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Christian Mission in a Multi-faith World
Interreligious Solidarity Against Economic Globalization
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visions of alternative to free market

I. INTRODUCTION

“Brazil and other Latin American governments have followed Washington down the free-market path, only to find they are now losing control over their economies,” reported *The New York Times* on August 11, 2002¹. Sadly enough, this is merely an example of many consequences of globalization of the capitalist economy that subject many nations and their people to servitude and injustice. However, God’s purpose in creation and history is exactly the opposite of this.

God’s new creation aims toward peace, freedom and justice. In an increasingly pluralistic world, socially, culturally and religiously, God calls us to continue to renew our commitment to live with one another peacefully. Globalization, however, through the expansion of the market economy, has often led to the dislocation of women, children and the elderly, extreme poverty, increased number of refugees and endless ethnic conflicts. For instance, Africa, experiencing negative effects of globalization, is deeply affected by poverty and civil wars.

Thus, both globalization and religious pluralism are major factors that set the context in terms of the church’s response to missions. Therefore this paper will explore challenges of doing Christian mission in this multi-religious and multicultural global communities, especially in the context of globalization, based on the author’s first hand experience of mission fields in different regions and continents. In the context of globalization and religious pluralism, what is the response of inter-religious solidarity against social and economic injustice brought by global capitalist economy? John Wesley was clear about the importance of expressing “a religious zeal” in the pursuit of “a good thing.” Wesley says, “It is good to be always zealously affected in a good thing.”² Could this “good thing” be “inter-religious solidarity” against forces called globalization of the capitalist economy?

new creation - peace, freedom, justice

II. THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE CAPITALIST ECONOMY: WAY TO SERVITUDE AND INJUSTICE

"In the abundance of your trade your lands were filled with violence." Ezekiel 28:26

In his own 18th century context in England, Wesley lamented on the scarcity of provisions such as food, land and the high taxes³. He concludes that provisions are so scarce because people have no work, but yet a few people still live in luxury and impose high taxes. Are the 21st century global economic situations any different? While unemployment rates are skyrocketing in many countries, a few transnational corporations, out of human greed, impose on those countries structural adjustment programs that destroy their local economy and create the scarcity of basic human provisions.

The globalization of the capitalist economy increasingly concerns both religious groups and civil society groups including NGO's, grassroots and community based organizations, trade unions, indigenous people, etc. Increase in the volume of communication and travel helps us see what is really happening to the lives of women and men, children, youth and the elderly facing globalization of the free-market economy. For instance, in Tanzania, I have seen refugees rejected to return home because of the local government's fear of losing economic revenues that these refugees bring to the local government and townspeople. I saw small mama and papa shops going bankrupt, facing the marching-in of Walmarts in Puerto Rico. In Budapest, Hungary, there is a Burger King in a most historic-looking building in downtown. People in India may lose their access to use the Neem tree that they have used to make toothbrushes for centuries as patent laws are applied and enforced. Patent laws are destroying the subsistence agriculture that feed over half the world's people⁴. *explain*

China is another typical example of how globalization affects one's economy. While they maintain the socialist system politically, China's economic system seems to be widely open to capitalism and immersed in its spirit. Main streets or department stores in Beijing are just like those of Seoul or New York. Local people in Beijing exclaim, "Each morning you wake up, you see a new building up, and be a hotel or a commercial building." What is most striking is that there is a McDonald store running in the middle of a courtyard of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It is more than shocking to see such an "American" fast food store being allowed to have business in the most private section of the Palace. This particular palace was supposed to be the most private place among all buildings in the Forbidden City as it used to be a home for kings and their families. It not only destroys the beauty of the Palace but also invades a sense of history of one of the most historic places.

Even in North Korea, supposedly one of the most isolated countries on earth is capitalist economy. According to a recent article in *The Economist*, "It seems that

massive adjustments of wages and prices began on July 1st.... North Korean officials are rethinking the way they run their economy”⁵. Truly, there seem to be no boundaries or walls that global free trade cannot penetrate.

The tragedy is that in the name of free trade, injustice has been imposed on many people. The global market enslaves us. National interest of super powers enslaves people and endangers peace and breaks the peace process.

Globalization promotes self-centered existence and excludes many people. To exclude the other is to deprive him or her of the right to live – truly to live, rather than merely to survive in an inhumane manner.⁶ If freedom is to be truly human with dignity given by God, globalization subjects people to servitude, not freedom.

