amos Yong. I restrict my

²⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 8.

response to these scholars' views on this topic to just a couple of brief observations. While the views of both have provoked much discussion, Yong's pneumatological approach to religions has perhaps triggered more reactions due to his advocating a clearly inclusivist view, most explicitly illustrated in the following quote:

[R]eligions are neither accidents of history nor encroachments on divine providence but are [...] instruments of the Holy Spirit working out the divine purposes in the world [...] the unevangelised, if saved at all, are saved through the work of Christ by the Spirit (even if mediated through the religious beliefs and practices available to them).²⁸

Although Kärkkäinen is clearly sympathetic to Yong's view, his trinitarian approach is more cautious, as seen in assertions like: "[T]he Spirit is everywhere, but the Spirit is also the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father. Not every spirit hovering above in the skies is the Spirit of whom Christians speak. So, there is also particularity to the Spirit."²⁹ Both Yong and Kärkkäinen, however, seem to tread a fine line between their deep-seated Pentecostal commitment to the finality of Christ and conceding some measure of salvific legitimacy to the Spirit's work in other faith traditions.³⁰

My response to this issue will emerge in the course of this article, but I turn now to consider four features of Pentecostal spirituality key to understanding the deep connection Pentecostals evince with respect to the lived experience of people of other faiths.

A Spirituality That Connects Deeply with the Culture

²⁸ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 235-36.

²⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Theology of Religions: Divine Hospitality and Spiritual Discernment", in Wolfgang Vondey (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* (London: Routledge, 2020): 449.

³⁰ For a nuanced evaluation and critique of Yong's and Kärkkäinen's approaches from a conservative Pentecostal perspective, see Robert P. Menzies, "The Nature of Pentecostal Theology: A Response to Kärkkäinen and Yong", *The Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 26(2), (September 2017): 196-213.

The Western missionary enterprise in the post-Enlightenment period was clearly tainted by cultural imperialism, by which Western nations assumed the intrinsic superiority of their cultures over all other cultures and viewed their calling to be the Christianisation of colonised territories.³¹ The challenge of contextualisation has thus never been greater than in the post-colonial period, in which Christian mission is seen as a continuation of the Western imperialist project.

Mission scholars Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh have made convincing cases for the essential translatability of the Christian faith. Both agree that Christianity is the most local of global faiths, and that no individual culture or language has absolute normative status in Christianity. Rather, diverse cultural forms are upheld in their plural diversity without being absolutised in their unique particularity.³² Sociologist Paul Freston sees in the Acts 2 narrative a basis for what he describes as “polycentric globalisation” in Pentecostalism, in which God reverses Babel by employing many languages rather than restoring a common language, signifying that Pentecostalism is a universalism that affirms the particular.³³

The essential autochthonous character of Pentecostalism is plainly asserted in the brilliantly simple subtitle *A Religion Made to Travel* of the influential text, *Globalization of Pentecostalism*. One of the editors, Byron Klaus, makes this telling observation: “Pentecostalism

³¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997): 374-79.

³² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996): 32; Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis, 1989): 117-51.

³³ Paul Freston, “Evangelicalism and Globalisation: General Observations and Some Latin American Dimensions”, in Mark Hutchinson and Ogbu Kalu (eds), *A Global Faith: Essays on Evangelicalism and Globalization* (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998): 72. Support for this observation can also be found in anthropological studies, such as Joel Robbins’ description of Pentecostalism as a homogenising cultural force that is at the same time most susceptible to indigenous appropriation and localisation, although his assumption that the homogenising impulse is Western is a moot point. Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (October 2004): 127-30, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093421>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024].

has been the quintessential indigenous religion, adapting readily to a variety of cultures. As a religious movement, it has taken on the likeness of a particular culture of people.”³⁴ This cultural translatability is what makes contextualisation – a key impulse of the fulfilment approach – an organic feature of Pentecostalism and explains its extraordinary success in its encounter with non-Christian cultures.

