

Conversion and Mission – a South-South Dialogue, from the Perspectives of David Bosch and Orlando Costas

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Samevatting

Die outeur, 'n teoloog wat in Brasilië werk, wys daarop dat die tipiese bekeringsprediking in die Latyns-Amerikaanse evangeliese kringe gekorrigeer behoort te word. Twee verskralings wat hy aandui is: (a) dat die dramatiese Paulus-tipe bekering as normatief geld, en (b) dat dit baie individualisties en eenmalig gesien word. Hy wys daarop hoe die menings van die Suid-Afrikaanse missioloog, David Bosch, en die Latyns-Amerikaanse Orlando Costas, as die nodige korreksies uit die Suide gesien kan word. Bekering is 'n holistiese ingrypende gebeure wat baie verskillende vorms aanneem. Verder is dit 'n dinamiese, voortgaande proses van verandering wat nie net 'n 'bekering van' nie, maar ook 'n 'bekering tot' insluit. Hy meen dat hierdie tipies gereformeerde beklemtonings is.

1. Introduction

The author would like to introduce by stressing two introductory points which seem to be very important to the purposes of the conference overall and of this lecture in particular. The first has to do with the importance of a theological congress of such high academic level like this one discussing a missiological theme. There is a prejudice against Missiology in some

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academic circles. It is considered by some scholars as inferior to Systematic Theology or Exegesis, so to speak. However, it is not wise to forget what Martin Kähler said exactly one hundred years ago: Mission is “the mother of theology” (Kähler, 1908; 1971:190 apud Bosch, 1991, 1992:16). If there was no (Christian) Mission there would be no (Christian) Theology. According to Bosch, “the New Testament writers were not scholars who had the leisure to research the evidence before they put pen to paper. Rather, they wrote in the context of an ‘emergency situation’ of a church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was *forced* to theologize” (1991, 1992:16). So, it is inappropriate that so many scholars consider Missiology as academically inferior to other fields of theological investigation. The second point I wish to make has to do with the importance of this “South-South” dialogue with which we are involved right now. Christianity – Protestantism and Roman Catholicism as well – has been understood by and large as a Western, North Atlantic religious system. However, in the last decades we have the opportunity to witness a turning point as far as the gravity center of Christianity is concerned. This is the main emphasis of Philip Jenkins’ books (2007, 2008).¹ Jenkins, history and religious studies scholar at Pennsylvania State University (USA), shows how a tremendous shift is happening in Christianity: it is no more only a religion of the West. Rather, it is a belief embraced more and more by non Caucasian people from Africa (south of Sahara desert), Latin America and many parts of Asia. The Christianity of the Global South is by and large very conservative in doctrinal and behavioral matters and charismatic in its worship style. Jenkins demonstrates with plenty of data and numbers that, as far as numerical growth and church attendance are concerned, Christianity is decreasing in Western Europe, it is stabilized in the USA but is growing faster and faster in this so called Global South. The greatest – and obvious – difference still is in the fact that as the West (or “Global North”) is affluent, the Global South is very poor. In his lecture delivered during the famous Lausanne Congress (1974) Peruvian Evangelical theologian Samuel Escobar cited this provocative quotation:

Imagine that all the population of the world were condensed to the size of one village of 100 people. In this village 67 of that 100 people would poor; the other 33 would be in varying degrees well

1 This book has not yet been released (See http://www.amazon.com/New-Faces-Christianity-Believing-Global/dp/0195368517/ref=pd_bbs_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1220602910&sr=8-2).

off. Of the total population, only 7 would be North Americans. The other 93 would watch the 7 North Americans spend one-half of all the money, eat one-seventy of all the food and use one-half of all the bath-tubes. These 7 people would have ten times more doctors than the other 93. Meanwhile the 7 would continue to get more and more and the 93 less and less.²