Thus, globalization acts as a big stumbling block to human communities in living a life of freedom and life of peace. There are voices of the voiceless that we need to hear who suffer from globalization – the landless, women, children and youth, immigrants and refugees. It is an imperative that we as Christians hear the voices of the marginalized of the world where almost half of the world’s population (2.8 billion) earn less than \$2 a day.

Most alarming is that globalization and militarization are inseparable. Siliva Federici, in her article on war, globalization and reproduction, critically examines the connection between war and economic processes of globalization in the developing world, especially in Africa. She argues, “the destruction of subsistence economics is one of the main reasons behind the proliferation of conflicts in Africa, Asia and Latin America...that structural adjustment generates war, and war, in turn, completes the work of structural adjustments.”⁷

In this context of generalized economic bankruptcy, violent rivalries have exploded everywhere among different factions. People are forced to leave their home villages and become dislocated persons. Consequently the social fabric is torn. The struggle for survival has laid the groundwork for the manipulation of local antagonism and recruitment of unemployed, especially youth, by warring parties. In the background of the appearance of child soldiers in the 1980s and 1990s, there have been these torn extended families, being undermined by financial hardships. Many “tribal and religious conflicts in Africa have been rooted in these processes.”⁸

Certainly the ethics of the globalization market leads many people to servitude. As Elsa Tamez claims, the free market has its theology and we might call it “the other gospel”⁹ that Paul names and urgently repudiates in the Letter to Galatians. In the current global contexts we see two “gospels” confronting with one another, i.e., the gospel of freedom and the other gospel, the gospel of the law or the gospel of exclusion. One that leads to life, freedom, and peace. The other that leads to poverty, servitude and violence.

Here lie theological bases for joining forces with other religions in opposing the negative effects of globalization? The globalization market promotes "the other gospel" which subjects people to poverty and injustice. The gospel of freedom is what we need to need to reclaim - the gospel that lead people to life, freedom and peace.

III. A MULTI-FAITH WORLD

Trans-position of Religious Forces

Against the backdrop of this complex and ambiguous phenomenon of globalization, religious forces are continually being "trans-positioned (re-positioned)," especially since the September 11th attacks. Both Islam and Christianity are undergoing a significant reposition-ing in that many Muslims and Christians identify their God with their own national or ethnic group's purposes.

Defining "to transpose" as "to put each of two or more things in the place of the other or others, to interchange," Martin Marty gives the following illustration. "Spiritually speaking, West complements East. Spatially, Islam abuts Christendom. Maps locate Southern Baptists and Canadian Anglicans, while Utah is a Mormon domain. Displaced European Jews repositioned their Judaism in Israel or in urban America."¹⁰ American or world religious forces and movements continuously undergo significant reposition-ing, bringing us ever closer to a true multi-faith world.

Perspectives of Understanding Pluralism:

So, it is our reality that we encounter people in and from other religious traditions all the time. A question then is how we engage ourselves in relation to people of other faith traditions. Today's missiologists speak of four options: Exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and transformationism/pluralism of interdependence.

As most of us may be familiar with these perspectives, I will primarily deal with the fourth perspective, transformationism or pluralism of interdependence. Diana Eck, known for the Pluralism Project at Harvard, comes close to what might be called the pluralism of interdependence. Pluralism of interdependence is not to simply tolerate, but to be open to opportunities of transformation through the active process of participation - encounter, dialogue and interaction.¹¹

Transformationism is similar to pluralism of interdependence. It maintains that the greatness and goodness of other religious traditions are recognized, but does not presume their truths are identical to those of Christianity. Not all religions are climbing the same mountain. There are many different mountains of salvation.

Jesus is the way to the top of the Christian mountain. But Buddhists are climbing a different mountain (Donald Messer). Messer says, "Listening to others and witnessing to them are not in conflict. In fact, as we are transformed by what we learn from others, our witnessing may become far more convincing to them."

Messer's position seems to be appropriate that the transformationist option fits the best for both integrity of the Gospel and the reality of a pluralistic world. The transformationist does not fear persons of other faiths, but seeks to learn from them as well as witness to them. It is very important not to be satisfied with pluralism of tolerance assumption. At an European Regional Gathering sponsored by the General Board of Global Ministries, held in Budapest, Hungary in January 2002, I heard a woman speaking to the effect that she did not believe in conversion, or in the preaching of the Gospel. She believes that the mission of the Christian church is just fulfilled by reaching out to those in need. If you don't believe in the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which includes proclamation, service and fellowship, I think you are limiting yourself as a Christian.

