

Editorial

Mission and Public Issues

J. Nelson Jennings

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2024

In a world increasingly threatened by violence, aggression and fragmentation, it is essential that states and businesses join in promoting far-sighted and ethically sound models of globalization, which by their very nature must entail subordinating the pursuit of power and individual gain, be it political or economic, to the common good of our human family, giving priority to the poor, the needy and those in the most vulnerable situations (Francis 2024).

Thus stated Pope Francis in his January 15, 2024 message to the Executive President of the World Economic Forum as it began its recent five-day Annual Meeting. A question: How might Francis's message have been connected to Christian mission? I will work toward answering that question through examining some recent historical examples.

Evangelicals—especially “Evangelicals” in the traditional religious sense who are involved in missions, characteristic of this journal's readership—have often struggled with how to relate to political, economic, and other public, structural, and what might be called non-religious arenas of societal life. The struggle is compounded when, as is typical, missionaries are serving as guests in a foreign setting.

One approach has been to try and steer clear of such issues. Indeed, a central *raison d'être* for the Lausanne Movement's formation in 1974 was the perceived drift by World Council of Church leaders away from evangelism and church-planting and toward a primary preoccupation with political and economic matters, including independence movements throughout Africa and Asia. Shoki Coe's 1972 appeal for “contextualization” by Christian missions—to expand from a narrowly spiritual, anthropologically informed gospel to one that encompassed more of people's total *contexts*, including structural and social realities of injustice and poverty—helped to confirm for many self-professing Evangelicals that an alternative missions network was needed. The coinciding, Ralph Winter-instigated focus on “people groups” deepened most Evangelicals' conviction that biblical missions meant evangelizing individuals and starting churches, apart from any distractions of politics, economics, and social justice concerns.

Even so, avoiding political and economic realities has proved difficult if not impossible for Christian missions. Perhaps Billy Graham, one of Lausanne's central founders, exemplifies that challenge as much as anyone. On one hand, Graham self-consciously preached a strictly religious message of the Cross of Jesus Christ, inviting millions worldwide to be forgiven of their sin through faith in Christ. Indeed, the Lausanne Movement's ten-minute tribute video to Graham focuses exclusively on that message, including in several clips of Graham preaching at Lausanne I in 1974 on the need to be laser-focused on evangelism (Lausanne Movement n.d.a.). At the same time, Graham's strident condemnation of communism and his support of U.S. policy in prosecuting the Vietnam War is well documented (Hays 2017)—even if, for example, Graham deflected questions about whether his two preaching trips to U.S. troops in Vietnam meant his support of the war by explaining, “My only desire is to minister to our troops by my prayers and spiritual help wherever I can” (Decision Magazine Staff 2022).

A more complete description of Lausanne’s makeup will include the social justice voices that were in fact present and deeply influential at Lausanne I. Several delegates, mainly non-Westerners including such Latin American stalwarts as René Padilla and Samuel Escobar, gathered as a “radical discipleship caucus” and openly criticized what they saw as Lausanne’s “American-culture Christianity” (Swartz 2021). Debates within Lausanne and wider Evangelical circles over the relationship between evangelism and social justice have persisted ever since, although Lausanne’s current 28 “Issue Networks” reflect at least an official acknowledgement of a variety of social, political, and economic concerns (Lausanne Movement n.d.b.). Of particular note at the present moment are the several concerted, prayerful efforts among Lausanne-related networks, both previous and current, to constructively deal with Israel-Palestine issues (Lausanne Movement n.d.c.).

For its part, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has a long-standing commitment to religious freedom, including through engaging the United Nations. Regarding the current Palestine-Israel conflict, the WEA describes its response as a “balanced, strategic solution” involving “send[ing] aid to the needy in both Gaza and southern Israel” and encouraging Christians to “pray for peace and justice”—noting as well that, given conflicting responses among Christians around the world, “the World Evangelical Alliance cannot adopt or endorse a political position” (World Evangelical Alliance 2024). I will venture to add two explanatory comments. First, while I do not wish to single out the WEA for employing the commonly used “cannot” here—implying some sort of constraint that removes any decision-making capacity or responsibility—“does not” would more accurately convey how the WEA is responsibly carrying out its “duty as part of the family of God to prioritise concern for all our fellow believers within ... conflicts, regardless of their nation of citizenship or residence,” as WEA Mission Commission Executive Director Jay Matenga has so aptly stated. Second, the WEA in fact has—unavoidably, I believe—adopted and endorsed “a political position.” That position is not restricted by national allegiance but instead is guided by a “higher ethic” of “solidarity” with fellow believers, and indeed all fellow human beings, who suffer on conflicting sides of this and any other conflict (Matenga 2024).