These words were first said 36 years ago. Perhaps this situation has not changed so much since then. This northern economic power will obviously have some very practical consequences. One of them has to do with its unbalance in theological and missiological education. It is nowadays a “North-South” conversation (it is more a conversation or a monologue than a dialogue – the “North” speaks and the “South” listens). At least in Latin America, many text books used for theological education and preparation of candidates for pastoral ministry are translated from English or German to Spanish or Portuguese. Latin Americans who wish to pursue advanced theological degrees in most cases go to countries in the Northern Hemisphere. It is not wrong *per se*. The problem is when one thinks that the only valid theology is the one produced in Western style in Louvain or Rome (if it is Catholic theology) or Tübingen, Amsterdam or Princeton (if it is Protestant theology). This situation of a “speaking” North and a “listening” South was modified a few decades ago with the appearance of Liberation Theology in Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant and Ecumenical circles, and, in a lesser sense, of the Integral Mission Theology, in Evangelical circles, both from Latin America. This monologue situation has been modified, but not totally changed. Concerning this situation Costas (1992: 118) stated this as follows:

Thanks to several publishing houses, ecumenical organizations like the World Council of Churches, and several sensitive Western theologians and missiologists, these emerging theologies have begun to make an impact in traditional theological circles, even though, it must be admitted, there are still far too many theologians and institutions that persist in their Western provincialism and chauvinism, refusing to acknowledge the novelty and creativity of their third world colleagues, or the liberating perspective of third world theological thought and its prophetic significance for theology in general and the church’s mission in particular.

Therefore, it is extremely important to establish what I call a “South-South” dialogue, as the one the author intends to present in this article,

2 Clifford Christians, Earl J. Schipper, Wesley Smedes. *Who in the World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p. 125.) apud Escobar in Douglas (ed.), 1975, p. 303.

viz., a dialogue about the themes of conversion and mission from the perspectives of South African theologian David Bosch (1929-1992) and Puerto Rican theologian Orlando Costas (1942-1987). Both of them were as a matter of fact, missiologists and both of them represent well the Global South – Bosch as one from African continent and Costas as a Hispanic Latin American. Both of them addressed the subjects of conversion and mission. We learn with them that it is possible to produce theology not only in Chicago or in Paris, but also in San José or in Pretoria! This South-South dialogue is a necessity in these post-colonialist times we are living.

This approach to the theme of conversion and mission is obviously done from my particular vantage point, as a Reformed theologian living and doing theology in a Latin American context. The theoretical framework of my own theological thought is classical Reformed theology. But the author also tries to consider the particularities of the Latin American context he lives. From this particular vantage point the author intends to propose this South-South theological, missiological and pastoral dialogue.

2. Conversion and mission – an overview

The theme of this conference is twofold – conversion and mission. There is an intrinsic relationship between these two concepts. About these concepts one can say, *in nuce*, that conversion leads to mission. There is no mission without conversion. And a conversion which does not imply in mission is lame – it is a kind of theological “*Saci Pererê*”!³

In spite of the tremendous theological importance of these themes, it is not so easy to find fine theological approaches to them. It seems that many a theologian think these themes are not worthy of appraisal. However, there is, in Brazil at least (and probably in the Spanish speaking Latin American countries also) a popular theology of conversion. This theology is more or less informed by the biblical narrative of how Saul of Tarsus, who was himself a former enemy of the Jews of “the Way” – the ones who accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah – became a member and ardent preacher of “the Way” (Acts 9:1-19). In this folk theology of conversion there is also some knowledge of the historical personal experiences of the conversions of Augustine of Hippo and, some centuries later, of Martin Luther. All these experiences were very emotionally strong and pervasive.

3 The *Saci Pererê* is a mythical being of Native Brazilian (“Indian”) folklore, which is said to have only one leg. Therefore, he cannot walk as everybody else, but only jump.

