

MISSIO DEI: THE UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING OF A THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT IN EUROPEAN CHURCHES AND MISSIOLOGY

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1. Introduction

I feel honoured to have been asked to give a lecture at this mission congress that is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the world mission conference here in Willingen. There is certainly ample reason to celebrate. We celebrate not only the Willingen conference of fifty years ago, but we also want to remember the dramatic developments in missiology during the second half of the last century that in many ways began in Willingen. The development that found its most extreme form in the 1960s and early 70s¹ involved a change from a more anthropocentric understanding of mission to a more theocentric, and from a more ecclesiocentric perspective to a more cosmocentric. In the latter perspective, the world, both in its socio-political and religious dimensions, is at the centre of attention.

The theocentric perspective was, of course, not new in the 20th century. It can already be found in Martin Luther's thinking about mission. The American Lutheran missiologist, James A. Scherer says, "For Luther, mission is always pre-eminently the work of the triune God – *missio Dei* – and its goal and outcome is the coming of the kingdom of God. Luther sees the church, along with God's word and every baptized believer, as crucial divine instruments for mission. Yet, nowhere does the reformer make the church the starting point or the final goal of mission, as 19th-century missiology tended to do. It is always God's own mission that dominates Luther's thought, and the coming of the kingdom of God represents its final culmination".² Here, already, we encounter the three concepts that form a dynamic triangle in post-war missiological thought: *missio Dei*, the kingdom of God and the church. Much of the discussion is centred on how they relate, and the answers given diverge strongly.

Before looking at the concept of *missio Dei* and the understanding of it in a historical perspective, I may be allowed two comments on my theme. Firstly, missiology is a global ecumenical discipline. Some of the most important milestones of missiology in the 20th century were the great mission conferences that for the most part were global in scope. Hence, to restrict the discussion of *missio Dei* to European churches and missiology seems somewhat arbitrary. I shall, however, for the most part limit my comments to European missiologists, but I cannot promise not to have the larger picture in mind.

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Secondly, the words “understanding and misunderstanding” assume that something more than a historical perspective is required. In some sense, there is a right understanding and a wrong one. This implies a normative perspective, and I will in this article present some normative positions. I would like to characterize them as Lutheran and evangelical.³

2. The origin and content of the concept *missio Dei*

The term *missio Dei* has a long history that goes back to Augustine and relates to the doctrine of the Trinity, but this is not our main concern here. It is the use of the phrase in missiology that is our topic. Although one of the main reasons for the fame of the Willingen conference is the introduction of the concept of *missio Dei*, I have not been able to find the term in the documents from the conference itself.⁴ It seems that it was Karl Hartenstein who, in his report from Willingen, coined the phrase when he spoke of mission as “participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with an inclusive aim of establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation”.⁵ To quote Hartenstein more fully, “Mission is not just the conversion of the individual, nor just obedience to the word of the Lord, nor just the obligation to gather the church. It is the taking part in the sending of the Son, the *missio Dei*, with the holistic aim of establishing Christ’s rule over all redeemed creation”.⁶

In my estimation, however, the emphasis in Willingen on a trinitarian basis of mission is even more important than the somewhat ambiguous phrase *missio Dei*. It is also this that is most clearly brought out in the report itself when it says, “The missionary movement of which we are part has its source in the triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father, in that perfect love which is the very nature of God”.⁷ It is this trinitarian basis of mission that should form the foundation of any understanding of *missio Dei*. In addition, we may note that Hartenstein only negates the “onlys” and therefore does not deny that mission also is conversion of the individual, obedience to a divine word, and an obligation to gather the church. The emphasis, however, lies on the trinitarian foundation and the universal redemptive purpose of mission.

It was another German missiologist, Georg F. Vicedom, who has the honour of having developed the concept of *missio Dei* in a way that seems to be consistent with the more classical missiology that preceded Willingen, and quite different from the more radical missiology that, under the same label, was worked out during the 1960s. In his book *Missio Dei*, Vicedom emphasizes that mission is God’s work from beginning to end. God is the acting subject in mission. However, Vicedom does not thereby exclude the church from the mission of God but includes it: “The mission, and with it the church, is God’s very own work”.⁸ Both the church and the mission of the church are “tools of God, instruments through which God carries out His mission.”⁹

In this mission of God, God is both the sender and the one being sent. This accounts for the trinitarian structure of the *missio Dei*. "The highest mystery of the mission out of which it grows and lives is: God sends His Son, Father and Son send the Holy Spirit. Here God makes Himself not only the One sent, but at the same time the content of the sending."¹⁰ From this content of the mission, Vicedom argues that the purpose of the mission is salvation. The revelation of God in his mission is always for the sake of the salvation of human beings. Mission is a continuation of the redemptive act of God: "The mission can be nothing else than the continuation of the saving activity of God through the publication of the deeds of salvation. This is its greatest authority and supreme commission".¹¹ I agree with this understanding of the mission of God.