A Spirituality That Challenges the Powers of Evil

The world of most non-Christian religions is dominated by belief in an invisible supernatural world of spirits and by fear of evil powers of darkness that exercise control over human affairs and the natural world. People perceive these forces to have influence in every area of life: they can cause or prevent conception, engineer sickness or health, ensure peace or turmoil in the family, success or failure in business, and so on. Witch doctors, shamans, and priests who know how to manipulate these forces through rituals and magical rites are the power brokers in these contexts. Although earlier missionary movements largely tended to bypass this “excluded middle”³⁵ in engaging non-Christian religions, Pentecostals live and move in this world of the supernatural.

When Pentecostals began to engage the non-Christian world, they introduced a new evangelistic approach involving “power encounters”³⁶ in which gospel proclamation was

³⁴ Byron Klaus, “Pentecostalism as a Global Culture: An Introductory Overview”, in Murray Dempster, Byron Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999): 127.

³⁵ Paul Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle”, in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999): 414-21.

³⁶ The term *power encounter*, first coined by Fuller missiologist, Alan Tippett, is today widely used and accepted in missiology to describe this approach. While this is no longer exclusively a Pentecostal phenomenon, without question it remains a distinctive feature of the Pentecostal approach employed in penetrating non-Christian communities with the gospel; see Charles H. Kraft, “Three Encounters in Christian Witness”, in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999): 408.

accompanied by power demonstrations, including miracles of healing, deliverance, glossolalia, and various signs and wonders. These signs and wonders demonstrate that the God revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ is the ultimate Lord greater than all other all other powers in the universe.³⁷ Followers of other faiths are attracted to Christ when they see that the salvation that he offers includes liberation from the powers of evil and death.

This Pentecostal approach proves effective because a gospel that promises not only eternal life beyond this life but that tangibly demonstrates signs of Kingdom love and power in the present through miraculous healings and deliverance from the powers of evil resonates deeply with the immediate felt needs and aspirations of people of other faiths.

We see fulfilment principles operating here in the demonic elements identified and negated in the encounter with non-Christian cultures, as well as in the fulfilment of the aspirations of people within those cultures as they experience freedom from fear and control of the powers of evil.

A Spirituality That Meets the Real Needs of the Powerless

The economic impact of globalisation has caused growing numbers of people to slip into extreme poverty due to rising social inequality and uneven distribution of wealth.³⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has severely exacerbated extreme poverty, causing the number of people in

³⁷ Conversions as the result of “power encounters” are “a conscious and rational movement” in the direction of power as well as truth; when two religious movements with partially overlapping criteria make claims to truth and power, people tend to accept the truth claims of the faith which is able to confirm its power claims more convincingly, van den Toren and Tan, *Humble Confidence*, 147.

³⁸ For insight into some painful globalisation realities, see Ruth Valerio, “Globalisation and Economics: A World Gone Bananas”, in Richard Tiplady (ed), *One World or Many? The Impact of Globalisation on Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003): 21; Douglas McConnell, “Changing Demographics: The Impact of Migration, HIV/AIDS, and Children at Risk,” in Michael Pocock, Gailyn V. Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell (eds), *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 48.

extreme poverty to rise from 70 million to more than 700 million people.³⁹ The vast majority of those who live in extreme poverty are people with some form of religious affiliation.⁴⁰

Social engagement is today an essential component of the Pentecostal Movement in most regions of the world,⁴¹ and much of its extraordinary success is due to the spiritual, social, and economic empowerment experienced by those who have been uplifted from poverty. The Pentecostal witness earns credibility and breaks through barriers of religious tradition while fulfilling the aspirations of the religious poor in two ways.

First, the appeal of the spiritual power factor is liberating to those on the periphery of society, whose experience of poverty leaves them feeling helpless and disempowered and for whom religious faith provides their only hope of survival. Second, even as Pentecostals proclaim a gospel of Christ's saving power and the promise of eternal life beyond this life, Pentecostal

³⁹ World Bank, "Poverty", *World Bank Website*, [Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024]. The pandemic has pushed debt in poor countries to record levels, widening the gap between rich and poor nations; price increases at the same time as income collapse have put healthy food out of reach for billions, "Impact of COVID-19 on People's Livelihoods, Their Health and Our Food Systems", Joint Statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO, *World Health Organization*, 13th October 2020, [Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people's-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024]; Saskia Osendarp et al., "The COVID-19 Crisis Will Exacerbate Maternal and Child Undernutrition and Child Mortality in Low- and Middle-Income Countries", *Nature Food*, 19th July 2021, [Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00319-4>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024].

