

Where in our pluralist world will the *Missio Dei* take us?

Pondering mission encounters in pluralist societies

Walter Sawatsky

Christians in the West tend to think Christianity had a bicultural beginning: we see it as a Jewish-Christian reality that early on became more philosophically Greek. Then, following the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, and Jerome's translation of the Bible into idiomatic Latin in the late fourth century, the faith—so

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we think—spread monolingually until all Christendom learned to worship in Latin. By this account, the shift toward a multilingual reality came with the Reformation, with Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (circa 1455) and the appearance of English, German, and Dutch translations.

But a closer look reveals indicators of a multilingual beginning throughout the New Testament.¹ And evidence of a multilingual reality also appears in recent histories of early Christianity, not only at Pentecost, but also in the relatively rapid spread of the faith eastward from Antioch in Syria into Persia, Armenia, Georgia, India, and also into

Arabic-speaking Africa. We have lost sight of the fact that Western Christianity only rose to prominence after 1300.

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1 Nancy R. Heisey, “The Non-Pauline Mission in the New Testament,” and “Thinking Again about Paul's Mission,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 13 (2005): 5–17, 18–30.

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As we have learned, when you translate you engage in a creative act. The translator seeks “dynamic equivalence,” as in the *Good News Bible*, not the word-for-word “translation” that Google has offered. Further, the bridging person—a definition of a missionary—has learned to live and

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think in more than one culture, and has been changed thereby. A few years ago, Lamin Sanneh observed with a sense of awe that whereas for Muslims everywhere the singular word for God is Allah, in the Jewish and Christian traditions this revealed God submitted to the vulnerability of having God’s name translated into all possible languages. That observation points to the vulnerability within which mission in pluralist societies happens.

The diversity of perceptions of who God is, of what Jesus should look like, or how each Christian must live, in order to truly claim the name, seems infinite. The word *pluralism* has become a commonplace in North American society in recent decades, but in itself it conveys little. Here I can only ponder, by means of a few anecdotes, some of the *pluralisms* I have encountered.


In post-Christian Europe

As a teaching assistant in graduate school at the University of Minnesota, sharing an office with a dozen other TAs, I was one of only three or four who professed some form of Christian allegiance. The rest had little use for religion, in either personal life or academic study. That experience helped me later, when I would travel in Western Europe on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee. Sometimes I would strike up a conversation with a seatmate on a plane or train. Eventually he (or she) would ask about my work. I would say that I was a historian of Christianity, particularly of the USSR, and an administrator of MCC programs in Europe. He would express surprise. “You are clearly well educated and widely read. How can you live in post-Christian Europe as a believer?” That was when the conversation got really interesting for both of us. Often the seatmate

would talk about Christian hypocrisy that had turned him off. Often he would express regret that he had not noticed enough alternatives to those negative experiences to allow himself to consider a deeper spirituality.

“Christ is risen”

I first traveled to the USSR in the spring of 1973 as a student in a Canada/USSR cultural exchange program. On Easter Sunday, I was invited to the apartment of a university professor in Leningrad, someone my doctoral adviser knew. The night before my visit, I had pushed my way through a circle of volunteer militia wearing red armbands. They were seeking to discourage young people in particular from entering the Orthodox cathedral, where Metropolitan Nikodim would lead the Easter midnight liturgy. With sweating bodies all around me, I waited for four hours for the service to start. Finally, around 11:40 p.m. the liturgy began with a speedy recounting (from scripture) of the Last Supper, Gethsemane, the trial—and the crucifixion, with Jesus’s lament, “Why have you forsaken me?” Then all the lights went out.



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Just after midnight one little candle flickered into flame, and within a few minutes the flame had been passed from one candle to the next until all the candles held by all those present were lit. We began to sing a simple, repetitive song, proclaiming “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.” Metropolitan Nikodim led the priests out onto the balcony surrounding the cathedral. He shouted “Christ is risen” to the mass of people inside the fence, loud enough so that the unbelievers heard it too.

When I found my way back to my dorm room at about 3:00 a.m., the refrain “Christ is Risen” had entered my bones, my whole body. Later that morning, Baptist worshipers on the edge of the city, beside the woods, held their predictable worship service. But they also sang that song, and they too could not seem to decide when to stop. By midafternoon I was at the professor’s apartment, with a few Soviet friends. Supper lasted a long time, because after we ate each little delicacy, someone would rise to

offer a toast. Each time, the toast would end with the speaker saying, “So therefore, Christ is risen.” And we shouted back, “He is risen indeed.”

Did those celebrating that day mean it? If so, what did they mean? They surely didn’t want to lose their jobs. Gradually I learned about the murky ways in which even well-educated people were beginning to search for Christ. Mikhail Bulgakov’s convoluted allegory, *The Master and Margarita*, was a text that had brought members of the intelligentsia to Father Dimitri Dudko to be baptized. Still others told of reading the easily accessible atheist literature; it contained scripture passages for the sake of refuting them, but that limited exposure to scripture had sufficed to start some readers on a journey toward and with God.

