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THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH Vol. 3

Identity, Survival, Witness

Reconfiguring Theological Agendas

The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches

Identity, Survival, Witness

Reconfiguring Theological Agendas

Karen L. Bloomquist,
Editor

on behalf of
The Lutheran World Federation

Previous two volumes published in the Theology in the Life of the Church series

Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire. Trinitarian Reflections*

Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*

Identity, Survival, Witness. Reconfiguring Theological Agendas

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Introduction

Karen L. Bloomquist

Much has been written about the need to contextualize theology in settings beyond those where Christian theological traditions have developed, and where the church is growing and/or facing challenges never imagined at the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Some of these multiple challenges and conflicting dynamics that churches face in such contexts are what readers will find in this book. Usually, these have not been considered a starting point for theological agendas that academic theologians in other parts of the world take very seriously. More systematic constructs of liberation or inculturation may get attention, as well as postcolonial studies and social scientific studies of religious phenomena that feel exotically pre-modern to modern sensitivities, and all too often are romanticized. To take seriously the concrete, unvarnished struggles of what it means to be the church in such diverse contexts is not usually what theologians place at the forefront of their attention.

In early 2008, a group of teaching theologians, mostly Asians from Australia, mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, as well as a few from Africa, the Americas and Europe, gathered in Hong Kong.[1] As in previous seminars of the LWF Theology in the Life of the Church program,[2] although most participants were from the region where the group met, those from outside were at times able to name issues and provoke critical questions that cut across regional contexts. In this sense, this seminar moved beyond what has been the inculturation phase of theological development toward more intercultural critique and transformation of theological understandings.

[1] 27 January–2 February 2008, at Tao Fong Shan Center and Lutheran Theological Seminary, Shatin, Hong Kong.

[2] This initiative of the LWF Department for Theology and Studies (2004–2009) has thus far involved five theological seminars focusing on poverty and injustice, interfaith realities, fundamentalism, empire and religious resurgence. The overall objective has been to deepen and expand how theology is understood and pursued in relation to the challenges or realities that churches face in today's world. The first two books is this series are, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire*, *TLC series*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation/Lutheran University Press, 2007); and Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, *TLC series*, vol. 2 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2008). A sixth seminar will be mostly for African theologians, followed by a concluding global consultation in 2009.

The seminar took place against the background of various kinds of religious resurgence around the world, particularly in different parts of Asia, and the challenges this poses for the theology and practices of more traditional churches. In some cases, there is a resurgence of certain Christian movements or emphases (e.g. charismatic) that are growing in popularity both around as well as within some Lutheran churches (see Chung Song Mee, pp. 109ff. in this publication). In other cases, it is the increasing presence, if not resurgence of other religions (e.g. Hinduism), that have shaped Asian culture, society and politics (see Suneel Bhanu Busi, pp. 41ff. in this publication). In countries where secularization and economic growth are spreading, there also is growing interest in seeking new values in old religious traditions (see Wang Guicai, pp. 35ff. in this publication).

Given this backdrop, the intent of the seminar for which these articles were initially written was to clarify, critique and reconstruct theological identity, reflections and practices as Lutherans/Christians in the midst of these dynamics of religious resurgence.[3] This identity, which is continually in flux, is developed in dialogue with our history, culture and society, as well as with those of other faiths and convictions. For this reason, not everyone who participated was Lutheran nor necessarily Christian by confession. Rather than dwelling on the challenges that different kinds of religious resurgence pose, the intent was to focus on the critical and creative theological work that is needed if theology is to serve the lives of churches and societies today in engaged and constructive ways.

As the articles for this book were being discussed in Hong Kong, participants made comments such as the following: Let's deal with the real issues. Let's create new categories for theological work. How can we develop a culture of thinking outside the "Lutheran" box, challenging both the theological establishment and ourselves? The usual theology sounds like a slogan: it's not practical. It needs to be more relational, dialogical and interactive. We need language that communicates. We need to listen to others and to dialogue on our life concerns. We should not be unduly concerned about whether or not our approaches will be acceptable to established theologians elsewhere.

Thus, interspersed among the articles are pieces that reflect and build upon what transpired during the group work, which focused on the actual questions that people seem to be asking. Participants contended that the church's silence regarding these kinds of questions is what makes people

[3] The title of the seminar was, "What do we believe, teach and practice in the midst of religious resurgence?"

rush to other answers. These discussions were not initially framed according to the usual categories of systematic theology, although they draw insights from such. Instead, they were framed to respond to people's actual questions related to "blessings," "after death," "strategies for Christian communities under threat" and "worship." The latter benefitted especially from daily participation in the creatively contextualized worship life of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong, where the seminar met.

Historically, most churches in Asia (and elsewhere) are rooted in denominationally-based mission work (or mission societies), which they still often refer to for their historical identities and relational ties, if not for their ongoing financial support. Increasingly, churches throughout Asia do not consider their allegiance to be narrowly bound to a given denomination's set of beliefs and practices. China is the most obvious example of where a post-denominational church has emerged, in ways intentionally cut off from its missionary/colonialist past. But being self-consciously "Lutheran" has not been the main theological concern of most Lutheran-initiated churches in Asia and beyond. Some will argue for maintaining some kind of Lutheran identity. This identity is often linked to factors not explicitly theological but to the piety or historical trappings of those who first established their churches. As one participant raised the challenge, Why should "Lutheran" be central to our identity rather than how we live out the gospel?

What you will find in this book are not a series of carefully worked out theological agendas, but some exploratory investigations that begin to suggest agendas for further theological pursuits. Not by conscious design but because of the practical realities that they face daily, dynamics of identity, survival and witness are continually intertwined. These three themes emerged in reflecting afterwards on what had repeatedly been raised during the seminar.

"Survival" emerges as an all-pervasive concern because of social, economic, or political factors due to which people or churches feel like discriminated against minorities, or when the society itself (e.g. in China or Japan) seems to be a-religious. Whether as outcaste Dalits in India, ethnic Christians living under military repression in Buddhist Myanmar, or Indigenous people struggling for existence in the deserts of central Australia, survival is a constant refrain. This is compounded when other churches and Christian movements compete for members and influence. As one participant said, "We are fighting to preserve our Chinese, Christian and denominational identities at the same time."

"Identity" is not an a priori but emerges in the midst of the above kinds of struggles and in relation to what has been passed on by those

who brought the Christian faith to a certain locale. It also has to do with preserving threatened cultures and ways of living together, or rediscovering values necessary for life. Who are we as Lutherans was a question raised time and again, with an awareness that this cannot only be a transplanted version of what has been passed on to people. It must become a "trans-figured Lutheranism," as Vítor Westhelle proposes in his opening article. Others added that we need to move toward a criticality, to be critical of Lutheran theology itself.

"Witness" is what Christian are called to do, but narrow answers as to what that involves (e.g. in terms of conversion) need to be expanded. There are no idealized notions here of what Christian witness entails. The very struggles for identity and survival are themselves a kind of witness. Witnessing to the Christian faith means communicating Christ dialogically with Buddhists and taking seriously their faith understandings, maintains Samuel Ngun Ling from Myanmar. Martin Sinaga urges attention to the public witness of Asian churches in their societies.

"What do we believe, teach and practice?" implies bearing witness to our faith, but what does it imply in situations of religious resurgence? It means more than solidifying our own identity over and against others. There are too many horrendous examples of where that can lead such as the thirty-two armed conflicts that took place in just one year (2004), all but one of which were identity driven instrastate civil wars.[4] It means something other than seeking to convert or "win" others over to our faith. Instead, in order to be consistent with the biblical witness we must enter into genuine dialogue with others. In doing so, we need to be open to their witness, to what the outsider or stranger can teach us, for our mutual transformation (see Prasuna Nelavala, pp. 75ff. and Samuel Ngun Ling, pp. 87ff. in this publication).

Bearing witness also means something other than providing stock answers from out of our theological "bag" or tradition before we hear the actual questions that people are asking (see the lock and key imagery, in Vítor Westhelle, p. 23 in this publication). The shape and content of the "bag" itself need to be examined critically in light of our realities today. Jesus continually challenged those—most prominently the Pharisees—who presumed they had the answers as to what it meant to be religious. But is this even about being "religious"?

[4] Project Plowshares, *Armed Conflicts Report 2005*, as cited in Bob Goodzwaard *et al* (eds), *Hope for Troubled Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 63.

At one point during the seminar the question arose as to whether today "theology" can even be used for what theologians need to be about in Asia and Africa? Or, is an authentically Christian stance one of being human, vulnerable, open to those different from ourselves, not boxed in by categories?[5] What we believe and teach is not for the purpose of setting ourselves over and against others in attempting to defend what we experience as the truth. Instead, we are set in relation with others, including those who feel threatening to us.

Although the situations of only a few churches in Asia are given attention here, the articles together provide glimpses into the complex, intertwined struggles for identity, struggle and witness that the churches here face. Describing these struggles, however, is only the beginning. Much more challenging is to reconfigure and pursue constructive theological agendas that can engage these struggles in empowering and transformative ways. May these perspectives here help to provoke and encourage this ongoing work in many venues.

As you read each author's probings, reflect on what is similar to or different from your own situation. How would you engage these challenges? What theological perspectives would you bring in? How should theological agendas be reconfigured for the sake of developing a theology that realistically engages the lives of the people of God in today's world?

[5] See, for example, the second book in this series, *op. cit.* (note 2).

Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts

Vítor Westhelle

The title assigned to me calls for defining what it means to be Lutheran in new contexts and to reconsider the relationship between the two. I shall start with the "new contexts" and conclude with "being Lutheran."

"New contexts"

First, I shall assume that "new contexts" are not traditionally Lutheran contexts, and definitely not the context in which Martin Luther lived and theologized 500 years ago. "New contexts" are those in which Lutheranism and Luther himself were adopted centuries after the birth of the Reformer in distant lands to the south and east of his birthplace. Luther was a German from Saxony, which at the time was a rather "backward," "underdeveloped" corner of Europe. The Reformer himself was aware of his social location and used to brag about being "an ignorant German," who was made fun of for not writing the tomes recognized as the standard of high theological scholarship. Above all, he was a pamphleteer, a man firmly rooted in his time, geography and environment, who was an occasional theologian. From this, some distinctive Lutheran theology and pastoral practices emerged. Even if these rapidly spread throughout northern Europe and developed a body of normative orthodoxy comparable to the erudite scholasticism that Luther had left behind, they were still bound to a relatively homogenous context.

It took more or less three centuries until Lutheran theology and pastoral practices started to speak languages other than the central and northern European ones. This happened first, on a minor scale, through the work of missionaries and, secondly, more massively through the waves of immigration from northern Europe reaching the shores of the Americas.

Four centuries after the Reformation—at the beginning of the twentieth century—just over a hundred years ago, the vast majority of Lutherans

(over ninety percent) were still to be found in the North Atlantic axis, namely, Germany, Scandinavia and the USA. This was still very much the situation half a century later when the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was founded in 1947 at an assembly of world Lutheranism in Lund, Sweden. For the next two decades, LWF documents still referred to the "three blocks" that made up the visible constituency of the Federation: Germany, Scandinavia and the US as the "third block."

So what about the new contexts referred to in the title of this article? They were largely invisible, particularly with regard to their claim to being Lutheran. "The three blocks" still had the hegemony of defining and adjudicating what Lutheranism was. Hegemony[1] is a term used in the social sciences to describe a social formation in which a given group has the hold on power, and the intellectual influence to provide leadership without having to resort to the overt use of force to sustain its dominion. Those kept under the dominion of hegemony are the subalterns. Subalterns are those who are deprived of power and unable to or prevented from exercising leadership.[2] In the case of the Lutheran communion, power was the money with which the "three blocks" financed the LWF's operations, from World Service to Church Cooperation (precursor of the Department for Mission and Development) to Studies (precursor of the Department for Theology and Studies). Intellectual leadership was provided by the unquestioned supremacy of the Western Enlightenment tradition and its influence on the sciences in general and theology in particular. Outside the "three blocks," there was no money to purchase a ticket for the fancy Lutheran cruise, nor did these new contexts master the etiquette deemed necessary to behave in a "proper" theological manner. By etiquette, I mean the command of certain languages, familiarity with the concepts operating in the hegemonic discourse, access to the huge amounts of literature produced in the centers of Reformation studies, the critical edition of primary sources and so on and so forth.

The "new contexts," our contexts, lacked power, felt inadequate to provide intellectual leadership that could challenge Western academics and, worse, constituted a tiny minority. Hegemony always presents itself as having universal validity, the rest is the rest, and the rest is at best heresy, or does not even reach the status of a heresy.

[1] The concept was introduced by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. See David Forgacs (ed.), *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 249, 422–424.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 351.

In his seminal work that opens the history of modern Protestant theology, *Glaubenslehre*, Friedrich Schleiermacher, reflecting on the missionary work in distant lands, discusses the impossibility of new heresies appearing in Christianity. For him,

> new heresies no longer arise, now that the church recruits itself out of its own resources; and the influence of alien faiths on the frontier and in the mission-field of the Church must be reckoned at zero.[3]

And then the great Berliner adds condescendingly,

> … there may long remain in the piety of the new converts a great deal which has crept in from their religious affections of former times, and which, if it came to clear consciousness and were expressed as doctrine, would be recognized as heretical.[4]

However, swiftly he dismisses any serious threat coming from that. Was he in for a surprise!

Schleiermacher was not a Lutheran, of course. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the situation in Lutheran circles was even more flippant. It was debated whether Jesus' Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) was meant for the first apostles only (the position of Lutheran orthodoxy) and was then presumably fulfilled, preempting any need for mission work, or whether it extended to every generation of Christians (the position held by Pietism), hence requiring missionary work. Nonetheless, unlike Schleiermacher, they did not even entertain the question of possible heresies creeping into the new converts' faith.

This was the situation way into the 1960s when, for the first time, the LWF, through its Department of Studies, started to take an intentional look at the interface between Lutheran churches and societies around the globe, creating, unsurprisingly, a crisis within the hegemony. The crisis was still manageable but heralded things to come. Since then, in the last few decades, only a fraction of the time Lutheranism has been around, a dramatic change has taken place.

Today, the LWF, which assembles ninety-five percent of all those who claim the Lutheran heritage, comprises 140 member churches, the majority

[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), p. 96.

[4] *Ibid.*

of which are from outside the North Atlantic axis. They are from the planetary South. Small churches, most of them, but their membership makes up almost half of world Lutherans. They constitute forty percent and are growing, while the "three blocks" remain at best stagnant and in several places register declining membership. It is plausible that in a decade or so the planetary South will be home to the majority of Lutherans in the world.

This is only one aspect of this rapid transformation. What is probably even more significant is the fact that unlike the contextual circumstances that set the agenda for the churches of the North, the planetary South has minority churches that are facing challenges not only from the traditional opponents of Lutheranism in the North Atlantic world (namely the Roman Catholics and the Reformed), but from a number of other religions next to which these Southern Lutherans exist. Additionally, they are witnessing the emergence of robust new forms of Christian piety expressed by the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, often within the ranks of the Lutheran churches themselves.

These two factors—the growing number of Lutherans in the South and the challenge they face from non-traditional neighbors, other faith traditions and new emergent pieties (the challenge of major minorities)—have implications for Lutheran theology and pastoral practice, whose breadth and depth we are only beginning to realize. To paraphrase Paul: Oh hegemony where is thy sting? Oh universal theology where is thy victory? Or, in the ironic words of the Brazilian poet, Vinicius de Moraes, *Ninguém é universal fora de seu quintal* (no one is universal outside their backyard).

This change, so radical and still far from having completed its entire revolution, significantly influences theology and is redrawing the face of Lutheranism (giving it a lift down, or a lift South). The changes to come are inevitable, as we shall see. This is not a paean: responsibility is increased, leadership needs to be provided and resources will have to be found from new sources. Meanwhile, who are those redefining the landscape of Lutheran theology? How do new contexts acquire the legitimacy to wear the Lutheran badge? Indeed, very good questions for more than one reason.

Representation

A fifth-century theologian, Prosper of Aquitaine, proposed a rule for theologizing that is descriptive of what happens with good theology: "The prayer of the supplicant shall be the measuring stick of theological

doctrine" (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*).[5] The supplicant is the one who is weighed down by oppression, persecution, sin and trial. Although liberation theologies have made much of this, it was not their invention; it is an old church tradition. So what is this plea of the faithful supplicants in new contexts that presumably sets the agenda for theology? And why would that have to be cast in Lutheran lingo? Do we need to import Lutheran theological conceptions to express what is autochthonous, proper to these new contexts?

This is a complex problem because it first begs the questions of who is presenting or representing this agenda and how. One thing is the supplicants' plea; another is who speaks for them, who represents them. As we have seen, the hegemonic theology of the North Atlantic world spoke on behalf the supplicants and articulated their pleas. Consequently, the agenda was set in different variations of Luther's own, well-known plea, How do I find a merciful God? But, who says what this means, whose voice represents the plea from these new contexts?

It is the questions pertaining to this specific issue that are left for us to examine: Who speaks for Lutheranism today? Who represents Lutheran theology and pastoral practice? What is its face, its ethnicity, its nationality, its class and caste? What languages and accents carry it? Who are the authorized spokespersons? Do we need to immerse ourselves in Luther's own context, his language, European history from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment and beyond in order to represent Lutheranism or to be Lutheran in new contexts? What is its identity, what is proper to Lutheranism? Let us be blunt. Do we need the doctrine of justification and how it responded to medieval theories of atonement explained to us and then to incorporate it into our theological work? What will set our agenda, the agenda of these new contexts?

These are not merely rhetorical questions; finding an answer relevant to these new contexts is an awesome and humbling task. Awesome and humbling, because talking about context is in itself a treacherous enterprise.