⁴⁰ "In the world's poorest countries – those with average per-capita incomes of \$2,000 or lower – the median proportion who say religion is important in their daily lives is 95%. In contrast, the median for the richest countries – those with average per-capita incomes higher than \$25,000 – is 47%." Steve Crabtree, "Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Nations", *Gallup* 31st August 2010, [Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024].

⁴¹ Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori's four-year field study of growing churches in the developing world engaged in significant social ministries has established this beyond any reasonable doubt. They document a wide range of types of social engagement by Pentecostals, from humanitarian responses to crises such as floods, drought, and earthquakes, to education, economic development, medical work, and community development. Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007): 42-43, 213. "[E]ngagement in social ministry by Pentecostals has practically exploded in the last few decades", Kent Duncan, "Emerging Engagement: The Growing Social Conscience of Pentecostalism", *Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry* 7 (Summer 2010): 2, [Available at: <https://www.evangel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Emerging-Engagement-The-Growing-Social-Conscience-of-Pentecostalism-by-Kent-Duncan.pdf>], [Last accessed: 17th March 2024].

social engagement extends God's love and seeks to make a difference to those living on the underbelly of society in the present. As Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori observe: "Instead of seeing the world as a place from which to escape, they [Pentecostals] want to make it better."⁴² Pentecostals are thus optimistic about their efforts towards social transformation, viewing them as evidence that the kingdom of God has pressed into the present.

The genius of Pentecostalism has thus been its relevance to the powerless and its ability to transform the lives of the socially and economically marginalised. Pentecostals feed the hungry, pray for God to heal the sick, fight against diseases, uplift the powerless, rescue victims of sex and human trafficking, and do their best to serve the needs of the poorest of the poor. In line with the fulfilment approach, Pentecostals meet people of other faiths at the point of their need and build bridges they can then use to communicate the gospel. The powerless receive a new sense of spiritual empowerment, the gift of salvation, and hope of eternal life in the future.

A Spirituality That Is Firmly Christocentric

The Holy Spirit in the New Testament is closely associated with the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth would guide us into all truth and testify about and bring glory to him (Jn 15:26; 16:13-14). The Holy Spirit is thus pre-eminently the Spirit of Christ, the "floodlight" to Jesus,⁴³ who comes to indwell and empower the Church as a consequence of the finished work of Christ. The Christian notion of "Spirit" must thus not be confused either with the human spirit or with notions of "spirit" in other religions.

The fact is, the Holy Spirit is not the only spirit at work in the world; other spirits are also active. John writes of the essential criterion to identify the legitimate activity of the Spirit: "This

⁴² Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 30.

⁴³ J.I. Packer's expression in *Keep in Step With the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005): 57.

is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 Jn 4:2-3).⁴⁴ Kärkkäinen’s appeal for a “robustly trinitarian view of the Spirit’s work in the world” must thus be taken seriously,⁴⁵ apart from which Pentecostals can easily drift into a pneumato-monism and into the embrace of Eastern religions, New Age cults, or relativistic liberal pluralism.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is, however, derived from the early Christian experience of and testimony to the deity of Christ as recorded in the New Testament. One must regard any trinitarian formulation not grounded in the historical fact of the Incarnation as theologically inadequate, despite its use of trinitarian vocabulary.⁴⁶ A Christocentric starting point is thus the only theologically coherent way of employing a Christian trinitarian framework to evaluate other religions. This procedure does not *a priori* dismiss truth claims in other religious traditions; instead, it provides a credible theological basis for affirming what may be of value within them.

A biblical doctrine of general revelation does not preclude the possibility of truth, goodness, and beauty in the world outside the Church – a world that includes non-Christian cultures and religions. Rather, it allows for a posture of critical openness towards all religions and cultures and permits pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty wherever it may be found. For

⁴⁴ Kärkkäinen quotes two scholars of repute, one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant in underlining this truth: “Jesus Christ is ‘the face of the Spirit’; looking at the Spirit is to look at Jesus Christ,” Stephen B. Bevans, “God Inside Out: Toward a Missionary Theology of the Holy Spirit”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22(3), (1998): 104; “[T]he Holy Spirit does not lead past, or beyond, or away from Jesus,” Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982): 216-17 as quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Challenge of Discerning between the Genuine and Counterfeit ‘Signs of the Spirit’: Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Discernment of the Spirit(s)”, *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 39(2), (July 2019): 180, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18124461.2019.1627510>], [Last accessed: 18th March 2024].