Zooming out topically beyond Israel-Palestine to consider socio-economic-political matters in general, the WEA Mission Commission stands not only for problem solving but for a more positive “wellbeing missiology,” for example “asset based community development.” Cross-cultural missionaries can thus come alongside and follow the lead of communities among whom they serve rather than assuming “the superior role of a clinician” (Matenga 2024). The Lausanne Movement’s Issue Network of “Integral Mission” at least gives space to many Evangelicals’ conviction that “there is no biblical dichotomy between evangelistic and social responsibility in bringing Christ’s peace to the poor and oppressed” (Lausanne Movement n.d.d.).

Zooming out organizationally to consider the wider “Evangelical missions world” that includes churches, ministries, and movements acting independently from Lausanne and the WEA brings into focus (at least for our purposes here) not only self-designating “Evangelicals” but also various “Charismatic,” “Pentecostal,” and “Independent” groups around the world. I assume from study and anecdotal experience that, in general, this plethora of groups also struggle with how to relate to political, economic, and other public, structural, and what might be called non-religious arenas of societal life. A common approach would be to try and avoid what are intrinsically unavoidable socio-economic-political involvements. Exceptions abound, for example joining an ecumenical political advocacy network in the U.S. (Churches for Middle East Peace 2024), opposing proposed progressive legislation regarding sexuality and gender in South Korea (Yim 2022), and supporting

a political candidate in Brazil (Petrosky 2023). Recent historical examples of at least some Evangelical churches and religious leaders contributing to reforming and even dismantling unjust political and economic structures during the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, for example, need mentioning here as well.

The World Council of Churches, its member churches, and their related international mission agencies have more consistently, explicitly, directly, and concretely related to public and structural matters than have members of the Evangelical missions world. For example, the WCC Executive Committee's November 2023 "Statement on the War in Palestine and Israel" expresses "outrage" at both "the brutal attacks on Israeli communities by Hamas militants on 7 October 2023" and "Israel's disproportionate retaliation," then specifically "***Demands*** [both] the immediate unconditional release and safe return of all hostages [and] an immediate ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors, and ***calls*** for guarantees of the unimpeded distribution and delivery of vital humanitarian assistance, including water, food, medical supplies and fuel, and the reinstatement of electricity and internet services in Gaza" (WCC Executive Committee 2023; emphases original). Corresponding Lausanne and WEA statements have been calls to prayer, not demands for specific political (and military) actions. It is worth noting as well that the WCC General Secretary joined the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem in blaming Israel for the October 20 bombing of St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza (Gencturk 2023).

Soon we will circle back to this editorial's initial question about Pope Francis's message to the World Economic Forum and Christian mission. For now, it is worth noting how Francis's engagement with the current Palestine-Israel conflict has not been without controversy. Amidst his consistent, heartfelt appeals and prayers for peace, Francis met separately with groups of grieving Israelis and Palestinians on November 22. Afterward some of the Palestinians recalled the Pope using the word "genocide" to describe what was transpiring in Gaza, although a Vatican spokesman reported that as far as he knew Francis had not used that term. In his general audience in St. Peter's Square later that afternoon, Francis stated that the conflict had "gone beyond war. This is terrorism"—and Israeli officials made a connection with Francis having said, in a previously undisclosed, post-Hamas-attack phone call on October 7 with Israeli President Isaac Herzog, that it is "forbidden to respond to terror with terror." Needless to say, the connotation taken that Israeli military operations in Gaza were genocidal and terrorist sparked criticism from various pro-Israel groups (Faiola et al. 2023). Whatever the intentions of a peacemaker, an economics critic, a prophetic witness, or a social reformer might be, most likely some people in the conflict or controversial situation being addressed will not be happy.

How, then, was Francis's message to the World Economic Forum possibly connected to Christian mission? Some readers will have already answered that question quickly and confidently (perhaps all the while wondering what the editorial's verbiage was all about) with a resounding, "Not at all." Reasons for such an answer might include (1) missions *is not* about addressing "states and businesses" or about politics and economics, and (2) missions *is* about cross-cultural (and international) outreach to unreached people groups. A different type of reason might be that religious leaders, especially including the Roman Catholic Pope, have no business reverting to a bygone era of European Christendom when issuing advice or even directives to political and other societal leaders was accepted practice. Anyone can now see that Pope Alexander VI granting Iberian monarchs in the 1490s the right to conquer the world's remaining non-Christian lands was entirely inappropriate; telling the world's economic and political leaders how to conduct their

business today is also not a religious leader's responsibility, much less part of Christian missions, so the reasoning goes.