In her now classical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[6] and her later works, the Indian philosopher and literary critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, develops a fascinating argument with regard to defining one's context, producing a representation, an image, or an experience. She begins by engaging some

[5] Migne, *Patrologia cursus completeus*, *Series latina*, 121 vols (Paris: 1844-1855), vol. 51, p. 209.

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

of the literature on the Hindu practice of *sati*, in which a recently widowed woman would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. She probes the unexamined assumption in literature that those writing thought that they knew what the widow's context was, either in avoiding the pyre or submitting to it. Spivak shows that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable distinction between that woman's experience, her actual context and the construction she makes of her identity on the one hand and, on the other, the representation of the *sati* ritual when made by others in describing the woman and her place in the ritual. This representation by others, either by orthodox Hindus or by Western anthropologists and other colonial agents, inscribe the ritual into a discourse fraught with moral, religious and political presuppositions. The one justifying the ritual will inscribe it within the traditional religious interpretation, while the one describing for a Western audience will likely cast it terms of individual rights and inalienable freedom. But where is the woman in these discourses that reduce her to a gesture within a ritual that is either defended or decried?

Spivak's point is that when the widow is represented by a proxy, when someone wants to speak for her, i.e. present her context, paradoxically she loses her own voice and what remains is only a picture, a gesture that defies translation and interpretation. In fact, we are not dealing with contexts as such, for they are unstable realities, in constant fluidity [cf. Kajsa Ahlstrand, pp. 25ff. in this publication]. From the time that people inhabited caves, representing is human. Otherwise, communication would not be possible. Nonetheless, when we represent something or someone, when we speak on behalf of a context, we are stabilizing that which is very unstable, we are producing an image that can be passed on as a commodity and communicated to other contexts. This is similar to a photo one takes of a landscape or a Hong Kong street market. It is never the same the second after the flash goes off, and it comes to us in another context always demarcated by a frame that the photographer chooses not only when deciding what to portray, but always also what to exclude, what is deemed irrelevant with regard to what one wants to present.[7] One's communication to friends about the trip to Hong Kong, for instance, comes with a filter that brackets out innumerous other factors that are part of

[7] This is studied exemplarily in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Water Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–551. Referring to film, he phrases this reversal thus: "The audience's identification with the actor (*Darsteller*) is really an identification with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values (*Kultwerte*) may be exposed." (pp. 228f.).

the experience, but will never enter the picture or be fully conveyed by it. Some contextual experiences, such as speaking in tongues, possession, apparitions or manifestations of the dead, are difficult or impossible to communicate because they have no correspondence or analogies in other contexts. What happens to them? They are filtered out, kept outside of the frame, psychologized or dismissed as exotic fancy. This happens to every context, including these new contexts referred to here.

Why is this important for us in "new contexts"? Because these have not only been defined by others, but have also been colonized by political, economic, ecclesial and military powers, including also their symbolic and religious systems, which the colonial subjects, the subalterns, had no choice but to buy into and negotiate with. Symbols, images, figures, concepts and doctrine circulating on the market of representations became the tools available for the construction of identities in new contexts; they have thus been defined, codified and filed.

So, what can we who have been colonized do? Should we not get rid of the symbolic system, with its imposed models of "democracy" or "communism" or "religion" and instead use only autochthonous images, representations, rituals and forms of governance? Why not get rid of a spurious legacy and imposed heritage and return to our roots, the autochthonous ground of our symbolic system? Most new contexts were formerly under colonial rule. A postcolonial condition is one in which the colonial power no longer has direct military and/or political dominion but whose symbolic systems and institutions linger as a specter fed and nurtured by a global imperial economy. Once symbols and representations of a certain reality have been implanted in a given context, it is virtually impossible to extricate them. The question is how to make use of them. What is important is not so much how a context is being represented, what images and symbols are being used, but who does the representation.

Transfiguration

If postcolonial theory has taught us anything, it is that it is a reflection on a practice, a practice of dealing with these haunting ghosts that we have grown accustomed to, for they have been with us for centuries. Such practice is one of taking a symbolic figure that was part of a colonial project and investing it with new contextual meaning. As Oswald de Andrade said in his Anthropophagous Manifesto, published in Brazil in 1928, "We made Christ

be born in Bahia [a state known for representing Brazilian culture at its best] or in Belém of Pará [a city in the Amazon, Portuguese for Bethlehem]."[8] The point is not to dismiss Christ because he came with the colonial powers, but to turn him into a figure that can be indigenized.

I have used the word "figure" (*figura*) to describe emblematic characters or events that, unlike concepts, symbols and doctrines, are rooted in concrete historical circumstances. Figures have a genealogy, a place and a time to which they belong. In addition, figures are capable of migrating across time and space and to find roots in other characters or events, creating

> a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. [9]

When figures migrate, they produce what Edward Said called a "contrapunctual"[10] dissonance. The figure becomes the host of contextual experiences different from the ones it was originally invested with, but in a certain way also consonant with these. A figure is the catalyst of different experiences at different times and in different places. We can call this the practice of transfiguration. A figure that was part of a given context reemerges in another and in it is trans-figured.

Take the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Mt 17:1–13). It is my contention that the passage needs to be read in the context of the preceding one, in which Jesus foretells the disciple his coming passion and Peter rebukes him. Unlike what the people said of Jesus being Elijah or one of the prophets, even the greatest one, Moses, Peter had just confessed him as the son of God. Right confession? Yes, but wrong context! Jesus' retort, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:23) was like saying, Peter, don't flee from your context, here is Elijah, here is Moses, it is also about them, they are also in me and with me. That is precisely what happens in the narrative of the transfiguration. The figures of Moses and Elijah emerge from different times and contexts, and their own mantle, which charged them with historical and

[8] Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropófago," in R. L. Scott-Buccleuch and Mario Teles de Oliveira, (eds), *An Anthology of Brazilian Prose: From the Beginnings to the Present Day* (São Paulo: Ática, 1971), p. 388.

[9] Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from Drama of European Literature: Six Essays*, translated by Ralph Mannheim (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 53

[10] See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 51, 259, and *passim*.

popular repute, is laid upon Jesus. Their figures were transmuted (*metemorphothe*) to Jesus, and in him they again became alive and present. When the disciples remind him that the scribes had said that Elijah must come before the Messiah, Jesus tells them that Elijah had already come and was not recognized. They realized that he was talking about John the Baptist. Now Jesus was also the new Moses, the liberator of the people. Here is this marginal Galilean claiming Moses' staff when the high priests were those who sat on Moses' chair. This is contrapunctual, yet the melody was the same: liberation like in the Exodus. For the disciples, it was at that moment that Jesus became contextualized and his figure became the host of all the relevant and cherished experiences of that Jewish context. Jesus was not the son of God out of this world, above history's ambiguities. In that context, Jesus, the son of God, was rooted in the history of his people; he was not the pristine son of God as Peter believed. Jesus embodied the ambiguous and frail history of the context into which he was immersed.

Transfiguration is what postcolonial practice does. Consider these few examples from the history of Christianity. Christ, the mighty conqueror of the Crusades, of the conquest, is transfigured into Jesus, our brother, the liberator, the companion on our journey and our struggle; he becomes our contemporary. The narrative of the Exodus, used as a symbol by the Afrikaners in South Africa and in the south of the USA by the US government to legitimize the expropriation of land from the Africans and the Mexicans, is transfigured into a narrative that gives expression to struggle and longing for liberation from oppression and slavery. The Franciscan spirituality of the *Via Crucis* with its fourteen stations, telling the story of Jesus in Gethsemane, his condemnation by Pilate, his body being laid in the tomb, is transfigured from an exercise that often borders on masochism into a liberating reflection on the present condition of the people. This occurs when a fifteenth station, depicting the Resurrection, is added.[11]

Sometimes the transfiguration is so thorough that we even forget its hybrid origin. For example, when Martin Luther King, Jr was given the name of his father, who in turn was named after the Reformer, that was a transfiguration. However, if you ask people in the USA today who Martin Luther was, meaning the sixteenth-century Reformer, a surprising number of people will say that he is the great black hero of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr King.

[11] See Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 160–176.

Transfiguration is the practice by which a figure from a given context has the potential for acting as a catalyst for experiences from other contexts, or when a figure from a given context embodies the spirit of figures from another context. This is the reason why we say that these contexts are hybrid. They inject autochthonous materials into what used to be an alien figure, often brought along by the colonial powers, initially to serve their own interests.

According to postcolonial theory, nothing is pure and pristine; we are all hybrids. "The universal word speaks only dialect," as Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga so often insisted.[12] The art of postcolonial resistance is really to trans-figure that which came as part of the colonial enterprise, and to use it as a weapon of resistance, disavowing hegemony the monopoly over the discourse. Even the "Lutheran" discourse (and the corresponding missionary enterprise) was a colonial discourse which defined and represented the subalterns' plea. It went like this: "You are sinners under the threat of God's wrath, but I bring you the gospel of justification of the ungodly!" Now the postcolonial consciousness retorts, "You have misrepresented my plea," and the subaltern adds defiantly, "You don't even know what you are saying when you use the word 'Lutheran' in 'these contexts'." Indeed!

On being a Lutheran

I have already suggested that Luther or Lutheranism functions as a figure that was brought to colonial contexts as part of the missionary work that was part of the colonial enterprise as such. The question is whether this figure can be transfigured and catalyze experiences far removed in time and space from those that originally gave rise to it. For a figure to inspire such new experiences, it must have intrinsic features that make it attractive as a host in the process of transfiguration, as Elijah gave a profile to John the Baptist, or Moses to Jesus.

As far as Luther is concerned, there are a number of motives that lend themselves to this purpose. Luther's rich but little studied creation theology can become a catalyst to address the ecological crisis (creation as the living mask of God). Luther's harsh criticism of emerging financial capitalism is as pertinent in the time of the global market as it was in the

[12] The expression is from Pedro Casaldáliga, *Creio na Justiça e na Esperença* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilição Brasiliera, 1978), p. 211.

sixteenth century. His recognition of the cross of Christ in the suffering of a crucified world is strikingly similar to the arguments of liberation theologians. Luther's emphasis on the vernacular as the means for theological communication is as relevant today, when English has become the *lingua franca*, as it was the case of Latin during Luther's time.

The Christian church is a community of believers that gather around the Word made flesh and the sacraments. That is its particular shape. Luther also saw the church (*ecclesia*) as an "order of creation" established by the institution of the Shabbat, belonging therefore to all humankind and not only to Christians.[13] This is what it means to be catholic and radically so: Islam is also church, Judaism is also church, Hinduism is also church, Shamanism is also church and so forth. Luther's argument for Christ's presence, not only in the person of Jesus or in the sacrament of the altar, but in the whole of creation,[14] is a surprisingly mute point in Luther studies done in the North Atlantic world, yet it is something already known by the Indigenous people in Australia, as Basil Schild shared at this seminar.

There are a number of issues in Luther that need to be rephrased if not rejected altogether, including his last stance on the peasant's revolt, his doubled-edged pronouncements on Jews and Muslims, his disregard for the Epistle of James. But this always happens in transfigurations. To take the example of Moses and Jesus, it was Luther himself who said that we need to have all that is worthy in Moses and have it in Jesus, but we cannot have all of Jesus in Moses. In the process of transfiguration, the host figure is always enlarged and expanded. The original figure becomes *quasi* larger than life.

But what about the sacred cows of Lutheranism such as the doctrine of justification of the ungodly, or the law-gospel dialectic, or even the two kingdoms doctrine? The problem here is that, contrary to the positive and the negative examples referred to above, these doctrines have become so reified that their contexts can hardly be detected. They are doctrines and no longer figures, no longer attached to their contexts, and thus also incapable of migrating to other contexts.

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[13] See Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 1 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), pp. 80f.

[14] Martin Luther, "Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 610. Cf. Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 223f.

This brings us back to Prosper of Aquitaine's rule for doing theology: the plea of the supplicant is the measuring stick for theological teaching. Luther's doctrine of justification, to take the most prominent example, can only be properly understood against the background of Luther's own afflictions and despair in knowing that he was not pleasing God to merit grace. His "discovery" of God's unmerited grace is the key that opened the deadlock in which he found himself. When he succinctly described his theological method, he followed a common three-step process, popular in medieval theology.[15] The two first steps that he described were prayer and meditation, making clear that prayer included talking to and about God, while meditation was not a solitary pondering of things divine, but reading and engaging books and other people in reflection. However, while in medieval theology the third step was blissful contemplation of the divine mystery (*contemplatio*), Luther made a radical change. The final and decisive step in becoming a theologian was not peaceful and idyllic contemplation but, on the contrary, it was struggle and being on trial (*tentatio*, *Anfechtung*). His own experience as an outcast, persecuted by religious and political powers, driven almost to madness by the occasional doubt that maybe he could be wrong, that is what he said made him the theologian he became. Experience, he said, is what makes a theologian,[16] and not any existential experience of angst. He was talking about undergoing concrete persecution and trial, being afflicted. This was the deadlock to which justification became the key that released him. Only having the key, without knowing what type of lock it fits, becomes an exercise in irrelevancy.

So, what does it mean to be a Lutheran in the new contexts that are not traditionally Lutheran but are in the neighborhood of other faith traditions? How can we understand this relationship between the church being Lutheran and the contexts that are no longer of yore? Being a Lutheran cannot be seen as something that is separate or over against these new contexts. Being a Lutheran and, for that matter, the church itself can be understood only as a reality which is at the same time at ease and in tension between and amidst the new, diverse contexts. This is especially urgent considering the fact that we inhabit an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world. Adjacency becomes then a constitutive

[15] Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 283–288.

[16] Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 7.

feature of the church as historically intended. The church cannot be and never has been an entity in and of itself. Not being of the world, it is still in the world. One cannot be a Lutheran apart from the multidimensional contexts—religious, political, economic, or cultural—that border and even inhabit one's own. We live in a world that is broken and damaged, but it is so in ways that need to be defined locally. Our identity as Lutherans does not lie in laudatory proficiency in reciting articles from the Augsburg Confession, but in our willingness to be vulnerable. While being immersed in the church's traditions, our theologizing should allow the cries of the broken, forsaken and the frail to interrupt what we usually hear, so that God's voice might be heard.

Today, when talk of justification is bandied about lightly, I am reminded of a parable.[17] A man was given a key. A very special key, he was told, that would open the lock to the greatest treasure anyone could find, and pure joy and happiness would be unleashed. He believed in the assurance that the key could unlock the secret to the most beautiful life one could imagine. He tried the key in all the locks that were imprisoning his life, and the key did not fit any of them. But the key, he surmised, was so precious that he decided to construct a lock that would fit the key, and so the key would finally be of use. Indeed, the key unlocked the custom-made lock, but it did not open anything. When "justification" language is bandied about, it is like the key in the parable and people receive it only to construct locks to fit the key, which do not open anything other than the lock itself. In Luther's case, the key was so important because it opened a real lock that kept his life in fear and despair. Prosper's rule applies; it opens the gates of joy and peace. The key is a real gift if, and only if, it opens the lock that holds us captive. The doctrine of justification, or any other doctrine of the Lutheran church, is irrelevant if it does not fit the plea of the supplicant's heart, the broken soul and damaged life.

[17] I first heard this parable from my former colleague, Prof. Reinhard Hütter.

We are not just our Religion: Identity and Theology

Kajsa Ahlstrand

When we meet as Lutheran theologians, one of the fundamental questions we must ask ourselves is, What does it mean when I declare myself to be Lutheran? Who am I? Who are we? As the British Roman Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Stuart, said,

> The Church teaches that in the end all identities other than that conveyed through baptism are relativized (which is not to say that they are dismissed as unimportant as the involvement of friends and family and the opportunity provided for some personal remembrance of the deceased in some rites indicates). There is only one identity stable enough to hope in. At death my Church teaches me that all my secular identities are placed under "eschatological erasure"… .[1]

Yes, created by God and baptized into Christ, that is who we are in the end. Nonetheless, in today's confusing world, this no longer suffices to define who we are, because that is not all that we are. As human beings, we live our lives limited by time and space. Although we believe that the church to which we belong transcends time and space, transcending does not mean being stuck in a time warp or to live in fantasyland. As Christians, we are called to witness to God's love and grace where we are, as the human beings that we are.

What kind of identity are we talking about when we speak of a "Lutheran identity"? I suggest that we assume that there is an essential or a generic Lutheran character that remains unaltered in different instances, i.e. sameness in spite of differences in time and space. But "Lutheran" is also thought of as a distinguishing characteristic that is different from say, "Methodist" or "Roman Catholic." Taken together, these two

[1] Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p. 2.

meanings, being the same in different circumstances and being different from others, would be what we call a Lutheran identity.

In the following, I shall argue that there is neither an essentially Lutheran character that remains unaltered, nor a distinguishing Lutheran character that separates the Lutheran from other Christian traditions. Yet, in spite of this, is it possible to speak of Lutheran identity in a provisional sense?

An image from ancient India describes the human being as a knot in a net of relationships; "I" am the place where my parents, siblings, ancestors, children, etc. intersect. The knot is not permanently located in the same place: new relationships (if I marry or divorce, if I have children or lose my children) change the location, but there is no "I" without relationships. In ancient India, the net was a rather simple construction for the majority of people; it consisted of family and relatives. If we hold on to the image of the net, it is immensely more complicated today, for all of us. We define ourselves by and belong to networks defined, for example, by age, language, class, gender, religion, looks (body shape, color, etc.), occupation/education, leisure interests and entertainment, values (political and moral), region or nation (geographic home) and family.

The relationship between I and we, me and us

There is both an "I" and a "we" in church language: "I believe" (*credo* in first person singular), "I confess" (*confiteor*). The "I" is not an invention of Western modernity, although it took on a life of its own there. "I" is integral to the way in which Christians understand themselves.

The "we" that we speak of is constantly being reconstructed. Benedict Anderson speaks of "imagined communities," reconfigured "wes."[2] The church is an imagined community, as is the nation, "the company of women" or any other "we" that comprises more people than I personally know.

