

Edinburgh 2010, Theme 3 Mission and Postmodernities parallel session

Presentation from the perspective of Peace and Reconciliation

Sebastian C.H. Kim, Professor of Theology and Public Life, York St John University, UK

I should like to begin by expressing my appreciation for the papers presented on the topic of mission and postmodernities, and for the work of the study group who have written such a helpful report.

I fully agree with what has been said but there is one thing I would like to point out. The definition of postmodernity used in the report assumes a linear historical development of postmodernity in the West, and then a spreading out to the rest of the world. But I would like to say that postmodernity arises simultaneously in different contexts. It is not only a product of the West but of everywhere. For example, if we look at young people, their shared culture everywhere is similar regardless of context, and not only in the West, and yet in each place it can be regarded as arising out of local historical development. Furthermore, this development does not always follow the same trajectory as in the West, as we see from the way mobile phones have bypassed landlines altogether in some places.

Among the nine themes of 2010, Mission and Postmodernities stands out compared to 1910 because it is a fundamentally new topic and highlights what has changed in the last one hundred years. Therefore we need to make a particular effort to have a new approach to mission in the postmodern context.

My role in this short presentation is to reflect on the theme from peace and reconciliation perspectives. York St John University, where I teach, is involved in an ongoing peace and reconciliation project. We have already held two international conferences and we are planning a third conference in Seoul in November 2010. The International Conference on Peace and Reconciliation was established in 2006 to provide a platform for both scholars and practitioners in the fields of peace and reconciliation. The nature of the conference is interdisciplinary but perspectives from theology and religious studies are particularly to the fore. It is held in partnership with Younknak Presbyterian Church, Seoul, South Korea, and has a particular interest in peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

The first conference at York St John University in 2006 took the theme 'In Search of Shared Identity: The Korean Peninsula and Other Contexts'. The second at University of California, Los Angeles in 2009 was concerned with 'Embracing the Displaced: Shaping Theories and Practices for a Sustainable Peace'. In 2010, Younknak Presbyterian Church is marking the tenth anniversary of the passing of its founder pastor, Rev. Kyung-Chik Han. Younknak Presbyterian Church currently has over 60,000 members and 500 sister churches world-wide, and Rev. Han was one of the most respected religious leaders in South Korea. He was awarded the Templeton Prize

in 1992, and made a significant contribution to the relationship between the people in North and South Korea. In his honour, the third conference will be a major event co-hosted with Younknak Church in Seoul, to which 140 theologians and church leaders from 70 countries are being specially invited to attend and discuss the theme, to make 350 participants in all. The plenary papers of all these conferences are being published to encourage wider interaction among the scholars, peace activists, policy makers and religious communities.

One distinctive feature of our approach is to collect stories, poems and visual images from people around the world engaged in peacemaking. These are being added to a database to make them more widely available. This is in keeping with one of the characteristics of postmodernity. Rather than following systematic or logical argument on the basis of facts and knowledge, postmodern thinking tends to emphasise personal experiences. I would like to give three examples here of the kind of material that is included. All of these are from the Korean context.

First, a story. One of the most telling aspects of despair and hope in the Korean situation is the experience of divided families and relatives, and the story of Kim Haksoo, a prominent artist and an elder of a Methodist Church in Seoul, is not an unusual one. He was married with four children and lived in Pyongyang just before the war broke out. After the short occupation of Pyongyang by the UN, when the UN troops had to withdraw from the city, he was advised to escape to the South with them, leaving the rest of the family behind. This was because of fear of communist retaliation and the fear that as a Korean man he would be forced to join the communist army, and also on the understanding that the UN troops would soon return to recapture the city. Just before the time to leave, his wife went out to borrow money for his journey to the South. Because he could not hold the last vehicle any longer, he had to say good-bye to his children only, and left to come to Seoul. When the war ended he could not go back and could not get any news about the family. For nearly forty years he was living with the guilt feeling of not having said good-bye to his wife and, though many who fled from the North remarried in the South, he remained single. In 1989, he unexpectedly received news from his close friend, who had visited North Korea, that his wife and family were still alive and that his wife had also remained single. He had very mixed emotions – on the one hand, he rejoiced that they were still alive and well, but he very well knew that they could not yet be united. He continues to hold *han* (or anguish) deep inside his heart but he is able to deal with it through his faith in Christ and by his dedication to painting. Perhaps, as C.S. Song suggests, Elder Kim longs that this *han* may be a seed in the womb for reconciliation, and that he will one day be united with his family.¹

Second, a poem: ‘Rice is heaven’. This poem is a powerful tool written by Kim Chi Ha, a Catholic activist who was imprisoned many times for his stance on behalf of the economically and politically oppressed.

Food is heaven
As you can't go to heaven by yourself

¹ Sebastian C.H. Kim, ‘Reconciliation Possible? The Churches’ Efforts Toward Peace and Reunification of North and South Korea’, in Sebastian C.H. Kim, Pauline Kollontai & Greg Hoyland (eds), *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 161-184, see p. 176.

Food is to be shared
Food is heaven
As you see the stars in heaven together
Food is to be shared by everybody
When the food goes into a mouth
Heaven is worshipped in the mind
Food is heaven
Ah, ah, food is
To be shared by everybody.²

This poem has been used to encourage the people to see the importance of sharing food with poor people in the South as well as the North.

Third, I have some visual images (on a slide). These pictures are used by *minjung* (liberation) theologians in Korea to communicate their theology to the general public. They have been powerful media for people to get to grips with the reality of poverty and injustice, and the call for peacemaking between North and South Korea.

For mission in the twenty-first century, understanding the new culture of postmodernity is of central importance. Experience is a key word for postmodernity. People with a postmodern outlook do not want to be persuaded by argument but respond to experiences conveyed in stories, poems and images. Unless the church touches people's hearts and enters their experience, mission will be ineffective. Utilising varied approaches of conveying and creating experience, such as those outlined above, is vital, along with the traditional approaches of theologising and strategising. Let us use creative ways and means to carry out our work!

² Kim Chi Ha, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus and Other Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 30.