Short-Term Missions: A Sign of Mutations, Tensions, and Challenges in Mission

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In 1990, David Stoll pointed out that the purpose of the Lausanne Congress, to make world evangelization the task of all Christians in all the world, did not in the long run mean the weakening of the North American missionary presence but in fact its expansion. His analysis revealed the increase in income of North American para-church agencies; their business, bureaucratic, and commercial character; their vertical and autocratic structures; their methodology;

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and the increasing use of "legions of North Americans on short mission trips" that during the eighties reached an annual flow of thirty thousand short-term missionaries (1993, 114). Stoll said:

> By commercial criteria, these [para-church agencies] were not particularly large, but their voluntary nature meant that they maintained large numbers of personnel. From an income of 105 million dollars in 1974, Campus Crusade maintained sixteen thousand associate and full-time employees. The following year, the five thousand full-time employees of Youth with a Mission (YWAM) supervised fifteen thousand short-term missionaries; they hoped to increase that number to fifty thousand in the future. (115)

Today, this reality has increased, and concerns and criticism are deeper. The current growth and cost of short-term missions (hereinafter STMs) is not clearly defined. Robert Priest (2005) considers that the estimate of four million North American short-term "missionaries" a year is a conservative figure. Adolescent groups alone account for over two million, and the numbers of church initiatives of projects of this type cannot yet be counted. This phenomenon is gigantic.

Children's outreach in Tarma, Peru

In view of this reality, we in Latin America need to ask ourselves: What is the frequency of short-term projects and "missions" in the region? How is this type of mission perceived or described in practice? What

is its social, economic, or political impact in our countries? What repercussions does this movement have within the evangelical churches? To what material, ecclesiastical, theological, and missiological transformations is it giving rise?

In this article, I will not attempt to answer these questions but rather to focus on two features or cultural and historical conditions that have allowed for the rise and development of STMs: first, the socio-cultural, political, and economic transformations that have given rise to the new context known as postmodern or late modern; and second, the re-composition in the religious field that is leading to a reconfiguration and mutation of the evangelical movement.

New Context, New Mission Subject

The discussion on the characterization of the current global context is broad and complex and will not be dealt with in depth in this article. Protestant authors writing in Spanish have, on the one hand, followed the postmodern explanation, asserting—with reservations—that there is a change of era in our social life (Cruz 1996, Escobar et al. 2000, Hong 2001); and, on the other, that we are facing the crisis of late modernism, an era in which the cultural factors that make up modernism are in question, but while they are not exhausted, they are—as in the religious field—in recomposition (Bastian 2004).

Based on these perspectives, we will now highlight some of the characteristics and factors that make STMs possible.

A Time of Deep Transformations and Mutations

In the first place, in general terms, we have to recognize that this phase in history is characterized by great socio-

cultural, economic, and political changes that have, for the last forty or fifty years, been modifying western societies, transforming their ways of thinking, of knowing, of feeling, and of doing things; generating various systemic crises in culture and life itself. These changes include structural dimensions as well as the more intimate spheres of personal make-up and sensibilities, which, according to some, reveals a process of "de-civilization" while for others it allows new forms of socialization to arise. Richard Shaull, a Presbyterian theologian, expressed the former position:

> If we analyze our position more deeply, we will be forced to recognize that we are entering an era in which the crisis we are experiencing is increasingly a *crisis of civilization*. And if this is so, we are facing a crisis of dimensions we had not heretofore taken into account. Because when we speak of civilization, we are not thinking only of some structures that can be analyzed and transformed in relative independence from each other. When we speak of a civilization, we are speaking of a whole: not only of the various elements that together constitute our economic and social, individual and collective reality, but of all that orients us in the face of reality, and thus constitutes our way of seeing, interpreting, organizing, and handling reality. This is what allows us not only to organize but also to integrate everything, and thus to make sense of and give direction to every aspect of our lives. (1998)

In that broad sense, the transformations we live through are not limited to the material order, to technological development, or to economic globalization but rather reach to the very heart of western and modern culture and civilization. That is, they are related to changes in the molds of our feelings, work and thinking, that include our view of

the world, our beliefs, values, customs, and institutions that from a religious and theological perspective bring concomitant pastoral and missiological tensions because they imply new forms of spirituality and action in mission.