A community has boundaries; the clearer the boundaries, the stronger the "we." This is neither good nor bad; it is a sociological fact. We can compare two churches, for instance the Church of Sweden and the Nigerian instituted Flaming Gospel Church International. There is no doubt that the feeling of community is stronger in the Flaming Gospel Church than in the Church of Sweden. There may be groups within the

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983, revised edition 2006).

Church of Sweden where the "we" is as strong as in the Flaming Gospel Church, but the Church of Sweden's seven million members do not feel as sisters and brothers in the same way as do the members of the Flaming Gospel Church.

We often refer to "culture." But culture is so complicated that I question whether it can be used at all. Is culture not a factor in our identity? There is no such thing as culture that is not related to all the other factors listed here. In spite of arguments to the contrary, I maintain that we are all individuals, each one of us with a unique constellation of identities, which to some extent will change over time. This does not preclude that we form communities, but these too change over time. Time and again, the nets are torn and reknitted. I argue that identity is relational and that we will look in vain for any unaltered substance when we ask who we are. As Christians we may say that we relate to the same Bible, the same sacraments and the same Christ. Nonetheless, because we approach the Bible, the sacraments and Christ in different ways, they are not the same for each one of us.

To be a Lutheran Christian in an established Lutheran church in northern Europe in 2008 is not the same as it was in 1958 or 1908. What are the differences? Society has changed and what we take for granted has changed. This includes:

- Age: it is obvious that those who live and tell their stories today have different memories, points of references and expectations compared to people in 1908 or 1958. There are also more elderly people today. In Sweden, the average life expectancy was less than fifty-five years in 1908, compared to over eighty years in 2008.
- Language: not only has Swedish changed so that we can identify texts written in 1908 or 1958 as belonging to different eras, but in 2008 we take for granted that educated people read, speak and understand English. Because of immigration, there are many minority languages. A Swedish citizen might have Swedish as their second or third language or not speak it at all.
- Class: the majority of the population belong to the middle class. The working class has changed and is no longer dominated by male blue-collar workers, but by women in semi-qualified care jobs. The Swedish Municipal Workers' Union is Sweden's largest blue-collar trades union; eight out of ten of its members are women.
- Gender: what we think of as women and men has changed tremendously. In 1908, women did not have the right to vote, they were excluded from many occupational careers and were economically

and socially dependent on their fathers or husbands. In 1958, one of the last bastions for male domination, the General Synod of the Church of Sweden, opened the priestly ministry to women. In 1908, gender equality was seen as the ideal of a few "extremists," in 1958 it was still debated, but today it is taken for granted by all political parties and voters.

- Religion: during the twentieth century there have been two major changes in the Swedish religious landscape. One is secularization: religion no longer matters to most people. The established church has become disestablished and no longer holds power over people's lives. Statistics show that today fewer people go to church regularly than in 1908 or 1958, fewer children are baptized, etc. The second change is that what was a religiously homogenous society in 1908, when only a very small minority did not belong to the Church of Sweden, now is a religiously diverse society. According to official statistics, approximately 115,000 Orthodox Christians, 85,000 Roman Catholics, 175,000 Evangelical Pentecostal Christians and more than 100,000 Muslims live in Sweden today. The Church of Sweden has changed too: the majority of the candidates for ordination are women. Not the Parliament but the General Synod now governs the church. Good ecumenical relations are taken for granted in a way that very few people would have imagined one hundred years ago.
- Looks (body shape, skin color, etc.): the ideals have changed. One hundred years ago, a poor person was often thin; being overweight was a sign of affluence. Today, it is easier to put on rather than to lose weight, and obesity is often a sign of poverty. The average Swede is taller and heavier than fifty or one hundred years ago. Because of immigration, more Swedes have brown eyes and dark hair today than a hundred years ago.
- Occupation/education: many jobs that were common in 1908 hardly exist today (e.g. cooper, farm maid), while some jobs that were unthinkable fifty years ago, are career options today (e.g. nail technician, Web designer). In 1908, fewer than three percent of all Swedes went to university, in 1958, under twenty percent and in 2008, over fifty percent. Society has changed from producing commodities to producing knowledge and communication.
- Leisure interests and entertainment: today, many people define themselves by their leisure interests or preferred forms of entertainment (e.g. gardening, football, special taste in music). In 1908,

most people did not have much leisure time and women would not have considered running a marathon an appealing activity.

- Values (political and moral): today, secular and rational values and self-expression predominate in Sweden.[3] Thus, religion and patriotism feature only marginally in society and children are encouraged to be independent rather than obedient. Diversity and tolerance are ideals that are taken for granted.
- Region or nation: the geographic area one calls one's home has changed. Due to migration and urbanization, society has changed considerably. While in 1908 approximately seventy percent of all Swedes lived in rural areas, in 2008 it is less than fifteen percent. In 1908, there were fewer than 10,000 immigrants but many more emigrated from Sweden. In 2008, the number of immigrants is close to 100,000.
- Family: in 1908, there were approximately 500 divorces, as compared to over 20,000 in 2008. As is the case in many European countries, Sweden has an aging population. New family constellations have emerged as people tend to have more than one long-term relationship during their fertile years. Also, numerous same-sex families live together with or without children. In 1945, six percent of all Swedes lived in single households (without children, parent/s or partner), whereas in 2008 this figure has increased to thirty percent.

Therefore, being a Lutheran Christian in Sweden in 2008 might mean that you were born in South Korea, adopted by Swedish parents, are a lesbian single mother with a teenage daughter, have a university degree, work as a social welfare officer, play in a women's football team, campaign for human rights' issues, have dark hair (although it was pink for a short period), monitor your weight, speak Swedish and English and have just begun to learn Arabic as you work in an area where there are many asylum seekers from the Middle East. You used to go to church to listen to your daughter singing in the choir. Today you realize that religion was more important to her than you had been aware of since she has just told you that she thinks she might want to become a pastor.

Most of the characteristics of this early twenty-first-century Lutheran were unthinkable one hundred years ago and highly unlikely fifty years ago. This person is not a "typical" Swedish Lutheran (there is no such thing), but

[3] Christian Welzel, "A Human Development View of Value Change," at **www.worldvaluessurvey.com**

she would not be considered exceptional in the Church of Sweden today. She would not regard being Lutheran or a Christian to be the most important part of her identity, but in some situations it might become more central. Whereas she does not seek guidance from the church in her daily life, when her daughter's best friend was killed in an accident, she was grateful that the parish pastor came to the school and talked about death and grief and she found the funeral service beautiful and comforting.

I shall not attempt to make a similar comparison between being a Lutheran Christian in a minority Lutheran church in East Asia in 2008, in 1958 or in 1908. What I would like to stress is that every local church sees these differences, not primarily because theology changes but because the people who do theology change. Change occurs over time in the same geographical area, but there are also variations because of historical, economic and social differences between various parts of the world.

There are differences in how we think of ourselves and the world. Are there also distinctions in how we think about God and the Christian community? Yes, God remains God, but the way in which we perceive God varies with how we think of ourselves and the world. Our concept of a "good society" influences how we think of the kingdom of God. If we believe that a good society depends on a good and mighty ruler, it is easier to conceive of God as the king who rules supreme, than if our ideal is a democratic society where we elect our rulers and where in principle every citizen may be elected to rule. If we call God our king, this has different connotations on a cosmic scale (where we might imagine an uncontested ruler) than in the political world of democratic rule and fallible humans. Nonetheless, theological/liturgical language referring to monarchs is difficult to understand if it contrasts with the values that we take for granted in our everyday lives, namely that democracy is better than dictatorship.

If we accept that it is important that every person be able to develop their gifts in their own way, and that creativity and empathy are more desirable in children than obedience to elders, then it is problematic to describe God as the parent who demands obedience from "his" children and will chastise them if they disobey. God then appears to be precisely the kind of parent we in our human frailty strive not to be. And if we think of love between human beings as mutual and based on respect, then it is difficult to speak of God's love as demanding people to go against their innermost convictions.

Even when using the same texts as previous generations did, the words do not call forth the same images. When we speak and sing of

God as king, father, love, what we think of in a democratic, egalitarian, individualistic society cannot be the same as in other types of societies. The words may be the same, but there is no unaltered essence that we can isolate. And if there is no unaltered essence, there is also no unchanging identity of the Lutheran community that others may recognize. Across the centuries and across the globe, Lutherans look, sound, think and imagine very differently.

How then, can we speak of a Lutheran identity? We are Lutherans if we are engaged in conversation and celebration with others who—across the centuries and around the globe—also call themselves and identify each other as "Lutherans." In so doing, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that it will be an easy ride. We must not assume that we know one another, but when there are glimpses of understanding we can treasure these. We must work on building trust in spite of our differences and, in doing so, we need a genuine attitude of helpless and benevolent curiosity. Genuine, because if it is just a political game, it will only result in cynicism. I need to be really interested in understanding that which seems strange to me. Helpless, because I do not assume that I know what is going on; I cannot understand until you explain it to me time and again. Benevolent, because even if I do not understand it, I think it is important to find out because it is obviously important and good for you. Curious, because I will not rest until I know more about your world; I am not satisfied with what I take for granted.

If we continue to engage one another in conversation and celebration, the "we" will constantly be challenged and renegotiated. And if we believe that the Spirit will lead us into new insights and friendships, we will not be afraid to go there.

On Being a Religious Pluralist in Japan

Emi Mase-Hasegawa

Japan is one of the most secularized countries in the world and religion plays only a minor role in the public sphere. When Japanese people are asked about God's existence many would tend to respond cautiously or even negatively. Most Japanese are indifferent to their religious affiliation and do not take religion seriously.

Many Japanese do not have sufficient knowledge in order to distinguish between true and false religion. The Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons call themselves Christian. However, quite unexpectedly, most young Japanese believe in the existence of the Spirit. Of the 300 young people between the ages of twenty and thirty I surveyed in 2004, eighty percent affirmed their belief in the Spirit. The Japanese believe there to be invisible spirits in nature, the land and people, and they give thanks to something greater than themselves. This is the basic Japanese spirituality.

In the Kyoto area, where I live, shrines, temples, churches and a mosque coexist peacefully. This corresponds to the people's religious culture and life. The Japanese observe many rituals and events that are a part of tradition without realizing their religious significance. A number of rituals and festivals held each season and at various stages of one's life enhance a person's spiritual experiences. Along with Shinto and Buddhist religious traditions, Taoist and Confucian elements also play an important role in the choice of celebration.

An interesting way of articulating the Japanese religious life is expressed in the saying: A Japanese is born as a Shinto, may be married as a Christian, but die as a Buddhist. Japanese children visit Shinto shrines with their families on their third, fifth and seventh birthdays, give thanks for their good health and wish for longevity. People visit shrines to pray for success in an entrance exam, good fortune, road safety, a good marriage, an easy birth, etc. When they purchase a new house, or a new car, a Shinto priest is asked to give *oharai* (purification).

Christianity is regarded as a Western religion and has a fancy modern flavor. Therefore, many young people prefer to marry in a white

fluffy dress, in a Western-style church and with a foreign pastor with blue eyes. Yet, for the funeral, family bonds and tradition become vital. If a woman marries the eldest son of the family, she and her husband are the ones who have to take care of the family grave. Most Japanese families have their graves in the temple. In order to be buried with the family, one needs to take on the family's religion, which in most cases is Buddhism. Twice a year, summer and winter, people visit the family grave and venerate their ancestors. What is important is how religion is considered in people's daily lives.

For a Japanese Christian, the significant partners in religious dialogue are not the others "out there" but the others within themselves. Christians in Japan are considered to be a spiritually colonized people—colonized by Western religious thought and practices. They appear to turn their backs on their culture, their earlier religious faith, their sacred spirituality and on beliefs, which derive from what the Japanese call their "sacred land." If this were true, I would be deeply disturbed to be a Christian. But the point is that because Japanese religious life is characterized by a symbiosis of several religions, there is no clear distinction between your religion, my religion or our religion.

To be a religious person is quite different from following a religious way of life. As a religious pluralist, I believe God is for all, regardless of how we refer to God. God's love is deeper than we think, and God's salvific will is universal. Generally, people hold a religious faith not because they find their beliefs to be true in metaphysical terms, but because they feel that faith is indispensable for ordering their experiences and regulating their lives and they respect something greater than human beings. Therefore, every belief in the divine Reality is meaningful. We all are in relationship with the ultimate Reality.

The Religious Quest: Searching for New Values in China

Wang Guicai

In China today, like in most other countries, there is a religious revival. According to official statistics, more than 100 million Chinese are religious, but a recent poll by the East China Normal University in Shanghai shows that over thirty percent of the population above the age of sixteen—about 300 million people—are religious. The Chinese government has admitted that it has had to recognize the growing role religion plays in many people's lives.

It is my observation that because of the break between religious tradition and Chinese society, today's religious resurgence reflects a searching for new values. Today, such seeking occurs in a pluralistic religious environment that includes Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam and others.

Religion in China

In China, each religion has a long tradition. For nearly two thousand years, until the outbreak of the New Culture Movement during the early twentieth century, Confucianism had been the state religion, albeit controversially. With a shorter history, but no less vitality, Buddhism has also been deeply rooted in China since it was first transmitted from India. Taoism, an indigenous religion of China, has deeply influenced the Chinese mentality. Christianity and Islam were once "foreign religions," but have gained followers since the Ming and Qing dynasties respectively.

The development of all religions was disrupted by the Chinese Enlightenment Movement—the New Culture Movement—around the time of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. The New Culture Movement reevaluated traditional Chinese culture under the borrowed Western principles of democracy and science. This reevaluation branded all religions as superstitious, antiscientific and harmful. All religions were frustrated by this

movement. Confucianism was reduced from being a kind of state religion to an outdated relic of a feudal society. Other religions were considered full of superstitions, with Christianity being the worst: it was thought of as being imperialistic. The spirit of this New Culture Movement has influenced the Chinese people and continues to do so today.

Today's religious resurgence begins by recognizing such modern values as science, freedom and democracy, while retaining specific characteristics related to China's particular history and circumstances. Three sets of phenomena, connected respectively with Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism, can shed light on this.

The first is the reappearance of the ceremonies of heaven worship and worship of Confucius. Following its abolition at the end of the Confucian feudal dynasties, heaven worship is once again being celebrated during the traditional Spring Festival at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing since 2002. However, unlike the former formal ceremonies, today's celebrations are merely cultural performances and the participants (including the "emperor") are mere actors.

In contrast, the ceremony of worshipping Confucius was officially revived in 2004. In 2005, a global worship of Confucius was held and in 2006, mainland China and Taiwan held the ceremony together. A number of folk activities are connected with "the resurgence of Confucianism," such as the movement of children reciting Confucian classics. In the modern Chinese educational system, the traditional classics are only being studied and recited in very few places. In 2006, the scholar, Yu Dan, became famous, when she was invited to give seven lectures on *The Analects*[1] on the popular prime-time television program "The Lecture Room."

The second set of phenomena is related to the concept of "cultural Christians." Toward the end of the twentieth century, the Chinese scholar, Liu Xiaofeng, began using this term, which has subsequently been discussed by scholars of Chinese Christianity, especially outside China. The term cultural Christians is applied to a type of Christian who is either not baptized or does not belong to a church but claims a Christian identity because of a personal commitment to Christ and the Bible. Overall, cultural Christians are well-educated intellectuals and a number are scholars who study Christianity, but keep a distance from the church.

[1] *The Analects*, are commonly attributed to Confucius, but were actually written by his disciples.

Scholars have explored the reasons for and the nature of this type of Christianity, generally thought to be connected to the historical situation and *status quo* orientation of the churches in China. When Christianity was preached in China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Chinese regarded Christianity as a foreign religion cloaked in imperialist garb, and felt a certain antipathy toward it. After the Cultural Revolution, when the Communist government changed its policy toward religion, all religions in China regained their own space. Many scholars were attracted to a new, precious spirit in the Bible and the person of Christ, so much so that some committed themselves to this and claimed to be Christian. Nevertheless, the majority do not trust the church in general and the church in China in particular. Furthermore, they usually do not want to be publicly identified as Christians in light of the fact that officially atheism continues to prevail in China.

The third set of phenomena, connected to Buddhism, is the story of a young Buddhist monk recounting his temple stories on the Internet. On 27 April 2007, a young monk, Jie Chen (his name means abstaining from anger), began to tell his temple stories on the very popular BBS (Bulletin Board Systems). His austere stories are philosophical, and within a short time many people were absorbed by these stories, reading them daily. According to conservative statistics, at the beginning of 2008, over 100 million were reading the monk's stories. This monk is the most popular monk ever, and it is expected that his extremely popular writings will be published. All along, however, some have questioned his identity and intention behind writing on BBS.

Analyzing the growing interest in religion

People express a deep need for new values because the link with tradition has been broken. Although China is atheist *per se*, the Chinese people are very sensitive to religious values. When the Communist government introduced its policy of cultural and religious pluralism, different religions gradually revived, although not in their original or previous state.

There are many kinds of religious resurgence: of traditional religions, new religions and a mixture of the two. In each case, people are attracted by values that can guide their lives. Chen Xiaoxu, a former film star, when talking about her conversion to Buddhism once said, "such

a change originated from my reading of the traditional Chinese classics which teach a lot about how to be a human being." Ever more people believe that it is necessary to learn from the traditional classics in order to lead a happier life. They want to conserve the religious traditions of the past, and advocate for the resurgence of Confucianism.

Others think that the traditional classics are outdated and less persuasive because of their intrinsic connection to the former form of society. They seek new values, ones that seem more "modern." Many of them find that they are more satisfied with some foreign resources, such as Christianity, especially as Christianity is becoming ever more accessible in contemporary China. The modernists or liberals, among whom are the "cultural Christians," intend to introduce more modern, Westernized resources in order to modernize Chinese society.