It should be said, however, that in his book Vicedom also opens up an understanding of *missio Dei* that is not restricted to this combination of the trinitarian perspective and the redemptive purpose. This reveals a basic problem that often appears when the concept of *missio Dei* is combined with an understanding of the kingdom of God as the "rule of God".¹² The differences in the understanding of *missio Dei* correspond with differences in the understanding of the kingdom of God. It is therefore necessary to take a brief look at two major concepts of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God (Greek: *basileia theou*) may either be understood as the reign or rule of God over the whole of creation (sometimes including redemption), or the present and final salvation that God offers in Christ (sometimes including ethical and social transformation). If it is understood in the former sense, the kingdom may be seen as universal, relatively independent of the church, primarily ethical (i.e. the realization of the will of God in the world), an object of faith and hope in the present (though some signs of it may be discerned), and as something to be fully empirically realized in this world only in the future. Its growth includes all of history. Its realization is therefore often seen as taking place primarily in the social and political realm. The church may be a witness to or a participant in the realization of the kingdom, but it is not the primary or sole actor.

However, if the kingdom of God is understood in the latter sense (i.e. as the present and final salvation that God offers in Christ), then it is restricted to salvation history. This is the "realm" where salvation is found, through faith in Christ and participation in his church. It is primarily a future eschatological reality, to be equated with eternal life, in a new perfect creation. In this life the kingdom is experienced as a foretaste of life to come. This understanding does not deny that God is the ruler of all the world, but sees this in terms of creation and preservation rather than in terms of the kingdom of God. Nor does this view exclude the ethical or present aspects of the kingdom, but it emphasizes that it is through the church and its mission that the peace and justice of the kingdom are worked out. The church, seen as the people who belong to the kingdom, is God's main instrument to serve the world in all its needs, both through personal service and through social and political action (*diakonia*).

It should be clear that I favour the latter soteriological understanding of the kingdom as more in line with the New Testament witness.¹³ One reason for this is that it would be difficult to understand how the kingdom could be announced as a future kingdom that has drawn near, as in the preaching of Jesus (cf. Mark 1:15), if it is identical with the rule of God over the whole world, which is a reality already from creation. However, only a study of the meaning of the expression “kingdom of God” in the New Testament can solve this disagreement. Here we can only affirm that the understanding of the kingdom has significant consequences for the understanding of *missio Dei*.

If we return to Vicedom and his discussion of the kingdom of God, we notice that he maintains that the content of the kingdom is Jesus, that it is a gift, that it is a kingdom of salvation, and that it is both present and future.¹⁴ However, Vicedom at the same time explores an understanding of *missio Dei* where it is not exclusively bound to the sending of the Son and to redemption.¹⁵ He talks about a *missio Dei* which is related to God’s work as creator and preserver, and to the lordship of God, “Herrschaft Gottes” (rule of God). In addition to the special *missio Dei* in Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in the sending of prophets and apostles, there is a *missio Dei* where God sends impersonal realities and thereby says, “That also by such means he brings his direct influence to bear on the world”. Then examples are given and the conclusion is drawn: “He exemplifies Himself as a God who has not excluded His creation from his care”.¹⁶

The Norwegian missiologist Jan-Martin Berentsen says that Vicedom in reality understands *missio Dei* both in a general sense as God’s work in creation and preservation, and in a special sense as the redemptive sending of the Son. Although there is presumably no Christian who would deny that God is the ruler of the world, that he is creator and preserver, it nevertheless seems that Vicedom opens up new and more radical views of mission when he ties creation to the concepts of *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God. Others would later take this “*missio Dei generalis*”¹⁷ and make it the main or the only understanding of *missio Dei*.

There is a quite understandable tendency among mission theologians to expand the concept of mission to include almost everything the church is doing, or to place mission at the centre of the response to the many challenges that face the church in the contemporary world. It takes some courage to limit or restrict both the biblical basis and the theological understanding of mission, as well as the practical outworking of it to what is the specifically missionary “intention”, without denying the missionary “dimension” (to borrow the famous words of Lesslie Newbigin¹⁸) of all the church is doing. This is not to say that mission is not central, even fundamental, to being the church, or that mission is only an aspect or function of the church. Mission belongs to the very *esse* of the church, to its being as an apostolic and catholic church. Yet there is some truth in the saying, “When everything is mission, nothing is mission”.

We must acknowledge that the term *missio Dei*, as well as the closely related term “kingdom” or “rule of God”, has been used by missiology in this – I

would almost say theologically imperialistic way – as a comprehensive concept that includes almost everything the church is supposed to do, or, even more, what God is doing, particularly with regard to the contemporary world and its many needs.