“What good is a road if it does not lead to a church?”

Later, in 1989, I met a prominent scholar from the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, which was then providing numerous experts who were fostering Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of perestroika (“restructuring”). We talked about what was happening. As a young sociologist, he had come to the US with a Church of the Brethren exchange program. So he had encountered Christians, and he had joined forces with them in efforts to find a peaceful way to end the Cold War. But he remained an atheist, convinced of Marxist ideals.

Now (in 1989) his married daughter was a member of the Communist Party, had a good job, and was successful. In contrast, his son had recently been baptized as a Christian and assumed he would be harassed and never have a good career. It was his son this scholar was proud of: the authentic morality the son was seeking to live by reminded his father of the Brethren he had known. Then he said, “You know, I would like to be like my son, to take that leap of faith, but so far I have not found the capacity to believe and trust.” We parted with some sadness, after more conversation about so many who were finding their way to a church. Six months later I learned that he had died of a heart attack.

That “on the way” theme had been talked about everywhere in 1987, when the previously banned film *Repentance* was being shown in the cinemas.² The movie ends with this exchange, in which an old woman asks the central female character, “Is this the road to the church?” She responds,

2 *Repentance*, directed by Tengiz Abuladze and set in Georgia, was made in 1984, but it was initially banned in the Soviet Union because of its semi-allegorical critique of Stalinism.

“This is Varlam Street. It will not take you to the church.”³ The old woman replies, “Then what’s the use of it? What good is a road if it does not lead to a church?” That final question became a headline of many newspaper and journal articles.

“Been there, done that”

Around 2007, after I gave a lecture in Moscow at one of the newly established theological colleges, a close Russian friend teaching at Moscow Theological Seminary (which trains Baptists and other Evangelical Christians), took me to a distant suburb for a prayer gathering. All present were pastors in the twenty to thirty suburban Moscow congregations that had formed after 1990, so many of them were pastors of people who had converted after 1990. The topic for the morning was local evangelism.

As they went around the circle, their reporting began to convey to me the depth of inner dismay, even depression, these young pastors were experiencing. No longer were people begging for a Bible to read, as had happened in 1989. Now there was no interest. “Been there, done that” was the phrase they kept repeating. Even church members had gone back to spending Sunday morning polishing their cars, going shopping, etc. A de facto atheism—acting as if God is irrelevant, though it is nice to go to worship once in a while—had reached even to Russia’s cities, thanks in part to Western missionaries of various stripes, with too many of whom I found it difficult to find common ground.

Seeking a bridge

The moment when mind-boggling pluralisms confronted Mennonites came especially for those able to attend the 1997 Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Calcutta, India. At that assembly, I was a volunteer overseeing workshops held during the second part of the morning. We were just in the process of organizing the Global Mennonite History Project, and were learning about other settings in Asia and in Africa. As a volunteer, I was assigned a cot in a room large enough to sleep at least fifty people, with some cold water showers nearby. Almost all of the fifty staying there were pastors from the Mennonite Brethren world of Hyderabad.

3 The movie deals with the rise to a position of power and terror of Varlam Aravidze (his surname means “every man” or “no man”); as mayor, he had destroyed the church, and the street was thus no longer called Church Street.

They spoke Telegu, and only a few knew English. So we communicated in minimal English.

It is only more recently, through historian I. P. Asheervadam's chapter in the Asia volume of the global Mennonite history series, that I learned more of the background of the Dalit (untouchable) people—those who had become leaders in the Indian Mennonite Brethren church—and about the emerging Dalit theology, which is at the center of Asheervadam's dissertation. Why had so many of them responded to the gospel, and converted as entire villages? This happened often enough in northern India that missiologist Donald McGavran had made it a key issue for missiology as early as the 1960s.

When I talked with Indian leaders from Hyderabad present at the Calcutta assembly, they told me about the many people in their region who had been Muslim for several generations. Now these Mennonite Brethren believers were exploring ways of conversing with their Muslim neighbors, seeking to find a bridge that would enable such people to take more seriously the Jesus they could read about in the Quran. This issue was the area of church growth they were concerned about then.

When nightfall came, and most of the foreign visitors had been bussed to their hotels, we settled down in our room full of cots. The glassless windows let in charcoal smoke from fires over which big pots of rice were cooking. Often I went for a walk at dusk. Surrounding the campus where we were meeting were many small shops which sold small goods, bottled water, and the textiles tourists were interested in. Shopkeepers pulled down barred shutters as they closed up for the night, but they often huddled in the doorway for a meal and to complete their religious rituals. As I walked around the area, I could easily recognize Hindu symbols, and Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh ones, but there seemed to be more than a hundred other religious markers that I could not identify. Even in a context where Hindu and Muslim politicians competed for political power, India was a world of many other religions too.

