


Mysterium Deus in missio: The mysterious God in mission



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As in all other world religions, a deep sense of the mystery is also central to the Christian religion. The mere existence of God is accepted as something mysterious beyond human comprehension. While theological literature speaks extensively of the mysterious nature of the triune God, little or nothing is said of such mysterious nature of God in missiology in the context of the *missio Dei*, particularly from the perspective of the Willingen's International Missionary Conference (IMC) of 1952. The question underlying this article is: how does the perception of the mysterious God relate to the context of the *missio Dei*? In other words, how mysterious is God in his own mission (*missio Dei*)? At its core, this article is more about the mysterious God in the mission leading to the mystery of the *missio Dei* itself. Consequently, this article made use of a search in literature to conceptualise the mystery encompassing the inherent character of the triune God in his own mission (*missio Dei*). In other words, it underlines the mysterious triune God through his innate attributes, namely *omnipotent*, *omnipresent* and *omniscient*, which are eternally at work in the *missio Dei*. It then concludes with the view that the understanding of the triune God as a mystery within the *missio Dei* economy may lead to different but comprehensive understandings of the *missio Dei* itself.

Contribution: The content of this article will contribute immensely to a better understanding of the *missio Dei* and as such will subsequently be used by missiologists as a reference in their attempts to describe the character of God within the context of the *missio Dei*.

Keywords: *Missio Dei*; omnipotent; omnipresent; omniscient; mystery; triune God.

Introduction

Although the understanding of the *missio Dei* from the perspective of the 1952 International Missionary Conference (IMC) held at Willingen, in Germany has been influential, it has only scratched the surface of God's character in his own mission (*missio Dei*). This article examines the literature with the intention of arguing that the development of the concept of *missio Dei*, from the perspective of this conference itself, is rooted and shaped by the mysterious God acting in mysterious ways throughout human history. In other words, experiencing and witnessing the mystery is at the heart of what *missio Dei* indicates, as understood from the Willingen Conference perspective. In other words, the recurring historical theology that accepts that God is a mystery that cannot be grasped by mere human thought, continues as the inherent substance in the narrative of the *missio Dei*.

In general, the term *mystery* refers to something that is difficult or impossible for human minds to understand or explain in human terms. Accordingly, this term is often used to describe things that human beings cannot understand or explain. Bockmuehl (2009:2) notes that modern persons use this term for any sublime and obscure reality that is often admired but not fully understood. Etymologically, the noun *mystery* comes from the Greek word *μυστήριον*-*mysterion* and is often transliterated as *mystery*, meaning 'secret rite or doctrine'. Similarly, the Latin word *mysterium* as derived from the Greek *μυστήριον* refers to something that is secret, unexplainable and unknown. Theologically, this term is also commonly used to refer to the divine revelations, hidden character of God and God's acts which are inaccessible to human knowledge. According to the German evangelical theologian and lexicographer Walter Bauer (1877–1960), the word *mystery*, as correctly recited in Wiley (1985), is used in the New Testament to refer to God's secret thoughts, dispensations, and his plans – from which mission is part (Wiley 1985:340). In this article the word *mystery* is used in reference to man's limited knowledge of God in his own mission (*missio Dei*) and limited knowledge of the *missio Dei* itself.

Consequently, within the next few sections this article will rely upon a literature review in its attempts to conceptualise the mystery encompassing the inherent character of the triune God in his

own mission (*missio Dei*). In other words, the inherent character of the triune God within the context of the *missio Dei* is viewed here as an enigma that cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind. Firstly, at the risk of over-simplification, an attempt is made to place the concept of *missio Dei* alongside Luther's understanding of God's character in his *opus alienum Dei* (God's alien nature). Secondly, the mysterious nature of God is firstly reconstructed from Paul's perspective of the cross and then from Luther's theology of the cross. Thirdly, the triune God is discussed as a somewhat mysterious concept within Christian theology and in understanding the character of the triune God in the *missio Dei*, so to speak. Fourthly, the mysterious nature of God is then discussed through his mysterious manifestations leading up to and after the Willingen conference. Finally, in the light of the Willingen Conference, the attributes of God, namely *Omnipotent*, *Omnipresent* and *Omniscient* God, are defined with the intention to reinforce the somewhat strange character of God in the *missio Dei*. In conclusion, the view expressed in this article is that the understanding of the triune God as a mystery within the *missio Dei* economy, may lead to different understandings of the mandate or scope of the *missio Dei* itself.