The British missiologist, J. Andrew Kirk has pointed out how the concept of *missio Dei* is used in this comprehensive way: “Its primary reference is to the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole universe. The wideness of its scope means that it has become a tag on which an enormous range of meaning has been hung. Legitimately and illegitimately the *missio Dei* has been used to advance all kinds of missiological agendas”.¹⁹ Kirk himself, however, would argue for a much more qualified use of the term, in line with the trinitarian and redemptive use: “When Christian communities speak about God, by definition they speak about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There simply is no other God. Therefore to speak about *missio Dei* is to indicate, without any qualification, the *missio Trinitatis*”.²⁰

With regard to the source and goal of the *missio Dei*, Kirk says, “The mission of God flows directly from the nature of who God is...God’s intention for the world is that in every respect it should show forth the way he is – love, community, equality, diversity, mercy, compassion and justice”.²¹ I would personally like to add to this list of divine realities the supreme quality of God, namely his *holiness*, without which it is impossible to have communion with God. Therefore sanctification as well as justification are basic requirements of communion with God, and at the same time gifts that are granted by grace to believers in Christ (cf. 1 Cor.1:30). The salvation that is the aim of *missio Dei* includes both the vertical dimension of communion with God and the horizontal dimension of human relationships.

Kirk draws out the connection with the kingdom of God when he states, “In contemporary mission thinking no one would contemplate trying to grasp the *missio Dei* without a thorough reference to the rule or reign of God”.²² “In this text (1 Cor. 15:24) the kingdom is understood as life free from the reign of all those forces which enslave humanity...In another sense, the kingdom is the sphere of life where God’s Spirit is in control, where justice, peace and joy are experienced completely and permanently” (Rom. 14:17).²³ This is, however, not divorced from the church, since the mission of the church is a response to the *missio Dei*: “It (the church) is a community in response to the *missio Dei*, bearing witness to God’s activity in the world by its communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed”.²⁴

This way of putting it may, however, lead to the misunderstanding that the activity of God in the world, *missio Dei*, is something different from what God is doing in and through the church. As I see it, the communication of the good news – in word and deed – is basically the means, the instrument, by which the kingdom of God is coming, by which God fulfils his mission. Here, a Lutheran understanding of the church as the instrument for God’s grace through the word and the sacraments could help us to see the central role of the church in mission for the growth and coming of the kingdom. The church

has not only a witnessing or participating function in what God is doing in the world, but it has a sacramental or instrumental function, in that the mission of God is carried out in and through the church as its primary locus. The deeper theological reason for this is that humans are saved only by faith in Christ, and that this faith comes by hearing the gospel, preached in word and deed (cf. Rom. 10: 13-15; 15:18-20).

3. The discussion of *missio Dei* in the 1960s

The connection between the concept of *missio Dei*, the church, and the kingdom of God is also brought out clearly by James A. Scherer. He sees the problem of accomplishing a successful transition from an earlier church-centred theology of mission to a kingdom oriented one without the loss of missionary vision or biblical content, as one of the crucial missiological problems of the second half of the 20th century.²⁵

There seems to be close to a consensus among the different strands of missiological thinking that such a transition was necessary. If we go back to as late as 1968, Wolfhart Pannenberg could complain that the theme of the kingdom of God had no place in contemporary theology²⁶, while Johannes Verkuyl with satisfaction ten years later could assert that, "Missiology is more and more coming to see the kingdom of God as the hub around which all of mission work revolves. One can almost speak of a consensus developing on this point".²⁷

In a recent article I have noted that the theme of *missio Dei* also seems to be one where a consensus is developing.²⁸ However, when a consensus is building or established with regard to the use of a common concept among theologians, who otherwise have opposing opinions, it may indicate that the content of the concept of consensus is understood quite differently, and that the consensus therefore is more one of terminology than theological substance. It may also indicate that the time has come for a new investigation of the matter, a fresh challenge of established opinion, although there seems to be no return to the previous form of church-centred missiology.

I have argued that we must hold the concepts of the trinitarian *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God together. I also would like to quote Scherer on this: "We have not yet fully grasped the meaning of a move toward the kingdom orientation, which closely correlates with the trinitarian *Missio Dei* viewpoint that gained currency in the 1950s".²⁹ In his opinion the Willingen conference of fifty years ago was crucially important in that the church-centred view of mission was challenged but still held sway, as the conference declared: "God sends forth the Church to carry out His work to the ends of the earth, to all nations, and to the end of time".³⁰ In my opinion, the time has come to reaffirm at this anniversary not only the *missio Dei* vision of Willingen 1952 but also the vision of the church as the instrument or agent of the *missio Dei*. I see no conflict between the two visions, and a new emphasis on the role of the church. For example, the development of the "missional church" concept

could well bring a new and fresh perspective on the role of the church within the framework of the *missio Dei*.