Photography is a constant in STM, important for the sake of memories for the participants and also for sharing results with sponsors

Two signs of this reality in the evangelical setting are the loss of referents and the change of sensitivities in regard to all that the protestant evangelical ethos represented. There are practices that were censured but are now accepted. There is a loss of that which gave meaning to or characterized the evangelical ethos, and now no longer does so, or at least not for the new generations. A simple example of this mutation is seen in the change of attitude of evangelicals to the cinema. Two or three decades ago, in several countries in Latin America, the average evangelical was forbidden by his conservative religious culture from going to the cinema. To do so led to feelings of guilt and sin, as well as the subsequent criticism of those "in the world" and the censure of the "brothers of the church". Nowadays it is different. Our young people openly plan in the church vestibule, without fear or shame, which movies they will go watch.

These changes question aspects of evangelical discourse and practice, which, in relation to the cultural and technological condition of our time, and indeed from a deep perspective of the gospel, have lost their raison d'être. Thus arises the need to understand these changes and open theology to interdisciplinary approaches and focuses that

help us to understand the processes of socio-cultural transformation: transformations of sensitivities, shame, guilt, fears, etc.[1]

A Time of Economic Globalization

Another characteristic of this context is its identification with globalization. According to Fredric Jameson, post-modernity and globalization are one and the same thing. "It is two sides of the same phenomenon: globalization covers the aspects of information, business and economics; and post-modernity is for its part the cultural manifestation of this situation" (2004).

This economic and cultural characterization of both processes (or one and the same process) presents a number of plausible things but also questioning and resistance that need to be considered. One of the major questionable issues is that the globalization of economic activity has accentuated the existing inequalities between developed countries and those that strive towards development. The only visible effect of globalization has been the several international financial crises that have devastated the economies of various countries. That is, using Miriam Adeney's (2003) missiological tale, Elephant's global party that aimed to bring cheer to all the guests, killed Mouse, Elephant's best friend. Is this not what happened in Argentina? Is this not what could happen in any Latin American or African country if we do not take into account the disproportionate (unjust) relationships at the party?

[1] There is an increasing amount being written in this line. To mention just two of the pioneer authors and works in this field: Norbert Elias, *El proceso de la civilización. Investigaciones sociogenéticas y psicogenéticas*, (Mexico, FCE), and Michel Foucault, *Vigilar y castigar, nacimiento de la prisión*, (Mexico, Siglo XXI).

Inequality also needs to be related to the political influence and hegemony of the United States. A Latin American cannot conceive of the economy of our countries independently of the "elephant". And that is precisely what the leaders of our countries do, or at least attempt to do: to dance intrepidly and fearfully with the aforementioned animal.

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The problem is undoubtedly complex and, without denying what has been stated, does allow for the possibility of entering the dance or surviving it. Jameson recognizes this possibility: "International trade is in operation, but its movements are contradictory; what is good for Chinese workers turns out to be bad for Latin Americans and Spaniards" (2004).

A Time of Religious Display and Globalization

At the height of modernism, it was felt that religion as an element that structured social life was progressively and definitively coming to an end. However, after the significant frustrations of the project of modernism, the world is returning to the religious values that were set aside in favor of a belief in reason and the idea of progress. Thus, we face the return or display of religion with many singular characteristics.

Although the globalization of religion is not a new phenomenon, the current conditions of expansion make it diametrically different. Whereas previously religion was exported in conjunction with political, colonial, and imperialist expansion, current religious flow is not solely related to these aims (Bastian 2005, 325). Current changes are characterized by religious pluralism and a multiplicity

of exchanges in the context of globalization. Structural technological and economic conditions as well as numerous and intense migratory movements are generating a process of religious globalization that is multilateral and plural in character, that is not limited to North-South spread, and that largely escapes the States. More than that, with the link to market logic, religion is stimulated by the multiplicity of offers of symbolic goods in competition that seek to meet religious needs and demands.