Missio Dei through opus alienum Dei

Opus alienum Dei is a Latin expression used by Martin Luther in his attempts to construct the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) through the mysterious, yet alien works of God, or the strange works of God. The sections following, will only deal with Luther's understanding of *opus alienum Dei*, while the theology of the cross will be covered subsequently in greater detail. In that way, just as Luther endeavoured to qualify the alien character of God through the theology of the cross, the theology of the cross is further used here to reinforce the mysterious nature of God in his own mission (*missio Dei*).

In Luther's understanding, the work of God is strange in that He would firstly humiliate in order to justify; He makes one a sinner in order to be righteous. This means that in every stage of human suffering that leads to justification, God is somewhat active and not passive. To illustrate this paradox, in the Heidelberg Disputation (Thesis 16) Luther introduces concepts of *opus alienum Dei* (alien to the nature of God) and *opus proprium Dei* (proper to the nature of God), simply to argue that an act which may be regarded as being alien to the character of God, on the contrary leads to, or manifests itself as an action belonging to the very proper nature of God. For example, if love and mercy are perceived as God's *opus proprium*, in contrast any wrath somehow attributed to God, will be his *opus alienum*. Grislis (1961) attempts to explain the paradox of what is meant by God's alien character, particularly in relation to what is perceived as his anger towards humanity, by stating:

[T]he term *alienum* does not mean that wrath is contradictory to the true nature of God and should therefore be either rejected or subordinated to love. Rather, wrath is called God's alien work in the sense that it describes God's relation to a world which through sin has become alien to God. (p. 278)

In other words, what is perceived as God's alien nature, is really concerned with human alienation from what is acceptable to the eternal character of God. Consequently, it takes a consciousness of alienation to restore the relationship between God and humanity. In Luther's interpretation, this meant that for a person to be justified, they firstly must acknowledge that they have sinned, and accordingly humble themselves before God. Put differently, before a person can be justified, he or she must firstly be utterly humiliated – and according to Luther, in that process, it is God who both humiliates and justifies. Grislis (1961:291) put it that, 'Luther's belief that God when dealing with sinful men appears warful in order to chastise, cleans, and save'. This way, the very action (imposing humiliation or making a sinner) to be alien to God's nature, results in an action (justification or making righteous) that is appropriate or in line with the very nature of God (Mackie 1955:205). Thus, God's strange or alien actions (*opus alienum*) that might appear to be very strange and incomprehensible to human intellect, are mysteriously a means leading to his appropriate actions (*opus proprium*). In other words, the means (strangeness) justifies the end (righteousness) and not the other way around. Core to this theology is the hidden character of God which remains obscure to human beings during suffering and is only revealed at the point of justification. This character of God is so mysterious, that people experience intellectual difficulty in placing God amid the sufferings of the world (Reichenbach 1998:67).

Perhaps the main reason why Luther became an outcast or the prodigal reformer, was simply because of this very theology that was often expressed in paradoxes. This theology seems to have contradicted each Christian traditional teaching of his time, or specific the traditional Catholic teachings. Kolb (2002) put it as follow:

Luther stepped to the podium in Heidelberg with an approach to Christian teaching that came at task from an angle significantly different from the theological method of his scholastic predecessors. (p. 444)

To this O'Reggio (2019:3) stated: 'True to his paradoxical style, right from the onset of the disputation, Luther asserted that the good works that appear beautiful and attractive are nothing less than mortal sins'. O'Reggio (2019:3) further observes that Luther applied his paradoxical theology even to the character of God, by arguing that God's works which might be perceived as somewhat ugly and evil, are to the contrary beautiful, as they inherently lead to salvation. Perhaps the most typical example that could explain this paradox, is the story of Noah in which God is said to have destroyed his own creation with the flood, in order to save it from destruction (Gn 6:11–9:19). Or better yet, the theology of the cross, in which God himself is made weak, vulnerable, and suffers humiliation as if He was a mere criminal, in order to sovereignly defeat suffering and save the entire humanity. O'Reggio (2019) argues that: 'it is in the apparent ugliness and evil of the cross that God's greatest act of grace is accomplished'. To further substantiate the enigmatic nature

of God in relation to Christ's crucifixion, he (O'Reggio 2019) recites Luther's words:

[Y]ou God exalt us when you humble us. You make us righteous when you make us sinners, you grant victory when you cause us to be defeated, you give us life when you permit us to be killed. (p. 4–5)

