

Is Jesus Christ Still Good News For a Humanity In A New Millennium - Enslaved By It's Global Economic System And Endangered By It's Deadly Clash Of Civilisation? Reflections By An Asian Methodist

A. A New Day Is Dawning

The Concept of the Year 2000 originates from chronological fiction. Jesus Christ was not born in the Year 1 A.D and that New Year's Day always occurs on different dates in different societies around the world throughout the year. Yet this reality of cultural pluralism does not seem to negate the concept of a new millennium for most of the people of the world. After all, globalisation is the other reality that we have to reckon with. Today, most of the urban centres of the world have been turned into components of a well connected global village, more aware of each other and more willing to find the common basis for greater coordinated activity. This has resulted in a worldwide recognition of a Common Era (C.E) as a basis for measuring the march of time, based upon the Gregorian computation.

More importantly, is the psychological reorientation ^{on} ~~as~~ a global basis that comes with the passing of the old millennium. 'It is not the objective reality that matters' says business strategist Ned Turnbull.

After all calendars may change and different societies may mark different days as the beginning of their New Year.... But the people in the currently dominant global society.... Believe that 2000 is significant and – because they believe it is significant – it is significant.... And because they believe it is different – they will behave differently and by doing so make it different.¹

To be more specific, heads of business corporation, have been advised by Turnbull to make important paradigm shifts in mentality in order to be prepared for a new generation raised differently from their fathers and mothers. The following considerations have been suggested as necessary information for all who want to function effectively in a new era, to understand:

1. Why the (new) millennium is important and how it will influence what people think about the 21st century.
2. Why what people think – their perception of things – is crucially important to what they do and how reality is shaped
3. What the fundamental social, technological and economic factors shaping the structure of the 21st century world will be
4. What the 1st generation of the 21st century will demand from the world.²

Eventually, people must be told that the concept of a new millennium originates from Biblical Symbolism. Unfortunately, Revelation 20 has been the ground for much unfruitful apocalyptic speculation. However, the history of biblical exegesis may suggest for us other more positive alternatives.

To read the millennium symbol as kairos is to retrieve the best of early Christian thought taking Revelation 20 with the seriousness and urgency it deserves – all the while avoiding the pitfalls of a literal interpretation.³

1 Turnbull, Noel The Millennium Edge 1996 Allen & Unwin, NSW pg 7 & viii

2 ibid pg 15

3 Bulman, Raymond The Lure of the Millennium 1999 Orbis bks, N.Y. pg 198 – 199

There is a universally acknowledged (but largely unexplained) sentiment that with the passing of an old millennium/century and the arrival of a new, something significant has taken place. This feeling must be addressed appropriately with an invitation to see the new millennium as kairos instead of apocalypse.

To respond to a kairos is to make a (positive) new beginning....To responsibly declare a kairos at this important juncture in history is to apply to the present moment the admonition that Paul gave to the Romans close to two millenia ago: 'You know the time (kairos) in which we are living. It is now the hour for you to wake from sleep.' (Rom 13:11) ⁴

Hans Kung is on record for making the following statement before an Asian audience:

Can the Christian message transform the world? It has transformed the world. That is a historical fact. But it has not transformed the world deeply enough and this is the fault of Christianity. But the Christian message will transform the world. This is our hope and Jesus Christ Himself is the ground of that hope. 'Behold I am making all things new.' (Rev 21:5) ⁵

Therefore, the kairos for today must be in terms of a deeper transformation of the world by Jesus Christ for the better and Christianity must not be the one to hinder that agenda once again.

B. Something New and Something Old

Unlike Jesus Christ, the new millennium will not make all things new. In fact many of the old problems of the previous century continue to be present to preoccupy us.

- i. The danger of religious conflict from reckless evangelism – history can be our teacher here:

The Methodist Mission in Ceylon saw revivals and great numerical gain from 1830 to 1865 with full membership figures increasing from 500 to 1,700. The District Superintendent then, Rev D J Gogerly was also 'a Pali and a Buddhist scholar'. He wrote a book in 1861 (Christian Institutes) setting forth arguments for 'the truth of Christianity and the falsehood of other religions.' The publication of Gogerly's book sparked off the first serious opposition to Christianity by the Buddhists of Ceylon.

