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# Introduction

## Bible and Theology from the Underside of Empire

Empire as a concept that generally defines the signs of the times in which the Council for World Mission (CWM) responds to its calling as a global mission body in the twenty-first century. Empire leaves faith in a precarious state. Theological imagination and Biblical interpretation in this context do not become matters of luxury, but matters of life and death. CWM, which is a product of the modern missionary movement with its colonial heritage, has since emerged as a community of churches in mission, witnessing relevantly and courageously in the context of Empire. The metamorphosis of CWM, namely, its change from a missionary paradigm of mission associated with the modern missionary movement to one of a roundtable of churches happened as a result of the Council's bold theological transgressions informed by the communities who are forced to bear the weight of the imperial oppressive systems unjustly. The Mission Theology Statement of 2010 articulates succinctly, the theological rationale for CWM's revolt against all manifestations of Empire in our context (CWM 2011).

God's mission in history has always been a celebration of bearing witness in the midst of Empire. God became flesh in Jesus Christ in an imperial world and Jesus lived out his life in accordance with the will of God as a counter-imperial praxis. The mission of the church is, therefore, to continue the praxis of Jesus to contest the claims of the Empire by affirming, protecting, and celebrating movements of life. Empire is that which claims absolute lordship over God's creation and commodifies all relationships between human beings and human beings, human beings and creation, human beings and faith, human beings and work, and human beings and sexuality; thus the commodification of the whole creation and the disablement of moral agency. The violent face of the Empire is exposed in systems and practices that exclude and discriminate people based on class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. Empire is hence a god that rejects God and the flourishing of the community of creation.

Mission in the context of Empire demands our absolute allegiance to the blossoming of life, exposing and confronting imperial forces. It is an invitation to resist the temptation to be co-opted by the Empire and the nerve to come out of the Empire, creating counter-imperial alternatives.

With this renewed vision, CWM began to search for new expressions of Christian public witness in a broken world. The Theology Statement of 2010 provides us with the theological

basis for CWM's existence today. The Theology Statement 2010 identifies Empire as the context in which we are called to be partners with God in God's mission to transform the world. Colonialism is part of our history and there are still unhealed wounds of imperial plunder on the body of our nations. Today we think that we live in a post-colonial world. But we continue to live under the sway of neo-colonial forces. Engaging in mission in the midst of Empire is not a new slogan. God's mission has always taken place in the midst of Empire. God became flesh in Jesus Christ in an imperial world. From the time of his birth, Jesus' life was threatened by Empire. We learn from the gospels that it is the Empire and its allies that eventually killed him. So we are called to continue this mission engagement in the midst of Empire. Here we need to understand and name the manifestations of Empire in our midst. And also, we need to contextualise the mission model of Jesus in confronting the Empire as we engage in the mission of God.

Mission is integrally connected with the church; the body of Christ. In the context of Empire, we are called to participate in the ministry of equipping the saints for witnessing to the living God in truthfulness. So our vocation is to enable the church to be experienced as a healing and empowering presence in the lives of the victims of Empire. How do we re-discover the church in the context of Empire? How do we transform our faith communities – our own congregations – into missional congregations? As stated in the CWM Annual Report of 2014, the adoption of the concept of a missional congregation is a call to local churches to become transformative communities, 'manifesting the reign of God in their midst as lives are made new and justice is realized for those who have been denied fullness of life.' The report goes on:

Such a call challenges the congregations to see mission as 'the practical outworking of our faith, so that it is rooted in our communities, and grows from there, engaging and transforming the challenges we face, gradually realizing the fullness of life that God promises.' Mission is no longer a delegated activity that is done elsewhere; 'but as part of the lifeblood of the congregation as they engage with the life experiences of their own members and the experiences of the people who comprise their neighborhood, witnessing to their faith in God's promise of life.'

A congregation cannot be missional if it is not attuned to those on the margins, either within its midst or beyond. At the heart of the Christian life there is community.' It is an expression of what our faith calls us to, the celebration of life in all its fullness, which can only be realized in community, in the company of other people. Mission is not something we can outsource, it should be the very essence of congregational life.' So the challenge before us is to re-imagine mission as developing life-affirming

communities, through the agency of the marginalized, in the midst of death and destruction. (CWM 2014:8)

In the Indian context our re-imagination of mission would provide us with two discernments: First, mission is *sangharsh*; a struggle informed by the silenced voices at the margins, to understand and expose the life-threatening forces in our midst; and second, mission is *nirman*, developing alternative life-affirming ethos, systems, practices, and communities. Let us briefly make an attempt to analyse the life-denying systems and forces which continue to colonise our life world, and to propose alternative missional expressions that transform our faith communities into God's beloved communities of abundant life and grace.

