

‘GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH’: THE SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANING OF THESE TERMS FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF MISSION

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ABSTRACT. The paper explores the metaphors of Global South and North. Looking at earlier terms such as the first, second and third world and identifying the changes coming with the shift of gravity in World Christianity and those after the year 1989 as important moments to start speaking of global Christianity, Global North and South, it is not the geography of places but the interrelations – economic, political, cultural, religious - of the various contexts which determine a meaningful usage of these terms. The interrelations are used as a background to discuss the paradigm of ‘mission from the margins’ from the perspective of the author who hails from Northeast India - considered to be part of the global South – and working in a center for mission studies in the Global North.

Keywords: global Christianity, Global South, Global North, postcolonial, mission from the margins

North and South - and the East?

Postcolonial discourses demand of you to situate yourself, both in terms of the position you speak from and in relation to the context you are addressing. The assumption behind this is that your place of origin or the context you come from informs your theology. It seems to me that the Orthodox tradition you are rooted in has a different approach, perhaps connecting such contextuality of theological approaches with the fragmentation of the Church into a multiplicity of churches, mainly in Western Christianity. This could be interpreted as the result of discontinuing with the tradition of the early church which was in the classical sense ‘ecumenical’ – as defined by the ecumenical councils – and ‘catholic’ as the one and universal church.

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In the Protestant tradition I have been formed by, contextuality is however almost something like a faith statement which should ensure that your theology will be relevant to believers and non-believers of your context. This is expected to happen when teaching and preaching the Gospel speak to the cultural, religious and political situations of the people in their own languages.

To me, contextuality of the Gospel is one effect/consequence of the reflection of how the Gospel came to the region I am from. I hail from Aizawl, Mizoram in the North-east of India, which was, in the long century of Protestant mission, in the 19th c., at the margins of Western mission or to put it differently, at the receiving end.

One example for what I am pointing to is that the Gospel started to take root only when the Mizo understood Christ as the most powerful spirit overthrowing all others spirits which had an all-pervasive negative influence on them and their social and religious practices. That message proved to be extremely relevant to them whereas the early preaching of the corrupted nature of humankind and the forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ with which the missionaries began, was to them literally foolish. This relevance of the Gospel led to an incredibly fast growing of the Church among the Mizo. Later, in the early revivals in 1906, already seven years after the first baptisms, the Mizo also acknowledged the importance of sin, its forgiveness and of salvation in Jesus Christ. This short note explains how the Mizo mission history leads to reflect on the relevance and the implied contextuality of the Gospel. It leads, however, also to the pertinent question of how far the attempt of making the Gospel relevant can be pushed before it dissolves in culture – and is not God's word any more.

I speak from the background of that experience of the Mizo Christians and of my church, the Presbyterian Church of India, with the Gospel. Hailing from Mizoram, I am often invited to speak as a Christian from the so called Global South. Even while working in Oxford I am not so much considered a theologian of the Presbyterian tradition. I am expected to represent the authentic Global South and to speak from my original context.

Cluj is south of Oxford from where I have come to attend this meeting and north of my home city Aizawl. All three places are actually located in the Northern hemisphere of the globe, yet Oxford is supposedly in the Global North, Aizawl in the Global South. And Cluj? To look at the location on the map demonstrates that the terms Global North and South are not meant as geographical terms. Both are metaphors for spaces which are not defined by what they are. They are defined by their interrelations in the fields of politics, economics, culture, religion, and especially in terms of wealth and poverty, an agglomeration of relations, which characterize the different contexts by their interrelations. This dissociation of space from its location on the globe can be identified more clearly when we add

two aspects: on various maps Australia and Japan are tagged as Global North. One is to the south of the equator, the other to the north so this designation is not based on their location on the globe. It is based on their economic and political power and international influence.¹ The second factor is that coming from such a sphere we wear its geo-metaphorical tags and that appears to establish the relationship between us. So, I am from the Global South, a female theologian not ordained and whatever the colour of my skin is, it is definitely not white. Assumptions about the people like me in the Global South are that they live in economical weaker situations or, at the margins of the real centers of power.

White people, especially men in the Global North are assumed to be privileged, economically better off, having had a better education than available to many in the Global South. The assumption is that these contexts will influence our respective theologies. When it comes to the sphere of theology and education, the dominant influence that is rejected on the basis of this matrix is labelled Western by many theologians who attempt to speak to their contexts in the Global South. (From the perspective of contexts, it comes therefore a bit as a surprise that it seems not to be meaningful to talk of a Global West.)