In that sense, I am with Lesslie Newbigin, a world renowned minister for his ministry in India and writings on global mission, who argues for continuous affirmation of "the unique decisiveness of God's action in Jesus Christ."¹² David Bosch is also in a similar position. He claims, "Entering into a spirit of mutual dialogue with persons of other faiths does not mean rejecting faith commitments and accepting relativism as normative." He goes on saying, "We are in principle open to other views, an attitude which does not however, militate against complete commitment to our own understanding of truth. It is misleading to believe that commitment and self-critical attitude are mutually exclusive."¹³

IV. MISSION IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC WORLD

Dialogue of Action: Commitment of Mutual Interest

Thus living in an ever-changing landscape of multi-faith communities challenges us to ask, "How can one preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and do Christian mission with confidence in a community where other faiths exist side by side or more dominantly than Christian faith expression?" It requires constant engagement in mutual dialogue and reformulation of one's own faith and beliefs. It also requires a commitment to mutual coordination of mission through participating in mission of mutual interest – peace, love and justice.

We as passionate Christians understand our participation in the struggle for peace and justice to be part of our Christian mission. I discover that Christian understanding of God's purpose in history -peace, harmony and love – is shared by other faith communities. Christians and people of other faiths work together

for peace building, justice and social change. Engagement in projects of mutual interest such as peace, harmony and justice is a dialogue of life and a dialogue of action.

Therefore, this paper, as a response to the present context of a religiously pluralistic society and world, will focus on how we as neighbors of different religious traditions are in solidarity to be engaged in interfaith mission to bring justice. In doing so, the underlying theme will be to promote an awareness of our neighbors as people of living faiths, whose beliefs and practices should become integral elements in our theological thinking about the world and the human community¹⁴. I will argue that interfaith dialogue has to do with seeking common grounds for God's purpose in history and work with neighbors of other faith traditions in a common cause to serve justice and righteousness. Thus, a meaningful interfaith dialogue of action would include inter-religious solidarity against social and economic injustice brought by global capitalist economy.

Mission in a Religiously Pluralistic World

It is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 3:15

To be in mission is to be willing to take responsibility as active partners in God's work of justice. The work of justice was Jesus' vision in ministry. When Jesus was baptized by John, he said, "It is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15)

In his book, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch sees mission as a multi-faceted ministry and offers a list of mission's many aspects, e.g., including "mission as witness," mission as service, and mission as justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation and peace.

In this interfaith context, I will refer to mission as "mission as common witness." Mission in this sense is living and working faith together to bring justice. Our common witness in interfaith context is the mutual coordination of mission through participating in mission of mutual interest –peace, harmony and justice. One important note here. We embrace ecumenical missionary paradigm or interfaith missionary paradigm of justice not simply because the world or the context of mission is religiously plural. Rather we do it because the Christian Scripture as well as the Qur'an encourages us together to struggle against injustice and for the creation of a world where people of God are freed from enslavement to other human beings and where they worship God freely.¹⁵

What about conversion to Xn faith + establishment of Xn churches?

V. A MODEL OF INTERRELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY

Before the discussion of interfaith solidarity against globalization, it may be helpful to illustrate a model of Interreligious solidarity. An Interreligious solidarity model is discussed by a Muslim theologian, Dr. Farid Esack, who himself was engaged in the inter-religious solidarity that was instrumental in bringing an end to apartheid in South Africa. In his book, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, Esack effectively discusses an Islamic perspective of Interreligious solidarity against oppression. His basic premise is that emerging theology of religious pluralism among Muslim theologians in South Africa was intrinsically wedded to one of liberation.¹⁶

Esack gives an account of how South African Muslims succeeded in both cooperating with members of other faith communities in the struggle against oppression, and being true to their faith. In discussing the embrace of the other (neighbors of other faiths) in solidarity, he draws theological support and affirmation from the paradigm of Abyssynia, which is an alternative model to Mecca and Medina. This is a shift in theological frame. This is the paradigm of harmony and peace.

In a sharing with the General Board of Global Ministries in October 2001, Esack said, "The only paradigm we have is that it is either Mecca or Medina. If the paradigm of Mecca is the paradigm of the oppressed, the paradigm of Medina is the paradigm of control and domination. The early followers of Islam were persecuted in Mecca. Mecca offered the paradigm of persecution, victimization and marginalization. This paradigm is still working among Muslims. They feel that they are persecuted and victimized, especially by the United States.

