Missiologists outside the evangelical fold hesitate to read Jesus’ command to be witness “to the ends of the earth” in a temporal rather than spacial sense, due to miraculous and apocalyptic undertones. Yet, clarity on how mission does affect history is needed. Not only do some major churches celebrate Mission Sunday towards the end of each liturgical year, with the expectancy of a final deliverance further accentuated liturgically by the following feast of Christ the King and with the chance of this assuming some more apocalyptic colours at the end of the millennium. But this question of the missionary impact on history, which missiologists should study in the light of biblical sources and notably of the famous mission discourse of Lk 24:47-48, is increasingly voiced amidst grave accusations against Christians, and quite often with a reference to the rather different perception of Jesus’ mission held by Muslims (despite their remarkably similar views on his person, as in Qur’an 19:22-33, and on his return to mark the end of time, in Qur’an 43:61).

Regrettably Christians mistrust the titles of praise Muslims bestow on Jesus, as God’s prophet and wonder worker, using the same blessing as for Muhammad - peace be upon him - because they contest the Muslim view of his person and mission. For, did Luke not, in the phrase that straddles his gospel and Acts, urge us to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name to all nations? What exegetical scrutiny could query that reading of the Lk 24:47-48 mission discourse as an order for the Church to go and proclaim the unique redemption brought by Christ and to continue personally his assignment of mediating forgiveness for the fulfilment of time? Yet, both the apocalyptic quandary of our days, with its unsavoury features, so often attributed to the Christian West, and notably the growing animosity between the religions invite us to revisit that doctrine in view of new exegetical finds.

1 It is not for us to review the studies claiming that human intelligence is about to destroy the biosphere (e.g. J. Leslie The End of the World, London 1996) which join many political, economic and also religious analyses to produce a flurry of doomsday apocalyptic literature. Suffice it to mention the special issue of Concilium 1998/4 devoted to the question: Is the world ending?
While the ‘third quest’ of the historical Jesus has again placed the idea of ‘realised eschatology’ at the heart of the evangelical message, as shown by authors like Sanders and Crossan, it is an other view of eschatology, neatly tying in not only with a liberation-oriented missiology that takes Jesus’ mission statement of Lk 4 as its key text, but also with quite a different view on dialogue.\(^2\)

Few now contest that the idea of a ‘realised eschatology’ is the veritable underpinning of Luke’s missiology, notably at this juncture of our gospel pericope and Acts, where he infers that the redemptive ‘end game’ has actually started. But how to relate it to the Muslim perception of Jesus and especially how to make sense of it amidst the challenges of today’s society, so ominously defined by U. Beck as a ‘risk society’, with its ever more disastrous streaks, in which people prove to be subject to hazardous lotteries rather than to a providentially realised eschatology?\(^3\) We are faced with the claim that much of the disarray in the global community is due to the West’s distorted and self-destructive reading of Luke’s message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name to be preached to all nations?

The realised eschatology of the Good News no doubt sits uneasily with apocalyptic feelings about insecurity in the global system. The very words ‘mission’ and ‘gospel’ (good-spell) seem irrevocably eclipsed, as the churches, after twenty centuries of Christianity and two centuries of modern missionary work, find themselves in the dock, having to defend their record not only against claims of irrelevancy, but even of heinous crimes. We shall refrain, both from studying allegations of missionaries colluding with colonial history and from defending their laudable intentions. Indeed, the criticism turns on itself as it betrays the enlightened mind’s pervading sense of superiority pretending at a ‘civilising mission’ of spreading relief and salvation. To criticise the preaching’s outcome is part of its very message of the ‘good news’. And this makes us ask how ideas about ‘witness’ and ‘salvation’ could themselves become part of an apocalyptic evil, rather than a ‘realised eschatology’. So, without speaking of missionary imperialism, we must scrutinise the roots of a history that engendered a sense of supremacy with obnoxious, rather than liberating effects. That the modern missionary work, 200 years ago, arose from British anti-slavery movements and that some missionaries actually gave their lives for the freeing of slaves, does not