Consequently this popular theology of conversion, perhaps in a subliminal level, based on this blend of a naïve reading of the biblical text added to some historical knowledge, expects always that every conversion be full of dramatic elements. Another important characteristic of this Latin American folk theology of conversion is its extremely individualistic emphasis. In this popular perspective, conversion is always seen as “conversion of the soul”: it is something absolutely necessary to avoid the soul to go to eternal damnation. And the mission of the church is understood only in terms of “winning of souls”. But it is very difficult to find in this popular theology a description of what comes after conversion. In recent times this situation became even worst: due to the tremendous numerical growth of Neopentecostalism (in Brazil and in the other Latin American countries as well), one sees a virtual reinvention of the concept of conversion. Now in some mega churches, like the mammoth Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (this church is Brazilian in its origin) and others, which foster theology of prosperity, conversion is understood as a magical key to open the gates of heaven mainly (almost only) to receive material and temporal blessings. And the question remains still unsolved: what comes next? In Brazilian classical evangelicalism (that means the average of evangelical believers in the country, who are members of Assemblies of God, Baptist, Foursquare Gospel, Methodist or Presbyterian churches)⁴, by and large mission is understood only in terms of evangelization. All missionary efforts must be developed only to make churches grow numerically. Mission, according to this understanding, is an end in itself. The church sees herself as the master of mission. These two understandings, of mission and conversion, are in fact, misunderstandings.

After this brief introduction, it is time to proceed, in order to see how is it possible to establish the proposed “South-South” dialogue between Bosch and Costas, and how this dialogue can be useful to criticize the mentioned folk theologies of conversion and mission.

3. Bosch on conversion

In *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch’s *magnum opus*, there is a very interesting approach to the concept of conversion. Bosch first comments

4 These churches are too obviously much different from each other, as far as doctrinal, organizational, liturgical or pastoral perspectives are concerned. Notwithstanding, there is a common ground in which all they stand, a common core of beliefs and practices that are useful to identify the *crentes* (Portuguese for “believers”, the popular word used by members of those churches and non members alike in order to identify them). For historical details of the roots of this shared core of beliefs and practices, see, inter alia, Marsden (1980: 3).

about the history of the idea of conversion in the Western tradition. In order to accomplish his purpose, Bosch traces the history of the readings of the three times in the book of Acts of the Apostles in which one can read the narrative of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-19). In its discussion, Bosch comments about the famous essay by Lutheran Swedish Bishop Krister Stendahl (1976) about Paul's conversion. In this now classic study, Stendahl denies the common comprehension of what happened to Paul in the Damascus Road. Stendahl believes that it would be fairer to speak only about a "calling", not of "conversion". Bosch, based on some recent researches done by Beverly Gaventa, states: "The emphasis on Paul's calling is certainly a most important correction to the traditional understanding of Paul's conversion. Even so, Stendahl and others go too far by regarding what happened to Paul exclusively in terms of a call" (p. 126). Thus, Bosch seems to have a more balanced understanding of the biblical concept of conversion than the one defended by Stendahl. To quote Bosch (1992: 126) once more,

So even Peter, Paul, and John, who had lived as righteous Jews, had to experience something else in order to be members of the people of God; they had to have faith in Christ. The Christ-event signifies the reversal of the ages and denotes, for Paul, the proclamation of the new state of affairs that God has initiated in Christ. The Law as way of salvation is superseded by the crucified and risen Messiah. One of the things those who wish to follow Christ have to die to is the law (Rom 7:4), which means that they have to abandon or give up something – and this is conversion language.

As it was declared in the introduction of this paper, in Latin American folk evangelicalism conversion is understood only individualistic in terms of "conversion of the soul". Bosch's understanding of the concept of conversion in the theology of Luke (the third Gospel and Acts) is a healthy corrective to this misunderstanding. He stated:

Even so, personal conversion is not a goal in itself. To interpret the work of the church as the "winning of souls" is to make conversion into a final product, which flatly contradicts Luke's understanding of the purpose of mission. Conversion does not pertain merely to an individual's act of conviction and commitment; it moves the individual believer into the community of believers and involves a real – even a radical – change in the life of the believer, which carries with it moral responsibilities that distinguish Christians from "outsiders" while at the same time stressing their obligation to those "outsiders". (Bosch, 1992:117).

