

Christian Theology's Engagement with Religious Pluralism
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In this forum, scholars of religion and theology discuss Christian theological thinking and the challenge of religious pluralism. What does it mean for Christian theology to take seriously the engagement of Christians with the world of religious pluralism? Does religious pluralism create a new global and local context for theological thinking? How will an engagement with religious pluralism impact theological education in the years ahead?

The problem with Christian theology's engagement with pluralism, including religious pluralism, is that we still think of it as extraneous to Christian identity, and therefore to theology. It is my contention that this is not so. In this presentation it is my intention to show why it is essential to take pluralism seriously in order to understand the heart of the Christian faith.

It is important to note from the beginning that the problem before us is not plurality per se, but the fact that we do not take plurality seriously in theological construction. Two scholars are extremely helpful in understanding the source and nature of this problem: Kwok Pui Lan and Archie Lee.

The problem lies not in the existence of plurality, but in our method for dealing with it. Kwok points out that we have inherited approaches to theology that are Euro-centric. What we fail to remember is the fact that this theology arose out of a particular period, namely, the colonial period. In her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, she argues that the field of religious studies has created an illusion of a value neutral perspective, of being an objective, academic study. In actuality study of religion grew out of Christian theology's curiosity about other religions and runs on the engine of a western framework and worldview. This worldview--and the illusion of its objectivity--serves a power dynamic in which one particular point of view is used to order, categorize and make sense of all the others. We need to pay attention to this methodology because the impulse to order rapidly becomes the impulse to colonize and homogenize. The illusion of objectivity, along with the means to order and assign value, carries with it the power to control and even to destroy plurality.

But the impulse to colonize and homogenize is as old as humanity's need to make sense of things. Evidence of colonizing efforts exists even within the biblical texts. Archie Lee argues this case in his article *Refiguring Religious Pluralism in the Bible*. While the bible grows out of a multi-textual, multi-religious and multi-contextual setting, he shows how the rich religious traditions of Israel have been suppressed. It is the viewpoint of exclusive, monotheistic Yahwists that is championed by the final form of the text. As with so much of history, it is those with the power who get to write and shape, and pass on their version of the story.

Lee uses the formation of the Pentateuch as an example of this very dynamic. He argues that the Torah is not about all of the people of Israel but a select few. These were the landless people – the aristocrats, intelligencia, artisans - who had been taken into exile in Babylon. They became a people without a land and it is the story of the exiles returning

to claim the land that is championed. The poor and worthless people were left behind to turn to the land and the people around them to survive. The Hebrew Scriptures we now possess reflect the powerful people who were exiled, over and against the powerless who remained behind. It is the religions and lifestyle of the powerless people that is demonised, even blamed as the reason for the exile. But the illusion of religious and cultural purity is a luxury of the elite. Only people who have power can curtain themselves off from the rest of life and live in their hermetically sealed bubble. Only the privileged can remove themselves from the world in order to maintain a state of purity.

In his book *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* D. Preman Niles addresses the homogenising tendency in the bible and church history particularly mission history by highlighting the work of Oscar Cullman as a typical example of this trend. Cullman¹ explains the biblical text as a narrowing of salvation history² from creation to Abraham, to the people of Israel and then the remnant of Israel and then the redemptive one, Christ. The history then broadens out again, through those who believe in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the whole world through the missional work of the church. The movement inward from the many to the one and then back outward to the many--with the pivotal role played by Christ-- is a creative way of homogenising redemptive history. It helps decide those who indeed are participants and shapers of this history.

Niles challenges this framework by asking what happens to the people who are dropped out as the salvation history narrows. People like Hagar and Ishmael (through whom Muslims make their link to Abraham), or even the descendants of Abraham and Sarah who get cut off as the history continues to open out through the history of the Church. All the while, the myriad histories of the people of Asia and Africa are never even considered as part of God's salvation history. When the history opens out again it is directed and moves in a certain direction through Rome into Europe and then the Americas. The rest of the world is then added into this salvation history through the missionary and colonial efforts of Europe and America. It is not surprising, therefore, that the churches outside Europe and America are understood as the younger churches, the daughter churches or --worst of all-- the mission fields: extraneous, later additions, afterthoughts of God's salvation history. They are expected to look to the older churches as the source of truth and meaning, their culture is devalued since it is outside Christian salvation history and finally their spiritualities and theologies are discounted as inferior to white, European and American theological expressions. We might rightly wonder, along with Niles, if there isn't a racist attitude at work in this version of history.

