Why Do Mission in Asia?

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Why Do Mission in Asia?

Why do mission in Asia? This question hit me with force one February day on a cold and wet Taiwan railway platform. We were waiting for a train to take us to see a young paralyzed aboriginal man in a local Catholic hospital. A simple enough question from a Spiritan missionary and you would imagine that after my twenty-two years in Taiwan and being close to the church I would be overflowing with words, opinions and suggestions, bursting forth with creative ideas in response to this key question. However, the silence that I confronted when trying to find words to answer this question was not quite what I had expected! It reminded me of my similar silent response to another very simple question (actually the title of a book), by the English Dominican, Timothy Radcliffe, “What’s the point of being a Christian?” Perhaps many of you reading this if asked the same question may also be confronted with a lack of words.

But then again, the silent reaction is a reflection of the fact that to answer an important question with real honesty, which of course we must do, we have to dig deep into ourselves to reach those places where the real answers lie. Silence does bring with it a deepening of experience and the emergence of an answer based on our whole and integrated self, not some immediate and meaningless “Pursuit of Excellence” corporate slogan.

Let’s not avoid the question of “Why do mission in Asia”? Are we not preaching to the converted, a continent full of ancient cultural riches, mysticism, philosophies etc. Why bother? In the Asian context of revealed truths we must be honest and admit that Jesus was a little bit late on the scene. But just because we may have a deep respect for the truth of other religions should not stop us from presenting the case for our own. Perhaps also the word “mission” and “missionary” do have slightly negative connotations in the modern world and history tells us that there is some justification for this viewpoint. But, however, why do we now have such a modern tolerance for some ancient culture’s belief in the presence of gods and spirits in animals, forests and stars yet an intolerance of a man who came on this earth 2,000 years ago to stand with the oppressed and speak out against injustice? Why is it in vogue to admit to one’s Buddhist beliefs at some fashionable party, but to be thought of as strange when standing up for Christianity? It seems to me we sometimes miss the whole point of our faith and this is indeed a rather strange contradiction and sad reflection on our modern viewpoint of religion and mission.

Kevin Gallagher
In 1990, Kevin (originally from Scotland) left an engineering design position at IBM in the South of England for a two-year volunteer position with a residential center for the mentally disabled in Taiwan. The volunteer position became a meaningful change of lifestyle and catalyst of a life vocation. This deeply personal spiritual journey has moored him to Taiwan till today, some twenty-two years later. Kevin works as an engineer in the Hsinchu Science Park. More importantly he is engaged in a local association for the disabled that he started along with two Taiwanese friends. As Taiwan’s severe and housebound disabled population exists very much on the margins of society, the association’s main purpose is to use special technical equipment to get this group of people back into the life of society, both children and adults alike. Examples would be giving severely paralyzed housebound adults access to the internet and equipping school age children with communication devices to participate in classroom activities. Fluent in Chinese, Kevin is married to a Taiwanese lady who is a special education teacher.
But back again to the question, “Why do mission in Asia”? Concepts such as unconditional forgiveness, a personal God who resides among those who are most rejected, the idea of us all being brothers and sisters, can be quite alien to many living in Asia. The Christian message of walking with the poor and dispossessed, not just as a charitable act towards the less fortunate but also because such actions bring us meaning in our lives and peace for our souls may be very radical, but are so life-giving that in my opinion how can such a message not be proclaimed to others irrespective of where they live and what cultural background they may have. Again, although the concept may be alien, that should not prevent me from presenting them, and in my experience these Christian concepts resonate at such a deep place within the common humanity and spirit of each one of us that they provide a very powerful liberating influence irrespective of nationality.

Why do mission at all could be looked at from a very pragmatic viewpoint. Take the example of Taiwan, just where would the migrant workers go for help when they are mistreated, who would go and live with the aboriginal people in the mountains, who would offer a place of shelter to abused foreign brides, and who would dare work closely with those with AIDS? These are the wonderful and powerful material things missionaries are doing, these are the things that show the beauty and closeness of God to us, show us a God of the poor and downtrodden, these are the things that in a wonderful and mysterious paradox also show us where we can find our own lives. The practical side to missionary work, the concrete acts of compassion are necessary, but are not the whole picture. What lies behind these acts of love, what makes the missionary travel from so far to carry out these compassionate activities, and carry them out with such joy must also be spoken of.

What Drives the Missionary

The missionary brings a message that God is alive, not in some obscure place above and beyond or in some tree or plant but alive in us personally, alive in the world and especially alive on the margins of life with those who are most rejected. This message of a Godly immanence, a God who resides within us and is concerned for our welfare, can be radically different to many Asian religious beliefs. But as this Christian message is so life-giving and so deeply integrated with pure and simple human liberation, it is a message that must be shared in friendship with those who have not heard it. To discover that to be truly human is also to be truly divine is such an enriching message that must be shared with all who care to listen and a major reason why we should never stop doing mission in Asia.
Christianity also offers a gentle challenge to the darker areas of ancient traditions which have perhaps reached a point of stagnation and which struggle to integrate with the modern world. With a firm basis in personal friendships the missionary is able to shine some light onto these areas and offer opportunities not for condemnation of the resident culture, but for its transformation. The light they bring should offer new possibilities and new insights into what might appear as intransigent and stifling cultural traditions, something very prevalent in what I call “heavier” cultures such as the Chinese one I encounter in Taiwan. And don’t forget that in this work missionaries are rewarded with far more than they give. The missionary is not someone who is here for a good time, to enjoy the warm sunshine, cheap food and wine and go home with a suitcase full of gifts from afar; missionaries are people who come to stay. And in this venture, in believing we are bringing something to the host country, we also believe that we are receiving and that the change in us will be beneficial to the country that is sending us. So let us not forget, it also works both ways.

But perhaps in some ways the “why do mission in Asia” question does not have to be fully answered. If we could fully provide an answer overflowing with intellectual and rational reasoning, then perhaps we would have already gone off the rails. There must be some inherent mystery, something about doing mission that just does not make sense with regard to standard values. Seeing a person or group from far away doing things beyond conventional social wisdom, and very importantly doing it joyfully, stands in itself as a witness to something beyond the rational material values of life. And it also brings me back to my initial silence in response to the “why do mission” question.

One could go on forever with detailed theories about mission in Asia and there are certainly many better qualified and more articulate than me to do so. However, if I were to choose one reason it would be for Christianity’s strong message of simple human liberation that I would say “How can we not do mission in Asia”?