Some readers will have noticed that I have carefully distinguished between the terms “mission” and “missions.” The former—used in the question at hand about Francis’s message to the World Economic Forum—refers of course to the singular *missio Dei* (much discussed as that phrase has been). God in his mission is “making all things new” (Revelation 21:5), re-creating his beautiful yet broken world into a glorious new heaven and new earth. God’s people are privileged and responsible to participate in God’s mission through their lives and words directed toward others coming to faith in Jesus Christ, the Church growing and maturing, and realizing glimpses of the new creation’s *shalom* of justice, goodness, and peace. Christian *missions*, for their (not “its”) part, are those intentional and organized efforts by churches, agencies, and individual Christians to take part in God’s mission. Some Christian thinkers have cautioned about a comprehensive view of “mission” running the risk of eliminating anything that is distinctively “missions.” In my judgment that risk is worth taking in order to live and serve as those God has sent into his broken world that he is committed to making totally new—ultimately upon Jesus’s return.

Pope Francis leveraging his twenty-first-century position of influence to encourage societal leaders to promote “far-sighted and ethically sound models of globalization” on particular behalf of “the poor, the needy and those in the most vulnerable situations” is a missional act. Especially given his recognized status as a Christian leader, as well as given the wide scope of how the Lord of Hosts uses people as part of his mission, Francis’s message is closely connected to, indeed part of, Christian mission—even if such a message is not part of Christian missions per se. May we all give thanks as well, as those consciously participating with the Spirit in his redemptive mission, for the gallant and patient efforts of the many peacemakers regarding Palestine-Israel, Ukraine-Russia, and other conflicts. And may the crucified, risen, and ascended Savior continue in his mission to call all of his people from among all the world’s peoples, joining us together and shaping us into his one universal body and bride.

This issue’s articles address important aspects of Christian missions: contextually appropriate education, detailed and reliable data compilation, and missiological reflection. Whatever the scope of your understanding of Christian mission(s) may be, I hope these articles will be helpful in your efforts to serve the cause of Christ’s gospel wherever and however God is pleased to use and shape you.

References

Churches for Middle East Peace (2024). Home page. Churches for Middle East Peace.

<https://cmep.org/>

Decision Magazine Staff (2022). Billy Graham’s Ministry to the Military. Decision: The Evangelical Voice for Today. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

<https://decisionmagazine.com/billy-grahams-ministry-to-the-military/>

Faiola, Anthony, Pitrelli, Stefano, and Loveluck, Louisa (2023). In undisclosed call, Pope Francis warned Israel against committing “terror.” The Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/30/pope-francis-israel-war-terrorism/>

- Francis (2024). Message of the Holy Father Pope Francis to the Executive President of the World Economic Forum on the Occasion of the Annual Meeting, Davos-Klosters, Switzerland. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2024/documents/20240115-messaggio-world-economic-forum.html>
- Gencturk, Ahmet (2023). Global Christian body slams Israeli air attack on Greek Orthodox church in Gaza. Anadolu Ajansi. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/global-christian-body-slams-israeli-air-attack-on-greek-orthodox-church-in-gaza/3028830#>
- Hays, Daniel Alexander (2017). “A Babe in the Woods?”: Billy Graham, Anticommunism, and Vietnam. Masters Theses. 2521. <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/2521>
- Lausanne Movement (n.d.a.). Remembering Billy Graham: A Video Tribute. Lausanne Movement. <https://lausanne.org/content/remembering-billy-graham>
- _____ (n.d.b.). All Issue Networks. Lausanne Movement. <https://lausanne.org/all-issue-networks>
- _____ (n.d.c.). Search results for: israel palestine. Lausanne Movement. <https://lausanne.org/?s=israel+palestine>
- _____ (n.d.d.). Integral Mission. Lausanne Movement. <https://lausanne.org/networks/issues/integral-mission>
- Matenga, Jay (2024). Whose side are you on? Leader’s Mission Forecast 2023. WEA Mission Commission. <https://weamc.global/leaders-forecast-2023/>
- Petrosky, Miguel (2023). The Brazil Riots, Bolsonaro, and Spiritual Warfare. The revealer. <https://therevealer.org/the-brazil-riots-bolsonaro-and-spiritual-warfare/>
- Swartz, David (2021). René Padilla: Enfant Terrible. The Anxious Bench, Patheos. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2021/05/rene-padilla-enfant-terrible/>
- WCC Executive Committee (2023). Statement on the War in Palestine and Israel. World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-war-in-palestine-and-israel>
- World Evangelical Alliance (2024). WEA Responds to the Holy Land. World Evangelical Alliance. <https://worldea.org/wea-responds-to-the-holy-land/>
- Yim, Hyun-su (2022). [Newsmaker] Conservative churches ramp up attacks on student rights ordinance. The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220530000300>