Then there are those who are seeking a kind of synthesis as they explore how religious values, both traditional and modern, can be integrated. Many innovators within different religions fall into this category. Terrestrial Buddhism, originally advocated by Master Taixu, is now realized more fully by the eminent monk, Master Xingyun. He utilizes modern technology, such as television and the Internet, to instill in society humanist values that are open to the wider world. Terrestrial Buddhists establish their temples not only on mountains but also in cities. They establish many "buddhismized" schools, factories, banks and corporations and are actively involved in dialogues with different religions.

Seeking new values through religion is complicated because of China's special cultural, political and historical circumstances. One factor is the preoccupation with economic success and consumer ideology that pervades China and the rest of the world. People are suspicious of the intentions behind or motives for this religious resurgence. They refer to it as "economy performing on the arena established by culture." Some suspect that Confucian ceremonial worship is being recovered only to increase income from local tourism. Yu Dan's seven lectures on *The Analects* on CCTV were published. The book, which remains on bestseller lists, is a simply written, highly personal interpretation of *The Analects* with a somewhat unorthodox premise: that the purpose of Confucian thought is to tell us how to live a happy life in the modern world. The book has brought Yun Dan considerable revenue. Some suspect that the monk who is writing his stories on the Internet is merely advertising his yet unpublished book. Such mistrust casts a shadows on the resurgence of religion, but cannot blot out the genuine religious quest for new values,

which must be faced and responded to positively, or those seeking will feel misled and become discouraged.

The dynamic of seeking new values through religion is conditioned by China's cultural and historical burden. For example, cultural Christians emerged against the background of people trying to explore a new spiritual path devoid of the shortcomings of the old or traditional path. But they have not done this in a vacuum. They have grown up in Chinese society and have been nourished by a deep-rooted tradition from which they cannot separate themselves. They express their Chinese mentality in their special way of being Christian. For example, a humanist spirit is so ingrained in the Chinese mentality that cultural Christians tend to single out the cultural part that is closer to their hearts. The word "culture" in Chinese means something cultivated by human beings. Thus, cultural Christian has humanist implications. Since Christianity is a more complex reality, there is a tension between the cultural roots of Christianity and the "cultural" aspect to which cultural Christians are drawn. They must seek to resolve this tension by carefully examining all aspects of this. That is their calling at this point in history.

I have described and examined the religious resurgence in China today in terms of a seeking for new values. This is a complex dynamic with many different forms, resources and responses. It must be envisioned pluralistically and through concrete, practical actions in daily life.

Transforming Indignity and Violence: A Dalit Hermeneutical Approach

Suneel Bhanu Busi

Introduction

On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Indian independence, tribute was paid to India's remarkable achievements over the past six decades. We heard that India is an ancient civilization, the cradle of world religions, a land of religious tolerance where diverse religions and spiritualities co-existed in harmony. Furthermore, India is one of the greatest and largest democracies in the world, a proud member of the "nuclear club," a giant in developing software and one of the world's fastest growing economies. According to a political slogan, "India is shining" today.

Yet, alongside these notable achievements and developments are the painful existential realities of contemporary Indian society, such as the evil of caste discrimination and inequality resulting in untouchability and the tragic plight of the Dalits. This is accompanied by the growing phenomenon of religious resurgence that creates mutual suspicion, distrust and growing religious intolerance among the votaries of various living faiths, especially between Muslims and Hindus and Hindus and Christians.

Despite the fact that freedom of speech, expression and religion are enshrined in the constitution, there appears to be a notable indifference to the dreams and visions of modern India's founding fathers and mothers, who had envisioned a land where people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds live in dignity and freedom, in peace and harmony.

A cursory look at the lives of the cultural and religious minorities in general and the oppressed Dalits in particular reveals that for them nothing much has changed, despite the giant strides India has taken on the road to development. In recent years, violent confrontations between Dalits, who are trying to assert their basic human rights and human dignity, and the so-called caste forces are resulting in mounting

tension between the two groups. Sexual abuse and rape, physical and mental torture based on unfounded and false allegations, the burning of Dalit dwellings and destruction of their property, as well as depriving Dalits of work and access to public services are common. This leads to fear and hopelessness among the Dalit people.

The reality of caste in today's India

For the average Indian, religion is everything; every act and phase of life is seen as religious. Caste is the warp and woof of Indian religious, social and cultural contexts and, because it is a religiously sanctified and sanctioned institution, it cannot be defied.

The backbone of caste is the graded system of ritual purity and pollution with its consequent social hierarchy. The *caturvarna vyavastha* (the fourfold caste institution) is manifest and reflected in every aspect of Indian life. It has reduced a section of society, the Dalits (*Harijans*), to non-humans, whose very touch and shadow would pollute others. Hence, they are banned from entering temples and villages, are deprived of worshipping God and have strictly minimal interaction with upper caste people. Who would dare teach people who are considered polluted? Aware of the Dalits' capacity to learn, the legendary Hindu lawgiver, Manu, legislated that such Dalit aspirants' tongues be cut off and molten lead be poured into their ears. As a result, even today, a majority of Dalits are illiterate.

The tentacles of caste also reach into the economic sector. Dalits continue to carry out such physically polluting work as carrying soil on their heads, removing and skinning dead animals and sanitation work, as well as poorly remunerated agricultural labor. Poverty is their perpetual companion. Who or what will liberate them from such a tragic plight and empower them? Who or what can provide them with the needed impetus and solidarity to break the three-millennia-old shackles of caste?

Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism have brought the hope of liberation from caste. The *asprisyas* (untouchables) embraced Christianity and its proclamation that all human beings are created in the image of God and as such all are equal. In response to the liberating aspects of the gospel, a significant number of Dalits have and still are converting to Christianity. Some Dalits have converted to Neo-Buddhism or Ambedkarite Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism, but a large percentage have remained Hindu.

Today, because of the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and related political initiatives (e.g. anti-conversion legislation), conversions to Christianity or others religions are discouraged and force is used to prevent Dalits from converting to Christianity. Religious fundamentalists are devising innovative and violent methods, calling for *ghar vaapasi* (return to the original/ancestral faith), *suddhi* (purification) and politicizing religion in ways that obscure its transformative potential. The growing tentacles of the *Hindutva* ideology are encouraging and spreading hatred and animosity among outcaste groups.

While attention is focused on clashes between Hindus and Muslims on the border between India and Pakistan, secular India has become a breeding ground for religious fanatics and a safe haven for religious fundamentalists who are igniting communal clashes, such as the one on Christmas Eve 2007 in the Kandhamal district of Orissa. An unprovoked attack on Christians by Hindu fundamentalist forces (the Sangh Parivar) and the carnage which continued until 27 December resulted in several Christians' death, as well as the torching and destruction of at least five big parish churches and fifty smaller churches, six convents, three presbyteries, six hostels, two minor seminaries, one vocational training center and one leprosy center. Most of the Christians, including small children and babies, were forced to seek shelter from the frenzy of the marauding mobs in a nearby forest. The fact-finding team of India's Minority Commission concluded that the attack on the predominantly Adivasi and Dalit Christians had been planned by Hindu fundamentalist forces.

The Sangh Parivar's[1] strategy is to promote strong anti-Christian sentiments. They intimidate Dalit Christians and coerce them to revert to Hinduism. Atrocities committed in the name of religion are increasing and, in January 1999, right-wing Hindu fundamentalists trapped the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in their car and burnt them alive. Such activities and religious intolerance are seriously jeopardizing India's secular identity. Hindu fundamentalist groups accuse the church of forcing people, especially low caste and outcast communities, to embrace Christianity by offering various incentives, especially material benefits. They continuously spread the misinformation that the achievements and progress of Christian Dalits are at the cost of the Hindu Dalits.

[1] The Sangh Parivar (Family of Associations) refers to the family of Hindu organizations built around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Sangh Parivar organizations tend to promote Hindu nationalism and integral humanism. Some members of the Sangh Parivar also accept the Swadeshi ("self-reliance") philosophy.

In such a situation, one way of breaking the barriers erected by religious fundamentalists is to emphasize the role of hermeneutics in understanding cultural traditions and practicing religious faith, so as to empower people to resist fundamentalists.

The role of hermeneutics

Faith is a response to God's transforming experience, theology is the perception and articulation of that transforming experience, and hermeneutics is interpreting that theology in ways that reflect one's cultural and religious traditions, context and existential living conditions. Hermeneutics attempt to provide direction as people struggle to appropriate and internalize the liberating streams of religious traditions in their struggle for human dignity and freedom. Various kinds of hermeneutics are important in this process, such as historicocritical, existential, liberative, etc. However, the question that arises time and again is whether these models and approaches meet the challenges confronted by those struggling at various times and in different contexts. For example, George Soares-Prabhu argues that the historicocritical method is historically ineffective, theologically irrelevant and ideologically loaded. He reiterates this by saying that it obliterates the principles of indigenous methods.[2]

The richness and value of Indian hermeneutics are beyond dispute. For example, the *bhasyas* (commentaries) of Patanjali, Sabara, Vatsyayana, Prasastapada and Vyasa are highly acknowledged in scholarly circles. Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhvacarya, who developed their own philosophical treatises with distinct hermeneutical principles, are not only popular but also authoritative. The neo-Vedantins, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, introduced new ways of interpreting *Sruti* and *Smriti* literature[3] to meet the challenges and needs of modern socio-economic and political milieus. These diverse Indian interpretative methods and approaches provide valuable insights and guiding principles for Indian hermeneutics. Even the early Indian Christian theologians incorporated some of these hermeneutical principles when interpreting biblical texts.

[2] George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Towards an Indian Interpretation of Bible," in *Bible Bhashyam* (6.1), p. 158.

[3] The *Sruti* and the *Smriti* are the two authoritative sources of Hinduism. *Sruti* literally means what is heard, and *Smriti* means what is remembered. *Sruti* is revelation and *Smriti* is tradition.

Mutilated body and wounded psyche: A Dalit hermeneutical perspective

The question that remains is how far these hermeneutical approaches have helped the victims of caste in their struggle for human dignity, liberation and empowerment. Earlier Indian theological articulations as well as other hermeneutical endeavors have concentrated on concepts such as sin and salvation rather than on the victims' existential and concrete historical experiences. What could be appropriate and effective for the Dalits? Hermeneutics not only need to address the liberation of their souls but also liberation from a subservient dependency syndrome and society's dominant political, economic and cultural structures.

While in economic terms Dalits may be poor, in physical and mental terms they are rich. They may be considered socially backward, but are culturally progressive. They may be branded as religiously primitive, but their religious and spiritual vibrancy matches that of any sophisticated religion. As such, they have rich resources for interpreting Scriptures in relation to their social and religious contexts. The text needs to relate to people's lives in a practical manner. The roots (history), culture (subaltern traditions) and ideologies (hope and aspirations) of the discriminated against Dalits need to become the starting point of hermeneutics. As Sam P. Mathew succinctly puts it,

> the needs of the poor and the oppressed Dalits … must be placed at the head of the criteria of biblical interpretation in India. Their experience and questions must be the starting point for the interpretation of the Bible in the Indian context.[4]

In such a context, the experience of the Dalits' mutilated bodies and wounded psyches needs to become central, rather than text-sensitive hermeneutics. The interpretation of certain religious doctrines and dogmas has turned Dalits into "non-humans" and socioeconomic and political exploitation has deprived them of their human dignity. They are ritually impure, live in poverty, are deprived of any decision-making powers and brainwashed to accept their culture and social norms as being inferior, uncivilized and archaic. They are conditioned to serve the

[4] Sam P. Mathew, "Indian Biblical Hermeneutics: Methods and Principles," in *Neotestamentica*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2004), p. 117.

upper castes without raising any questions or objections. It is through utter subservience that they hope to reach the goal of liberation or salvation. They are a broken people. Hard labor, both as bonded laborers and traditional service providers, has left their physical bodies exhausted and mutilated. The slightest trace of disobedience or demanding their human rights invokes their master's wrath and can lead to the abuse of their wives and daughters, or the violation of their property. The inhuman treatment also wounds their psyche.

According to Hindu tradition, the only way out of this misery and pathos is the *karma-marga* (path of duties): do your duty sincerely and that will lead you to the *moksha* (release)—the ultimate release from the bondage (of ignorance/suffering) in the life after death. Even this is not guaranteed because of the *karma samsara*, the cycle of births and deaths. What is left for the Dalits is perpetual suffering. Therefore, for them life is meaningless because there is no hope of a new tomorrow. Everything in their world is hostile towards them. This hopeless situation, haunting them until death, is compounded by the onslaught of religious intolerance.

Any program for Dalit liberation and empowerment needs to include a specific agenda and strategy. As James Massey emphasizes, it is

> … to make them aware of the Dalit state into which they were forced; to heighten their awareness that their assigned inferior status was imposed on them by a man-made system and, not by their own fault or by divine creation; to raise their consciousness of being part of a casteless community based on a divinely established principle of equality; and to help them reject the mythical Brahmanical order which has perpetuated their captivity.[5]

Added to this is the challenge to defeat the strategy of religious fundamentalists who are creating a gulf among Dalits in terms of religious affiliations. A Dalit hermeneutical perspective is for the purpose of raising this consciousness.

Hermeneutics have for too long confined themselves to written texts, overlooking the oral religious and cultural traditions of illiterate peoples such as the Dalits. Such oral traditions were thought to be inferior and

[5] James Massey, *The Gospel According to Luke*, *Dalit Bible Commentary*, *New Testament*, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2007), p. 24.

therefore, as Maria Arulraja passionately argues, the first step is to recognize the primacy of the oral nature of Dalit traditions and to transmit the biblical texts to them as orally communicated narratives.[6] Secondly, the religiosity latent in Dalit culture needs to be brought into dialogue with the religiosity of the Bible. That is, the questions and issues that emerge out of their struggles and conflicts are brought into dialogue with the biblical texts.[7] Key here is to perceive and interpret God's Word in and through the Dalits' experience.[8] Their experiences and consciousness of marginalization become the point of departure.

These experiences are reflected in their myths, legends and folk stories, which are their social history or social biography. C. H. S. Moon rightly advocates the use of the people's social biography as an hermeneutical key to understand the reality of the marginalized or victims and the message of the Bible.[9] To explain this further, one example may be cited from the social history of the Dravidians, or today's Dalits.

An hermeneutical analysis of Onam

Onam, which means celebration, is the national festival of the Malayalees who live in the southern Indian state of Kerala. They claim their state as the "land of the gods" because of its beauty and serenity. Because history is recorded by the dominant group, "[n]one of the scholars of ancient Kerala took pains to compile genuine historical narratives or accounts recording the events and developments of each epoch of history in a regular chronological order."[10] Thus, the historical insights and richness of the marginalized are conveniently ignored.

For many, Onam is a Dravidian or pre-Dravidian (Dalit/Adivasi) festival. The celebration is linked to the beneficent rule of one of the kings of Kerala, Mahabali, during whose reign the land was blessed with

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[6] Maria Arulraja, "A Dialogue between Dalits and Bible," in *Journal of Dharma* (24.1), pp. 44–45

[7] Maria Arulraja, "Reading the Bible from a Location: Some Points for Interpretation," in *Voices from the Third World* (23.1), pp. 77, 79

[8] James Massey, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 12.

[9] C. H. S. Moon, *A Korean Minjung Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

[10] K. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society Ltd., 1970), p. 12.

successive years of good rains, resulting in plentiful harvests. The king was a wise, generous and self-sacrificing ruler who did his best for the welfare of the people. As a result, there was neither hunger nor poverty during his rule and no incidents of oppression, suppression, discrimination or marginalization. The celebration of Onam recalls the "golden age and righteous reign" of plenty and prosperity and the equality and harmony of diverse groups in society.

The onslaught of the Aryans and their rapid and systematic push into south India resulted in the Dravidian account of Onam being absorbed into Brahmanic/Sanskritic religious tradition. This was an active process of religious conquest and domination. Hidden behind the transformed legend is the story of the Brahmanic tradition's struggle to conquer and dominate the Dravidic hope and aspiration for equality and human dignity.[11] According to the transformed legend, in the battle between the *suras* (gods/Aryans) and the *asuras* (demons/Dravidians/Dalits) for the possession of *amrita* (nectar of eternal life/the fertile land of plenty and prosperity) the demons were cheated and defeated by *devas* (gods). As a consequence, by performing sacrifice and severe penance, Mahabali, the king of the *asuras*, not only regained his powers and prowess but also became invincible. With his newly acquired skills, he conquered all three worlds—heaven, earth and the sky. Consequently, the gods lost their abodes and in their helplessness turned to Lord Vishnu for protection and the restoration of their privileges and properties. In order to help the gods, Vishnu took the *avatara* (human incarnation) of Vamana, the dwarf. Vamana approached King Mahabali and asked for the gift of being able to cross over in three steps. Once the generous Mahabali had granted this, the dwarf immediately assumed his *viswarupa* (the universe-pervading form) and with one step strode over heaven, with the second over the earth and with the third sent Mahabali to *patala* (the nether world). Thus, Mahabali, a good, righteous and generous king, was transformed into a proud, egoistic and power-hungry demon.

The Sanskrit version of this legend sees it as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, with good ultimately being victorious. In fact, good conquering evil is the essential theme and explains the multiple manifestations/*avatars* of Vishnu (a principle Hindu deity).

[11] For more details and different versions of the legends of Onam, see Chaman Lal (ed.), *Spiritual Stories of India* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of I&B, Government of India, 1968), pp. 45–50; W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1973), pp. 155–162.