Fitting into context

The week before the Mennonite assembly in Calcutta, about fifty educators from around the Mennonite world had gathered in the college that William Carey had founded,⁴ to seek common ground for better fostering

4 Serampore College was founded in 1818 by Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward.

theological education for our churches around the world. On New Year's Eve, we were invited to a Catholic parish nearby for midnight mass. The bishop, representing another minority expression of Christianity in that Indian setting, welcomed us as fellow believers, and spoke a prayer of intercession for us and our upcoming world conference.

Once again I found myself pondering the ways my learned stereotypes were not working. I thought about William Carey (1761–1834), that cobbler who dedicated himself to bringing the Christian gospel to India, starting in 1793 in the place where we were. A few other missionaries eventually joined the work, but the walls of incomprehension were high. If in 1997 most of the Christian colleges and seminaries in India were legally registered via Carey's college, it was because it had set a pattern for fitting into the context. What is still remembered about Carey, and others like him, was their persistence in getting to know their world. It was language learning and publishing dictionaries to help others that became the legacy.

Eventually there were large Baptist communities. They lacked staff, so Baptists offered Mennonite Brethren missionaries from Russia to live and work in that Telegu-speaking region. Paul Hiebert (1932–2007), grandson of one of those missionaries, became the go-to teacher of anthropology in mission at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, California) and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois). When he spoke to a gathering of North American mission administrators and missiologists a few years before he died, he challenged our conventional theologies again, by deeply probing what transformed worldview—what thoroughgoing conversion—is necessary in a globalized context.

Recent encounters with post-Communist societies in Russia and Georgia

Just as Russia was using surrogates in late 2014 to undercut Ukrainian independence from the old Soviet Union, Mykhailo Cherenkov in Kiev issued a call for more serious missional engagement with the culture.⁵ The book he and British missionary Joshua Searle published in English and Russian assessed, twenty-five years later, what their frantic evangelism and mission efforts since 1989 had achieved. Too focused on salvation of

5 Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education, and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

the soul, too reliant on the evangelism strategies introduced from abroad, they had failed to remember sufficiently why it was, for example, that at a 1989 gathering of 10,000 in the Zaporozhe stadium—which Mennonites from Kazakhstan had organized to celebrate 200 years of Mennonite sojourn in Russia—that everyone was asking for a Bible, and so many made commitments to Jesus Christ.

In spite of decades of aggressive atheist propaganda and persecution, these converts and listeners had been watching local evangelical believers with growing respect. Further, Cherenkov kept stressing integration of faith and action, a living out of the gospel for all people. The book is peppered with references to writings of people in the West—not only John Howard Yoder and James William McClendon Jr., but also people Cherenkov and Searle know: Peter Penner, Johannes Reimer, Mark Elliott, and me. Moving further, Cherenkov and Searle urged evangelicals to take more responsibility for social ministries. Above all, they lamented their inattention to manifestations of corruption emerging again, now under the new order.⁶

Meantime, in Georgia, finally an independent nation in 1991, Baptist leaders were becoming more active and more critically reflective about their life and witness. Georgia has been Christian since the fourth century. Its Bible dates from those early beginnings, and a modern translation appeared only in 1989. One of the translators was a Baptist with a doctorate in Semitic languages. That young man, Malkhaz Songulashvili, would become leader of the Evangelical Baptist Union of Georgia a decade later, following in the footsteps of his parents and grandparents in ways that began to frighten leaders in the Euro-Asian Federation of Evangelical Christian Baptist Unions; around 2006, his union was expelled.

Songulashvili's thorough history of Baptists in Georgia (2015) was much more a missiology for everyone than a chronological narrative about an obscure minority in Georgia.⁷ He argues that if Christianity is to take context seriously, then Georgian Baptists must own that they are indeed Georgians, that they share that culture, and that they embrace Orthodoxy in its best renewed sense. He encouraged adoption of Orthodox

6 For more detail, see my review in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 35, no. 3 (July 2015), online at <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss3/5/>.

7 Malkhas Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2015). See my detailed review (citing other reactions) in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 37, no. 2 (March 2017), online at <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss2/5/>.

liturgy, with icons, vestments, and hierarchy. Renewal-seeking Orthodox priests and bishops encouraged these developments, until a new catholicos (patriarch) resisted. By then, too, the role of women (from the first convert who was a woman forward) had shifted toward recognizing greater equality of gifts, until a few women had been ordained as priests, and one as regional bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia.

Songulashvili also became an active advocate and practitioner of non-violence. Soon his public intervention in behalf of other minorities, including homosexuals in Georgia and even Uganda, caused part of his own union to express concern. So he resigned as archbishop but remained bishop in Tbilisi while also teaching on religious and interfaith subjects at the state university. Songulashvili's commitment to mission in context must cause all of us to ponder where the *Missio Dei* in our pluralist world is happening in ways we must join.

About the author

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