However, at the same time, Bosch remembers that in Paul's theology the ideas of "conversion" and "salvation" go close together. Bosch uses the communicative word *metamorphosis* to describe the "before" and "after" in the experience of one's encounter with Christ the Lord (Bosch, 1992: 134). He says, "Salvation is, for Paul, the experience of undeserved liberation through the encounter with the one God and Father of Jesus Christ" (Bosch, 1992: 135).⁵ This particular aspect was well understood by Latin American evangelicals. The problem with their theology of conversion and mission is that they stand only with this, and understand it, as already mentioned, only in individualistic terms. *Contra* this self-centered or egocentric perspective, Bosch presents a more balanced one:

The purpose of Paul's mission, then, is to lead people to salvation in Christ. This anthropological perspective is, however, not the ultimate objective of his ministry. In and through his mission he is preparing the world for God's coming glory and for the day when all the universe will praise him (Bosch, 1992: 135).

As a matter of fact, Latin American evangelical churches by and large must learn urgent this more comprehensive understanding of conversion, one which is linked to a more biblical understanding of mission. Regarding to this Bosch declared:

Conversion is, however, not the joining of a community in order to procedure "eternal salvation"; it is, rather, a chance in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and center of one's life. A Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being "saved", but a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God's reign in all its forms. Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become a participant in the mighty works of God. The believer is, after all, a member of the church, which is a sign of God's reign, *sacramentum mundi*, symbol of God's new world, and anticipation of what God intends all creation to be. (p. 488).

If conversion and mission are understood only in these individualistic, anthropocentric and anthropological terms, the pastoral action of the church will never be contextual. When the mission of the church does not pay attention to the *Sitz-in-lebem* where the church is, her mission is seen only as the "winning of souls". This is what the majority of Latin

5 Karl Barth comments the story of Paul's conversion stressing the fact that it was a "direct encounter with the risen Jesus Christ". (Barth, IV. 2, 2004:268).

American evangelical churches do today. These churches see themselves only as ships sailing through the seas of perdition to get to the harbor of heavenly glory.⁶ In such comprehension of mission, when a converted “soul” comes to the church, he or she hardly will learn a different view of the purpose of the church in the world. Bosch’s understanding of conversion will be extremely useful in order to help Latin American evangelical churches to obtain a more biblical view of their mission.

4. Costas on conversion

Orlando Costas, considered by C. T. Carriker (an American scholar and Presbyterian missionary to Brazil) “the first missiologist of Latin America” (1992:1), was without a shadow of a doubt one of the most outstanding and creative thinkers in the field of mission studies Latin America has ever produced. Even though he had a very short life (he lived only 45 years), he was a prolific writer, and produced 13 books in Spanish and English and had academic articles published in nearly 40 theological journals and magazines around the world. There is also a plethora of works about Costas’ missiological thought,⁷ including many master’s thesis and doctoral dissertations.⁸

The theme of *conversion* might well be seen as a key to the reading to Costas’ mission theology. In a paper entitled *Conversion as a complex experience: A personal case study* (1978:14-24), Costas speaks about his own experience of conversion and besides, produces a very interesting theology of conversion as well. Like Martin Luther, many centuries before him, Costas enjoyed a lot to talk about himself. In this paper, Costas presents the Christian understanding of conversion as an experience which is dynamic and complex.⁹ Costas presents a harsh criticism to traditional Evangelical view of conversion as something static, once-for-all, private, beyond and above the culture and non-contextual. At the same time, he defends a more biblical, theological, and socio-historically sound formulation of the Christian doctrine of conversion.