But let us go back to the discussion of the above mentioned transition: The church-centred missiology around the turn of the former century drew much of its force from the vision of the unreached nations and unconquered areas of the world. As the church was understood as the national church, the vision seemed to fade as the church was planted in practically all nations.³¹ The vision of the evangelical mission movement of the unreached or hidden peoples, not as nations but as people groups, which became common from the Lausanne congress in 1974 and onwards, gave, however, new impetus to church planting, combined with individual conversions, as the primary goal of mission. This was succinctly expressed in the slogan of the “AD 2000 and Beyond” movement in the 1990s: “A church for every people and the gospel for every person by the year 2000”. A problem which arises when missionary goals are defined sociologically or pragmatically, or in terms of statistics, as in much of American practical missiology during the past thirty years, is that the goals appear to be achievable, and, in the next phase, when “fulfilled”, to be obsolete.

The old church-centred missiology was theologically deficient in that it did not fully realize the broadness of the missionary task as modelled, for example, by Jesus’ own ministry to the poor, the suffering and marginalized. Neither did it adequately realize that Jesus’ initial call to repentance and faith in the gospel because the kingdom of God was near (Mark 1:15), presupposes the temporal and substantial priority of the kingdom over the church, as well as the eschatological character of the kingdom and therefore also the mission of the church (Matt. 24:14). The church is part of the *missio Dei*, but the mission of the church cannot simply be identified with God’s mission.

Regardless of the flaws of the earlier church-centred missiology, the attacks on it and the alternatives to it that were put forward under the name of *missio Dei* were quite early hampered by interpretations of missiology that, as expressed in the title of this lecture, were “misunderstandings”.

Scherer for one puts it quite sharply, “In the decade of the 1960s, *missio Dei* became the plaything of armchair theologians with little more than an academic interest in the practical mission of the church but with a considerable penchant for theological speculation and mischief making”.³² Scherer refers to those theologians in Europe and the US who worked on the WCC project, “The Missionary Structure of the Congregation” before Uppsala 1968. Theirs was a fundamentally different and non-trinitarian understanding of *missio Dei* influenced strongly by the contemporary secularization of theology. It is one of the rather sad events of the past fifty years of missiology that such a rich and promising concept as *missio Dei* should be taken over and reinterpreted in a way that would require years in order to restore it to its proper place.

It was the Dutch missiologist, J.C. Hoekendijk, who through his own writings as well as his influence on others would be mostly responsible for the change of understanding of *missio Dei* that happened during the 1960s. Hoekendijk

had been active in the preparation of the Willingen conference; already then he attacked the church-centred view of mission.³³ However, his views did not win the day in 1952. It took some more years before his views became dominant in some ecumenical mission circles.

Hoekendijk's view of evangelism is clearly contrary to what the term historically used to mean. He removes the church from centre stage in relation to mission and evangelism in several ways. When he discusses evangelism, he sees firstly Messiah (Christ) himself as the subject of evangelism, and, therefore, secondly, the aim of evangelism is nothing less than what Israel expected the Messiah to do, i.e. establish shalom. This shalom is "at once peace, integrity, community, harmony, and justice", and he goes on, "This concept in all its comprehensive richness should be our leitmotif in Christian work. God intends the redemption of the whole of creation".³⁴

The negative consequence of this understanding is the rejection of two well-known methods of evangelism, namely "propaganda" and the planting of the church.³⁵ Hoekendijk argues that the church should be a function of the apostolate, which he understands as "God's redemptive action in the world". Shalom should be proclaimed (kerygma), lived in koinonia and demonstrated in humble service, diakonia. We may agree with Hoekendijk when he says, "These three aspects, kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia, should be integrated in our work of evangelism. Only so are our methods of evangelism justified".³⁶ But we may ask: Why should this, or the concept of shalom itself, be played out against the planting of the church, when the church is the "institution" – to use a word with some negative connotations – that should have exactly these functions?

In a famous section, Hoekendijk outlines the central concepts of his understanding of mission, expressed in the following sequence: kingdom – apostolate – oikoumene. He says, "It is true that the context Kingdom-apostolate-oikoumene does not leave much room for the church. Ecclesiology does not fit here. When one desires to speak about God's dealings with the world, the church can be mentioned only in passing and without strong emphasis". The church is only the church to the extent that it lets itself be used as a part of God's dealings with the oikoumene. For this reason it can only be "ecumenical", that means in Hoekendijk's language, oriented toward the oikoumene – the whole world. To Hoekendijk, oikoumene is another word for world. Then follows his famous sentence: "Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre".³⁷

The *missio Dei* did not figure centrally in Hoekendijk's own terminology but it seems that it became the concept into which his thinking about the kingdom, the apostolate and the oikoumene, as well as the goal of shalom, was poured in the 1960s.