However, as Padmanabha Menon rightly remarks, "… the popular outcry consequent upon Mahabali's deposition was so great that the former ruler was eventually allowed to return to earth once a year."[12] The period of Mahabali's visit to his people is the celebration of Onam, in the month of Chingam (August-September). In Kerala, the rains usually cease by early September. Nature is rejuvenated, flowers are in full blossom, trees and fields are bearing fruit. Mahabali's visit coincides with the first harvest. This reflects people's yearning for a peaceful and prosperous society, one based on freedom, plenty, equality and justice, where people can live as human beings with dignity and self-respect, caring for and sharing their resources with one another. In essence, the Dravidian version of Onam highlights the concern for the welfare of all (*sarvodaya)*, which includes the well-being of those who are the least (*antyodaya)*. This emphasizes the equality of all and the harmony between humans and with the rest of nature.

Conclusion

A critical understanding of this legend is of paramount importance to the marginalized—both Christian and non-Christian Dalits—in the contexts of growing religious fundamentalism and their struggle for liberation and empowerment. Such a liberation hermeneutics rejects any neutral reading of texts, legends or myths. It is from this perspective, that Dalits can move forward in their search and quest for liberation, empowerment, dignity, equality and humanhood. Liberative, empowering resources are needed to confront that which challenges their very existence as human beings in daily life. They do not yearn for historical truths but implicitly prophetic meanings, which offer them the needed courage and confidence to confront what stands in their way and brings about the needed social, economic and political changes in society.

In this process, the texts and legends that hold them back need to be deconstructed. In the legend analyzed above, it is apparent how this was misinterpreted in terms of good against evil for the benefit of the dominant group. Ordinary people are sacrificed on the altar of religious

[12] K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, vol. 4 (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1986), p. 294.

resurgence and fundamentalism and, in the name of religious differences, they are turned into adversaries and their unity downplayed.

Onam emphasizes the reign of peace and prosperity and the welfare of all people irrespective of color and creed. Living in religious and social harmony is of paramount importance both to the ruler and the subjects. Both Hindus and Christians celebrate Onam; the reading of the Scriptures or legends is never an academic exercise, but rather a practical quest for liberation. As such, a new reading and understanding could lead to cooperation when addressing issues that plague and divide people and defeating the schemes and strategies of religious fundamentalists.

Onam is a celebration of rejoicing over good rains, the promising signs of an abundant harvest and the hopeful expectations of the people for a plentiful and prosperous year. In other words, it is "… intended for soliciting from the gods a happy and fruitful year."[13] Because they are predominantly agricultural laborers, the ecological consciousness that flows through Dalit people brings out the need for restoring the relationships between the divine and human beings, between human beings and creation and between the votaries of different religious traditions. The cosmic Dalit worldview can anchor and lead the way toward a new tomorrow—of peace, prosperity, equality, dignity, humanhood and religious harmony.

Finally, Onam reflects the human quest for identity and self-esteem. While the Sanskritization of the legend denies Dalits their human status, the reenactment of Mahabali's reign, as well as the rereading and reinterpretation of Onam from the Dalits' perspective, restores the *imago Dei* as an aspect of the *missio Dei*. In other words, bringing together the image and the mission of God to restore people's dignity is the essence of an empowering Dalit hermeneutical perspective.

[13] L. A. Krishan Iyer, *Social History of Kerala*, vol. II (Madras: Book Centre Publications, 1970), p. 123.

"God like Whitefella more Better I Reckon"

Basil Schild

In 1877, Lutherans began missionary work in the western desert of Central Australia. Today, in the midst of a suffering people, there is an Indigenous Lutheran church. Before it closed in 1982, the Lutheran Mission, centered around Hermannsburg/Ntaria, had a proud and respected history. It was venerated by Indigenous people as a place of protection, sanctuary and support for those suffering under the impact of colonization. The mission's Indigenous evangelists proclaimed the love of God for all people. Today, sixteen Indigenous pastors regularly celebrate the sacraments for 5,000 Indigenous members in six different desert languages. These congregations are seen by Indigenous people as a place where they stand in the presence of God together with non-Indigenous Christians, where there is "one family, God's family."

But, returning from a funeral in 2006, an Indigenous Lutheran pastor said to me softly, "God like whitefella[1] more better I reckon." If such a statement represented the viewpoint of the entire Indigenous church it would indicate the failure of the Lutheran project. I shall reflect on the implications of this statement for the task of Lutheran theology in the deserts of Central Australia.

"Whitefella" vs "Blackfella"

After being ordained in 2000, the pastor who spoke these words lived in an old car wreck for three years. Other Anmatyerre Lutheran pastors also live in car wrecks and "humpy houses"—houses made out of discarded iron scraps and tree branches. This reflects both the enormous housing shortage facing Indigenous communities and a simpler way of life. The pastors have never complained about their living conditions. Many of their extended families live in the same circumstances.

[1] Fella = people

This pastor is a first generation Christian, as are possibly one third of central Australian Indigenous Lutherans. Other tribal groups, closer to the original mission, were evangelized three or even four generations ago.

Every trimester, theological training is conducted outdoors on the desert floor. The theological college in Adelaide requires a high degree of fluency in written and spoken English. However, the majority of Indigenous Lutherans do not read or write and speak only limited English. For most desert people, English is their fourth language. Thus, theological courses are conducted at "bush camps"—a lecturer flies in from Adelaide and a translator comes out from Alice Springs.

Indigenous pastoral students learn to read the Bible in their first language. However, the whole of the Bible has not been translated. After 130 years of missionary work, most of the Old Testament, apart from portions of Genesis and Exodus and a small selection of other pericopes, have not yet been translated.

A significant number of Indigenous people continue to embrace their ancestors' culture, beliefs and traditions. The last superintendent of the Ntaria Mission surmised that all Indigenous males, including the Indigenous Lutheran pastors, had undergone full traditional initiation during the century of mission work.

Daily, Indigenous pastors and congregations face the challenge of how to fit the "new stories" into the old ways of meaning and being. Traditional culture forms the bed into which new stories are placed, including the stories of the New Testament. Traditional culture also remains the filter through which Lutheranism is accessed and interpreted. In most bush communities, the traditional culture has not been overthrown by the new stories but continues to sit side by side with these more recent stories.

Traditional desert culture has significant rituals devoted to the fertility of the land. Such "increase ceremonies" for plant and animal life are celebrated to ensure the continued provision of food and water. These rituals seek material and physical well-being. This is also key in how aboriginal Christians interpret and understand the rituals of the church. Will the new ritual assist in bringing material well-being? Why would anyone bother with the ritual if it were not so? Is not material well-being one of the key purposes of religious ritual?

Thus, when Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christians appear to be materially blessed in such vastly unequal ways, even though both are performing exactly the same rituals, difficult theological questions

emerge in the minds of Indigenous people. One such answer is, "God like whitefella more better I reckon."

Poverty amidst wealth

In central Australia, Indigenous Christians do not have to look far to see evidence of God's "unequal blessing." The main town in the desert area (Alice Springs) is home to a large "whitefella" population who share none of the tragic living circumstances of the surrounding bush communities.

Statistics on impoverishment, mortality and suffering among the Indigenous people of Central Australia are similar to those of the poorest communities in the world. Caught between two radically opposite cultures, alcohol and passivity have become the preferred means of coping. Traditional frameworks of law have collapsed and health problems are endemic. The life expectancy of Indigenous central desert people is thirty years below the rest of the Australian population.

Violence and abuse within Indigenous communities have reached record levels. Alice Springs has become the murder capital of Australia, with the highest rate of stabbings (per capita) in the world. Indigenous mothers are the majority of those murdered—most often by their partners.

Hospitals and prisons are full. While Indigenous people now form only forty percent of the central desert population they account for ninety-five percent of admissions to these institutions.

Most Indigenous people live in inadequate shelter: in "humpy houses" built from scrap, in the dry river bed, or in dwellings built for five but providing shelter for twenty.

If religious ritual is seen as a way of obtaining material blessing then one can well understand that after 130 years of participating in Christian rituals the cry, "God like whitefella more better I reckon," is being voiced.

The opposite of liberation

In this soft cry is voiced a theology that is almost the exact opposite of a liberation theology that proclaims God's prophetic concern for the well-being of those suffering oppression. Here, in the deserts of Australia, God is not seen as being on the side of the poor but as favoring the

"whitefellas," that is, in effect, the rich and ruling class. God is not seen as one who suffers with the poor. But what kind of a theology is that?

Certainly in the eyes of at least this Indigenous pastor the "spiritual economy" is one in which Indigenous people see themselves as second-class citizens, just as they are in the mainstream economy. What has happened? After 130 years of Lutheran work in the desert, how have we reached this point? What has brought us to this? What comes now? What should we learn from this? Behind the pastor's statement lies this kind of logic: faith brings material blessing. White people are materially blessed. Both Indigenous and white people have faith. Indigenous people are not materially blessed. Therefore God must favor white people.

It is not that God has a problem with black people or that black people have done something wrong. Rather the problem of unequal blessing is placed directly at God's feet: God is held responsible for the lack of equality, which is seen as the result of God favoring one people over and against another. This statement was not made by a pastor influenced by Pentecostal theology, or focused on God's vengeance, but someone who knew well that God also seeks to forgive people. Thus, the absence of material blessing is not due to punishment or lack of forgiveness. Instead, God must just like white people "more better."

It is not "the system" that is put in the dock, or even "whitefellas," but God. The statement touches the question of theodicy—what kind of a god is God? A god who is good? A god of justice? Or a god who takes sides, even the side of the conqueror? The statement is bold. It is one thing to question the justice of the system, another to question God' justice.

Mission and colonization

Obviously, a god who arrives along with white colonization, the subsequent theft of land and the ongoing destruction of Indigenous people is going to have a public relations problem. That Indigenous people have not viewed God consistently as taking the side of the oppressor and as favoring the "white man" is a tribute to the work of the early missionaries, who proclaimed the opposite. Yet, their decision not to translate the Old Testament may have directly contributed to the questioning today of the earlier proclamation in support of the oppressed.

The Indigenous Lutheran church is essentially a church without the Old Testament. The pastor's statement is in essence Job's cry: is God

good or is God my enemy? Yet the Old Testament book of Job is unknown to Indigenous Lutherans, as is the overall biblical witness to God's overwhelming love and concern for those who live in poverty and under oppression. Almost none of the prophetic books have been translated. Lacking a sense of connection with the cries in the Old Testament, the pastor's bold statement carries the despair felt by so many Indigenous people. If God is not on your side, what can you do? If God, like the government, like industry, like the law, like history, simply favors white people, where can you turn?

Theology under colonization

The early missionaries faced a challenge: how to preach of a God of love and concern to a people who were experiencing the invasion of their lands. For many Indigenous people, the church represented the only positive picture of the white man's world amid a multitude of negative experiences. The missionaries taught of a God who would forgive all people, unite all people as one spiritual body and lead them to a better life in the world to come. In the face of the destruction of the Indigenous way of life in the present world, many placed their hope in the promise of a better life in the future.

Despite decades of teaching and evangelization, many Indigenous Lutherans remain unaware of God's deep concern for the well-being of the poor in this present life. In line with the conservative Lutheran tendency to spiritualize the concerns of God's kingdom, there does not appear to have been a focus on the body of Christ being made visible in the present. The pastor's statement may be a critique of this position. "God like whitefella more better I reckon" could be a way of saying that, in fact, the church "likes whitefella more better I reckon." They have long been aware of the ways in which their white brothers and sisters in Christ appear to have access to greater resources. Indigenous Lutheran pastors have pointed to perceived disparities in the way in which black and white pastors and church members are supported by church leaders. At times, Indigenous Lutherans have issued calls to their non-Indigenous sisters and brothers to make real the fact that "we are one family, God's family." Our unity in Christ is far from being visible across the race divide in Central Australia.

Within faith communities, the Indigenous people's suffering is salved only by a focus on the life to come. It appears that no teaching regarding

God's solidarity in suffering with people in the present has taken root. The incarnational suffering of God, the theology of the cross and the way God joins to us in our ongoing struggle have not been emphasized through the Lutheran mission. God's concern for social justice, as in the prophetic writings, has not been heard. While early missionaries did engage with the government to secure the mission lands as a sanctuary for a people facing oppression during the first decades of colonization, there appears to have been no further teaching regarding God's concern for justice and equity. Thus, Indigenous Lutheran spirituality is almost entirely otherworldly, escapist, passive and disempowering.

Therefore, we need to ask to what extent Lutheran mission theology has failed to proclaim a God who suffers with the poor and oppressed, with concern for justice and the unity of the body of Christ across racial divides.

A way forward

The brutally honest, independent theology reflected in the Indigenous pastor's statement needs to be encouraged. There needs to be genuine grassroots reflection across all the issues and questions facing Indigenous desert peoples. Job's struggle with God and with perceived orthodoxy should be modeled as the basis for the construction of a genuine Indigenous spirituality and theology.

The books of the Old Testament should be translated. The suffering of the Incarnate God and the presence of God amid people's suffering should be intentionally proclaimed. Much in Martin Luther's writings highlights God's concern for the well-being of the poor.[1] While Luther did not have our contemporary understanding of social equality, he had a sense of the need to defend the poor and be in solidarity with them.

Much of the suffering Indigenous communities experience today is a result of the destruction of their previous vocation as hunter/gatherers.

[1] For example, God takes the side of the poor (cf. *LW* 12:336 on Ps 51: 3; *LW* 14:276 on Ps 109:31). God regards the despised and humble (*LW* 5:316 on Gen 29:32). Christ is living in the poor and despised (*LW* 10:190 on Ps 41). A mark of his kingdom is that it contains poor, crying, praying people (*LW* 14 :184 on Ps 102:17), the insignificant, the faint-hearted, the harassed, the lowly, the fearful (*LW* 16:121 on Is 11:3). Feeding the poor is feeding Christ (*LW* 22:520). Christ is the guardian and leader of all who labor and are oppressed in the world (*LW* 6:311 on Gen 36:43). Wherever the church is, there must be poor people; most of the time they are the only true disciples of the gospel (*LW* 26:105 on Gal 2:10). You should break all laws rather than see your brother (sister) suffer want or affliction (*LW* 51:106). (*LW* = *Luther's Works*, *American Edition*.)

Here, Luther's teaching on vocation and his observation that all have a role to play in the social economy is helpful.

Beyond this context

While the cry of the Anmatyerre Pastor that "God like whitefella more better I reckon" may be unique to central Australia, similar questions arise in other contexts. For example: God like men more better than women I reckon; God like Christians more better than non-Christians I reckon; God like straight people more better I reckon; God like Protestants more better I reckon; God like Westerners more better I reckon; God like Muslims more better I reckon; God like Pentecostals more better I reckon; God like good people more better I reckon.

At its heart, Lutheran theology has always been a direct protest against any of these "more better theologies" (more works, more favor, more blessings). To all these, Luther said no, God's favor is not dependent on who you are and what you have done but on who Christ is and what he has done. Through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, "God likes all people more better I reckon."

Blessings in Daily Life[1]

Basil Schild and Karen L. Bloomquist

Questions such as the following can become starting points for reframing or reconfiguring theological discussions that connect with people's real concerns:

- Why do people desire or pray for material and other blessings?
- Why do some receive blessings and not I? Why does God not act in my world in tangible ways?
- Why are many attracted to churches and preachers who assure them that God will bless them with material benefits?
- What do Lutheran churches have to say that is different from prosperity churches?
- How should blessings be understood theologically?

Understood in biblical terms, "blessing" encompasses a full range of human experiences of well-being: physical, emotional, spiritual, familial, social, communal, political, etc. It could include relief from poverty, healing from illness and success in personal or family life. Many believe that such blessing will come to them supernaturally—if only they have enough faith and pray diligently for such. In many different contexts, the desire and expectation prevail that having faith will result in material blessing.

However, from a Lutheran perspective, blessing is not a reward for faith. It is freely given by God through creation to all. Blessing is an expression of God's grace. Grace is a whole process, not just a moment. Grace makes us reach out to others, in freedom and responsibility. More theological attention needs to be given to the relationship between grace and blessings in daily life. Because a Lutheran theology of grace is not really what people associate with their daily lives, they often turn to charismatic and other movements, seeking material blessings there.

In the first article of the creed, we confess God to be Creator of all that is in the sky and on earth. In Genesis, we hear of the goodness of what God has made. In his explanation of this article, Luther did not

[1] Reflections based on the group work at the TLC seminar, Hong Kong, January 2008. The shaded boxes are examples or comments from members of the group.

meditate on the origin of creation but on the reception of the blessing of creation in the present. Luther understands that the blessings given to the earth are to be accessed by every generation.

The Scriptures describe the blessings that God provides through land and sky, water, trees and hills, animals, fruit, corn, oil and wine and family. The blessings of creation are meant for all: "for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). God desires blessings to permeate the whole community. Instead of being individualistic, blessings are intended to be participatory and relational.

A young girl had prayed hard that it would not rain for a special event in her life. Despite her prayers, it rained. Rather than asking why God had not responded to her individual prayer, the girl instead recognized that at least the farmers were glad for the rain.

Why are blessings so important to people? Because people want to name or bring God into their daily lives. This helps take away the fear of the curses and evil that surrounds them.

The desire for material blessing is experienced most urgently in communities suffering poverty and sickness. The church, convinced that Christ is present in such marginalized and impoverished communities, cannot by its silence imply that God is not interested in their material reality. We must insist that God does not want to keep people in poverty; living in misery is not God's will.

When those who suffer are taught falsely that faith is a means to material blessing, not only must they contend with an absence of the expected blessing, but also an absence of grace. When our material well-being and relationship to God are made dependent on what faith is able to bring forth, then faith has become an achievement or work. What is lost is Luther's insistence that our relationship to God is based on sheer grace and not on what we do. The call to have greater faith in order to receive greater material blessing is betrayed for those who continue to live in suffering and poverty. The essential understanding of grace as proclaimed by the Reformation is lost.

God is interested in material blessing, but it does not come to us because of our faith. The blessing is not conditional. Instead, God wants us to participate in the realization of these blessings. Often those living

in misery can do a lot to change their situation, rather than just waiting for help. What God does and what human beings do—divine and human agency—are interrelated. Rather than passively waiting for God's blessing to "drop from the sky," we are called to work to implement God's blessing in our societies, communities and families.