All the critics explored above share one common concern, namely, pluralism is made extraneous to the Christian faith and the construction of theology. The major theological and ethical problem in ignoring or collapsing the reality of pluralism is not only that we may be charged with being exclusive. More dangerously, such an orientation inevitably silences the weakest voices. If we indeed believe in a God who champions the weakest

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949) 93

² I am using salvation history here as God's redemptive interplay and relationship with humanity.

and the poorest among us, this must be an issue of concern. This God is not calling us to homogeneity but plurality because it is only in a plurality that the weakest can be heard.

Plurality is not the problem. The problem is that we have failed to value pluralism or even to take it seriously in our theological constructions. As Kwok, Lee and Niles have demonstrated, this has led us in treacherous directions. So how do we begin taking plurality seriously in our theological discussion? What might such an approach look like? And where might it lead us? I will explore these questions first by revisiting the biblical text with the lens of pluralism, then briefly outlining how this approach shapes the construction of Christian theology. Finally I will look at some of the consequences this would have for theological education in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural context.

First, let's look at the biblical text. The passage I would like to examine is Genesis 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel. This text has two clear movements; humanity's movement inward and God's pushing them outward. It is the interpretation of these movements that makes the text interesting. The dominant tradition of interpretation views humanity's movement inward as sinful hubris in the face of God. God's response is thus interpreted as punishing or even cursing humanity with plurality. Even Gerhard Von Rad, who reads the text with a more generous eye, sees God's act as punitive, even indeed preventive.³ Underpinning this interpretation is the assumption that the ideal state of humanity is the prior state of humanity: with "one language and the same words," and the divine punishment was the destruction of that state.

An alternative interpretation, using a lens of pluralism, is that of Bernard W. Anderson. In his article *Unity and Diversity in God's Creation*, Anderson asserts that the importance of the Tower of Babel story lies in its address of our common humanity as creatures of God and of pluralism as the Creator's purpose. He draws attention to three points that are worth noting: 1. This pericope is a well-structured literary unit, and refers to nothing before it or after it. 2. The interpretation of this periscope has not always been that it is punishment. Josephus and John Calvin as well as several other rabbinic interpreters have understood it as a benediction that flowed from God⁴. 3. A proper interpretation of the periscope would be to see it in the total primeval history covered in Genesis 1-11 as a part of the whole human history and God's desire for them. The desire of God for humanity is given in Genesis 1:28 – "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...'" Leaving aside all the complications attached to 'subduing' the main point of the blessing is the fruitfulness in multiplying and filling the earth (land) which was in danger of being subverted at Babel. So, God came down and confused their language and scattered them over the face of the earth and they left off building the city and returned to God's original intention of filling the earth.

Thickening this discussion, Nestor Miguez suggests that Genesis 11:1-9 refers back to Genesis 10:8-12. Seen in this manner, the characters referred to in Genesis 11 are not all of humanity but a particular group of people from the Table of Nations: Nimrod and his

³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1972) 149

⁴ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Unity and Diversity in God's Creation*, in *Currents in theology and mission*, (April 1978, Vol.5, No.2), 76-77

followers. This is a man who has left his father, Cush's home and occupies lands "not of his family," first in Shinar and then Assyria⁵. Thus, Babel may be interpreted as a story not of human beings' hubris in relationship to God but in relationship to each other. The tower, Miguez argues, is not a means to reach God but watch over the earth.⁶ In response God comes down and performs a liberative act by confusing the language of the conqueror so that this occupation is no longer possible. This, he states, is a blessing for the people who were conquered. The people who were under the hegemonic project of the people "with the same language" are released--allowing their own languages and cultures to be expressed again. God, according to Miguez, does not come down to punish; God can punish from anywhere. Instead, God descends to join people in order to overcome oppression.⁷ This is a God who champions plurality because it is an act of liberation and therefore blessing.

What then does it mean to believe in a God that champions plurality? I will now turn to the second issue of how to construct Christian theology if we believe in this kind of God?

We begin with creation, which is fundamentally plural. I remember a conversation I had with the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama. He had returned from taking his grandson to a petting zoo that boasted having every species of chicken in the world. He was laughing and saying, "So many chickens? Why do we need so many chickens? What a wasteful abundance!" What a wasteful abundance indeed. Plurality seems to be the very fabric of creation. The theological question then becomes, what is God's intention in all of this? I see three possible responses to this question: The first is that plurality is not God's intention but God's mistake, implying the need for correction. A second response is that plurality is a result of human brokenness, also implying the need for correction. A third response is that plurality is a part of God's intention and creation is purposely fashioned in that manner. If we accept that God indeed is a champion of the weak, and therefore of plurality, then the first two options do not make sense. God's blessing then is a constant returning us back to plurality.