A society for the propagation of Buddhism was organized with branches in all the coastal areas. Tracts and pamphlets attacking the Christian religion appeared. Buddhists were asked not to have any connection with Christian services. This culminated in the public debate in Panadura in 1873, between the Methodist Rev David Silva and a scholarly Buddhist monk... the result was that relations between Buddhist and Christians were strained.⁶

⁴ *ibid* pg 199

⁵ Kung, Hans article 'What Is the Christian Message' from Japan Missionary Bulletin, Tokyo, Dec 1970

⁶ Information from Lecture by Somasiri Perera A Brief History of Methodism in Sri Lanka given in Singapore in 1985 for the Centennial Consultation of Asian Methodist Leader.

If Jesus Christ is to be allowed to transform the world deeply enough in this new millennium, it looks as though this deeper transformation has to start first with the Christians. Somehow the idea of human communities being torn apart by animosity created by Christian evangelism does not seem consistent with what the person of Jesus Christ stands for.

ii. Post Cold War Realpolitik

According to Samuel Huntington's controversial observation of the current global political order – ideology now gives way to culture and religion.

In the post cold war world, States increasingly define their interests in civilisational terms. They co-operate with and ally themselves with States with similar or common culture and are more often in conflict with countries of different culture.⁷

Often it is religion which unwittingly promotes civilizational clashes which may even escalate into war (ie Global Balkanisation)

Violence between States and groups from different civilizations carries with it the potential for escalation as other States and groups from these civilizations rally to the support of their 'kin countries'... The revitalization of religion throughout much of the world is reinforcing these cultural differences.⁸

Apparently the root of this conflict goes back to the search for the cultural identity of a particular group of people. Unfortunately, 'people use politics.... To define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against'⁹ Self identity and hatred for 'the other' is a lethal combination.

iii. Global economics and the question of human worth

Things have not changed even though we are now in the 21st century. The global economic arrangement is still organized so that 'the principal benefits of economic activity are derived by the metropolitan countries and within them by the rich entrepreneurs and owners of capital.' Often, 'the economies of poor countries have been fashioned to fit into the needs of the rich ones.' This breeds a culture of selfish greed as 'the world economic system is built on the basis of profit maximization.'¹⁰ For the wealthy and powerful the adage is still true 'money begets money'.

Capital has been accumulated by wealthy individuals, families, companies and countries by centuries of hard work, business acumen, technological superiority, and large scale exploitations and pillage. Today vast decision-making powers are concentrated in powerful multinational corporations and government agencies.¹¹

7 Huntington, Samuel The Clash of Civilisation & the Remaking of World Order 1996 Simon & Schuster N.Y pg 34

8 Ibid pg 28

9 Ibid pg 21

10 Balasuriya, Tissa Planetary Theology 1984 SCM Press, Lond. Pg 34

11 Ibid pg 34

In the midst of a situation where great wealth generates great power over many by a few, the question should be rightfully raised at this moment – What is the measurement of the value of a human being? Is a human person only of value because of the ownership of wealth? Is a human person 'worthless' because of being in a state of pennilessness? This issue is fundamental before any structural reorganisation can even take place.

If Jesus Christ is to be Good News in the 21st century and the new millennium, then Christ must be allowed to meaningfully address the real challenges today of global religious conflicts, the hatred that exist between various human communities and the depreciating of human worth in a brave new world where only the political, economic and educated elite are the only people who really matters. In fact, Jesus Christ must be allowed to become the kairos for the transformation of such destructive situations and conditions for the entire human race.