When I went to visit a very sick, formally very active, church leader in a crowded, poor church compound, we passed by a brand-new, flashy church with a very ostentatious name. It looked out of place in that very poor neighborhood and I asked myself, If I were a resident here, which of the two would I regard as a sign of God's blessings? The one that was as dilapidated as every other house in the neighborhood, or the other one that promises change and hope?

God's blessing must not be viewed in individualistic, miraculous terms but as realized in and through community. God does not bless me alone, but calls me to responsibility. The focus is on how we bring blessings to others. The blessing permeates the whole community. It is participatory and relational, and distributed for the sake of all. Thus, the question becomes not, What must I do to receive blessing? but, How do we bring blessing to others?

When blessings are blocked

Blessings are blocked if we take too much of what should be shared with the neighbor. God wants to bless people, but human beings violate this by stopping the blessing or by not working for all to realize or enjoy the blessing.

One example of this is the story of the fig tree in the gospels (Mk 11: 12–14, 20–24 and Mt 21:18–22). Although the fig tree was usually associated with God's blessing, in this account, Jesus curses a non-productive fig tree and it withers, signifying God judging or withholding life-giving blessing from an elite-controlled system that causes so much misery for the people.[2]

Through our actions, such as human activity that contributes to climate change, we can stop God's blessing of rain. The blessing is in the land and the sky, but it is being stopped or impeded by what human beings are doing.

[2] Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament (*Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), p. 51.

Martin Luther not only had overwhelming concern for those shut out from what might be thought of as God's spiritual blessing (forgiveness, mercy, compassion) but also for those shut out from God's material blessing. Thus, he strongly objected to certain practices of trade and usury that exploited and impoverished people. He clearly realized that blessing could be blocked, stolen, derailed, overturned, killed off, burned down and destroyed. This can occur because of individual irresponsibility, greed and laziness, as well as through political and economic structures and practices.

Such "blessing-blocking" forces are visible in our societies. When governments become corrupt or selfish or serve only some interests in society, then the earth's blessings are available only to a few. When selfishness, greed and laziness take root in communities and in the lives of individuals, then the blessings of creation are put in jeopardy. If we destroy the forest, God's blessing of rain may be jeopardized. If we abuse others, or ourselves, God's blessing of social and family harmony will be derailed. Many of the world's poor are victims of the systematic blocking of blessing. Many experience God's creation not as blessing but as suffering and a curse.

Government often is key in whether the blessings get through. In Luther's understanding of how blessings are to be shared and distributed, he points to the important role of government as a provider, distributor and agent of God's blessing. Legal and governmental systems as well as families or local communities are to be good stewards of the blessings of creation. They are to assure that blessings are fairly distributed. These agents need not be Christian.

Many belief systems of tribal and other religions have rituals and codes prescribing the good governance of their respective societies. For example, Indigenous Lutheran pastors in central Australia talk of having "two-laws": *alkirinya* and *anarinya*—one from the sky and one from the ground—but both are from God. The "law from the sky" refers to Christian wisdom and teaching, the "law from the ground" refers to the wisdom and teaching of the ancestors.

The observation that both laws are necessary for our well-being and that both are from God is analogous to Luther's insight that God works through explicitly Christian as well as other means. A popular song in Indigenous Australia is entitled, "Jesus can you mend this broken song." This contemporary song not only refers to the Christian faith, but also to traditional wisdom and guidance necessary for the survival of Indigenous communities. Some of the law and wisdom contained in the old songs have been destroyed by fundamentalist and Pentecostal Christianity that leaves no room for traditional law and culture or for God's two ways of working in the world.

Can the blessings of God's creation be understood to come to us also through the spirits of the ancestors, as understood within many tribal traditions? Are the offering of thanks to ancestral spirits and the offering of thanks to God mutually exclusive? Can ancestor spirits be seen as conduits of God's blessing? If a company director is thanked when his/her good stewardship and governance enables a community to access and share further in material well-being, why within a different context might ancestor spirits not also receive thanks? In some communities, God is understood to work with and through the power of totemic spirits, who are viewed by contemporary Indigenous Christians as also having been created by God.

Blessings come to us through human beings

Created in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27), human creatures are designated by God to be cocreators within creation, generators and channels of God's original blessing. Throughout history, human beings have been able to bring blessing to one another; from the blessing that comes to a child through its mother's breast, to scientific discoveries that save the lives of millions. In this sense, humankind and all of creation are harnessed, employed and directed by God to be creative agents for blessing. A blessing is not only passively received and enjoyed but requires the active engagement of humanity in nurturing and passing on the blessing to others.

At God's invitation, humankind and the rest of creation are involved in unfolding and enacting God's blessing of creation, including for the future well-being of the earth. As the blessing of creation is mediated by human life and behavior, so the blessing of creation can be harmed and distorted via human greed and injustice.

How do we build communities that can see God's blessings? Through actions of a just and compassionate society, the blessings given through creation are shared with those who are in need, rather than being hoarded or kept from the people because of corrupt systems and practices.

The blessing of divine solidarity

Christianity proclaims a God who is the victim of abuse, lack of compassion and a corrupt justice system. The God we know in Jesus is denied the blessing and instead is tortured to death. This God has an intimate under-

standing of what it is to experience the blocking of blessing. God is both in intimate solidarity with the suffering of the poor and deeply offended by their ongoing suffering and the way in which blessing is blocked for them. God's response to the ongoing suffering of so many is not just an outrage voiced by the prophets but it is felt and declared via the ultimate act of solidarity: as God himself is executed and abandoned, God's outrage is voiced not just from heaven but in God's own embodied suffering.

Through that divine suffering God's new creation is proclaimed, the blessing of divine forgiveness, a blessing with the power to break cycles of vengeance, greed, guilt, denial and fear. And so, when the suffering Son talks of blessing, it is with an altogether different emphasis from those preachers who talk of blessing as material reward. Instead, it is the blessing of the human-divine relationship, of human-divine solidarity in, through and under the struggle of our life.

> Blessed are the poor in spirit …
> Blessed are those who mourn …
> Blessed are those who are meek …
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness …
> Blessed are the merciful …
> Blessed are the pure in heart …
> Blessed are the peacemakers …
> Blessed are those who are persecuted … (Mt 5:1-10).

Giving thanks for blessings

Thanksgiving is often based on what I have achieved and for which I give money, rather than in terms of how God is involved in my life.

There are many passages in Scripture that refer positively to material blessings in the lives of the faithful. But material success is sometimes attributed in Scripture to other sources: "… I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek" (Ps 73:3–4). Proverbs 30:8 proffers caution, "… feed me with the food that I need or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?'" Furthermore, blessings are usually ambiguous. The anti-blessings (curses) also come out of the earth.

Can we thank God for our well-being while others remain trapped in misfortune? How can we rejoice in the face of others' misery? In the

face of what people have not done to help the poor? Can we be happy and enjoy life when so many others are suffering? How do we know our "good fortune" is from God?

Should I thank God for what and how I am at the moment, so different from those I grew up with, or should I feel guilty? Should I sell everything I have and donate my savings in order to be like my relatives back home? Should I blame the "system"? Have I actually been part of the oppressive system, for which I should repent?

The affluent North condemns moralism in the South, but falls into another trap of moralism by dwelling on what they should do but fail to do for the poor.

I refuse to join in prayers intended to evoke guilt that basically say, "Lord, I am sorry that I am so rich." People are given not comfort but more baggage.

It is hard to rejoice if you realize the blessing is not getting through to many, including in the church.

How do I know my food is God's blessing and not from the devil? Might the lack of food also be reinterpreted as a blessing? How can we talk about material blessing without a sense of our identity being in terms of what we have?

Material blessing becomes a blessing only when it is shared, otherwise it will be a curse. Too much material well-being is not a blessing at all—it will be a curse like obesity is for many today in the developed world. If material well-being comes without spiritual wisdom then it is not a blessing.

A theology of the body of Christ means we cannot separate ourselves from others. It is the church's task to work on getting the blessings through to others. Joy emerges from being connected with what is real, even if in pain. The church is called to lift its voice and prophetically proclaim the need for systems, governments and individuals to steward the blessing of creation in ways such that material well-being may be accessed by all.

Thus, we will offer praise and thanksgiving:

When our good fortune does not come at the expense of others
When communities together are able to access well-being
When material good fortune is shared with others
When governments provide good and fair stewardship of the blessing of land, country and resources
When the forces of greed and corruption and blocked blessings are overcome.

After Death?[1]

Hans-Peter Grosshans

What will happen to us after we die? How will we participate in salvation after death? Questions such as these face Lutheran churches throughout the world and are especially provoked by what other Christians and those of other faiths believe and teach about these matters.

The Christian belief in the resurrection from the dead and eternal life in the presence of God raises many questions that have implications for our understanding of human life (anthropology), for life on earth and for cosmology and metaphysics.

For example, one of the frequently asked questions is, Where are the souls of those who have died? Many Lutheran churches are faced with the practice of people communicating with the spirits of the dead, especially their dead ancestors.[2] It is supposed that the souls of the deceased are somewhere between earth and heaven, not yet having reached heaven. Therefore, in a certain sense, they are still around. How should we as Christians relate to such beliefs and related practices? Do the beliefs involved in such practices really correspond to the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life? How should Lutheran Christians envision the whole realm of life after death?

Many different, even contradictory images and models about life after death and final salvation have been put forward throughout the history of the church. In part, this diversity, with conflicting models, images and beliefs, is rooted in the Bible. It may be helpful to look at these concepts in the New Testament and to consider various models in church history and theology which have tried to make sense of this diversity.

In Christianity, there have been rich and differentiated understandings of what human beings can expect and hope for after death. The very structure of the Christian faith and theology is eschatological and based on the New Testament witness. Jesus affirmed his belief in the resurrection from the dead, contrary to the Sadducees according

[1] Reflections based on the group work at the TLC seminar, Hong Kong, January 2008.

[2] On these question, see Ingo Wulfhorst (ed.), *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church. LWF Studies 01/2005* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005); Ingo Wulfhorst (ed.), *Spirits, Ancestors and Healing: A Global Challenge to the Church. A Resource for Discussion* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2006).

to whom there was no resurrection (see Mt 22:23ff.; Mk 12:18ff.; Lk 20:27ff.). For Jesus, this belief was founded in God, who is "not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Mt 22:32; Mk 12:27; Lk 20:38). After Jesus' brutal death, the overwhelming experience of the appearance of the crucified Jesus before his disciples revealed that God had raised him from the dead (see Acts 2:24; 2:32, 3:15; 4:10 etc.). "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30). We find similar statements in Paul. This belief that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead was then generalized into an action characteristic of God—to "raise the dead." The God in whom Christians believe is a "God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9), leading to the expectation that God will raise everyone from death, "because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (2 Cor 4:14).

The theologian Paul centered the Christian faith on the hope in the resurrection of the dead. "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised" (1 Cor 15:13). If Christians ignore this hope, then, for Paul, they put into doubt that God raised Jesus from the dead and that God is a God of the living.

How does this resurrection from the dead take place? What is the resurrected life like? We come across different visions and models in the New Testament, for example in the eschatological reflections of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17

> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

In this case, the resurrection from the dead is clearly combined with Jesus Christ's second coming (*parousia*). The dead are envisaged as being asleep and there is no hint of death as a separation of the soul

from the body. The dead are sleeping, and with Christ's *parousia* they will be awakened and taken away with those who are still alive. Within the confines of human imagination, the text uses "in the air" to indicate that the form of life after the *parousia* is beyond the limits of what we, as earthy creatures, can know.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul discusses how the dead are raised and with what kind of body. Again the resurrection of the dead is combined with the second coming, but Paul tries to avoid the imagery used in the text above and rather uses the central concept of "change."

> Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Cor 15:5–52).

Clearly, this kind of resurrection is not like Lazarus' resurrection (see Jn 11). When we die, we are not preserved so that we can be activated again in the resurrection. Paul prefers to talk about a change in or transformation of our body and with that, how we are present to ourselves, to others and to God. "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44). This is how Paul answers those who wonder what the resurrection of the body will look like: we will exist as spiritual bodies. As such we are recognizable to ourselves, to others and to God, but no longer bound to the natural and metaphysical limits of earthly human existence. Instead, as spiritual bodies, human beings are prepared for living forever with the Triune God.

In the New Testament, we also find the idea that after death human beings, especially believers, do not have to wait for the *parousia* but are with God immediately after death. For example, we find this in John and in some of Paul's remarks. Luke's depiction of Jesus' crucifixion is especially impressive, where Jesus promises one of the two criminals crucified with him that "[t]ruly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). The idea, based on death as the separation of body and soul, was that immediately after death a person's soul would be in paradise with Jesus Christ.

Being identifiable as spiritual bodies, which are somehow related to our earthly life, is an essential element in the later biblical notion of a Last Judgment, in which Jesus Christ is the judge. Resurrection

is clearly linked to the idea of a Last Judgment. Consider, for example, Romans 14:9–12:

> For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

In this respect, the imagery in Matthew 25:31ff., in which the Son of Man comes in glory and will sit on his throne in heavenly glory, is striking. Like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, Jesus Christ is depicted as separating people according to what they have done in their earthly lives. The threat of suffering forever in hell is especially palpable in the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31). This vision of judgment expresses the Christian faith's strong commitment to justice, as lived out by human beings in the present and finally realized by Jesus Christ. The risen crucified Christ represents the law, as he identifies, judges and makes the final sentence against injustices.

Again, the New Testament imagery and concepts vary. In some texts, the Final Judgment follows immediately after the naming of injustice, while other texts suggest that this sentencing will occur at the Final Judgment. Christ does not relate to human beings in different ways but gives himself for the sin of all. In this sense, no one can be sentenced to everlasting death, because that would contradict Jesus giving himself for the sin of the whole world.

Various eschatological models have tried systemically to account for the realm beyond this earthly life. In Lutheran theology, six topics have traditionally been distinguished: eschatology, death, resurrection, the fulfillment or destruction of the world, the Last Judgment, eternal life and/or condemnation. While throughout the world churches have generally believed that in death, body and soul are separated, the body disintegrates and the soul continues living, questions are also being asked about how the life of the soul continues.

As expressed in the creed, there is a clear expectation of the resurrection of the body, which would once again give the soul a bodily presence. This hope rests in Jesus Christ's second coming, but ideas as to what occurs short of this vary widely. According to a simplistic understanding, the soul

is with God in heaven immediately after death. Some object to this understanding since it would preclude that our earthly existence is judged, or that a cleansing and sanctifying process prepares us for heaven. In response, others suggest that this judgment occurs immediately after death, or that it is combined with a thousand-year rule by Christ with those who believe in him. But this rule cannot be for eternity because of the Christian claim that the Triune God is for all people, whether or not they are believers. For this reason, the idea of the Last Judgment is added: at the end of history, all people will appear before God for their Final Judgment.

For Lutheran theology, the main question in this regard is whether these different concepts are consistent with the doctrine of justification. If the primary and only principle is that we are justified by faith through the saving event of Jesus Christ, then we should not draw upon other principles when thinking about the Last Judgment. Christians believe and trust that the Triune God is acting according to the same gracious, merciful and loving principles according to which the world was created, Jesus Christ was sent and the Spirit is at work. The Triune God brings human beings together, is with them and promises to stay with them forever. In this sense, Christians do not fear a Last Judgment, but are hoping and longing for it, because they believe that God's law is directed by God's grace and mercy.

Two pastoral aspects of this topic can be considered, bearing in mind that on the one hand, God's grace is not cheap (Bonhoeffer) and, on the other, that the center of the Christian faith is the gospel/promise and not the law/threat.

First, what do eschatological images and conceptions tell us about the people who are using them? About how they understand their personal and social lives, their hopes and vision for life in the present and the future, their critique of the present situation and their hope for change?

The power of eschatological conceptions is that they are often contrafactual with regard to present life. They express people's will for life, of not wanting to give in silently to bad or unjust situations. Eschatological images, models and conceptions are not expressions of resignation, but of a longing for a better life. They actually make a difference in the present life. Therefore, it is important to interpret them in relation to the actual situation in which people are living. In this sense, it is important to distinguish between the different eschatological images, models and conceptions people are following.

For example, in many parts of the world, people seek to communicate with those who have died. They long to be in community with those

whom they love and still consider to be part of their lives. They long to share with them what is happening in their lives, to seek their advice, to voice their sorrows or joys and discuss life decisions with them. The refusal to stop communicating with those who have died is a kind of protest against death.

In Indonesia, the Batak people still worship the souls of their ancestors and hope that the ancestors will give them such blessings as fertility (people and land), health and wealth. They relate closely to the norms, rules and customs of *adat*, the code of traditional social behavior and traditional religious beliefs as prescribed by the ancestors. Although two-thirds of the Batak people embrace Christianity they still obey the *adat*. The gospel and *adat* stand side by side in the life of our church members, with *adat* playing the dominant role in people's daily lives. Consequently, most people live with a two-fold ethic. *Rudolph Pasaribu*

Problems arise when communicating with the dead negatively affects those who are alive. At this point, pastoral intervention becomes necessary. The crucial question here is whether communicating with the dead is increasing or restricting the freedom of those who are still alive. Are people encouraged to seek new solutions, or do they look for solutions in the past, when the dead person was still alive. In the latter case, the freedom of the living is restricted because they are orientating their lives toward the past rather than the future. They need to be helped and encouraged to develop new possibilities and new solutions for their future life. Pastoral care is also indispensable when people communicate with the dead as a way of shirking their own responsibilities. They need to be helped to assume responsibility for their own lives and to make decisions, instead of relying on those who have died.

