MISSION AND MISSIONARY HISTORIOGRAPHY
IN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:
TEN PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS

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The following statements are preliminary in the sense that they reflect the discussion I am having within a particular academic location. This is mainly: a) my own work as a mission historian in Britain, b) the trends and impulses surfacing in the work of my doctoral students, and c) the perspectives that emerged from my participation in an international attempt at re-writing and re-configuring theological knowledge.¹

1. Looking ahead: Churches and Theologies, on the one hand, are individual manifestations of Christian identity and history, on the other, they are improvisations, transition stages or transit camps of a much larger continuing and unfinished intercultural communication. Looking back: each of the new beginnings in Christian identity (that is the formation of new knowledge as to what it means to be Christian) is subjective and starts its re-reading of all other Christian identities from its own specific contextual location. In this regard, each variation of Christian identity has its own centre, as every sphere has its own centre of gravity.

2. Built-in structures: different perhaps from other great religions, Christianity does not insist on a specific cultural and linguistic shape. However, the necessary translation and appropriation of the message and the meaning of faith into the local context amounts to a kind of ‘re-invention’ of the faith. This reinvention sketches a new vision of humanity, a new language of the sacred, and, therefore, constitutes a widening of the Christian vision. The Christian story is characterised by a high degree of malleability and a permanent trend towards the revision of its previous shapes (fides semper inculturanda).

¹ The Statements were presented by Werner Ustorf and discussed by Martha Frederiks at a meeting of the Post-Graduate Network of Dutch Theological Faculties, cooperating in NOSTER, 7 May 2002 in Utrecht. Werner Ustorf is the area editor for missiology of the 8-volume theological dictionary Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1998 ff. The first four volumes have been published in the meantime.

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3. If Christianity, seen from a historical point of view, appears to be a ‘chameleon’ it is clear that the historian cannot claim to find the universally valid measure for all things Christian within the historical process. Domesticating the chameleon (that is: making a particular shape of Christian identity the yardstick of all others) is not the mission historian’s job. Terms such as ‘mission’ or even ‘Christian’ are holding precariously together what is in fact an enormous variety of experiences. The pluralisation and decentralisation of Christianity (currently there are approx. 33,000 separate and independent Christian denominations) requires a ‘parallel’ or ‘polycentric’ approach to Christian history.

4. Statement 3 does not imply, however, that we should not make clear distinctions. Without making distinctions the old and new world order projects (the ones having ‘Christian’ overtones in particular, such as Bush, Blair and Co.) cannot be addressed. Distinctions are essential, but they are to be made in the knowledge that there is an almost invisible line between the handing down and the handing over of the tradition between traitors to and traditores of the faith (see the use of paradidoomi in I Cor. 11:23). In fact, as the case of Saint Peter shows, betrayal was around from the very start of the tradition. It is unlikely that we can hand down the tradition without handing it over. Every inculturation is therefore ambivalent: a new branch on the tree and, in its re-shaping of the tradition, a new imprisonment of it. Inculturation is not simply positive and it is not synonymous with ‘good’, ‘true’ and ‘Christian’.

5. Missiology was in the first century of its academic existence very much a domain of the West, and its missiologists often applied a practical form of ‘missiological materialism’. They were aware that within the international, the academic and even within the Christian theological discourse, missiology was unable to demonstrate a) the non-truth of other religions, ways of life and convictions and b) the certainty of the future victory of Christianity over its rivals. So they resorted to resolving the question of truth through practical means: by a) attempting to erase competing forms of thought (sometimes in collaboration with political powers), and b) by claiming that ‘spiritual experience’ was endorsing the truth of Christianity. Both attempts failed: the religions and also the political religions could not be erased, and ‘spiritual experience’ is something to be found in all religions (and non-religions).

6. After the collapse of the two dominant forms of consensus, the Christendom approach and the liberal-agnostic model, it is fairly easy to

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2 The late Adrian Hastings used this formulation in his introduction to A World History of Christianity, which he edited in 1999 (London: Cassell).