Mission in the midst of Empire is the Christian praxis of engaging in the public affairs of our times, offering critiques, insights and alternatives to transform our social relations, based on the vision of the reign of God. It invites us to listen to the margins, the wretched of this earth. We see a new politics brewing in the seashores, the forests, the fields, the mountains, the river valleys, the urban slums, and the campuses.

In her book, *The End of Imagination*, Arundhati Roy writes:

At a time when opportunism is everything, when hope seems lost, when everything boils down to a cynical business deal, we must find the courage to dream. To reclaim romance. The romance of believing in justice, in freedom, and in dignity. (Roy 2016:103)

The new social movements are born out of this dream. Christian mission in our times requires from us an unwavering commitment to be in communion with the social movements in our midst.

'Mission' is a contested term. Our dominant mission discourses are founded on exclusive truth claims. It is our sense of call and burden to reach out to the unreached to bring them to light from the bondage to darkness is that which inspires us to engage in mission. This understanding of mission stems from the presupposition that the beliefs and practices of the other are heathen and sinful. So it is our mission to intervene in the life stories of the other and impose our beliefs and practices on them and convert them into our understanding of truth. Over the years, attempts were made to redeem mission of this negative legacy of conquest and violence. New paradigms were proposed to widen the horizons of mission. In spite of all those attempts, mission continues to be interventions in the life of the other to forcefully incorporate them into our fold. External interventions

reduce people to the level of objects to be acted upon. It is in the light of this critical discernment that we need to look for alternative mission paradigms.

The alternative mission paradigm is to become partners in the praxis of God. In the creation story, narrated in the book of Genesis, we see the divine hovering over the chaotic order like a mother bird and creating life and beauty. Creation as a beautiful community of life connected to each other in a deep sense of communion and relationality is the consequence of the creative transformative praxis of God. The creativity that is given to us is to continue this process of creation and transformation. The command to till and to keep the earth is to engage in transformative interventions on earth which will enhance the quality and sustenance of life on the face of the earth. Divine creativity, the very image that we share in ourselves, is the ability to transform our surroundings according to God's will. Hence our commitment to transform the world is a commitment to participate in God's redemptive work in history. Transformation of the world is not a social work. It is the collective expression of our commitment to God and our earnest attempt to live out our faith.

Traditionally, we tend to understand faith and Christian life as a subjective reality that we experience at the innermost recesses of our hearts. But the God whom we meet in the life stories of our ancestors of faith narrated in the Bible is a God who is Emmanuel; a God who is ever present in the everyday living experiences of the community; a God who laments with the oppressed and the exploited; a God who liberates the oppressed from the shackles of bondage; a God who travels with them in their journey towards the Promised Land; a God who becomes flesh in history and accepts human frailty; a God who laughs, dines, walks, and weeps with the people; a God who undergoes the experience of utter God forsakenness along with a multitude of people.

So faith in God from a Christian perspective is not to search for a God who is aloof from our world of tears and sorrows; rather our faith in God invites us to discover God afresh in the most unexpected times and places in our history. So faith is to meet God at the bleeding points of history, and to participate in the salvific praxis of God. Christian mission is not a rescue operation of airlifting believers from a sinful world; rather Christian mission is to believe in the promise of God to transform the world and to participate in the divine project to realise that promise. In the context of the Empire, we are called to transform our churches into missional congregations to spearhead this mission of transformation. CWM is committed to equipping the churches to live out this subversive gospel through radical social engagement. Bible being the primary source of revelation, together with other sources of faith is central to the faith formation of our

communities – a new ‘grammar’ of doing theology in the context of Empire. Contextual and anti-imperial reading of the Bible and alternative theological imaginaries place a huge responsibility on CWM to enable faith communities to witness relevantly, subversively and insurrectionally against Empire. This is the purpose of this book.

In this book, we share chapters developed out of the Bible Study Workshop – Discerning the Signs of the Times: Mission in the midst of Empire – to bring out a global Bible and theological study book. The potential readers of the book are members of the congregations, pastors, theological educators and peers in biblical and theological studies. The content and the style are intentionally simple and reader-friendly without compromising the academic integrity of the book. Each reflection engages with a Biblical text and a particular manifestation of Empire in our times, facilitating a theological conversation between the text and the context. Authors suggest non-conventional hermeneutical explorations. There are short stories, poems, statistics, quotations, prayers, illustrations and artwork to add clarity and sharpness to the Bible studies and theological reflections.