C. Muhammad's Prophetic Witness of Jesus As Second Adam

It was the year 630/631 A.D by Common Era reckoning or 9/10 years after the Hijrah (A.H) by Islamic chronological reckoning. Muhammad had defeated decisively his Meccan adversaries and seemed to be vindicated by the Almighty in the eyes of all in the Arabian peninsula. Many tribes came to him to offer their submission. In that Year of Deputation it was very clear that paganism, Judaism and Christianity had lost the battle for dominance in Arabia, and Muhammad had won. The Mandate of Heaven must surely be with him.

One prominent group of Christians from the Najran (towards Yeman, about 150 miles south of Sana'a) headed by their Bishop Abu Haritha came to call upon Muhammad in that Year of Deputation. In the course of discussion, a dispute erupted about the Divinity of Jesus Christ, with the good Bishop making a case for Christ's divinity from His miraculous birth. The Qur'an records for us the two-fold reply given by Muhammad to Bishop Abu Haritha. Firstly, the Bishop was informed that the miraculous birth of Jesus did not indicate any divine status for him because Adam was also without an earthly Father.

The similitude of Jesus
Before God is as that of Adam;
He created him from dust,
Then said to him: 'Be'
And he was Surah 3.59 (Yusuf Ali's)

Secondly, Muhammad challenged the Christians of Najran to a contest by imprecation

If any one disputes
In this matter with thee,
Now after knowledge
Hath come to thee
Say: Come! Let us
Gather together,
Our sons and your sons,
Our women and your women,
Ourselves and yourselves:
Then let us earnestly pray,
And invoke the curse
Of God on those who lie! Surah 3.61 (Yusuf Ali's)

The Christians of Najran understandably refused both suggestions of conversion to Islam and the contest by imprecation. Instead they submitted to Muhammad's overlordship. To quote Yusuf Ali's commentary about the incident.

The Holy Apostle, firm in his faith, proposed Mubahala ie a solemn meeting, in which both sides should summon not only their men, but their women and children, earnestly pray to God, and invoke the curse of God on those who should lie. Those who had a pure and sincere faith would not hesitate. The Christians declined and they were dismissed in a spirit of tolerance, with a promise of protection from the State in return for tribute, ' the wages of rule' as it is called in the Ain-I-Akbari.¹²

In spite of everything else, Muhammad had given a faithful prophetic witness to the fact that Jesus was just like Adam. Obviously, like Adam, Jesus had no human father biologically. To think of Adam is to think about Creation – to think about a new Adam is to think about a New Creation. To think about Adam the Man is to think about humanity at large. Surely this is a fruitful point of discussion for Christians and Muslims to ponder on: Does a new Adam imply the possibility of a New Creation? Does a curse await those who fail to appreciate Jesus Christ as the second Adam?

D. Paul's apostolic witness to Jesus as the Great Reconciler of conflicting peoples.

The apostle Paul makes reference to Jesus as the New Adam and therefore, the ground of Hope for the future of the human race ((Rom 5 & 1 Cor 15). If Death came because of the old Adam then Life comes through Christ the New Adam. For Paul, Jesus Christ is the sign of a new and more hopeful humanity.

In Eph 2:14-21, the apostle Paul proclaims the One who is the reconciler of conflicting civilisations. This reconciliation Christ accomplishes by:

1. Preaching peace to those at war v 17
2. By removing walls and barriers promoting hostility between peoples v 14
3. By abolishing legalism and traditions which promote alienation v 15
4. By being the New Man/Adam where two opposing sides can find a focus for unity v 15
5. By reconciling both enemies to God v 16
6. By crucifying their hatred for the other v 16
7. By offering a common salvation for both parties to partake of v 18

Jesus still calls us to follow Him even in this lifestyle of peace making. Surely the church that will faithfully follow the example of Christ the Reconciler, will be called the children of God (Mt 5:9) Interestingly when Barbara Ward gave the Beatty Memorial Lectures in McGill University in 1955, she made reference to Christ as the second Adam. What she bore witness to may still have relevance for us in the 21st century.