6 This very well known metaphor of the mission of the church was first used by American evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899). Many evangelical churches in Latin American countries (including Brazil, the only Portuguese speaking country in the area) still follow this as a description of their mission.

7 For a comprehensive listing of Costas’ writings, see Fernandez Calienes (1989: 87-105).

8 Inter alia, Carson (1980), Traverzo Galarza (1992), Barro (1993), Caldas (2000 [published as a book in 2007]).

9 Regarding the dynamic aspect of conversion see Barth (2004, IV.2:566).

Costas criticizes the fundamentalist and pietistic concept of conversion as static and individualistic (1979:39). At first he built his understanding of conversion as concentric circles, one inside the other. But later he changed this view, and adopted one which was formulated in terms of a spiral. It is interesting to observe that Costas declared once that a friend of his, a theologian from Cameroun, criticized what he had written about conversion as concentric circles. This view of concentric circles was still very static. According to Costas it was this criticism which came from Africa which helped him to formulate his understanding of conversion in a dynamic model of a spiral.¹⁰ This spiral has three volutions or turns. First there is personal conversion to Jesus Christ himself. Costas wrote his own personal experience of conversion. Even though he was born in a Methodist home in his native island of Puerto Rico, when he was a teenager in New York City (his family moved there searching better economic conditions) he attended a Billy Graham evangelistic crusade at the Madison Square Garden. Orlando declared that when he heard the hymn “Just as I Am” he felt that “God was not anymore the sovereign distant one to be feared, but he became my Lord and Savior. I had turned to Jesus the son of God, but God had also turned to me” (1984: 16).¹¹ Then comes what Costas called “cultural conversion”. It is not too difficult to understand Costas’ concept of cultural conversion. However it is necessary to know a little bit of his life story. After his conversion to Jesus Christ, in 1958 his parents send him to attend high school at Bob Jones Academy (Greenville, South Carolina). There in what could be called the heart of WASP¹² culture, he discovered his own Latino identity. After his years in BJA he went back to Puerto Rico to study at the Universidad Interamericana, where he majored in Latin American History. About this Costas wrote,

In Puerto Rico I was able to understand that the son of God not only had a Jewish identity (Jesus of Nazareth) but a Puerto Rican

10 Cf. Bonilla (1988: 125).

11 All the citations of Costas about his conversion are translations of a personal testimony he wrote in Spanish which is a chapter in a book published by C. René Padilla in 1984. Costas himself translated many of this material and published it in the aforementioned paper entitled *Conversion as a Complex Experience*. This citation in Spanish reads: Dios habia dejado de ser el Soberano distante que debia temer, y se habia convertido en mi Salvador y Señor. Ciertamente me habia convertido a Jesús el Hijo de Dios, pero Dios también se habia convertido a mí.” On conversion as an encounter with Christ Jesus himself, see Barth (2004, IV. 2: 557-558).

12 WASP is the popular acronym for representing the traditional North American cultural values: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.

and Latin American one (the Christ of Brown America). From this point on, my cultural experience gave me a new Christological understanding (1984, p. 21).¹³

Finally comes what Costas called his third conversion. This one is the conversion to the world of the poor and oppressed. This was the socio-political conversion.¹⁴ He gained this understanding of a socio-political component of the conversion experience after pastoring for three years the Iglésia Evangélica Bautista (Baptist Evangelical Church) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. During this period of pastorate he learned from the experience of the African American community, and started to think in theology and politics as not as worlds apart.¹⁵