On the other hand, Medina was where the Prophet Mohammed exercised full control from the moment he entered it. Thus, if Mecca offers the paradigm of persecution, victimization and marginalization, Medina represents the paradigm of control and domination.

This paradigm becomes the utopia, the ideal model of the world. They want to establish the world of Medina. "Theologically, we don't seem to have a way of dealing with the world as equals, as co-citizens," Esack said. "Medina is the utopia. We want to go back to Medina. But even if we would like to, we are not able to incorporate Medina in our daily life."

A combination of these two paradigms seems to explain the first reaction of the Muslims when the September 11th attacks happened. They rejoiced at what they did. They rejoiced at what happened along with the two-thirds of the world. Their resentment was that, "We are persecuted, we are victimized by the United States. We are not in control of the world. The U.S. is an obstacle to idealizing our utopia- Medina."

In the early stage of Islam, followers of the new religion experienced such great persecution in Mecca that the Prophet Muhammad advised them to move to Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The Christian king of Abyssinia received them with sympathy, and for several years Muslims lived with their Christian neighbors in peace.

Since September 11, Esack said he has noted a shift-taking place in Muslim thinking and theological discourse. In the midst of sorting out, he himself has proposed the Abyssinian model as a hopeful one. He proposes reviving the Abyssinian paradigm as a way to move forward with Muslim-Christian relations. Esack said that the Abyssinian experience exemplified a model of inter-religious relationship in which Christians and Muslims lived with each other justly. "When we can form Abyssinian community, we have reason to hope," Esack said.

VI. INTERRELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY AGAINST ILL EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

"So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So, then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all." Galatians 6:9-10

Asked during a news conference in Argentina why Latin Americans were increasingly rejecting the magic recipe of privatization, lower tariffs and increased foreign investment, Treasury Secretary Paul H. O'Neill replied, "I have no idea." When it was suggested to him that such policies were not yielding the expected results, he said, "I don't know of another plausible answer, do you?"¹⁷

"Yes, we do, Mr. O'Neill," I would respond. People in various sections are working out different proposals of alternatives. Many seem to agree that the free trade market is a failed development model (David Wildman, Response)¹⁸. It is also clear that there is an urgent need of alternatives to this gigantic globalization process that leads people's lives to ruins and servitude. Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Langan priest, is helpful in suggesting, "In the process it is necessary to discern who and what are the allies and enemies of this great human cause. Alternatives will have to be worked out, evaluated and shared as there are no blue prints for success... These orientations require spirituality of the leaders and of the groups to be self-critical, respectful of others efforts, and mutually supportive in campaigns, along with common evaluation of efforts."¹⁹

Now, more and more spiritual leaders are addressing this issue, locally as well as internationally. I have seen international conferences being pulled together around the common thread of globalization issues, especially the unacceptable nature of the current economic system. Currently opposition and struggle against

globalization are gaining strength, but seem to remain fragmented. Therefore, it is all the more important to pull together the international initiatives already in existence. Free trade is truly a global problem that affects the entire humanity. As Thangaraj claims, "Global problems need to be addressed by the global community, not simply by one branch of it. This means that Christians will be increasingly drawn into interaction and conversation with other religious communities in or mission to serve humanity."²⁰

Truly, our neighbors of different religious traditions are our allies, not our enemies in working toward freedom and justice. My earlier claim was that God's new creation aims toward justice, freedom and peace. However, the gospel of free market spreads through globalization does not concern the issues of justice, peace, sharing, love and compassion.

demonization?

The sharing of the earth's resources justly among all humans is a primary obligation of all disciples of Jesus. It is also the core teaching of the other world faiths, or the implication of their basic values (Balasuriya). Balasuriya goes on saying, "The core values of the religions are against greed, accumulation, exploitation of persons and nature and for sharing, tolerance, respect for all persons and nature. The religions advocate that society ensures that each person is cared for as a human being with rights to life and the means to contented living. All the religions stress the spirit of sharing of material resources among all humans" (Balasuriya).