It is through "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" study process, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, that the concept of *missio Dei*, inspired by Hoekendijk's missiology came to the fore. Two groups, one North American and the other Western European, worked on the theme,

and came up with reports which were later collected as “The Church for Others”.³⁸ The Western European group focussed on the work of God outside the church, *extra muros ecclesiae*. It is into the world and into world history that God sends, and to participate in God’s mission is to enter into cooperation with God in the world and in this history. The goal of *missio Dei* is to establish shalom. The primary focus of *missio Dei* is therefore the world. The church’s role is to give testimony to this mission – because it is supposed to know what is going on – and to join it in the sense of working with the movements in the world that further shalom, whether or not these movement have any Christian basis. The order is therefore not God-church-world, but God-world-church. Or one might rather say: God-world-shalom (or: humanization, which was the North American word for the aim of God’s mission), while the church does not really have any important place in this sequence of *missio Dei*.³⁹ Scherer says, “For Hoekendijk, it appeared, *missio Dei* had become identified with a process of historical transformation whereby humankind would gradually achieve the goals of the messianic kingdom through the processes of secular history”.⁴⁰ Therefore, the world would set the agenda for the church. Scherer is quite outspoken in his critique: “Hoekendijk’s reflections went far beyond the challenge to church parochialism and self-sufficiency; they implied a quite new, unhistorical, and methodologically unclear model for Christian mission”.⁴¹

In a perceptive article, Berentsen points out that from Vicedom in 1958 to Uppsala in 1968 something happened to the concept of *missio Dei*. While Vicedom used a distinction between *missio Dei generalis* (as Berentsen calls it) and *missio Dei specialis* (Vicedom’s own term) in order to distinguish between God’s work in creation and redemption, in the 1960s *missio Dei* becomes a comprehensive term for God’s work in general, where God’s redemptive work is seen as integrated in his creative work and his preserving work in the historical process.⁴²

There were strong reactions to this new missiology. In Europe it came from circles within the Lutheran church, particularly from the Lutheran World Federation’s Commission on Stewardship and Evangelism.⁴³ In particular, the German theologian Werner Krusche presented an important critique of the new understanding of *missio Dei*. He criticizes, on the basis of the scriptures, both the understanding of the church and the world that is found in the ecumenical documents. He opposes the thesis that, “Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ all men already belong to the new mankind, even if they are not aware of it”.⁴⁴ Thereby he rejects the universalism that is inherent in a view that sees all of world history as a history of redemption. It does not come to grips with the biblical reality of divine judgement and the necessity of faith, baptism and conversion. The world is a lost and fallen world “in which God initiated the redeeming counteraction by sending His Son, who, with His death and resurrection, broke through the law of death which was ruling and ruining this world, and who gives life in the form of freedom from the compulsion to self-assertion and self-justification”. Krusche argued that, “Only God’s saving acts in the world should be described as missionary. The

missio Dei must be comprehended in a precise way as the sending of the Son into the world for its salvation and as the sending of the Church into the world with the saving Gospel".⁴⁵ The content of the *missio Dei* will be the justification of sinners, the gift of reconciliation with God, and the new life in fellowship with him under his lordship. Shalom should include not merely temporal wellbeing but also eternal salvation, the resurrection of the dead. Mission confronts people with a decision to accept or reject the offer of the gospel. A church that does not seek to integrate people into the church would be disobedient to the *missio Dei*.⁴⁶

We note here an almost exclusive emphasis on the salvific nature of the *missio Dei* related to faith in Christ and justification, though the social dimension and service to the world are not neglected. As a response to the extremism of the views of Hoekendijk and others, this emphasis is justifiable but it seems to fail to come fully to grips with the trinitarian sending in John 20:21-22, where the mission of the disciples is modelled on the mission of the Son. Mission involves both proclamation and service, both individual and communal renewal, both justification and justice, and both peace with God and peace on earth. The failure to come fully to grips with this comprehensive nature of mission has also been the weakness of a particular Lutheran position where one makes a too rigid distinction, or even separation, between the secular and the spiritual, and between creation and redemption, based on an otherwise valid theological distinction between God's work in and through the church (by the gospel) and in and through the world (by the law). This doctrine of the two kingdoms may be very helpful in developing the relationship between God's general revelation in the world and his special revelation pre-eminently in Christ as recorded in the scriptures, and therefore also for the understanding of *missio Dei* in relation to the world.

The Willingen conference rightly referred to John 20:21 in its understanding of the basis of mission: "There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world mission. 'As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you'".⁴⁷ Mission is inexorably tied to the incarnation and ministry of the Son, as well as to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

4. *Missio Dei* in recent missiology

The concept of *missio Dei* has not been so frequently used in missiological writings in recent years, yet we may observe that the matter itself ("die Sache") is clearly present.⁴⁸ One may notice a certain convergence of views between the ecumenical and evangelical streams of missiology when it comes to the trinitarian understanding of the basis of mission. Although the Lausanne Covenant from 1974 refers to the triune God, the significance of the Trinity for mission is not spelled out.