In that context, new forms of spirituality tend to emerge, in which "beliefs have become more subjective; established belief gives way to personal belief. Each individual chooses his own sacred cosmos in a competitive market and may move from one religious expression to another" (Bastian 2004, 170). In other words, there is a subjective spirituality in which:

> Religion is no longer a heritage received from our forefathers nor from institutionalized traditions, but rather the result of a personal search, encounter, or making. Religion is privatized, individualized, and subjectivized. In subjective spirituality, truth is measured by the individual's personal and subjective experience; there is no longer a theologized objective religious truth, but rather a truth that is lived out subjectively. (Hong 2001, 11)

Short-Term Missions: Subject and Agent of this Context

STMs have not just arisen recently. We understand that they have been present in the southern hemisphere for at least four decades, if not more. However, the weight they have acquired on the mission scene in our countries is recent, and their size and dynamics are awakening an interest in studying and understanding their character and incidence,

as well as the tensions and challenges they give rise to in churches in Latin America.[2]

As we understand it, this weight is the result of the transformations we are living through, that are also affecting the traditional forms of ecclesiastic and missionary endeavor, spilling over into new forms of church and mission in keeping with disenchanted or late modernism. In that perspective, STMs reveal a new subject and agent of mission that is characterized by a pluralization of models and forms of service; by a multiplicity of exchanges of symbolic and material goods and networks that are outside the formal and traditional circuits; by the huge economic potential it represents, which encourages agencies to market STM packages and mission agencies that have seen it as a means of subsistence; by its highly subjective, emotional, playful, and esthetic spirituality, if we observe STMs that offer mainly concerts and high profile events... Thus, in the context of religious globalization, STMs arise as one of the strongest instruments of contemporary mission and of the religious transformation that the whole world is experiencing.

Religious Recomposition, Rupture and Recomposition of the Evangelical Movement

Sociologists of religion have coined the term "religious recomposition" for the "process of reconstruction of religious representations that affects both form and content within a given socio-cultural reality" (Campiche 2004, 201). In concrete terms, it refers to the processes of religious change or

[2] I was personally part of the STM research team gathered by the Centro Evangélico de Misiología Andino Amazónico (Lima, Peru) and the Intercultural Studies Program of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (USA). The description that follows is part of the conclusions that I shared initially in August 2006.

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transformation that current societies face due to globalization and the pluralization of beliefs.

In this perspective, clearly counter to the theory of secularization that stated that religion would be marginalized in the modern world, research of this type describes the deployment of the religious through new logic and forms that do not mean the revitalization of Christianity nor the strengthening of the church-institutions (Catholic and Protestant), but instead complex, partial, relative, and even paradoxical processes of de-institutionalization and individualization of religion, plurality, and new forms of religious regulation. To cite just one example: One of the features of the recompositions taking place in Latin America is the display of a market logic which, together with the rapid development of Pentecostalism, is leading to the destabilization and transformation of Catholicism and the so-called historic Protestant denominations. That is, in the context of the pluralization of religion and the multiplicity of exchanges, the Catholic church can no longer impose its practices nor beliefs on social players but has to sell them in a competitive market, having recourse to the strategies of its rivals (the media and charismatic preachers), not without destabilizing the institution and the referents of tradition, by questioning clerical authority and traditional Catholic forms and, moreover, giving rise to the pentecostalization of Catholicism itself.

Similarly, the churches or denominations of historical Protestantism are being permeated by movements of this

type, to the point where on the one hand they are reconfiguring evangelical Protestantism, and on the other they are creating a deep breach or differentiation, at the level of content and form. As Samuel Escobar said—referring to the "charismatic" or "neopentecostal" movement, which he described as "para-evangelical"—there was a new religious force emerging, which was marked by "its numerical growth, its scorn for theological definition, its capacity for developing ecclesiastical forms that are pertinent to post-modern culture, and its aspiration to be something new and original," and tending to become "a new religious force distinct from both Evangelicals and Catholics" (2004, 11).

STMs fit in that context of transformation and complex processes as contextual instruments of religious globalization which, linked to the neo-Pentecostal movement, encourage the recomposition of Protestantism. Let us look at some of the signs of this transformation:

Menopause, Death Throes, and Transformation of Missions

In 1987, missionary Stuart McIntosh asserted in a self-critical and prophetic voice that traditional missions had reached "the menopause" (1987, 210). McIntosh was objecting at the time to the heavy ethnocentrism and civilizing perspective of missions that did not value the riches of the mission models of third world churches, as well as questioning the economic structure on which missions were based, a structure which did not correspond to the real purposes of mission due to the heavy bureaucracy, and because the efforts were fundamentally contradictory since they came from churches in decadence... Twenty years on, the situation of missions confirms the death throes of traditional models while at the same time we see new models arise that are less inclined to ecclesiastic commitments and contextual, long-term projects.