This alien character of God to Jesus' plight, is observed in Burns (2006:285) who affirmed Luther's understanding, that God used the natural evil encompassed by suffering and death, only to reveal the goodness of his intended plan of redemption for the world. Perhaps like Luther, the famous Italian philosopher Dante Alighieri, in attempting to describe how mysterious God's plan for mankind is to be understood, called God's providence (*inenarrabilis*) indescribable (Marciano 2019:582). Burns (2006) subsequently proposes a possible interpretation that attempts to demystify Luther's thoughts by saying:

We can interpret Luther's claim that God conceals His mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath and quickens by killing as a call to see the power of self-giving love at work in spite of and through the created order. (p. 285, 287)

Consequently, in order to place the above in the context of the *missio Dei*, more attention must be paid to the apparent analogy between *opus alienum Dei* and the *missio Dei*, from the perspective before and after the Willingen Conference. Thus, attention must be paid on how God's engagement in the mission is seen before the Willingen Conference, and how this view dramatically changed in or after the Willingen Conference. It can be argued that consistent with his *opus alienum* (foreign works), the involvement or presence of God in his own mission (*missio Dei*) in the pre-Willingen Conference period was somewhat obscure, mysterious or incomprehensible to human minds. Although such involvement has been explained or better understood from Willingen's point of view, God's character in his own mission remains an insoluble mystery to human reason. Perhaps Luther's paradoxical theology became more relevant to underpin the seminal understanding of the *missio Dei* from the perspective of the Willingen Conference, in that God's mission (*missio Dei*) continues to be shaped by the *opus alienum Dei*.

God and the cross in mission

According to the apostle Paul, any advancement in theological knowledge cannot be moved away from the cross, as the original mystery of faith. Hence Paul could even say to the Galatians: '... may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gl 6:14). He declared the deeper meaning of the cross to be a stumbling block for both Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23), since some were convinced that Jesus was subjected to the cross and even died on the cross simply because God cursed him and as such, He could not be a Messiah, nor one with the Father, as suggested by his claims (Jn 10:30–38). He (apostle Paul) merely wanted to point out to the Corinthians that the mysterious wisdom of

the cross has turned human logic into stupidity, making Jews and Gentiles alike seem foolish in the face of the meaning of the cross (White 2018:141). In his view, the cross marked the inherent conflict between human stupidity and divine wisdom. Some in the deeply divided Corinthian community (Polhill 2010:1–25), and perhaps as in many other communities (Rm 16:17–18; Tt 3:9–11; Phlp 2:5–11), were persistently challenged by an inability to see the mystery of the cross as it was intended, but instead followed the flawed, overbearing, and indiscreet wisdom of those who saw the cross as a punishment rather than a blessing (Fiore 1985:101). Consequently, in his extraordinary attempts to demystify this stumbling block, the apostle Paul argues in his letter to the Galatians: 'Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree"' (Gal 3:13). For the Jews in particular, anyone who was crucified was cursed since the Torah had taught that obedience is rewarded with blessings, while disobedience is rewarded with punishment or curse (Brondos 2001:12). They therefore miserably failed to understand that the cross and the pain that accompanied it, essentially pointed to God's active mission (*missio Dei*) with salvation as the goal. What was then a stumbling block or puzzle to the mere human mind, was the inherent and paradoxical wisdom in the theology of the cross. Jews and Gentiles equally failed to understand, that what they perceived through human eyes as a curse, was a blessing, or better still, what they thought was an excruciating punishment, was an absolution. In other words, the Cross of Christ stood at the heart of the *missio Dei*, because it was used perplexingly for salvation. For the apostle Paul, and later also for Martin Luther, the mystery of the cross is at the centre of all Christian theology, since it carries God's mysterious mission of salvation (Deedat 1993:2; Lane 1987:232–242). For both the apostle Paul and Martin Luther, the mystery of the cross and its paradoxical interpretation is the criterion of authentic theology (Pannenberg 1988:162). That is to say: 'The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology,' as Martin Luther will put it (Kolb 2002:443). As if to clarify the inherent relationship between Paul and Luther's theology of the cross, Pannenberg (1988) put it this way:

It was Paul who first emphasized the cross in such a way. And later on it was Paul's argument against the supposedly superior wisdom claimed by the Corinthians that Luther called upon when, in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, he praised the theology of the cross in contrast to the theology of glory which speculates about the nature of God on the basis of his work in the creation of the world. (p. 162)