It might be helpful to reconsider where the souls and spirits of the dead are. In different parts of the world, it is widely believed that the souls/spirits of the dead hover between earth and heaven. Accordingly, one might imagine them to be quite close and as possibly intervening directly in life today. A further problem is that we do not know the intentions of the dead. Do they always have good intentions? How can we know if they are good or evil spirits? In some places, people have grand funerals to honor the deceased. This may in part due to the fact that the family assumes that the spirit of the deceased will thus be influenced to be favorably disposed toward them.

A possible alternative to the above would be to consider the spirits of the dead as being located beyond heaven, where we can still communicate with them but where they do not intervene in our earthly life.

Second, in situations where Christians are in a minority, they are confronted by the question of whether in eternal life they will be reunited with those family members who are of another or no faith—be they Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, animist or atheist. Already in the New Testament, Paul states that in the case of a couple, where only one partner is Christian, the other will be sanctified through the Christian partner (cf. 1 Cor 7:14). But what then if family members follow different faiths? There is a strong sense of hope among Christians that all family members will be in heaven together. This hope is supported by Lutheran eschatology. Christians believe that the Triune God is a universal God, a God who is the Creator, Savior, Sanctifier, Redeemer and Consummator of every human being. No one will be lost (cf. Lk 15:3–7), and therefore it is vital that we hope for the Final Judgment of all human beings. In light of Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 25:31ff.), the fundamental distinction in that judgment is not between faith and faithlessness, but between good and evil. This distinction can be applied to all, whether or not they are Christians, and makes it possible for people of different faiths, who worshipped different gods in their earthly lives, to live together in heaven, sharing in the hope that is ours as Christians.

After discussing these matters, the group formulated the following recommendations to churches and those engaged in pastoral ministry:

- Promote a minimalist definition of judgment and salvation/condemnation, emphasizing that judgment pertains to God's mystery, while being aware that notions of judgment remind us of and promote accountability in everyday life.
- Be lenient regarding the vastly diverse eschatological imageries (many of which are incompatible), recognizing that our knowledge is limited. There are very different theological interpretations and we find a variety of views in the Bible. The litmus test is to discern among them and examine how they impact social and communal life, promote justice, peace and joy in the midst of all creation (Rom 14).
- Encourage a humble approach regarding matters that transcend our finite life, offering the assurance to all that ultimately we trust that God's grace never fails, however this might be interpreted.
- Support and promote within the churches practices of accompanying members, relatives and friends in the process of mourning the loss of loved ones, offering care and reassurance in times of

insecurity and anxiety regarding supernatural realities that we cannot understand—such as life after death, judgment, eternity, the manifestations of the dead, etc.).

- Keep the discussion open as to theological and missiological models of salvation—exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, relativism, etc.—probing their relevance pragmatically in concrete interreligious encounters.

Dialogue for New Life: Dalit Women and the Samaritan Woman

Prasuna Nelavala

Dialogue is a horizontal relationship between people involving communication. Paulo Freire refers to it as a relation of "empathy" between two "poles" who are engaged in a joint search,[1] a joint endeavor to comprehend and articulate meaning.[2] In my experience as a Dalit Christian woman, dialogue is a living process, a way of living together with others. In our struggle for a new life, such diapraxis focuses on the life and space we share in order to develop a common vision of solidarity, respect, justice and compassion. As Ingo Wulfhorst states, in dialogue the other is no longer the "other," a "stranger," but becomes a "friend," a companion struggling for peace and justice in coexistence.[3]

I am a Dalit woman who, as an academic, feels called to serve her community. Although there is some distance between academic theology and most Dalit women's lives, I believe that my voice represents my community as it struggles for new life. However, my interlocutors are not Dalit women, but the dominant groups who exclude them. Further, global voices are needed from outside to urge divided communities and churches in India to be in dialogue if the lives of Dalit women are to be transformed. As a Dalit Lutheran theologian, I struggle both with a deep sense of depression and hope for the situation of Dalit women. The frequent violence inflicted on them cannot be ignored. Through dialogue, Dalit women will perhaps be enabled to realize new life. Dalit feminist theology can help set the stage for this to occur.

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[1] Paulo Freire quoted in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha in the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujesrista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 88.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Ingo Wulfhorst, "The Lutheran World Federation's Study Programs on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations," paper presented at an LWF conference, Indonesia, 2006, pp. 7–8.

Dalit women

The term "Dalit" has been defined in various ways. A Dalit is a completely neglected human being, ignored, one whose human dignity and self-respect have been destroyed. Dalits are treated as untouchables, impure and dirty.[4] Dalits are an outcast, untouchable social group that is outside the *varna* system. Nirmal expresses this in six ways:

> (1) The broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split, (2) the opened, the expanded, (3) the bisected, (4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered, (5) the down trodden, the crushed, the destroyed, (6) the manifested the displayed.[5]

According to Gail Omvedt, Dalit women are "the Dalit of the Dalit." The Hindu caste system is like a pyramid of earthenware pots: Brahmins at the top, then Kshtriyas, Visyas, Sudras and at the bottom the untouchables or Dalits. But within each pot, men are at the top and women of that caste are at the bottom, like crushed and wasted powder. Dalit women are at the very bottom.[6] They have lost their lives, labor and laughter for the sake of upper caste men and women and Dalit men. They are neglected and ignored, dismantled, diminished human beings.

Dalit women and men are forced to lead miserable lives due to their caste. Interaction with other caste groups is prohibited; any interaction between Brahmins and Dalits will be severely punished. For instance, if a Brahmin drinks water from a Dalit's vessel, the Brahmin is penalized by living on cow's urine for a number of days.[7] A person who belongs to a high caste is exhorted to leave some food out for Dalits so that they can eat along with the crows and dogs outside the house.[8] The multiple restrictions imposed in the name of caste, gender and religion, including in the church, has had dreadful effects on the lives of Dalit women.

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[4] Kumud Pawde, "The Position of Dalit Women in Indian Society," in James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People Dalits: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), p. 143.

[5] Arvind P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1990), p. 139.

[6] Quoted by Aruna Gnanadason, "Dalit Women—The Dalit of the Dalit," in Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (eds), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurkul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991).

[7] A. Ramaiah, "The Dalit Issue: A Hindu Perspective," in Massey, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 85.

[8] *Ibid.*

The term "new life" is intended to communicate that which is contrary to their "past life." My research among Dalit women in the South Andhra Lutheran Church has revealed that they simply feel that they do not deserve dignity, respect, rest and nutritious food and that it is their duty to respect the caste system. Dalit women need a new life that gives them self-dignity, self-worth, peace and joy. New life is a life in fullness. Human beings need self-esteem, to learn to love themselves, feel proud of who they are and to have a sense of belonging. Dalit women are not able to come forward to dialogue with the dominant group. The church needs to focus on Dalit women in society, and to draw on biblical accounts of how the lives of individuals and communities are transformed.

Dialogue between the Bible and the experience of Dalit women

When the Dalit and the biblical worlds meet, a creative dialogue can take place. The problem is that the Bible has been used far more frequently to oppress than to liberate. Its pervasively male bias, also in the way in which it is interpreted, is well known. As Monica Melanchthon has pointed out,

> the Bible was shaped in a male-dominated world, councils of men determined the canon itself, and over the centuries, male theologians and scholars interpreted texts that were considered to subordinate women. It is therefore a difficult and complex task to reconsider those texts from the perspective of women and bring to the fore an interpretation that reveals God's concern for the whole humanity. Besides, it has been proven that the oppressed often internalize the ideals and values of the oppressor, and women are much more apt to do this because of their belief in scripture as the divine word. Hence, sometimes women are highly resistant to feminist interpretations.[9]

In my research, I have discovered that most Dalit women are under the impression that God created women to be helpers, meaning that they are obliged to obey their husbands. Most of them are opposed to women's

[9] Monica Melanchthon, "Indian Dalit Women and the Bible: Hermeneutical and Methodological Reflections," in Ursula King and Tina Beattie (eds), *Gender, Religion and Diversity* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 221.

ordination on the grounds of impurity, safety and dependency. All of them agreed that their lives are lacking and not leading toward fullness. They strongly assert that they are weak and therefore cannot compete with men. We cannot remain silent about this internalized humiliation based on gender and caste ideologies. Thus, it is urgent for Dalit feminists to dialogue with biblical stories that mirror their own.

Dialogue in Scripture

Protestant theology emphasizes that God addresses us in and through the Word. However, too often we assume that God speaks to us only in terms of what we need to believe or obey. Yet, faith is much more than believing and obeying. Faith is where we meet God through dialogue with God. God raises genuine questions such as, Are you there? Where are you? Where is your brother or sister? What have you done? Do you have bread? What do you think of me? Are you searching? What are you discussing? Do you want to be healed? Who do you think I am? Can you give me water to drink? Where is your faith? Who touched me? We are invited to reflect and to respond to such questions. These are not questions requiring "yes" or "no" answers. Instead, they call for dialogue in action that could bring transformation.[10]

The questions addressed to and by Jesus indicate that he was open for dialogue. For instance, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The Old and New Testaments offer the basis for dialogue that can lead to new life. The church and its theology need to realize this and encourage communities to be neighborly, pluralistic and peace loving. The questions Jesus raised called for dialogue in which Jesus was open to people's further questions. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:4–42) illustrates this, and is an important resource for the transformation of Dalit women and their communities.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman

When retelling the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, there is a connection between the world of Dalit women and that of the woman at the well.

[10] Frank Rees, "A Conversational Theology for a Conversational Church," in *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2007), pp. 32–49.

While traditional and sexist interpretations have branded the woman immoral, sinful and of bad conduct, feminist scholars have highlighted and affirmed her knowledge of tradition, her logic and how competently she engaged in an extensive theological dialogue with Jesus. She becomes a spokesperson, missionary and mediator between Jesus and her community.[11]

Jesus arrived at the town of Sychar at about noon, and sat at the well and the Samaritan woman came to draw water from Jacob's well (Jn 4:6). In the first part of the dialogue, Jesus initiates the dialogue, asking the woman for a drink of water. John ends the lengthy dialogue episode with the celebration of friendship and partnership between Jesus and the Samaritans.

Dynamics of gender, race/ethnicity and caste

The narrative provides an opportunity to reflect on racial/ethnic tensions between Jews and Samaritans, gender disparities and the purity laws of Judaism. The question raised by the Samaritan woman, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" brings these aspects into the open. Relationships between Samaritans and Jews were tense. Samaritan women were deemed perpetually unclean. The laws of purity stated that "the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruates from their cradle."[12] Jews and Samaritans did not share things and Jews were forbidden to use vessels used by Samaritans. The Samaritans, on the other hand, viewed themselves as the true Israel, the true heirs of the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, with the Pentateuch as their only Scripture.[13] However, the prejudices of the day prohibited public conversation between men and women, or between Jews and Samaritans.

When Jesus initiates the dialogue in seeking water to drink, it was a shock for the Samaritan woman, for Jewish men maintained their superiority over Samaritans and over women.[14] When the Samaritan woman replies, "Me, a

[11] Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York, Crossroad Books, 1984), pp. 327–328; Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scriptures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), pp. 186–194.

[12] David Daube, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 69 (1950), p. 137.

[13] R. J. Coggins & J. L. Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 607.

[14] Musa Wenkosi Dube, "John 4:1–42–The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters: The Samaritan Woman and African Woman," in Nyambura J. Njorge and Musa W. Dube (eds), *Theologies of African Women* (South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001), p. 42.

woman of Samaria?" she challenges Jesus on the basis of the racial/ethnic and gender issues with which she struggles. Jesus' request for water sounds as if Jesus was crossing established cultural and religious borders. But that first impression does not last long. Jesus presents himself as the giver of living water, claiming that whoever drinks his living water will never be thirsty. In contrast, everyone who drinks the water of the well will thirst again. Instantly she asked for the living water.[15] The text reveals Jesus' latent tendency to feel superior and the woman's internalized tendency to feel inferior. There is a gradual development in the relationship between the woman and Jesus, and in their acceptance of each other.

It is worth noting that the Samaritan woman's position is elevated in the gospel. Jesus first revealed himself to the Samaritan woman as the Messiah the Samaritans were expecting. While there is no proof in the text that Jesus drank water from the Samaritan woman's vessel, toward the end of the discourse, Jesus stayed with the Samaritans for two days, which implied he dined with them and shared things with them. The differences between Jesus and Samaritans had been overcome.

While the Samaritan woman was regarded as ignorant, morally and religiously wanting,[16] she was also a victim of gender and racial discrimination. Although she is the first person to know and recognize Jesus as the Messiah in the Gospel of John, she is not identified by her name but as a Samaritan woman. Her story mirrors the struggles of Dalit women.

In the complicated relationship between caste and gender in India, impurity is especially attributed to females. Menstruation and childbirth are regarded as the natural basis for this impurity in the traditional sociocultural order. In the case of Dalit women, this impurity is twofold, since they also become polluted through their occupational activities. Widows are treated as impure and thus prohibited from worshipping family deities. Their very presence is impure and inauspicious, which is not the case for widowers.[17] Untouchability continues to prevail in Indian society, even in Christian communities. Dalit feminists must question these widespread gender and the caste prejudices.

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[15] L. Jayachitra, "A Postcolonial Exploration of 'Water' in John's Gospel," in Sam P. Mathew and Chandran Paul Martin (eds), *Waters of Life and Death* (Delhi: UELCI/ISPCK, 2005), p. 249.

[16] Musa W. Dube, "Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)," in Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley (eds), *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 51–75.

[17] Leela Dube, "Caste and Women," in Anupama Rao (ed.), *Gender and Caste* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2003), pp. 231–132

Disputes over where to worship

With regard to questions as to where it is proper to worship, the Samaritan woman turns to the tradition of her religion to protect herself: "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (Jn 4:20). This statement reveals the religious tension that prevailed between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus is provoked by her statement and he reinforces the existing religious tension by replying to the woman, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). Jesus' strong declaration sharply distinguishes between the Jews who know everything and the Samaritans who know nothing. It indicates that Jesus realizes his privileged status and superior position in this interaction. However, he soon makes a more inclusive position clear to her by responding "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (Jn 4:21). He proclaims that instead people will worship in spirit and truth. The text indicates that both Jesus and the woman are transformed. While Jesus uses the "you and we" distinction, he also uses the term "but" to signify that "the hour is coming" where all worship together in spirit and truth. All will be included. Jesus declares that the place for worshipping God in not exclusively on the mountain nor in the temple, but wherever people worship in spirit and truth.

The matter of the place of worship and the place of Dalit women in the church are crucial theological issues. As in Hinduism, separate worship places exist in Indian villages for Dalit and for caste Christians. A 1987 report indicates that in Tamil Nadu the Roman Catholic Church constructed two church buildings, one for caste Christians and the other for Dalit Christians. In some parishes, liturgical services are conducted separately, and in some churches there are separate seating arrangements within the same church space, separate cemeteries and separate queues for receiving communion. In some places, Dalits can receive communion only after so-called caste Christians.[18] While visiting many villages in Andhra Pradesh, I witnessed that in each village there are two churches: one for caste Christians in the village, and one for the Dalits in the Dalit colony. Why should be there such divisions in the Christian community between those who worship the same God?

[18] S. J. Aruldoss, *Statistical Handbook: Discrimination Against Dalits by Christians* (Bombay: SAR News, September 1992), pp. 19–25.

Disputes over morality

Many have concluded that the Samaritan woman was immoral. She indicates that she has had five husbands and is living with another man who is not her husband. Her coming to the well at an inappropriate time has been misrepresented by traditional interpretations that ignore that Jesus was at the well at the same time. Feminist scholars surmise that there may be different reasons as to why she had five husbands, such as a levirate marriage,[19] divorce or widowhood.[20] Many commentators downplay the woman's theological ability by saying that her immediate question concerning the proper place of worship was a trick to draw Jesus' attention away from her supposed immoral life.[21] One possibility is that her five husbands had deserted her and she had been their victim,[22] as Hagar had been Abraham and Sarah's victim. It is understandable that she may not have been interested in having a prolonged discussion on her married life, which had been unsuccessful.

Further interpretations are offered. For example, Musa Dube suggests that the woman's five husbands and the woman herself serve as symbols. The five husbands stand for the foreign powers that had ruled Samaria, with the last refering to the Roman Empire's rule over Samaria.[23] Some interpret the text symbolically as a potentially liberative reading,[24] since the Gospel of John contains such imagery as water, sacred place, food, harvest and living water, all of which are linked with eternal life and the mission of Jesus. Surekha says that while her marital status has been taken literally, the other details in the text can be interpreted symbolically. While traditional interpretations are quick to view the woman as immoral, not so Jesus. He brands her neither a sinner, nor does he tell her to sin no more, as he told the woman caught in adultery.

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[19] Gail O'Day, *The Word Disclosed: John Story and Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: CBP, 1987), pp. 41–42.

[20] Her five husbands could have been brothers for whom she was supposed to bear a son (Mt 22:24–28). Maybe she was unable to have children and thus was divorced on grounds of the law.

[21] O'Day, *op. cit.* (note 19).

[22] Linda Mickinnish Bridges, "John 4:5–42," in *Interpretation* (April 1994), pp. 173–176.

[23] Dube, *op. cit.* (note 14), p. 41.

[24] Stephen D. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Living Water That the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman," in *Biblical Interpretation*, 1 (1993), pp. 207–227.

The ways in which Dalit women are branded by the caste system and patriarchy as immoral, sinful, dirty, untouchable and unclean need to be challenged and deconstructed. The church needs to remove the caste barriers and gender discrimination that still prevail in the church.