I am struggling to find my position in these metaphorical spaces, what about Christians in Cluj? Do they consider themselves to be part of the Global North? Would maybe east of the Global North make sense to them, especially in view of their history? Or would they side with the Global South, at least if it comes to a weaker economic power compared to other countries in the European Union? I could imagine that the orthodox background makes a difference, in which the tradition of the one and 'catholic' church to teach and preach the Gospel in a relevant way may be the point of reference.

In my reflection two layers intersect: one talking of contexts and various theological resources and another of a metaphorical geography with which we orient ourselves in this world. In reflecting on 'mission from the margins' I have become recently interested about where the metaphors of the North and South or the West and the rest come from and how they may help us to define our space and position or, whether they are perhaps too simple and blur real issues.

From the 'Third World' to 'Global South'

The current approach of clubbing countries according to economical, developmental and political systems goes back to the fifties of the last century. With the global changes after the Second World War the French sociologist and

¹ *Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders* (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life) (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2011), 11. <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Global-Survey-of-Evangelical-Protestant-Leaders.aspx>.

anthropologist Alfred Sauvy used the term Third World in 1952 for the first time. According to him the first world was formed by the capitalist countries, the Second by those of the communist/socialist countries, one of them being Romania. Sauvy was inspired to apply the new term Third World not by geographical aspects. He was inspired by the former French Third Estate, i.e. those in France who before the French revolution did not belong to the nobility or the bourgeois class. These were striving for a better life, political influence and better economic opportunities, all of which were denied to them by the two other classes. In referencing this, the term Third World was thought of by Sauvy to constitute those countries which were attempting to stay independent of the two other post-war blocks.² Even though the term was used first in the West, persons from a series of such countries started to apply this term to themselves. The countries they represented were quite diverse in their state of development but they had some aspects in common: people living there shared the expectations and aspirations for far reaching radical political and social changes, not only for themselves but for the whole world. Economic advancement, modernization, sustainable development, education and health systems, democratization – and less dependency were what they hoped for. One easily can see the analogy to the French pre-revolutionary time.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru was actually one of those who started the movement which led to the foundation of the so called Non-Aligned Movement of 25 states, in 1962 in Belgrade (then the capital of what was Yugoslavia and today the capital of modern-day Serbia).³

Only around a decade later, the Third World acquired the characteristic of being the poor world, being economically backward and hence needed help to develop in the direction of the Northern industrial economy. It became, however, slowly apparent that these countries were quite diverse and so new groups became visible: such as the rich oil producing and exporting countries in the Middle East, or the so-called Tiger states in Asia which modernized so rapidly. Both groups left behind the least developed countries of which most are to be found in the southern hemisphere of the globe.

It was with the dissolving of the Eastern communist block after 1989 that with the disappearing of the Second World, the term Third World lost its defining power. The dissolving of the Second World left people in locations like Cluj perhaps in the necessity to redefine their space in relation to the changing power settings.

With the growing globalisation, the newer term Global South became more characteristic as defining the continuing relationship of dependence between centers and margins. Global South seems to have been first used by the World

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_World.

³ See Suryanarayanan, 'Role of the non-aligned nations in U.N.O. for peace and disarmament 1960 – 1987'. Thesis (University of Calicut: Department of History, 2002), 95.
https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/50774/8/08_chapter%202.pdf

Bank in the 1980s to transcend the hierarchical order which was associated with the terms First World, Second World etc. The new term also connected to discourses about global change, global development, globalisation. In other words, it became associated with a perspective that at least presumed to focus on a common development in a globalised and interdependent world.

Christians in the Global World

South, North, East, West, poor, rich, developed, underdeveloped, center, periphery ... What could all these terms mean for a discussion here in Romania? Are all those from Europe from the Global North, especially those countries that belong to the European Union? According to the maps we saw, yes. But where do we place ourselves? And what does the answer to this question imply for a reflection on Mission from the margins? In general, in the Protestant mission history which started rather late at the beginning of the 18th century and was so strong in the 19th c. the North has been the sending region, and the South the receiving region, the margins. But if we look closer, the missionaries from the North have often been on the margins of their societies. Mizoram may have been on the margins of Wales from where the first missionaries came at the end of the 19th c. But Wales itself was on the margins within the United Kingdom.

In November of last year, I co-organized a conference on 'mission from the margins' at Aizawl Theological College, a college of my church, (the Presbyterian Church of India, Mizoram Synod) and I learned then that the Synod supports around 2700 mission workers. One of the questions that emerged from the conference was how the understanding of mission has been affected now that the vibrant Mizo Presbyterian Church has itself become a center for sending missionaries to the margins in other places.