The evangelical Iguassu Affirmation⁴⁹ from 1999 affirms the trinitarian basis of *missio Dei*: "All three persons of the Godhead are active in God's redeem-

ing mission". Then it goes on to describe the "overarching biblical themes" of missiology with reference to the work of each person.

Although the term "mission of God" is not used in the Millennial Manifesto of the "AD 2000 and Beyond" movement, there still is a clear reference to the concept when it says, "We covenant together to worship the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We affirm that mission flows from the nature of God who alone deserves to be worshipped by every person of every culture and language. The mission to which He calls us is His mission. The Father having sent the Son and the Spirit, now sends His Church to live and proclaim the gospel among all peoples, thus fulfilling His covenant of grace".⁵⁰

The most recent mission statement⁵¹ of the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) also makes the trinitarian basis of mission very explicit with several clear references to the mission of God. In this regard, the document is different from the Ecumenical Affirmation of 1982: "The mission of God (*missio Dei*) is the source of and basis for the mission of the church, the body of Christ".⁵²

Here, however, it is necessary to point out that the fact that the term *missio Dei* is used or implied does not mean that there today is one single understanding of the term within the CWME. In a comment on the CWME mission statement, the secretary of the Commission, Jacques Matthay, correctly refers to the two quite different understandings of the term. One draws especially on John 20:21, which one could call the "classical" way to refer to *missio Dei*, where God's mission is primarily carried out through the church. The other understanding is where God is seen as active in the secular political and social events of the world and where it is the role of the church to discern what God is doing in the world, and then participate in it.⁵³ The latter understanding which, as we have seen was dominant in the WCC in the 1960s, is still a quite common understanding in ecumenical missiology.

With regard to the understanding of mission in recent evangelical documents, it is quite clear that it is the "classical" understanding of *missio Dei* that is expressed there, while, interestingly, the ecumenical document *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today* shows a certain vacillation between the two. In its paragraphs 10 and 14 the broader understanding that locates God's mission primarily in the world seems to dominate: "The mission of God (*missio Dei*) has no limits or barriers; it has been addressed to and has been at work within the entire human race and the whole of creation throughout history". This is then further developed in the direction of the Son's and the Spirit's presence and work "in people of other nations and religions". It is not spelled out, however, what the end result of this work is, and how it, for instance, relates to the question of salvation outside the church through other religions.

It is in keeping with classic trinitarian theology to say that the works of the Trinity towards the outside, *ad extra*, cannot be divided. It is therefore not correct to say that God the Father is at work in the whole of creation, while the work of the Son and the Spirit are limited to the church. Both the Son and the Spirit are also active in creation and in the world. Nevertheless, the decisive

question seems to be what the aim or result of the work of the Trinity in the world is, and whether or not it is to be understood in terms of creation and preservation, or in terms of redemption. Paragraph 14 in the CWME Mission Statement seems to go far in the latter direction when it refers to Christians being called to be “agents of God’s mission in the world (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15 *sic!*) to identify the signs of God’s presence, affirming them and promoting them by witnessing to and cooperating with all people of good will, and to be co-workers with God for the transfiguration of the whole of creation. Thus the goal of mission is ‘a reconciled humanity and renewed creation’”. But then the paragraph adds, “The church is sent into the world to call people and nations to repentance, to announce forgiveness of sin and a new beginning in relations with God and with neighbours through Jesus Christ” (thus quoting the earlier Ecumenical Affirmation!).

Paragraphs 15-17 follow up this ecclesiological perspective by insisting that, “The mission of the church in the power of the Spirit is to call people into communion with God, with one another and with creation”, and, “To tell the story (of Jesus Christ) is the specific privilege of the churches within God’s overall mission...Evangelism includes explication of the gospel...as well as an invitation to believe in the triune God, become a disciple of Christ and join the community of the existing local church”.

I believe the key to understand the seemingly different understandings of *missio Dei* in this document lies in the phrase, “within God’s overall mission”. God’s mission is seen as larger than but including the mission of the church. How the two are related to each other in terms of salvation is, however, not clear and would probably still be a hotly contested question.

At this point, the evangelical documents are unambiguous. This may easily be seen in the way they develop the work of each of the three persons in mission, maintaining the *proprium* of each without excluding the others.

Firstly, it is especially God the Father to whom the creation and preservation of the world are ascribed. This again forms the basis for the worth of humans and their stewardship of creation in terms of ecological responsibility, and concern for other people in terms of love, peace and justice. “Our missiology centres on the overarching biblical theme of God’s creation of the world, the Father’s redeeming love for fallen humanity as revealed in the incarnation, substitutionary death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ultimately of the redemption and renewal of the whole creation”.⁵⁴ We notice here that salvation is seen as much more than “salvation of souls”. Rather, it includes the whole creation, and is thus similar to the understanding in the ecumenical statement, but with the significant difference in that here it is more directly tied to the redemptive work of Christ.