⁴⁵ Kärkkäinen, “Theology of Religions,” 448.

⁴⁶ Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996): 93-94.

instance, Hindu converts winnowing Vedic texts on the basis of Christological criteria find copious references to sacrifice as a means of redemption from sin, in which they see helpful pointers to Christ's atoning death; they then can use these pointers to share the gospel with their neighbours in the Hindu community.⁴⁷

An a priori Christocentricity thus provides a clear theological basis for the ongoing inculturation project of the Church and enables believers to express the gospel in contextually relevant forms. It also provides a robust apologetic framework for "the Voice of Truth" to be heard clearly as we proclaim God's love in Christ and his atoning death and resurrection and as we invite people of all faiths to put their trust in him and be restored to right relationship with God. In this respect, Pentecostalism concurs with a crucial commitment of the fulfilment approach.

Pentecostals in general tend to be passionately Christ-centred in their worship, service, and witness. They regularly pray for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of neighbours of other faiths and even to reveal Christ supernaturally to them. They hence have no difficulty accepting that pre-Christian ancestral traditions and religious experiences could be used by God to prepare those outside the Church to eventually respond positively to the good news of Christ.

Conclusion: "The Voice of Truth" in Wonders, Works, and Word

The third millennium might well be the most culturally diverse in history, presenting both formidable challenges and enormous opportunities for the Christian Witness in Asia and across the global. The rise of religious pluralism poses a serious threat to the Church's mission and to

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself Without Witness*, 114-70.

the future survival of the Church in Asia. In a world increasingly intolerant of “otherness” and in which tolerance and harmony appear to be the only virtues worth defending, a real danger exists that “the Voice of Truth” could be muted or silenced. Asia, however, has been home to some of the earliest and most resilient Christian communities for two thousand years, and as home to most of the world’s unreached religious people groups, it offers the world’s greatest evangelistic opportunity in this millennium.

The diverse cultures and religions of Asia make it an exciting living laboratory for followers of Christ to explore new ways to connect the good news of Jesus with the lived experience of religious peoples across the globe. Pentecostals have demonstrated the effectiveness of the fulfilment impulse by engaging cultures critically, seeking points of contact carefully, and building bridges courageously, all while keeping Christ at the centre unapologetically. Such a Spirit-empowered approach integrates wonders, works, and word in a presentation of the gospel that connects deeply with the hopes and aspirations of neighbours of other faiths. The challenge not just to Pentecostals, but to the people of God as a whole, is to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he shows us how we can amplify the voice of God’s truth in Christ creatively, enabling us to share the story of Jesus with our neighbours of other faiths with humble confidence and without compromise – but with sensitivity and respect.

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This essay is part of the **Global Pentecostal Voices Initiative** sponsored by **City Harvest Church in Singapore**. See www.chc.org.sg

This essay is the print version of a video presentation that can be viewed at www.GPVoice.org

This essay is published in **Voices Loud and Clear** edited by Kong Hee Byron D Klaus and Douglas Petersen published by Regnum Books UK.

It may be purchased at <https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/voices-loud-and-clear>

The ebook is available in open access format at <https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/voices-loud-and-clear?variant=45345072513175>

Abstract

The history of the Jesus Movement is a story of ongoing encounter with pre-existent religious traditions as it spread over time across various geographical regions and people groups across the globe. Life in the twenty-first century is marked by multiculturalism and religious plurality, and as various religions passionately assert the supremacy of their own truth claims, it heightens the potential for communal conflict. Sharing Jesus in a way that affirms his absolute and universal lordship and yet shows sensitivity and respect for people of other faiths is thus today a burning existential concern. Pentecostals are uniquely endowed with the spiritual resources to respond effectively to this need to clarify and amplify the ‘Voice’ of Truth, God’s Word in Christ, amidst the confusing cacophony of religious sounds in our world today.