The book is divided into three sections: Broken Bodies, Colonised Spaces and Transgressive Bodies.

### ***Broken Bodies***

In the first section, **Graham Adams** poses an important question about justice. He argues that justice is central to our Christian faith and links this question to the importance of truth in the light of the antics of Empire and its ability to manufacture its ‘truth,’ which is clearly propaganda. Adams points us to the need to be alert to a competing vision of justice and illustrates how justice in the domination system of Empire divides, concocts lies and destroys.

**Eleazar Fernandez** discusses the impact of globalisation and corporatisation, particularly health and well-being. He identifies a globalising network-power, which has adverse consequences, resulting in much pain and suffering to people and the earth. Dr Fernandez calls on the church as a community to faith to lead a resistance against this disorder. He posits a holistic approach to health care, which goes beyond remedial responses to a deeper understanding and response, and one which considers the interconnectivity of life at the social and ecological levels. A holistic approach requires the participation of medical personnel as well as social workers and spiritual leaders.

**Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth** weaves her penetrating argument and perspective on patriarchy through the story of Kowsila. Pitched within the context of indentured Indians

in the sugar plantations and slavery, Sheerattan-Bisnauth celebrates Kowsila's struggle to argue that the struggle, in fact, is edifying. Reading the Bible through the eyes of gender liberation and engaging Victorian perceptions and imbrications of patriarchy, she poignantly cautions that patriarchy maintains Empire in our times.

**Rev. Feiloaiga Taule'ale'ausumai Davis** interrogates the issue of gender injustice examining the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 and the realities of women today. The culture of silence in the face of sexual violence has a devastating impact on women, children and families. Yet, the church remains silent and is also complicit in this abuse, failing to address the injustices, such as domestic and sexual violence, and marginalisation in church and society. She makes the point about the detriment of the church's adherence to the societal culture of oppression of women, which relates them to the background. Women are denied their rightful places in church and society, are visibly missing from leadership positions and are not acknowledged for their work in the private and public spheres.

**Graham Adams** shares a powerful contrast between child-likeness and childishness, ostensibly Empire's propensity to dissect communities by childish acts. Pitched within the context of the UK, where the rights of a child are seemingly affirmed, Adams exposes the contradictions of his context by pointing at the prevalence of abuse and the sexualisation of children. Clearly intending to put across an undeniable feature of the Empire, a pseudo-innocent façade, the 'hiddenness' of suffering is revealed through 'the touch of the first-born of creation' Jesus the child of God. Our humanity is childlike, unlike childish as Empire has shown, Adams poignantly argues.

**Marsha Nathalee Martin** offers a real story that exposes the sexuality of Empire. It is a harrowing, tragic story of Roshanne whose pristine innocence and promising life is shattered first in her most intimate of spaces of trust – her aunt's home. Embroiled in a vicious cycle of brokenness, she is sexually abused at a very young age, her body later turned and defiled into a money-making machine as a prostitute, trafficked and arrested in the Empire *polis*. Hers is a story where the touching of her body became more frequent as is the case in the Empire *polis* whose savagery is written on the bodies of innocent children. Yet in this story, Martin points us to hope as Roshanne is on a path of healing.

### ***Colonised Spaces***

Reading the narratives of the Union Carbide industrial disaster and the birth narratives of Jesus, **George Zechariah** offers a prophetic condemnation of the instruments of Empire that are destroying the life and the livelihood of vulnerable communities. Critiquing

dominant understandings of mission that coalesce around the centres of power, **Zachariah** seeks to subvert this dominant paradigm by calling for alternative understandings of mission that emerge from the margins. He suggests that this can be done only through anamnestic solidarity among the oppressed. To him it is the remembering of dangerous memories that offers subversive resistance.

Critiquing modernity with its economic reductionism, **John Samuel** offers an analysis of the changing face of the market economy that has become a dominant and dominating force in all spheres of life. Prising open the inner workings of capitalism, Samuel offers a historical account of Christian engagement with capitalism. It is with this introduction that he enters into a discussion of Genesis 11:1-9, the narrative of the Tower of Babel. Samuel deconstructs this imperial project by exposing the dynamics of power interests in the text. He concludes by suggesting that we can only speak 'one language' when we remove the imbalances of power and hierarchy.