Secondly, the evangelical documents strongly tie the understanding of the salvific work of the Son to the historical redemptive work of Jesus Christ by referring repeatedly to the historical realities of his life, death, resurrection and exaltation, and strongly emphasizing his uniqueness: “The Lord Jesus Christ is the unique revelation of God and the only Saviour of the world. Salvation

is found in Christ alone”.⁵⁵ This uniqueness is not only expressed in positive terms but also in exclusivist terms: “In the face of competing truth claims, we proclaim with humility that Christ is the only Saviour”. The Millennial Manifesto says, “Recognizing the dangers of universalism, religious pluralism and syncretism, we proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus the Messiah...as confessed by the Church through the centuries”.

Thirdly, the person and work of the Holy Spirit is emphasized in the evangelical documents. He is seen as “the agent of mission” and “source of power”, leading the church into all truth and calling the believers to holiness and integrity.⁵⁶

Looking again at the CWME Mission Statement and especially paragraph 12, one may raise the question of the relationship between the three persons of the Godhead, and particularly between the Spirit and the Son. There has been a tendency in some WCC documents to separate the work of the Spirit and the Son, both as a result of the *filioque* controversy and in order to give room for an economy of the Spirit outside the church. Matthey discusses this and refers to the letter of evangelical concerns sent to delegates at the San Antonio conference in 1989. The letter said, “Some assert that Christ’s spirit is present salvifically in all religions and thus sever Christ from Jesus of Nazareth... We, like you, do not accept this”.⁵⁷ More reflection is called for concerning the discernment of the Spirit’s presence among people of other faiths or no faith. As mentioned above, I believe the emphasis on the trinitarian basis of mission inherent in a right understanding of *missio Dei* is one of the most important and lasting contributions of the concept. The unity of the Trinity in God’s mission has to be maintained. This also means that mission always must have a christological core, and that neither the Father nor the Spirit can be known apart from the Son.

The challenges in the past to a correct understanding of *missio Dei* have for the most part come from missiologists who emphasize the world as the locus of God’ mission, with a particular concern for questions relating to peace and justice. There has also been, however, a significant trend towards an understanding of *missio Dei* in relation to other religions. Non-Christian religions have been seen as part of the mission of God.

John Hick has advocated a “Copernican revolution” where God becomes the centre of the religious universe. One needs to move from a christocentric or ecclesiocentric view to a theocentric view of religion. In this perspective, the great religious traditions of the world must be seen as legitimate divine revelations and as ways to salvation. This pluralistic point of view is also shared by the Catholic Paul Knitter and many others.⁵⁸

The Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith has specifically used the concept of *missio Dei* to develop his theology of religion. He argued that the work that God does through the Christian church is not “God’s only mission in the world”. God’s mission has not and cannot be restricted to one geographical area or one historical or religious context. It has also taken place through other religions. Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism may also be seen as the mission of

God. The task of the church then is to see God's mission in the church as part of his total mission to humankind.⁵⁹

This pluralistic and inherently relativistic religious understanding of *missio Dei* may form a present and future challenge to a biblically based missiology that is equal to that posed by the ecumenical theology of the 1960s. I believe that theologians and missiologists in Europe need to grapple with the question of a theology of religions that is open to the work of God also in other religions, while at the same time confessing and proclaiming the unique *missio Dei* in which God the Father is the only source of all mission, Jesus Christ the only Lord and Saviour and the Holy Spirit the only divine lifegiver and power.

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¹ Timothy Yates, ed., *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 163-64.

² James A. Scherer, ed., *Gospel, Church, & Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1987, p. 55.

³ This is not to be seen as contrary to ecumenical. "Evangelical" is used in the English sense of the word, as denoting a conservative position; it is not as a translation of the German "evangelisch" which indicates a Protestant, non-Roman Catholic position.

⁴ As recorded in Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions under the Cross*, addresses delivered at the enlarged meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952, with statements issued by the meeting, London, International Missionary Council, 1953. This is also pointed out by Bassham 1978 (see reference in following note 5), p. 332 and Berentsen 1883 (see note 15), p. 2.

⁵ Quoted in Rodger Charles Bassham, *Developments and tensions in mission theology, 1948-1975: an historical analysis on some positions advanced by the International Missionary Council, World Council of Churches...*[s.l.], [s.n.], 1978, p. 332.

⁶ Hartenstein in Walter Freytag, ed., *Mission zwischen gestern und morgen: vom Gestaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Lichte der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen*, [s.l.], [s.n.], 1952, p. 54 (quoted in German in Engelsviken's original paper as delivered at Willingen last year; the English translation of the quotation was done by the editor).