In his great work titled, *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525; on the bondage of human choice), which constituted a reply to a polemical work written by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1524, titled: *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Sive Collatio* (commonly called *The Freedom of the Will*; Erasmus 1524). This work appeared in September 1524 as Erasmus' first public attack on Luther's views. Martin Luther argued that human beings can attain redemption or salvation only through God, and not through their own willpower (Luther 2013; Luther, Packer & Johnston 1973). Luther sought to reject the medieval

mentality that constrained the nature of God to human purposes or liking; they even glorified the human ability or effort as essential to gaining God's favour. Kolb (2002) argued:

For they attempt(ed) to constrict their picture of God on the basis of human judgements, abstractions that make universal some selected bits and pieces of the human experience and put human epistemologies in charge of divine revelation. (p. 447)

Thus, Luther understood that only God may choose his method of revelation, rather than being conceptualised by the human mind. Perhaps this can be called the Mystery of Kairos, since it encompasses God's revelation in his own timing, occasionally even contrary to human speculation. This agrees in some respect with the fifth point of the Northern Irish theologian, Alister MacGrath's five points in relation to Luther's theology of the cross, as mentioned in Fabiny (2006:48). The latter insisted that the theology of the cross conveys to the human mind the fact God himself remains hidden in his revelation. In other words, even though God chooses to reveal himself in his own time, He only reveals himself in accordance with his eternal will. This often and justifiably surprises human minds. Subsequently Kolb (2002) disputed:

Thus Luther's theology of the cross is a departure from the fuzziness of human attempts to focus on God apart from God's pointing out where he is to be found and who he really is. (p. 450)

In terms of the *missio Dei*, this would indicate that the triune God alone can choose the direction of his own mission – this is opposed to humans trying to compress it into the bounds of human logic, or what the apostle Paul will see as foolish wisdom.

The core focus of the cross is not on the cross itself, but on Jesus, whose suffering and death on the cross was a certain mystery, revealing the character of the triune God on mission. The mere idea of God being subject to the human ego to the point of suffering and dying on the cross, did not solve any mystery about the character of God in mission. On the contrary, the whole scene on the cross mystified the revelation of God in mission even more. In fact, such mysterious revelation was and is not kind to human reasoning, or the best theology entrenched in the Word of God himself. If Jesus of Nazareth could not leave the precise trace of the character of God in mission, then it is safe to say that the triune God remains mysterious beyond the cross. To put it as succinctly as possible: while the purpose of God on the cross has been made clear, the compatibility of God and mission on the cross remains somewhat mysterious. Instead of providing answers, the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) itself leaves theologians with many unanswered questions, continuing to mystify the character of God in mission, and even challenges the historical knowledge of missionary theology itself.

Trinitarian God in mission

According to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit exist inseparably

as equal, equally eternal and consubstantial divine persons who form the eternal unity of the triune God. In its historical development, the concept of the *missio Dei* is understood based on the doctrine of the Trinity, hence Engelsviken (2013:482) put it: 'It is this Trinitarian basis of mission that should form the foundation of any understanding of *missio Dei*'. The Willingen conference itself testified to the understanding of the Trinity as the basis upon which mission is to be conducted. The report correctly cited in Botha (2005) reads:

The missionary movement of which we are part has its source in the Triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit be made one in Him with the Father, in that perfect love which is the very nature of God. (p. 146)

Accordingly, in this contribution it becomes clear that the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity in the understanding of the *missio Dei* can never be questioned or doubted, but what remains untouched is the understanding of the Trinity as a certain mystery in the total economy of the *missio Dei*. According to scholars such as Hill (1988) and LaCugna (1985), the idea of the Trinity is the mystery of salvation, that is, the mystery of what the *missio Dei* is intended for (ultimate salvation). For the Trinitarian theology in its entirety serves primarily the narrative and understanding of God, commissioning himself out to save his own creation (Hill 1988; LaCugna 1985:1–23). Joseph (2013) recited Hill (1973) who argued that understanding the Trinity as the mystery of salvation is intrinsic essential to attaining intended salvation. In other words, it is important that people participate in the *missio Dei* while remembering that the actor (God) in such a mission is mysterious and does things in mysterious ways (Hill 1973:285–286; Joseph 2013:192). Upon exploring the understanding of *missio Dei* from the perspective of the Trinity, Daugherty (2007:153) put it more clearly: 'The Trinity is a mystery of salvation, otherwise it would never have been revealed'. Likewise, Seiler (2016:11) put it in a nutshell by stating assertively: 'Thus, the Trinity captures the divine mystery of unity in diversity'. In other words, the discourse regarding the triune God is not necessarily about the inner life of God, but more about how God has and continues to reveal himself in his mission, which includes salvation as the actual goal. Considering the different roles played by the divine persons at different times in human history, it becomes clear that God also reveals himself as a somewhat mysterious God in his own mission (*missio Dei*). While these roles could be intellectualised to some extent, the one question that has been and remains an unsolvable mystery, is how it is that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are construed as identical and non-identical at the same time. Or even better: How can one communicate the trinity of God without contradiction? – that is: How is it that God is one and three at the same time? (Ekeh 2009:202–211; Martinich 1978:169). What complicates this matter perhaps more, is the fact that God did not reveal his identity to improve human understanding of his nature, but his revelation was and always will be for the eternal activities of his mission (*missio Dei*). Thus, the identity of the Triad God will forever remain a mystery to human