**James Perkinson** offers an alternative analysis of the problems that plague post-industrial cities in general, and Detroit in particular. Using the language of the street and the styling of hip-hop, Perkinson uniquely exposes for us the rottenness of the post-industrial city while showing us how the marginalised are able, in their struggle for life, to transform this space. He connects the dots between the culture of urban African-Americans from the 'hood' so to speak and the movement of Jesus, highlighting the liberating elements in both.

**Vuyani Vellem** studies resurrection through the eyes of *iziko*. Citing the resurrection as possibly the most potently subversive element of the Christian faith, Vellem argues that *iziko*, translated as the fireplace or the hearth of a home, also contains similar subversive elements in the black African context and suggests that this could be an interpretative lens through which the insurrectionist elements of resurrection could also be seen. An account of a unique relationship between insurrection and resurrection, Vellem contends, suggests a resistance towards Empire that emerges out of death and resurrection instead of eternity, which he suggests is, in fact, the hallmark of Empire.

**Lily Phiri** appropriates the well-known political fable by George Orwell, *Animal Farm* to lament the savage manner in which God's creation, the world, and its peoples have been plunged into a pig sty through civilisations that subvert the original vision of equality and dignity of life. 'All animals are equal but some are more equal than others,' Phiri argues and demonstrates through numerous examples one of which is the (mis)placement of decent work and the unceasing episodes of greed and the perpetuation of inequalities by the powerful of this world. At heart is the distortion of the vision of life in its abundance



in the vineyard of *Animal Farm* and yet the illusory vision of inequality and indecency that thrives only through life killing.

In her eco-theological reflection of the situation of ongoing exploitation of the continent and Zambia in particular, **Kuzipa Nalwamba** presents the prevailing situation of mineral (copper) extraction and exploitation of the people of Zambia. This exploitation has not been limited only to humans, but also to their closest neighbours; nature and mineral resources. The frustration of these two has had a negative spill over to humans. While other countries attracted multinationals vying for different products, such as gold and diamonds in South Africa, and rubber and oil in Cameroon, Zambia became popular for its copper, a mineral that seduced the British through their South African company (BSAC) as early as 1923. She soon took over the administration of the entire country as colonial masters and carefully carved out the Copperbelt as a main industrial zone where carefully planned strategies for exploitation of workers were designed, such as unskilled labour, low wages, hut taxes and life threatening jobs. This situation continued even after independence and maintained Zambia on a steady level of poverty and degradation in spite of the copper export for almost a century.

### ***Transgressive Bodies***

Challenging the norms of heterosexuality, **Ragies Gunda** seeks to reinterpret Genesis 19 and Judges 19. Traditionally cited as a text that legitimises homophobia and religious sanctions against sexual minorities, Genesis 19 is an oft-quoted text among those who would like to maintain the heterosexual patriarchal order. Gunda, however, flips this traditional reading and reads both texts through the lens of hospitality. Raising the questions of responses to homosexuality in the African continent, he critiques imperial approaches towards issues of sexuality and calls for an alternative perspective based on sexual rights and the rights of sexual minorities.

According to **Roderick Hewitt** the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not rooted in Biblical times but finds its roots in the political and economic conflict between European nations. Post-World War 1, the existence of the Ottoman Empire navy made it crucial to divide the Ottoman-Syrian province into several countries, which led to European Jews migrating and then settling in Palestine. The land that the European Jews found in Palestine was not empty or unoccupied, yet a number of commercial real estate transactions resulted in the local people being disposed of and expelled from the land. Because the land of Palestine continued to be occupied by the indigenous people, the solution to the current problem

being faced is one that must benefit both the Jews and the Palestinians – and must also resemble the Will of the God who remains the defender of victims of oppression.

**Unhey Kim** presents a study of human sexuality and trafficking of persons in light of a liberation reading of Genesis. Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift and an expression of Christian faith. Christian teaching about human sexuality is firmly grounded in the love of God revealed by Christ. Professor Kim reads the creation narratives, recognising that the gift of sex was among those things God declared to be very good in creation. (Gen. 1:31) The Christian faith celebrates the goodness of creation, including our bodies and sexuality. We come from diverse Christian communities to recognise sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. However in our context, in the midst of Empire, body, especially women's bodies have been destroyed and exploited. Kim makes the point that Empire is pervasive in the reality of our lives; to think about Empire is to think about our reality. She makes the case of sexuality being at the centre of the moral crisis in the midst of Empire.

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Sudipta Singh, and  
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