⁷ Goodall, *op. cit.*, 1953, p. 189, also quoted in Bassham, *op. cit.*, 1978, pp. 332-333.

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- ⁸ Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God. An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*. Saint Louis, Missouri, and London, Concordia Publishing House, 1965, pp. 5-6; at Willingen last year, Dr Engelsviken quoted Vicedom in German.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹² Vicedom discusses the "lordship" of God as "justification" of mission. Vicedom, *op. cit.*, p. 12ff.
- ¹³ I have presented this argument more fully in T. Engelsviken, "Guds rike I nyere misjonsteologi", *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke*, No. 2, 1987, pp. 130-144, and T. Engelsviken, "This-Worldly Realities and Progress in the Light of the Eschatological Kingdom", in Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken, eds, *All Together in One Place*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pp. 192-198.
- ¹⁴ Vicedom, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-31.
- ¹⁵ See to this, Jan-Martin Berentsen, "Missio Dei: Nokkelbegrep til bestemmelse av et hovedproblem I etterkrigstidens protestantiske misjonstenkning", *Norsk tidsskrift for misjon*, No. 1, 1983, p. 4. (English translation: "Missio Dei: A Key Concept for Determining a Major Problem in Post-war Protestant Mission Thinking".)
- ¹⁶ Vicedom, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁷ Berentsen's term, see Berentsen, *op. cit.*, 1983, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, ed., *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, London, International Missionary Council, 1958, p. 43.
- ¹⁹ J. Andrew Kirk, ed., *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999, p. 25.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3f.
- ²⁵ James A. Scherer, "Church, Kingdom, and *Missio Dei*: Lutheran and Orthodox Correctives to Recent Ecumenical Mission Theology", in Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland and Paul Pierson, eds., *The Good News of the Kingdom. Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, Maryknoll, NY, 1993, p. 82.
- ²⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, 1977, p. 51.
- ²⁷ Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, Grand Rapids, MI, W.B. Eerdmans, 1978, p. 203. See also T. Engelsviken, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 129.
- ²⁸ Engelsviken, "Convergence or Divergence? The Relationship between Recent Ecumenical and Evangelical Mission Documents", in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, No. 2, 2001, pp. 202-207.
- ²⁹ Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 82.
- ³⁰ Quoted from *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, 1952, pp. 1-5, by Scherer 1993, p. 83.
- ³¹ Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 84.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ³³ Bassham, *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 329.
- ³⁴ Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, ed., *The Church Inside Out*, London, 1967, pp. 19-20.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ³⁸ *The Church for Others – Two Reports on the Missionary Structure of the Congregation*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1967.
- ³⁹ See WCC, *The Church for Others*, 1967, pp. 12-16; Berentsen, *op. cit.*, 1983, pp. 5-6; Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1987, pp. 112-114.
- ⁴⁰ Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 113.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ⁴² Berentsen, *op. cit.*, 1983, p. 6.
- ⁴³ Herbert T. Neve, *Sources of change: searching for flexible church structures: a contribution to the ecumenical discussion on the structures of the missionary congregation* / by The Commission of Stewardship and Evangelism of the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1968.
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 115.

- ⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 116; Berentsen, *op. cit.*, 1983, p. 7.
- ⁴⁶ Scherer, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 117.
- ⁴⁷ Goodall, *op. cit.*, 1953, p. 190.
- ⁴⁸ See T. Engelsviken, *op. cit.*, 2001, and the references made there.
- ⁴⁹ William D. Taylor, ed., *Global Missiology for the 21st Century. The Iguassu Dialogue*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, pp. 15-22.
- ⁵⁰ Millennial Manifesto, Article 2.
- ⁵¹ "Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today", *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXXVIII Nos. 348/349, January/April 1999, pp. 109-127.
- ⁵² "Mission and Evangelism – An Ecumenical Affirmation", *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXI No. 284, October 1982, pp. 427-451.
- ⁵³ Jacques Matthey, "Missiology in the WCC: Update. Presentation, History, Theological Background and Emphases of the most recent Mission Statement of the WCC", *IRM*, Vol. XC No. 359, 2001, pp. 429-30.
- ⁵⁴ The Iguassu Affirmation, Introduction to Declarations, see Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ See the helpful comments by Jacques Matthey, in *IRM*, *op. cit.*, pp. 430-32. For the full text of the letter, see "A Letter from those with Evangelical Concerns to the Lausanne II Conference", in Frederick R. Wilson, ed., *The San Antonio Report – Your Will be Done: Mission in Christ's Way*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1990, p. 191-194.
- ⁵⁸ See e.g. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY, 1991, p. 482f, and the references there.
- ⁵⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Mission, dialogue, and God's will for us", *International Review of Mission*, 1988/89, No. 307 (July), p. 366f; cf. also Berentsen, *Det nye Areopagos*, Stavanger, 1994, pp. 84-85.



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