understanding, as it is not intended for human understanding, but rather intended for the eternal functionality of the *missio Dei*. In other words, the true character of the triune God in the context of the *missio Dei* remains an enigma to the human mind, or to say the least, logically inconsistent.

Missio Dei as seen by Willingen

What emerged from Willingen, was further evidence that God's mission is consistent with his mysterious character, or perhaps in accordance with his mysterious divine name – YHWH (Marciano 2019:493) cannot be discerned by human logic. In other words, just like his name and character are, is God's mission basically beyond human understanding. In fact, Sundermeier (2003:561–563) notes that the notion of mystery appeared several times in the Willingen Conference notes, although insufficient attention was paid to it. In other words, the Willingen experience was shaped by the Revelation of Mystery, in which the triune God unfolded his mission to become a somewhat universal subject, accessible to all spheres of humanity. In doing this, not only the church but the whole world can participate in its eternal mandate. While the church was believed to be a particular channel through which God's mission is manifested, the Willingen Conference discovered that the triune God, as the source of his own mission (*missio Dei*), mysteriously reaches the world beyond the narrow walls of the church.

In its broad application, the concept of the *missio Dei* has been in existence for decades prior to the Willingen conference of 1952. It goes as far back as Saint Augustine, and Martin Luther (Kwiyani 2015:56). At the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, Karl Barth was perhaps the first among modern scholars to lay a foundation for the Willingen conference, by articulating mission as an inherent activity of God (*actio Dei*) (Bosch 1991:389; Laing 2009:90). In 1934 the German missionary, Karl Hartenstein transplanted the substance of Barth's *actio Dei* broadly into *missio Dei*, by placing mission within the bounds of God's will and action in human history (Schwarz 1884:126). A few years later, in 1938, the critical statement made by a lay missiologist of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands, Hendrick Kraemer, at the IMC meeting in Tambaram in India, made it somewhat clear to the church that the rise of secularism in the world was slowly drifting towards the central significance of Christianity. He explained that both the church and universal Christianity face questions aimed at understanding the church's role, responsibility and obligation to the world (Laing 2009:90; Stransky 1991:688). In the years leading to the Willingen Conference, mission in and towards the world, as opposed to the church, took centre stage since mission became more important than the church. Relying upon Bosch (1991), Laing (2009) put it as follows:

[M]ission, not the church, was becoming central. By Willingen, the IMC had moved from asking the how, wherefore, and whence of mission to asking the more fundamental question 'why mission?' (p. 90)

In the years leading up to the 1952 IMC-Willingen Conference, the sudden disruption of missionary work, particularly in China, and more generally the political unrest in several countries around the world, led to what Matthey (2003:579), correctly recited in Thinane (2021:5), described as a missiological crisis. Ross et al. (2016) described this moment as a shattering and soul-searching period for missionary leaders and further referred to such historical crisis and stated that: 'the crisis prompted a quest for a deeper theological meaning and justification of mission' (Ross et al. 2016:62). Similarly, Botha (2005:145) underscored that the developments leading to the Willingen conference expectedly led to a somewhat uncertain atmosphere at the time of the conference. It was this crisis of uncertainty that in a way compelled the Willingen Conference to raise important questions about mission towards the world and the involvement of the triune God in such mission. In other words, the church and missionary communities were constrained by the advent of this crisis to finally engage in a reasonably well-balanced theology of mission that led to a different understanding of mission of God (*missio Dei*). This shift pointed to the mysterious ways in which the triune God worked and continues to work in his own mission (*missio Dei*). According to Ross et al. (2016:63), the Dutch missiologist J.C. Hoekendijk was among those who strongly opposed the church-centric approach to mission, advocating the all-encompassing kingdom of God that incorporates the agency of God indiscriminately in all human institutions such as politics, religion, culture, and science. This means that the church was not and is not at the centre of the mission but is one of the instruments used by the triune God in his own mission (*missio Dei*). In the words of Goodall (1953) as correctly observed in Laing (2009):