Now, however, missionaries come seeking to help themselves. It seems they come only to meet the demands of their subjective spirituality.

With certain exceptions, there is a clear difference. Previously, mission agencies arrived with the purpose of cooperating in Christian mission and helping established churches. They helped in the drawing up and execution of projects of the national churches and the evangelical movement in each country; they committed their lives and loyalty to these, sharing their vision and their dreams. Now, however, they come seeking to help themselves. As in the story of the elephant, not realizing how many they trample on, it seems they come only to meet the demands of their subjective spirituality. Without aiming for deeper commitments or projects that are significant for the churches and the communities, contemporary missions limit themselves to short or occasional service and individual projects that do not demand loyalties. The initiatives of the so-called "ministries," organizations that are often independent and currently proliferate in the protestant religious market, also belong to this spirit.

STMs are anchored in and participate in this ambience of missions that have been transformed both in character and in spirit.

Dominance of Unilateral Projects that are not Contextual

An STM field survey in Peru in 2005 revealed a dominance of unilateral projects, designed by promoting agencies outside the field of service, that do not take into account the reality nor the needs, let alone the expectations of the groups they come to "serve." A constant feature of the interviews carried out is the affirmation that the initiatives for contact, the selection of churches or groups

to be "beneficiaries," the definition of programs and budgets, as well as the training of support teams, are defined by the missions or ministries that promote these activities, without taking into account the receiving churches. In that sense, the programs are generally imposed by the visiting benefactors.

There are noteworthy exceptions, efforts of joint projects that respond to contextual objectives.

At this point it is worth highlighting the exceptions, that is, the efforts of joint projects that respond to contextual objectives, such as those fostered by the Uniendo Manos contra la Pobreza Network (the Joining Hands Network, a Peruvian association of churches and non government organizations) and its Presbyterian church counterpart, twenty PCUSA congregations, that promote STM groups in long-term projects, operating an economic corridor that exports Peruvian handicrafts to the United States and participates in defending the health of children in La Oroya, the most contaminated city in South America (see Farrell 2006).

Dominance of "The Strongest"

Taking into account the paradoxes of globalization, we must state that material conditions favor the dominance of STM groups from the economically stronger countries. Although it is true that migratory flows are generating a multiple and multilateral religious globalization, it must be recognized that STM flows are for the most part in a North-South direction. In Peruvian experience, the groups come primarily from the United States, European countries, and South Korea. Fundamentally, economic globalization and its ideological counterpart, neo-liberalism, discriminate and exclude, because in a free market world, only a few can buy and participate in the benefits of the system.

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The exception to this system are the Latin American young people who are called by STM agencies to help out as interpreters or counselors in projects in their own country or region. Depending on the agencies' economic and logistical capacity, these people are called in their own countries and trained abroad—together with the members of the STM groups that are preparing for their exotic experience—in order then to return as facilitators of an STM group. During my research I met a Mexican woman who came to Peru with a group of Canadians. She had been called from her own country, trained in Canada, and then come to Peru as an interpreter. In another case, the research team interviewed a Peruvian who had participated in several projects outside the country and the continent, taking part in STM groups sponsored by Christian Children's Fund, YWAM, Operation Mobilization, VEA, Operation Transit, and other national organizations. These exceptions, however, do not negate the dominance of the strongest, though they at least allow us to glimpse the windows used by those who have other resources.

Conclusion

Thus far I have attempted to explain STMs on the basis of the contextual factors and processes in which they are set. My aim has been to approach the descriptions of the current global cultural situation and to seek to understand STMs on this basis. The aspects and signs mentioned need to be studied in greater depth. Some have not even been mentioned here, namely, looking in greater depth at the

relationship of STMs with the processes of religious globalization and the new forms of spirituality; explaining in greater detail the recomposition of the Protestant religious field and the role STMs play therein; being aware of the true weight being acquired by STMs; and valuing the challenges that they represent for the church at this time.

I would like to conclude by reiterating the weight of the religious in the contemporary world. In the words of Jean Pierre Bastian: "If sources of social and cultural change are sought at the moment in Latin America, they will not be found in the political parties nor the unions, nor the revolutionary guerilla movements, but primarily in civil society in the religious plane" (2004, 155).

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