The Eastern idea that the highest aim of man is to achieve unity with a higher consciousness, to move to new levels of freedom by breaking away from the constraining egoisms of the self, can, at this point, be fruitfully confronted with the great christian doctrine of the second Adam - the doctrine that Christ is the first born of a new race of men.¹³

Barbara Ward saw that the truth of human hope and potential in Christ would enrich all possible views of humanity which sought to be optimistic. Consequently, she was not speaking about the confrontation of ideas but of mutual enrichment between thinking of people in dialogue and discussion. To let her continue:

If what we seek is a new type of life, which expands human consciousness, takes man beyond his present level of intelligence and raises him to new heights of creativeness and capacity, we have to look for it in the great leaders of the world's religions and above all, in Christ Himself.¹⁴

For her, this faith is what is needed especially when we lose sight of the preciousness of the human person because of the overwhelming materialism and technological innovation around us.

If we can keep this faith, God willing, we shall be able to help our brothers when they go through the darkness of doubt, when they too are engulfed in technology and materialism, when they forget the divine image in which they are made, and believe that the purposes of science is not to make truth manifest but to make gadgets.¹⁵

E. The credibility of the life of Jesus Christ

It will be difficult to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Reconciler and the Incarnation of Peace, if, in the first place, the earthly life of Jesus does not give us a basis whatsoever to see in Him a possible solution for the challenges endangering all of us in our day and age. Mack Stokes presents the case beautifully for us in highlighting 2 facts about Jesus very often overlooked.

- i. The compassion of Jesus - we are made to notice first of all the compassion that Jesus had for the multitudes.

Who were these people that Jesus loved? They were not cultured folk. They were poor, sick and enslaved by the tyranny of conventions. Jesus loved them. He suffered with them. He felt the pangs of their hunger, the privations of their poverty, the anguish of their diseases. He had compassion on the multitude (see Matt 15:32, Mk 8:2)¹⁶

- ii. Jesus' estimate of people - According to Stokes, Jesus struck mightily against that chronic plague of the human race which has led the proud people of all the ages to look down upon their fellow human beings.¹⁷

13 Ward, Barbara The Interplay of East and West 1957, Allen & Unwin, Lond, pg 81-82

14 Ibid pg 82

15 Ibid pg 82

16 Stokes, Mack Major United Methodist Beliefs 1984, Abingdon Press, Nashville, pg 44 - 46

17 Ibid pg 45

The rich had no right to hold their special privileges over the poor. Not even Caesar was entitled to lordship over the souls of people. Men had no birthright which did not also belong to women. Adults walked no pathway into the kingdom of God which little children might not tread. The sons of Abraham had no claim upon the power of God which was not also available to the Canaanitish woman or the hated Samaritan. And the chief priests and elders had no seats in heaven which the harlots and the outcasts might not fill.¹⁸

For Stokes, both these attitudes of Jesus reflect in some way a revelation to us in the Life and Being of Jesus, showing how God actually regards us and wishes to relate to all of us, without discrimination.

Was the compassion that Jesus had for the people merely the strange exaggerated mood of a Jewish peasant who lived two thousand years ago? No. That was God in Christ.¹⁹

Likewise,

Was this estimate (of human equality) Jesus placed upon all people merely the peculiar judgement of a Jewish peasant who lived centuries ago? No. This was the eternal God showing us what He thinks of people. For God 'shows no partiality'... This was God in Christ.²⁰

The point that I am trying to make here is that it is highly insensitive for us to preach Christ as Divine Saviour to others, without first trying to show what a decent and likeable human being Christ was in the first place. In a sense, Muhammad was right. We should be speaking firstly about the Son of Man before people are ready to hear about the Son of God!

F. Can we still give a convincing witness for Jesus Christ today?

I believe Jesus Christ still deserves to be heard today because He not only reconciles sinners to God but He also reconciles us to our enemies (both religiously and civilisationally) and He reveals to us the greatness and extent of our worth to Him. If Christ has His way, then human kind will never be replaced by the machine no matter how smart or sophisticated. But how shall we speak of Him meaningfully today? I believe we should make our witness understandable, courteous and with credibility.

i. An understandable witness for Christ

Fouad Elias Accad is an Arab Christian evangelist, whose approach has been developed after more than 40 years of preaching in the Middle East. What he shares with us deserves respectful attention.