[T]he very existence of the Church springs from God's sending forth His Son. God sends for the church to carry out His work to the ends of the earth, to all the nations and to the completion of time. (pp. 241–242)

Shortly after the Willingen Conference, building upon the understanding of trinity as the basis upon which mission is established, Karl Hartenstein's account of the conference coined the term *missio Dei*, speaking of mission as participation in the mission of Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ together with the Father and the Spirit, by extension as the source and the ultimate centre from which the mission springs (Engelsviken 2013:482). Similarly, the British missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin summarised the statement as adopted by the Willingen Conference on the statement titled: *The missionary calling of the church*. Newbigin stated as quoted by Thinane (2021:7): 'The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God himself'.

Above all, the Willingen Conference seems to have come to terms with the human secondary responsibility in the *missio Dei*, that is, with the fact that the church can only plant and water, but God brings the fruit (1 Cor 3:6). Therefore, the Willingen Conference indicates, it became clearer that while human beings can participate in God's mission, such

participation must not give the misleading impression of having the ability to dethrone the sovereignty of the triune God in his own mission (*missio Dei*) (Arthur 2009:4). Perhaps Bosch (1991) resolves the new understanding of mission as a mystery linked to the triune God, as correctly recited in Laing (2009) who stated that:

[M]ission [h]as its origin in the heart of [G]od. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people. (p. 90)

The mysterious role played by the triune God in his own mission (*missio Dei*), while somewhat or slightly vivid from the perspective of the Willingen Conference, is at the same time impenetrable to human understanding. Thus, the *missio Dei* was and always will be a mystery, embracing the centrality of the triune God in mission.

Attributes of God in mission

Among monotheistic religions or Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the quality of having unlimited or infinite power is attributed to God only, as one of his eternal and intrinsic divine qualities. In theology, attributes of God are prefixed with the Latin term 'omni' (all) to reinforce or characterise God as being all-powerful (*omnipotent*), all-present (*omnipresent*), and all-knowing (*omniscient*). These three are usually used together to formulate a unified perspective of the greatness or power of God. In other words, the inherent meaning implied by each of these terms offers a perspective on the all-encompassing dominion of the triune God in the universe. Above all, these attributes characterise God's enigmatic powers in his own universe, thus providing theological scholarship with a rich understanding of how God carries out his salvific mission, the *missio Dei*, through inference. However, what will become clear by the end of this discussion, is the fact that each of the attributes of God complements or overlaps the other attributes more than they can ever contradict each other.

Omnipotent God in mission

In a Latin language, the word *omnipotence* refers to such unlimited powers and is derived from the prefix *omni* (all) and the word *potens* (mighty). When these two are brought together they give a specific meaning of almighty or *omnipotent*, so to speak. Essentially and effectively, this means that God can do whatever He pleases at any time since He is not subject to physical limitations like humans (Ps 115:3; Jr 32:17). This means that while human beings are limited in what they can do, God is not bound by such limitations in anything He is willing to do. Although the omnipotence of God is often compared to that of human beings, such a comparison does not exist as a contest between God and human beings, but merely to acknowledge or describe, through limited human words, the finite nature of man compared to the infinite nature of God. This is to say even the

limitless of his powers is far beyond what human beings can even imagine (Urban & Walton 1978:3). This is consistent with Geach's (1973) observation as he stated:

God is not just more powerful than any creature; no creature can compete with God in power, even unsuccessfully. For God is also the source of all power, any power a creature has comes from God and is maintained only for such time as God wills. (p. 8)

This view fits well with Luther's paradoxical theology, since for him God was not only *omnipotent* but also omnibenevolent, exercising omnipotence to impose all suffering and death equally as per his will, only to show kindness to mankind in all the various stages of history (Burns 2006:285). As correctly recited in Stopa (2018:663), for Luther it was not the abstract power that makes God *omnipotent*, but his experienced eternal work in the visible world alone, even in the absence of the imperceptible world, pointed to his omnipotence. However, the concept of omnipotence itself cannot be fully understood by the human mind. Simply stating that God is *omnipotent* leads to the inherent challenge of understanding this concept itself. This is acknowledged by Geach (1973) in observingly stating that:

When people have tried to read into 'God can do everything' a signification not of Pious Intention but of Philosophical Truth, they have only landed themselves in intractable problems and hopeless confusions. (p. 7)

What then becomes important, is always finding a way to apply this divine attribute, particularly in situations where there is tension or doubt about God's abilities, as was the case prior to the Willingen Conference when the somewhat flawed missionary theology tended to overshadow and ignore the centrality of God's role in mission.