Costas' understanding of conversion is very dynamic. It is known that conversion has a double aspect of "from" and "to". Conversion, in classical terms is conversion "from" sin "to" Christ. This double aspect involves the concepts of repentance – the "from" of conversion – and faith – the "to" of conversion.¹⁶ Costas built his theology of conversion stressing these two aspects. In the first turn of his spiral model, conversion was understood as from egocentrism to Christ. In the second, from a traditional monolithic Anglo-Saxon view of culture to Latin American culture. And in the third, it was conversion from a traditional view of pastoral action to a more engaged one, in social and political terms.¹⁷ Traditional evangelical theology in Brazil, with a distorted Pietistic comprehension of conversion, stresses only conversion from sin to Christ. This is without doubt important. But it is important to think in conversion as a movement towards culture and to the social and political context as well. After all, conversion has to do not only with the "soul", but with all of life. This is a very important lesson we must learn from Costas. Perhaps the third turn of Costas' spiral model of conversion is the most necessary one to comprehend in the thinking in our both sides of South Atlantic. This understanding of conversion is not against, by no means, classic Reformed theology. According John Calvin himself in

13 The original in Spanish reads: "En Puerto Rico pude entender que el Hijo de Dios no solo tenía una identidad judía (Jesús de Nazaret) sino puertorriqueña y latinoamericana (el Cristo de la América Morena). De ahí que mi conversión cultural me diera una nueva comprensión cristológica.

14 Cf. Costas (1984: 22).

15 For an understanding of conversion in its social context see de Gruchy (1991: 184-188).

16 For a consideration of this double aspect of conversion see, *inter alia*, Tillich (1976 [1963], III, p. 219).

17 For this understanding of conversion in socio-political fashion see, *inter alia*, de Gruchy (1991: 80-81).

conversion God has set us free “for all the duties of love”.¹⁸ And this implies in loving one’s neighbors in the concrete context in which these neighbors are. Love is not to be understood only in naïve emotional or sentimentalist fashion. To quote de Gruchy once more:

Conversion – the process of transformation from sin to righteousness through repentance, faith, and obedience – is not to be conceived of in the ahistorical and static way of privatized piety, but as a new praxis. Conversion or *metanoia* is a new way of life. While it is in the first instance facing reality, perceiving its injustice and our role in it and turning away from it, it is also beginning to participate in the process of its transformation. (1991:188).

5. Final remarks

In this short paper I tried to demonstrate how Bosch’s and Costas’ understandings of mission and conversion can establish a dialogue. This dialogue is useful to build a healthier and more balanced view of conversion and mission. I think that it does not matter if one is in South Africa or in Latin America. Both contributions, from David Bosch and from Orlando Costas can be good for these two contexts. Conversion must always lead to mission. If this does not occur, something very wrong is happening. Conversion is not the end of the road of Christian life, but its very beginning. So, the question is: what is mission? Of all possible answers to such an important question, the most lucid is the one proposed by Bosch in the conclusion of his *Transforming Mission*. It is a quite long quotation, but it is worth reading:

news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake Mission is *missio Dei*, which seeks to subsume into itself the *missiones ecclesiae*, the missionary programs of the church. It is not the church which “undertakes” mission. It is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church. The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and re-conceived. Mission is not competition with other religions, not a conversion activity, not expanding the faith, not building up the kingdom of God; neither is it social, economic, or political activity. And yet, there is merit in all these projects. So, the church’s concern *is* conversion, church

18 Calvin, Institutes, III, 19.12. As far as the socio-political implications of Calvin’s thought are concerned, see also, *inter alia*, Richard (1974, p. 177, 179); Pattison (2006); Dommen and Bratt (Eds.) (2007).

growth, the reign of God, economy, society and politics – but in a different manner! The *missio Dei* purifies the church. It sets it under the cross – the only place where it is ever safe. The cross is the place of humiliation and judgment, but it is also the place of refreshment and new birth. As community of the cross the church then constitutes the fellowship of the kingdom, not just “church members”; as community of the exodus, not as a “religious institution”, it invites people to the feast without end.

Looked at from this perspective is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experiences seems to belie. It is the good of the world (Bosch 199: 519).

For this we, in both sides of South Atlantic, were called for. Our calling – *conversion* – is for this mission. Both Bosch and Costas might be our guides in this road, as servants of *missio Dei*, in this world God so loves.

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