The problem of plurality is not that it is, but that we have difficulty functioning within it. The theological key in Christianity for solving this is the figure of the Holy Spirit. The story of the Pentecost presents us with an excellent example of how the Holy Spirit helps us to negotiate plurality. This is the biblical moment when the Holy Spirit is introduced to the Christian story. We find Jews and seekers from every nation, present on the scene, and the Spirit communicates with each of them in their own language. The function of the Holy Spirit is not the abrogating of difference but illuminating it and forming lines of communication and connection through difference.

The Holy Spirit is the gift to the church. It enables the enriching of one another in a receptive plurality. Living out of its instruction gives us a particular purpose, a mission if

⁵ Miguez points out that Cush is traditionally placed in Africa, South of Egypt or south of the Arabian peninsula in from to Egypt. Nester Miguez, *A comparative Bible Study of Genesis 10-11:9: An Approach from Argentina* in *Scripture Community and Mission* ed by Philip L. Wickeri (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia & World Council of Churches, 2003) 158

⁶ Miguez, 159

⁷ Miguez, 160

you will. That mission is the championing of plurality. D. Preman Niles calls it “mission as contestation”.⁸ Put another way, the church--or more appropriately churches are called to read the signs of the time, to champion the possibilities that allow for the greatest amount of plurality and to contest those forces which deny it. Niles calls this being ‘The People of God in the midst of All God’s Peoples’.⁹ In this way, the church is called to be a ‘blessing to the nations’ and do the work of the Spirit of celebrating plurality and working with it. It is important to note that the character of a church involved in this kind of work cannot be one that sees itself over-against the world, but a church in the midst of the world and part of it.

Traditionally we have approached Christology, the work of the Risen Christ, through the so-called Great Commission in Matthew. This way of thinking about Christ has focused on the proclamation of the Good News of the Risen One. While proclamation is important, I see two troubling consequences in this focus. First, the proclamation has been couched exclusively in Euro-centric language and imagery. Second, this method of proclamation has failed to see how the context into which the proclamation is placed has transformed *and been transformed* by Christ in ways that were outside of a Euro-centric understanding of him. An approach to Christology that avoids these problems is through the experience of Pentecost which both reaffirms plurality and indicates receptive plurality as the heart of what we are doing in Christian theology.

Why is it that we abstract and universalise what we have learnt about God among a particular people and turn it into ideological principles? Of all the Christian doctrines, Christology allows us to pay attention to particularity. It is the means by which God deals with humanity in its particularity. It is about the moment that God becomes enfleshed in a context. We see what God looks like in that time and place. God is manifesting Godself among the people of first century Palestine. The key idea here is not transcendence or abstraction, but immanence. Immanence means that the face of God, the face of Jesus, takes on the nuances of the people and culture in which it is found. The cultural context shapes Christ and in turn Christ shapes the culture. From this perspective, emphasis is placed not only on the proclamation, but also on what happens in the interaction of the Christ who is proclaimed and the particularities of the place in which he is proclaimed. Thus, we move from talking about an overarching Christology to a plurality of Christologies that reflect contextual engagements.

What is subsequently possible is conversations about how Christ is manifested in various contexts and how Christ transforms these contexts, and even further how each manifestation informs the others. Latin American Christians have drawn our attention to the communities of the poor as places where Christ is manifest. Asian churches call our attention to the richness and diversity out of which Christ can be known, and they show

⁸ D. Preman Niles, *Towards the Fullness of Life: Intercontextual Relationships in Mission*, in International Review of Mission (Vol. XCI No. 363) 472.

⁹ This formula was proposed by Niles and used at the Theological Roundtable Sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and Council for World Mission (CWM) in Hong Kong 1999 as a means to understand the Church’s mission in the world. It was later developed by Niles in his article *Towards the Fullness of Life: Intercontextual Relationships in Mission*, in International Review of Mission (Vol. XCI No. 363)

us that its collapse toward homogeneity means the loss of the various possibilities of knowing Christ. The African Christians bring to our awareness the theme and experience of community as a key to encountering Christ, and African American churches emphasise the importance of race for a fuller understanding of Christ. The loss of any of these perspectives impoverishes our understanding of Christ. A method that pays attention to this plurality in experiencing Christ moves us away from attempts to construct an overarching Christology. Rather, these voices call us into a conversation among many Christologies, each bringing their own gifts into an intra-Christian dialogue. Bishop V.S. Azariah put this eloquently in his speech to the 1910 International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh when he said:

*The exceeding riches of the glory of Christ can be fully realised not by the Englishman, the American and the Continental alone, nor by the Japanese, the Chinese and the Indian by themselves – but by working together worshipping together, and learning together the Perfect Image of our Lord and Christ. It is only “with all the Saints” that we can “comprehend the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.” This will be possible only from spiritual friendships between two races. We ought to be willing to learn from one another and to help one another.*¹⁰

Taking plurality seriously requires this kind of an intra-Christian dialogue as a preparation for a wider inter-religious dialogue. What we will discover as we enter this wider dialogue is that many a time other religious traditions have already appropriated Christ and Christian theology in their own terms. Bringing these insights into a larger conversation, they offer Christians a unique opportunity for restating their understanding of who Christ is to us. The way another faith interprets a Christian idea is a means for us to understand how the elements of our faith are construed by them. This provides a point from which a larger dialogue can take place.

The potential fruitfulness of this method of entering dialogue with other faiths is seen in the work of M.M. Thomas in his book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. In this work Thomas looks at the understanding of Christ is some key Hindu thinkers during the period of India’s struggle for independence, and how they have explicitly stated their understanding of who Christ is with reference to their own philosophies and praxis in relation to nation building. Examining this process, Thomas is able not only to enrich his own theology, but also to position his own thinking and praxis with regard to nation building as a Christian.

Constructing theology in a manner that values and takes plurality seriously allows us as Christians to celebrate and participate in the diversity around us and to add our own particular stories, enriching the story of God’s work in the world. It also helps us to hear the weaker and marginalised voices often silenced in the name of an artificial unity.

¹⁰ “The Problem of Co-operation between Foreign and Native Workers,” in *World Missionary Conference 1910 Edinburgh: The History and records of the Conference*, vol. 9 (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910) 315

Finally, what consequences would this have for theological education in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural context? It requires us to look for new sources: resources that broaden our theological horizons and help us to understand and live into --not out of-- our pluralistic world. What are some resources which theological education can tap into to develop this new vision?

One area of exploration is the biblical text itself. As demonstrated earlier in this presentation, the bible is a rich resource to study this diversity of cultures and religious traditions as they try and make sense of God. We must read the bible with an eye to the pluralism already inherent in it. Where do we hear different voices? How is plurality dealt with in the text? We need to ask basic hermeneutical questions: Who shaped the text? Who were they and how did they benefit from this way of telling the story? What is our own vested interest? Most importantly-- are the weakest voices being heard?

Another source available to theological education to broaden the theological conversation is the often ignored histories left out of salvation history, both outside and inside the church. C.S. Song in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction – An Asian Attempt*¹¹ proposes a shift away from salvation to creation as the starting point for doing theology. He believes that creation is the backdrop on which several (previously excluded) histories of redemption, including that of Israel can be seen. The biblical theme of Israel in exile--as a nation among other nations--and her history as part of a much larger history creates space to see the histories of other nations, like the Asian ones, alongside that of Israel. D. Preman Niles in his article *Christian Mission and the Peoples of Asia* asserts that Song does not go far enough. He believes that to say God is the God of creation not only creates space to see several histories of redemption, but also is to say that God can do the radically new thing in history, which is implicit in Second Isaiah's understanding of God as Creator.¹² We move then from talking about a singular salvation history to sharing salvation histories, our stories of God at work with us.

Finally, we need to do theology with plurality in mind. This presentation is merely the beginning of this task. If each of us is to claim our own particular task as Christian thinkers and educators, then much more remains to be done to open ourselves up to the rich plurality to which our God and our faith keeps inviting us. We need to take seriously the presence of plurality in our construction of theology. In order to do so, our theological efforts need to do two things: first, we need to take context seriously so the different angles that contexts bring to a theological idea can be explored; second, we also have to create methods of study that enable conversation across contexts so that we can learn from and enrich one another. As we go about these tasks, we would do well to hold before us the vision of the Anglican Bishop Lakshman Wickremesighe of Sri Lanka, who believed that dialogue will lead to a deeper sharing of life, devotion and insight with people of other faiths, which in turn will lead to a deeper and more comprehensive expression of one's own vision of God and the world.¹³

¹¹ C.S. Song, "Christian Mission in Reconstruction – An Asian Attempt," (Madras: CLS. 1975)

¹² D. Preman Niles, "Christian Mission and the Peoples of Asia", *CTC Bulletin* vol. 3, no. 1 (1982), 38.

¹³ Lakshman Wickremesinghe, "Togetherness and Uniqueness - Living Faiths in Inter-Relation", in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol 5 no. 1-2 (April-August, 1984), 7.