Omnipotence as the exclusive essence of the triune God cannot be denied in the context of the newly formulated understanding of mission after the Willingen Conference. The concept of *missio Dei* itself, especially from the point of view of the Willingen Conference, testifies to the maximum greatness of God in mission. More importantly, it shows that although the triune God sought the participation of humans, or specifically the church in his own mission, this should not be construed as though He is insufficient to accomplish his own mission autonomously. As if applying the understanding of such a divine maximum power to the goal of *missio Dei* (salvation), Urban and Walton (1978:3) put it succinctly: 'only a God who has supreme power is a fitting object of trust and can assure salvation'. This means that only the Almighty God with his supernatural powers can initiate or direct a missionary course with a clear promise or guarantee of salvation as an inherent result. In other words, while it is true that God desires a relationship with human beings, this is not the same as depending on human involvement for the success of his mission. Consequently, the triune God is unconditionally *omnipotent* and can carry out his own mission (*missio Dei*) without human aid, human comprehension or limitations.

Omnipresent God in mission

In a Latin language, the word *omnipresence* refers to such unlimited powers and is derived from the prefix *omni*-all and the word *praesens* – present. When these two are brought together they give a specific meaning of being everywhere present, in all places at the same time or *omnipotent*, so to speak. Perhaps slightly different from the understanding of and extension of the concept of omnipotence, to say God is *omnipresent* means that He is capable of being everywhere at any point in time. Thomas Kuhn, correctly recited in Dyck (1977:90), thoroughly explained that God's omnipresence suggests that while his presence is localised somewhere, at the same time there is no part of the universe where He is not present. This means that while human presence can be limited as they cannot be everywhere at once, God, on the other hand, is not bound by such limitations, as He can be anywhere at once as He sees fit. Perhaps to put in another way, unlike humans, who can only be in a place at a given time depending on the nature of the place to be inhabited, God on the other hand, can inhabit the universe in its entirety without being limited by the sort of location (Ps 139; Jr 23:24; Rv 1:7). The question of whether such a presence of God is manifested substantially or virtually, is neither here nor there (Friedman 2010:502–510). What is important, is the understanding that He can be anywhere at once, without being limited by space or time. In other words, to say that God is *omnipresent* is a mystery that no human mind can ever fully comprehend. Further attempts to explore the concept of omnipresence in human terms, can only lead to further confusion. This understanding is very consistent with Luther's view as recited in Burns (2006:287): 'God is inscrutable being who is at once wholly in every kernel of grain and yet in all, and above all, and outside all creatures.'

In their attempts to integrate the idea of the omnipresence of God into the context of the *missio Dei*, George and Harold (2021:1) applied the idea of an *omnipresent* God in mission, describing the triune God as the missionary God who cannot be limited by space and time, but is always present and in motion to achieve this goal of his mission. It is precisely about this eternal presence that Cheung (2012:194) speaks of Jesus Christ as the *omnipresent* agent of the triune God in mission, saying: 'He demonstrates his spiritual omnipresence through the visible forms of the church'. This is what Niemandt (2017:1–16) called the deep incarnation that embraces the presence of the triune God on the eternal journey to reach the goal of the *missio Dei*. Similarly, Arthur (2009:3) spoke of the empowering presence of the Spirit in mission, perhaps to emphasise how invested the eternal presence of the triune God is in his own mission. The *missio Dei* from the point of view of the Willingen Conference made it clear that the presence of God is not only limited to the church but is present in all human spheres (Flett 2009:12–15; Kemper 2014:189; Laing 2009:89–98). From the point of view of the Willingen Conference, the concept of the *missio Dei* is a deep testimony to the mysterious presence of God in his own mission. He is present and active in the secular world just as He is present in the church (Engelsviken 2003:481–495).

