The concept of mission has experienced fundamental changes during the last decades of the twentieth century. As will be shown in the first part of this article, concentrating on changes in the concept in Catholic theology between 1550-2000, mission was taken initially in a geographical way and has been in a permanent process of reformulation, especially during the last four decades. Its precise meaning, however, has become vague and still awaits more precision. In the second part the major challenge of modern mission theology is described in the development of the concept of dialogue, starting from the 1960s. In the third part some major developments in the field of Protestant theology are discussed. The discussion of mission and dialogue leads to a proposal for missionary thinking in the 21st century, when we can no longer rely on a division between Christian and non-Christian countries or cultures, but have to develop a consciousness of truly multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. What is the role of the Christian message or Christian churches in this new setting of societies? The mission of dialogue as defended in this contribution calls for an end to the planning of geographic and statistic growth as primary aims of mission. Non-Christian religions, cultures and communities must first be sought or accepted as partners in mission and dialogue.

Religious freedom has been an important issue in the missionary debate during recent decades. A major point has been the individual's right to change religion and the right of (Christian) minorities in countries dominated by majority religions who also acted as state religions (several Muslim societies, Buddhist Burma and Thailand). Attached to this question was the need to respect other religions and the right to be respected by people of other convictions. How can we relate the obligation to respect the religion of the other with a missionary duty? How can we delineate...
mission from proselytism? Is it therefore necessary to re-define membership of religions?

Although it may weaken my argument, and even obscure the more general validity of my exposition, I want to give two biographical anecdotes in this introduction that may illustrate the purpose of this article. They are quite in contrast with the more common abstract and academic phrasing of the whole. However, in their emphasis on the narrative, the incidental and the unplanned, they also argue that the normative and seemingly universal convictions also often rise through fortuitous and concrete incidents.

The first anecdote is from my period as a Ph.D. student, doing field research on the changes in Islamic education in Indonesia in the early 1970s. In order to really know the practice of teaching and learning in an Islamic college, I asked the director of a nationally famous institute that I be allowed to live in the same condition as the 1200 students in the dormitories and to follow the common classes. During the discussion of my request with the director and staff, I suggested that I would also join the mosque prayers, five times per day, while remaining a Catholic. The request caused some surprise and a long debate. I was shown an Arabic copy of the Qur’an and was asked to read the text of Sura Al-Ikhlas, and to produce a translation. The short text of this 112th chapter reads: “Say: He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.” My first comment was that this is basically the same as the first line of the Nicean creed, sung everyday Sunday in my Church. The lines on the concept of ‘begotten’ should also be approved by Christians who reject a physical fatherhood for the Divinity. In the following discussion we did not always come to full agreement on texts, but I repeated several times, that I also had problems with some sacred texts in Christianity, especially the harsh curses in some psalms. During the debate it had become clear, that I knew all the regulations of the ritual ablutions, but did not give them much attention. Finally I was allowed to join the prayers, under condition that I would faithfully would perform the cleansing. Not only during my three months stay for participant observation, but also later as a student and friend, I often joined Muslim prayers. I always loved the simple and expressive ritual, like a dance of the body, standing upright, hands high to praise God and bowing to humiliate and show the human condition. Quite often Muslims asked me to become a full Muslim. I sometimes answered, that I hoped already to be a faithful Muslim in the true sense of the word. Some liberal contemporary Muslims take the adjective Muslim not as an indication of religious adherence but in the literal meaning of the word as submission to God, the attitude of surrender, of trust in God’s mercy, benevolence and goodness. I found it a good strategy, while living in a Muslim neighbourhood, to give as a standard answer on the question,