With participants from Europe and from North East India, we discussed what it would mean to study 'mission from the margins' together, coming as we were from the Global North and the Global South. We also needed to ask questions such as 'Do we have a common mission'? Have the mentioned relations between the North and South become a defining power we cannot escape? If such defining relations exist between North and South, as Christians are we able to become united and thereby transcend defining categories and power relations?

To sharpen that perspective let us look briefly into some of the developments in the ecumenical world. At exactly the time when terms such as First World etc., were starting to be used, the World Council of Churches held for the first time its assembly in a Third World country, i.e. 1961 in New Delhi, India in which participants gave a different picture compared to the earlier general assemblies in Amsterdam

and in Evanston 1954. It is well known that in the 1961 a number of orthodox churches as well as several churches from the then Third World countries joined the WCC in New Delhi.⁴ Several voices at this 3rd Assembly of the WCC pointed out that the churches had played an important role in shaping the concept that the rapid social changes in the various societies were interrelated. These churches promoted the idea that their ecumenical fellowship could bring in the vision of a worldwide community, of a global humanity which should engage together with these dramatic changes and not the individual churches alone.⁵ M.M. Thomas, a well-known Indian theologian said in hindsight that New Delhi constituted the shift from the WCC being a fellowship of basically West European protestant churches to an ecumenical 'truly world movement.'⁶

One can point to several factors which support that claim that Christians and their churches can tell a different story of these decades. The World Missionary Conference in Mexico City in 1963 spoke of 'mission in six continents.' It claimed that the period of missionaries being sent only from the North to the South was over.⁷ In 1972 Philip Potter, a Caribbean, and considered as being black was elected the first General Secretary of WCC. At the WMC in Bangkok in 1973 under the theme 'salvation today,' almost only voices from the Third World were to be heard in the first days of the Conference and the Western missionary societies felt accused of their close association with the powers of the First World.⁸ They were also confronted with the accusation that their wealth was the result of an unjust economic system which was based on the exploitation of the Third World.

When it comes to numbers we can observe what is often called the 'shift of gravity to the Global South', i.e. the fact that today 2/3 of all Christians live in what is called the Global South.⁹

⁴ See Hooft, W.A. Visser 't, 'The General Ecumenical Development since 1948' in Fey, Harold E. (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance. A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Vol. 2 1948-1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1970 2nd ed.), 1-26.

⁵ See the passages on the Christian responsibility for Rapid Social Change in the New Nations (247-250) in Albrecht's contribution. Albrecht, Paul, '9. The Development of Ecumenical Social Thought and Action,' in: Fey, Harold E. (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance. A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Vol. 2 1948-1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1970 2nd ed.), 235-259.

⁶ Thomas, Madathilparampil Mammen, *My Ecumenical Journey* (Trivandrum: Ecumenical Publishing Centre, 1990), 252.

⁷ Orchard, Ronald Kenneth, *Witness in Six Continents. Records of the meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. Held in Mexico City, December 8th to 19th, 1963* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964).

⁸ *Bangkok Assembly, 1973: Minutes and Report of the Assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism*, 31 December, 1972 and 9-13 January 1973 (Geneva: WCC, 1973)

⁹ See Johnson, Todd M., and Kenneth R. Ross, (eds.), *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010*. (Edinburgh: University Press), 2009.

This is paralleled with the calculated number of transcultural missionaries being approximately 440,000 in 2010.¹⁰ While in absolute numbers, the United States still tops the chart by sending 127,000, 'of the ten countries sending the highest number of missionaries in 2010, three were in the Global South: Brazil, South Korea, and India.' Large numbers of missionaries are further sent out by churches and mission organizations in South Africa, the Philippines, Mexico, China, Colombia, and Nigeria.¹¹

'The 10 countries that sent the highest number of international missionaries in 2010 were home to 32 percent of the world's church members but sent almost 73 percent of all international missionaries.'¹²

If we take these numbers and movements as indicators of the changes that occurred over the last decades, it may appear as if the North is still powerful when it comes to economics. But it could look marginalized in terms of spirituality, faith, church life and evangelism.¹³ Often enough we hear or read that the decline in church membership, the growing number of non-believers etc. is resulting in the marginalization of Christians in the Global North in their societies. It would appear that in terms of faith, spirituality and evangelism, the resources in the Global South are greater. One factor which probably contributes to this is as can be seen in Northeast India, the 'the three selves' model that the local churches and their missions practiced successfully right from the beginning of their history.¹⁴

Our conference in Aizawl also confirmed that the perspective the Church in Mizoram had from its beginnings was to be a Church with a mission. Does this then mean that the Church had initially been at the margins, but found its way to becoming a vibrant hub, a center of mission by deciding to be a mission minded Church?