A Better World is Possible: Inter-Religious Forum on Globalization

Perpetual optimists like some of us continue to dream of a better world and hang high catch phrases such as "A sustainable world is possible," or "A better world is possible".²¹

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, which will be held this month in South Africa, is a place and time that advocates that a sustainable world is possible. This event is considered a unique opportunity for different groups to publicly express their vision, expectations and positive actions for a positive and sustainable future. The Global Peoples Forum at the WSSD is a good example.

I would advocate a similar interreligious summit on sustainable development. I believe that forces brought by interfaith dialogue and actions should be able to provide a forum and space for those involved in social change processes, such as landless people, anti-globalization movements, human rights etc. with a view of integrating sustainability within the vision and actions.

in Johannesburg

Interreligious solidarity will bring power in working against globalization and for calling for actions to build a better world. A global interreligious forum on globalization could be a place for all people to get together to explore ideas and

alternatives and determine the changes that need to be made in making a sustainable development possible.

Interfaith communities in solidarity can examine what has already been proposed by other groups and see how they can provide spiritual leadership in this alternative movement. For instance, there is a document offered by the Alternatives Committee of the International Forum on Globalization, "A Better World is Possible: Alternatives to Economic Globalization."²² This document illustrates visions that bring about changes at the global institutional level. In summary, this document recommends reforming the Bretton Woods Institutions including the World Bank and the IMF, and unifying global economic governance under a reformed UN system. To me, what is significant about this document is that it recognizes that "the society is at a crucial crossroads. A peaceful, equitable and sustainable future depends on the vision of democratic economic process, not one corporate." A better world is possible!

Dava - World Economic Summit

VII. CONCLUSION

The human family is God's family. Despite the long histories of conflict, persecution and suffering, we remain hopeful as we hear about religious people entering into a dialogue and collaboration process. I believe that we need to continue to create and search for mission opportunities such as interfaith cooperation on globalization that are in line with our mission understanding of God's purpose in humanity and in history.

Wesley is right. Insofar as we use our religious zeal to do service to our neighbor, whether in temporal or spiritual things, not persecuting others,²³ we will bring a better world and a sustainable world.

¹ The New York Times, "Brazilians Find Political Cost for Help from I.M.F.," Sunday August 11, 2002

² Wesley, John, "Sermon 92: On Zeal" – p. 308

³ Wesley, John, "Thoughts: The Present Scarcity of Provisions," Wesley's Works, Vol. II, Jackson Edition – pp. 53-59

⁴ Wolfwood, Therese J, "Seattle: A Convergence of Globalization and Militarization," *There is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization*, ed. By Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas Faraclas, and Claudia Von Werlhof, Zed- Books, 2001

⁵ "Stitch by stitch to a different world," *The Economist*, July 31, 2002

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- ⁶ Tamez, Elsa, (2000), "Hagar and Sarah in Galatians; A Case Study in Freedom," *Word and World* 20, No.3 (Summer 2000), - p.27
- ⁷ Federici, Silvia, "War, Globalization and Reproduction," *There is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization*, ed. By Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas Faraclas, and Claudia Von Werlhof, Zed- Books, 2001 – pp.133-134
- ⁸ *ibid* – pp135-136
- ⁹ Tamez, Elsa (1998), "Three Biblical Reflections for Our Time," *Hope and Justice for All in the Americas, Discerning God's mission*, ed. By Oscar L. Bolioli, Friendship Press, New York – p. 13
- ¹⁰ Martin Marty, "Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance" – pp.329-343
- ¹¹ Diana L. Eck, Elinor J. Pierce, And Alan G. Wagner "The Pluralism Project", Harvard University
- ¹² *My Neighbour's Faith -- and Mine. Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue: A Study Guide.* Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986
- ¹³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* – p.187
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- ¹⁴ *My Neighbour's Faith -- and Mine. Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue: A Study Guide.* Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986, - p.vii
- ¹⁵ Farid Esack. *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, One World Publications, 1997 – p. 180
- ¹⁶ *Ibid* – p.179
- ¹⁷ The New York Times, "Brazilians Find Political Cost for Help from I.M.F.," Sunday August 11, 2002
- ¹⁸ Wildman, David, "Free Trade," *Response*, February, 2002
- ¹⁹ Tissa Balasuriya, *Globalization and Human Solidarity*, Religion on Line, 2002
- ²⁰ M.Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task* – p.23
- ²¹ The Alternatives Committee of the International forum on Globalization, *Report Summary, A Better World is Possible!, Alternatives to Economic Globalization*
- ²² *Ibid*
- ²³ Wesley, John, "Sermon 92: On Zeal"