Omniscient God in mission

In a Latin language, the word *omniscience* refers to unlimited powers and is derived from the prefix *omni*-all and the word *sciens* – knowing. When these two are brought together they give a specific meaning of infinite knowledge or *omniscient* as it were. Essentially and effectively, this means God knows everything that there is to know in the universe and that his knowledge is total as opposed to partial like that of human beings (Ps 139:4; 147:5; Jn 1 3:20). According to Wierenga (2018: online) omniscience refers to the capability of having a complete or maximal knowledge without bounds.

The apostle Paul as recorded in the book of Romans, asked pertinently: 'How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! ... For who has known the mind of the Lord?' (Rm 11:33–34). In Corinthians Paul stated: 'what we utter is God's wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom ... of this wisdom it is written: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard' (1 Cor 2). To further illustrate how unreachable and incomprehensible God's wisdom is for every human being to understand, the final part of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*Pardiso* – Paradise) presents the majestic glittering Eagle startling him in his dream during the early house of his second day on the mountain of purgatory (Ginsberg 1982:41–66). The Eagle speaks with a collective voice, defending God's mysterious yet just character and addressing Dante's questions about the nature of justice. Several comparisons are then made between the wisdom of God and that of human beings or their ability to understand God's wisdom. Firstly, the eagle compares God's wisdom to something concrete and substantial, while on the other hand the human mind is compared to a jar or vessel too small to ever hold that wisdom. Secondly, it compares it to the sun, while equating the human intellect to a single ray of the sun. Finally, in terms of justice, it compares it to the bottom of the ocean, which people know is there by observing the surface but cannot see nor touch it (Marciano 2019:589).

The understanding of the *missio Dei* from the perspective of the Willingen conference reinforced the *omniscient* nature of God in his own mission and even deepened the understanding of his wisdom in conjunction with his plan for the world. This is consistent with Flint's (1998) analysis of divine providence as recited in Wierenga (2018) stating that:

[T]o see God as provident is to see him as knowingly and lovingly directing each and every event involving each and every creature toward the ends he has ordained for them.

What this indicates in terms of what may be termed Willingen's wake-up call, is that God has exercised and continues to exercise his eternal and infinite wisdom to direct the course of human history in relation to his own mission (*missio Dei*). In fact, the application of his wisdom in his mission (*missio Dei*) is attested to by Jesus Christ himself in the book of Luke: 'Because of this, God in his wisdom said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute"' (Lk 11:49). In a way, this seems consistent with Luther's theology

of the cross, since killings and persecutions in performing the *missio Dei* may seem somewhat alien to the character of God. Yet the very killing and persecution reveal the mysterious nature of who God is in his own mission, and even the extent to which He will go to attain his intended goal of salvation. In other words, in God's infinite wisdom He alone chooses a path to salvation, even when such a path might be or seems contrary to his nature or is utterly insane to human mind.

Conclusion

This article conceptualised the mystery encompassing the indwelling character of the triune God in his own mission (*missio Dei*). This was done by firstly, placing the concept of *missio Dei* alongside Luther's understanding of God's character in his *opus alienum Dei* (God's alien nature). Secondly, it reconstructed the mysterious nature of God from Paul's perspective of the cross, and then from Luther's theology of the cross. Thirdly, it discussed the Trinity doctrine which encompasses the triune God as a somewhat mysterious concept within Christian theology, and so to speak, further transplanted such mysterious character of the triune God in the *missio Dei*. Fourthly, it discussed the mysterious nature of God, his mysterious manifestations before and after the Willingen conference. Finally, it discussed the attributes of God, namely the *omnipotent*, *omnipresent* and *omniscient* God in the light of the Willingen conference, with the intention of reinforcing the somewhat strange character of God in the *missio Dei*.

Above all, the circumstances and general circumstances of the Willingen Conference showed, in contrast to the traditional theology of the time, that the triune God and his mission cannot be restricted to the framework of any conceivable doctrine. In fact, prior to and after 1952, it became clear how mysterious God is in his own mysterious mission. In other words, no conceivable doctrine and knowledge can ever be sufficient to confirm who God is in his own mission. Consequently, the eternal character of the triune God in mission will remain a mystery, just as the eternal course of his mission will forever remain a mystery to temporal humanity. From this it can be concluded that the *missio Dei* in its entirety is a mystery of salvation, according to the understanding of the Trinity as a mystery. In other words, Trinitarian theology immerses the *missio Dei* in a mystery, that surpasses or exceeds human understanding. In summary, the view of this article is that once the understanding of the triune God as a mystery is fully explored within the *missio Dei* economy, it will certainly go a long way in introducing different but comprehensive understandings of the *missio Dei* itself.

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