¹⁰ *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020. Society, Religion, and Mission* (June 2013). Ed. by Center for the Study of Global Christianity at the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary (<http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>). The following quotes and numbers all are taken from this publication, 76-77. More elaborate graphs and regional surveys of the same center are to be found in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 258-289.

¹¹ *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020*, 76.

¹² *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020*, 76. 'Yet, if one looks at the global picture a surprising fact pops up: The majority of these missionaries is sent to majority Christian countries: "The 'top nine' receiving countries were home to only 3.5% of the world's non-Christians but received more than 34% of all international missionaries.'

¹³ The quoted PEW paper *Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders* found that 71 % of evangelical leaders in the South opine that evangelism is successful and will change their countries whereas those in the North are more pessimistic, 11.

¹⁴ Biehl, Michael, 'Concluding Remarks,' in: Ngursanzeli, Marina, and Michael Biehl, (eds.), *Witnessing to Christ in North East India* (Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, 31) (Oxford: Regnum publs., 2016), 423-428.

Christian and non-Christian spheres

If we speak of holistic mission then this perspective may be a bit too spiritualized and simplistic- as if the opposition is a secularized wealthy people versus the faithfully poor. It seems to imply as if the story would change simply because the movement of sending of missionaries had changed direction.

At the famous first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, a distinction was applied that were to remain influential for a long time. The theme of the first volume of the eight commission reports to the Conference was: 'Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World.' The implication was that there was a Christian World where those who lived in it had the Gospel, and there was a non-Christian World to which the Gospel needed to be carried and this world was considered to form the margins of the Christian World.

With the changes within World Christianity an important shift occurred in mission and in theology. The jubilee conference of Edinburgh 2010 looked back and highlighted that mission is happening from 'everywhere to everywhere.' With that understanding mission can also happen from the margins and not only to the margins. This is borne out of the fact that the number of missionaries working in foreign countries has increased considerably since 1910.¹⁵ Some of these missionaries are sent by congregations to peoples groups' in the own country or to other countries¹⁶, some are individual so called tent-maker missionaries, others are supported by large mission organizations. Again, others are sent as part of a sharing of personnel or in the context of one church spreading internationally like with some of the new African and Asian churches – the variety is immense and almost impossible to map. The surprising fact: among those countries sending high numbers of missionaries are several in the Global South: Brazil, India, the Philippines and Nigeria among others.

Conclusion

Global North and Global South are metaphors that refer to an agglomeration of relations between the two regions and their contexts. Globalization is the buzzword that accompanies these terms. Globalization can mean different things but it is,

¹⁵ *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970–2020*, 76.

¹⁶ As one instructive example see Hong, Sung-wook, 'Mission Engagement of a Local church. The Case of Anyang City, Korea,' in: Ma, Wonsuk, and Kyo Seong Ahn (eds.), *Korean Church, God's Mission, Global Christianity* (Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, 26) (Oxford: Regnum, 2015), 242-253. These church send missionaries as well transnational (Brazil, North Korea) as well as in Korea to city or island or mountain community where the "evangelization rate is low", 249.

broadly speaking, a specific constellation of global relations and strategies affecting or even dominating local circumstances. Seen critically from a non-Western perspective, globalization is not a metaphor and still has a geography and therefore centers of powers and marginalized regions. Although many of these centers of power still can be localized in the Global North, new power centers have arisen in the Global South. That is also for the power centers of Christianity which have shifted to the Global South.

At the conference in Aizawl, we concluded that mission from the margins seems to be a paradigm which takes into account the important changes in World Christianity and mission over the last hundred years. As a paradigm *for mission* it demands from us to look into local contexts, into relations of power and to identify margins and marginalized groups in the own environment with whom mission is engaging. The position of a Church in mission could then be considered from two perspectives: it can be part of a region that is at the margins within a globalized world or in its own society; or it can be powerful and engaging with the margins in its own society.

We explored the implications of 'mission from the margins' with people from the Global South and North like I have approached them in this contribution. This paradigm is a challenge to reflect critically on where we place ourselves on a global map and in the local context and how others experience our mission. This encourages us to look closer into our own contexts and to share about our mission practices across the regions.

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