18 ibid pg 46

19 ibid pg 46

20 ibid pg 45

Someone asked....the following puzzling question: 'Who do you think existed first - God, His Spirit, or His Word?' The friend answered immediately - 'Certainly God, as nothing could have existed before Him.' The man then said, 'If God was at anytime without Spirit or Word, which means a dead or a dumb God, hence and imperfect God, how can He be God at all? The friend thought for a long time....and then said, 'You are right my friend, God cannot be dead, without Spirit, or dumb, without Word, at any time, for in Him life and perfection are personified... God's Spirit and Word, were with Him from the very beginning, and will remain, without interruption, till the very end. God, I can see now, cannot be partitioned into God, Word and Spirit. He is One God.²¹

Here is an attempt to share the Good News with ideas and truths that we already share in common together. This kind of common ground can only be established through much dialogue and friendship together with others.

ii. A courteous witness for Christ

One day the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (779-823) was brought to Baghdad to face the third Abbasid Caliph Mahdi. He was asked the most sensitive question of all: 'What do you say about Muhammad?' What Timothy gave by way of reply deserves to be reproduced here as an example of polite dialogue with Christian integrity.²²

Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets... Finally, Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.²³

We cannot but feel that Patriarch Timothy I was simply following the wisdom of Paul - 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone' (Col 4:6)

iii. A credible witness for Jesus Christ

Mother Teresa tells of this incident which deserves repetition

When our sisters were in Ceylon, a Minister of State once told me something very surprising. He said, 'You know, Mother, I love Christ but I hate christians.' So I asked him how that could be. He answered, 'Because christians do not give us Christ; they do not live their christian lives to the full.'²⁴

Credibility for the witness is lost when the lifestyle does not back up the words that are spoken. A more encouraging incident is given here below:

21 Nazir-Ali *Islam-A Christian Perspective* 1983, Exeter, Paternoster, pg 16

22 Moffett, Samuel Hugh *A History of Christianity in Asia Vol 1* 1998, Orbis, N.Y, pg 350

23 *Ibid* pg 351

24 Devaranda, Angelo *Mother Teresa - Contemplative at the heart of the World* 1986, Fomt, Lond, pg 123

A muslim mulvi was standing with Father Gabric and looking at a Sister bandaging the wound of a leper with so much love. She didn't say anything, but she did something. He turned to Father and said, 'All these years I believed that Jesus was a prophet, but today I know He is God because He has given so much love into the hands of this Sister.' Even today, that Sister does not know that her actions brought Jesus into the life of that man.²⁵

Much of the friction that comes from our 'witness' for Christ can actually be reduced if we proactively seek to be understandable, courteous and credible in the way we relate to others. This I believe is the least we should expect of those who wish to proclaim Christ as Saviour and Reconciler - the second Adam. Yet the significance of our witness would be even greater if we especially take note of the insights of Kosuke Koyama when he complained that Christianity suffers from a 'teacher-complex'. According to him, Christianity in Asia has no future because it has been aggressive and unchristlike in many ways.

When did Christianity become a cheap military campaign?... I submit that a good hundred million dollars, 100 years of crusading with 100,000 'Billy Grahams' will not make Asia Christian. Christian faith does not and cannot be spread by crusading. It will spread without money, without bishops, without theologians, without plannings... if people see a crucified mind (not crusading mind) in christians....It is the mind of Jesus Christ...If we have this mind, people will see it. People are perceptive. They will ask the secret of this crucified mind. And that is evangelism.²⁶

Presented to the Evangelism Working Group for the 11th Oxford Institutes by
Malcolm T H Tan (Methodist Church in Singapore)

²⁵ ibid pg 124

²⁶ Koyama, Kosuke's Christianity suffers from 'Teacher Complex' CCA News, 15 Nov 1974, Singapore