Leaving the jar behind

The dialogue between the Samaritan woman and Jesus ends in a fruitful climax: the disciples enter with the food and the woman leaves the jar and moves towards her community. "Leaving her water jar" is of theological significance, since the call of other disciples involved their leaving their occupations of fishing and tax collecting. Schneiders explains that we have a "feminine version of the standard Gospel formula for responding to the call to apostleship, namely 'to leave behind the things'."[25] According to some scholars, the Gospel of John depicts women as disciples, apostles and missionaries,[26] even as paradigms for apostolic discipleship and leadership.[27]

What is it that Dalit women need to leave behind? Are Dalit women being called to discipleship? Dalit women carry the jar of low self-esteem, internalized beliefs of impurity, dirt and worthlessness. The stigmatization of being born into the Dalit community will accompany them throughout their lives. The Samaritan woman's story is a challenge for Dalit women. Her inquisitiveness, the courage to question the stranger and the openness to accept the male Jew Jesus are potential insights on which Dalit feminists could draw.

Come and see

John uses the Samaritan woman as a paradigm of female discipleship, thus changing the idea that only male disciples were important in the founding of the church.[28] The woman is given an apostolic role as she

[25] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Women in the Forth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," in *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 12 (1982), pp. 35–45.

[26] R. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," in *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), pp. 688–689; Schneiders, *ibid*.

[27] Fiorenza, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 333.

[28] Alan R. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 137.

calls her villagers, similar to how Jesus called the disciples to "come and see" (Jn 1:39; 4:29). Others came to believe in Jesus "because of the woman's testimony" (Jn 4:39). The phrase "come and see" has been used twice before in the Gospel of John.[29] The Samaritan woman's apostolic activity is further implied in Jesus words to his disciples, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (Jn 4:38).

Jesus did not command the Samaritan woman to leave her jar behind nor to go and call her community. She moves beyond her victimization, leaving the jar and joining Jesus. Her potential, her concern, her commitment, her vision and courage to join Jesus' mission transform the whole village. It is an apostolic call for Dalit feminist theologians to experience liberation, to transform their communities and boldly to raise their voices against oppression.

Initiate dialogue and challenge the powerful

The text begins by noting that Jesus "left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria" (Jn 4:3–4). Actually he did not have to do this, because Jews normally went out of their way to avoid crossing Samarian borders.[30] Rather than walking around the region of Samaria, Jesus chose to cross it. Becoming thirsty, he requested drinking water from the Samaritan woman, which shows us Jesus' amazing, revolutionary new attitude towards the woman.

Some scholars note that Jesus only asked for the water but did not actually drink it. Yet, the episode ends with Jesus staying with the Samaritans for two days. Can such a guest not be served water and food? Certainly, Jesus is likely to have dined with them. Being a Jewish rabbi, he had the prerogative to violate the social and religious norms of his day. Even though at times he seems to exhibit some religious superiority, he was firmly committed to a vision of inclusiveness and a transformative mission. He initiated the dialogue in the request for water, and continued his dialogue with the Samaritan woman on the religious, racial, theological, spiritual and cultural issues until a relationship

[29] Once by Jesus when he calls his first two disciples in Jn 1:39 and again in Jn 1:46 when Philip invites Nathanael to follow Jesus.

[30] Kari Jo Verhulst, "Getting the Story Right. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman, he was talking to us," in *Sojourners Magazine*, vol. 30, no. 5 (September-October 2001), pp. 39–41.

is established between them. His revolutionary and radical approach transformed her life.

The church in India is a powerful institution. The majority of its members are Dalits, yet caste and gender discrimination prevail. Dalit women are victims of this discrimination. As a divine-human community, the church in India might be envisioned as a community of a dialogue for new life. After the colonial period, in the context of Indian nationalism and Hindu renaissance, there was repentance and resistance to Westernization. The need today is to develop theological understandings that can creatively engage our specific contextual realities in more critically constructive ways.

It is difficult to tell whether or not the Indian church can become a habitat for Dalit women. Caste, as the breath of Hinduism, has firmly extended its influence into Christianity. Two caste groups exist among Christians, one having a disproportional advantage over the other in terms of advanced theological education. This is used as a means of exercising authority over the weaker sections in the church. Gender violence is widely visible in the Indian church. The patriarchal and hierarchical system has deep roots in some interpretations of biblical traditions. The church has also inherited the sinful and terrorist caste and patriarchal system. Can the church approach Dalit women and dialogue with them? Can the church take the initiative to seek new life for the Indian Dalit community? Will the church recognize the theological and spiritual potential in Dalit feminist theology? Will the church accept the call of women to be disciples? Can the powerful walk an extra mile, as Jesus did, by violating the oppressive existing norms?

Conclusion

Dalit women are considered untouchable and impure because of their caste and gender. Their contribution to building the church and nation goes unrecognized. Hence, Dalit feminists begin their inquiry by identifying the rich and vibrant grounds for a liberative Dalit hermeneutics. Diapraxis is essential in bringing Dalit women new life. In the process, the "other," or the "stranger," becomes a "friend," a "companion" and a "partner." The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a rich resource for empowering Dalit feminists to pursue dialogue with the powerful in India. Those in power have to take an initiative in pursu-

ing friendship and partnership with Dalit women, and accepting their potential to contribute toward developing the church and the nation at large. As advocates of the oppressed, we must initiate dialogue with the oppressed if they and we are to be liberated.

A Dialogical Approach to Communicating the Christian Faith in Myanmar Today

Samuel Ngun Ling

Introduction

In Myanmar, the global market economy is flourishing along with a militarized form of modernization. At the same time, the growing Christian churches and theological institutions are under threat because of the Buddhist religious-cultural assimilation and sociopolitical domination. Christians, who are in the minority, are deeply affected in social, cultural, economic and political terms. Since they lack access to political and economic power it is vital that Christians develop a dynamic of engaged dialogue with their Buddhist neighbors, who are a powerful majority. It is important to engage constructively in dialogue theologically, socioculturally and politically in mutual and effective ways.[1]

Throughout Myanmar's history, Christians and Buddhists have failed to communicate at the level of faith or to live together dialogically at the sociocultural level. Therefore, one of the most challenging tasks is to find ways to communicate Christ in life and action in ways that are intelligible to their Buddhist neighbors.

Making sense of Christ to fellow Buddhists would inevitably include preaching Christ's message in *dhammic* terms and expressions of faith and relating Christ's teachings to their thinking and life experiences. Communicating Christ must not only consist of verbal communication but real life situations. The simple Burmese Buddhist term *metta*, love, to the Buddhist means more than mere sexual love.[2] It calls for self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. A genuine Buddhist will exercise *metta*

[1] The focus of my book, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions, and Perspectives* (Yangon, Myanmar: Association for Theological Education in Myanmar, 2005) is geared towards this goal and concern.

[2] See Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity: Some Bridges of Understanding* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), pp. 8–9.

towards every living being—even the tiniest of creatures that crawls at one's feet—and identify him/herself with all, making no distinction whatsoever with regard to caste, color, or gender.[3] Because of the different usages of religious terms, Christians and Buddhists often cannot communicate on certain points, and become reluctant to interact or dialogue.

I have the impression that in the past there has been no real encounter between Christianity and Buddhism. Hence, no real dialogue between the two great faiths has yet taken place in Myanmar. I seek to establish a good theological basis on which to enable Burmese Christians meaningfully to communicate Christ to Buddhists. A mutual understanding of each other's context, the people involved, the issues to be confronted and the claims both religions make need to be developed in order for the two communities to communicate and subsequently establish Christian-Buddhist dialogue in modern Myanmar.

Myanmar is unique in terms of what Kosuke Koyama once referred to as the "Burmese way to loneliness."[4] The pluralistic structure of its society is a perfect ethnological museum[5] or melting pot.[6] According to the government, there are 135 ethnic groups living in the country, the eight major groups being Burman, Kayin, Kachin, Chin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. In 2002, the population of the country was estimated at approximately 52 million (there has been no general census since 1983). Buddhism is thought to be practiced by 89.3 percent, Christianity by 5.6 percent, Islam by 3.8 percent, Hinduism by 0.5 percent and primal religions (animism) by 0.2 percent of the population.[7]

In Myanmar, two great world religions, Christianity and Buddhism, and two great world cultures, East and West, meet and interact. During the postcolonial period, Buddhism became resurgent in Myanmar because of its close connection to the sociopolitical powers, and the

[3] Ven. Narada Mahathera, "Buddhism in a Nutshell," in *The Light of the Dhamma*, published by the Union of Burma Buddha Sasana Council, vol. III, no. 4. (August 1956), p. 18.

[4] Douglas J. Elwood (ed.), *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Manila: New Day Publishers, 1978), p. 29. Here Kosuke Koyama indirectly referred to the "Burmese way to socialism" which was the country's one party ideology.

[5] Taw Sein Ko, *Burmese Sketches*, vol. II (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1920), pp. 332–335.

[6] H.N.C. Stevenson, *The Hill People of Burma*, Pamphlet. no. 6 (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1944), p. 5.

[7] Ministry of Information, Union of Myanmar, *Myanmar: Facts and Figures 2002* (March 2002), pp. 4–5.

role it continuously played in a chain of Burmese nationalist, socialist and militarist political movements.[8] While the present military government has repeatedly claimed that there is freedom of worship and no discrimination on religious grounds,[9] Buddhism enjoys a special status[10] as *primus inter pares*; the state backs all its activities. Therefore, as long as special attention is being paid to the "favored" religion, real dialogue cannot occur between the "favored" (Buddhism) and "un-favored" religions such as Christianity. This ideology of favoritism is the very point where the minority ethnic Christians (the un-favored) and majority Burmese Buddhists (the favored) have encountered each other. The result has been conflict without communication.

The Westernization of the churches

Church life in Myanmar is predominantly Western-oriented, especially in its theological expression (soteriology), its form of worship (liturgy), its structure of church organization (ecclesiology) and in its strategy of mission outreach (missiology). This Western orientation was not merely the result of the missionaries' teachings, but also of colonial rulers, civil administrators and educators. Consequently, churches were formed in the image of those who had established and administered them. "Christianity in Burma is tarred with a colonialist brush."[11] This "colonialist tar," which represented the strong influence of occidental ideals and ways of life on the churches in Myanmar, continues to be eyed suspiciously by the present government. This deep, historically based stigma has to be removed.

Antidote: Deconstruct and reconstruct missionary Christianity. In order to do away with Western ideals and accessories, the church in Myanmar needs to deconstruct its mindset, forms of worship and structures of Christian life modeled on Western concepts, and then to reconstruct these in a Burmese way, drawing on Burmese resources. This reconstruction process, already initiated under the leadership of the Myanmar Theologians

[8] Successive military governments called themselves State and Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

[9] *The New Light of Myanmar* (5 January 2003), p. 9.

[10] *Mirror* (Kye-mun), Burmese Newspaper (20, 21, 22 August 2002).

[11] Erick J. Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1977),p. 104.

Fellowship, could be called the "Myanmarization of Christianity," because it seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct Christianity in ways adapted to the diverse religious situation of Myanmar. This is a challenging theological task that Myanmar Christians need to undertake.

Divided trends of missionization

The Christian missionaries' most undesirable legacy were the divisive and discriminatory trends that were part and parcel of the British Indian Empire's "divide and rule" colonial policy. From the seventeenth to the middle of the twentieth century, missions were divided among different missionaries, with different mission fields from the same sending mission body, and from different denominational mission societies or agencies. This resulted in an undesirable schism[12] and unjustifiable favoritism.[13]

For instance, the missionaries concentrated on putting local dialects into written form but not on developing a future of human dignity, identity and unity. Their visionless missions resulted in shameful and divisive competition and schism between the regional Christian churches of different mission fields. Again, fearing that the ethnic/tribal people would have no influence in society if Christianity were represented overwhelmingly by the poorest and most illiterate (although this has actually happened today), the missionaries and mission administrators were not much concerned about the growth of Christianity among such people.[14] Hence, divided trends of mission traditions of the Western churches later became major divisive factors, especially for self-supporting Baptist churches in post-socialist Myanmar. Divided trends of mission traditions and churches have in turn caused disintegration among post-missionary churches, creating an unhealthy relationship between them.

[12] David Lai Sum, *Naming God in Burma Today*, (D.Min. thesis, Divinity School of the University of Chicago, 1994), p. 31. Here Sum indicates that missionaries to the Chin Hills rejected the use of a Chin dialect (Falam) as a medium of instruction in all primary schools in the Chin Hills, though the British administrators had decided to use it.

[13] Cung Lian Hup, *Innocent Pioneers and Their Triumphs in a Foreign Land: A Critical Look at the American Baptist Mission in the Chin Hills (1899–1966) in Burma from a Missiological Perspective*, (Th.D. dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1993). Hup shows how the Chin Christians were neglected and ignored by the missionaries in comparison to the Burmese and the Karens.

[14] Charles W. Norman (ed.), *Christianity in the Non-Western World* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), pp. 52–53.

Antidote: Ecumenical unity in mission. Without solidarity among churches and denominations, the witness of the churches to their Buddhist neighbors can be neither meaningful nor successful. Hence, striving for solidarity among churches and denominations of different mission traditions is a great challenge for ecumenical theology in Myanmar.[15]

Exclusive missionary theology, irrelevant Christian witness

In theological terms, Christians in Myanmar are not yet mature in their theological thinking, and follow centuries-old missionary teachings verbatim, without critically questioning and reevaluating their contents. Being spoon-fed by missionary teachings, many Christians still believe Christianity to be quite exclusive, especially in relation to people of other faiths.[16] The problem here is that a spoon-fed spirituality produces a "missionary compound" mentality and an exclusive Christian attitude—a mentality that looks to the West alone as a role model and a holier-than-thou-attitude that makes Christians feel better than others.[17] This attitude has led Christians to look at people of other faiths with complete disdain, as a bunch of people bound for hell, who are unworthy of their friendship. This narrow-mindedness is the result of what missionaries had taught them in the past, with certain biblical texts being used to justify this exclusive theological stance. This is a problem not only in Myanmar but also in many other parts of Asia.

Hence, during the missionary period, the missionaries and their new converts were often opposed to and did not pay sufficient attention to Buddhists and adherents of other religions. Buddhists were seen as objects to be missionized. As Pe Maung Tin, former professor at Yangon University, pointed out: "They [missionaries] evidently came to teach, not to learn, not to make Buddhists the object of their missionary love and concern. Rather, the Buddhists are seen only as the object of their

[15] Attempts are being made by the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar and by the Myanmar Council of Churches to help strengthen the ecumenical call for building unity between the mainline and para-churches.

[16] Samuel Ngun Ling, "In the Midst of Golden Stupas: Revitalizing the Christian Presence in Myanmar," in *RAYS*, *MIT Journal of Theology*, vol. 3 (February 2002), pp. 110–111.

[17] U. Kyaw Than, "Christianity, Burmese People and Burmese Culture," (in Burmese) a paper presented to the Third Inter-Seminary Assembly, held 14–17 October 1999, at Pyin-Oo-Lwin, p. 8.

missionary preaching."[18] Another problem is related to the conquest mission approach of the Christian witness. This sort of proselytized mission is only concerned with conversion, statistics and quantitative results rather than with the quality of Christian life.

In contrast, the primary aim of Christian mission should be to serve others, not to conquer. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Such a serving type of Christian mission cares for people irrespective of race, religion or culture. This type of mission respects all faiths, whether or not they are favored or disfavored by the ruling government. We need a mission theology today that does not look down on non-Christian neighbors and is not bent on condemning them to hell. The church in Myanmar does not need an offensive mission that calls arrogantly for forced conversions and statistics but rather a mission of service that is carried out with genuine Christian love, humility and hospitality.

Finally, most Christians in Myanmar today do not consider Christian witness to be a matter of reflecting theologically and critically about what is relevant to the challenges of their context. Instead, they view this simply as a matter of imparting knowledge about the Christian faith and tradition. Hence, very little attention is paid to the questions and challenges posed when Christians encounter Buddhists and Buddhism. Again, many Christians are not enough aware of the need to relate their faith and practice to current social, political and economic issues, although these issues are closely linked to Burmese religious community life as a whole.

Antidote: Reevaluate past missionary theology and local Christian witness. The theological issues need to be redefined, reinterpreted, and reoriented in terms, ideas and expressions comprehensive to the Burmese Buddhist ways of thinking. Feminist and gender issues are also emerging for future theological discussion in Buddhist society. The heart of the Christian mission lies not in what others can do for the church but in what the church can do for others. Such a shift in mission thinking may require more listening and acting than telling and teaching. Mission must be a matter of "being there" and caring, instead of "going there" and unloading. Hence, if the church in Myanmar really wants to be successful in mission, it must first of all seek to serve others. Only this type of *kenotic* mission would be able to make the gospel of Christ

[18] *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (October 1961), p. 28.

more intelligible and acceptable to Buddhists in Myanmar and to bring them to a better knowledge of Christ.

Resurgence of Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist culture

Burmese culture is deeply embedded in Theravada Buddhism, the foundation of the creativity, philosophical thinking and way of life of the Burmese people. Its Abhidharma philosophy expresses their worldview, their conception of the meaning of human existence, human destiny and also the idea of the Ultimate or God. Religion and culture are two sides of a coin. People's religious life cannot be separated from their sociocultural identity.

Understanding Burmese culture means understanding the Buddhist way of life. Going to the pagoda and offering bowls to the monk are, for the Burmese, not only religious but also cultural acts. Burmese Buddhist mothers and children pay reverence to their father. The father or husband is highly respected as *eing-u-nat*, literally "chief spirit of the household."[19] In a typical Buddhist family, mother and children must bow down before the father twice a day, once before he goes to work and again at night before he goes to bed, thus showing full reverence.

A Burmese Buddhist woman is submissive to her husband, even if he treats her abusively. Burmese Buddhist law also discriminates against women in succession rights. Buddhist women must be reborn as men to enter *nibban* (salvation), thereby perpetuating their spiritual inferiority. Widows are also looked down upon. Regarded as bad omens, they are driven into lonely and poverty-stricken lives in old people's homes.[20] Hence, patriarchy is one of the great challenges for Christian theology in Myanmar.

In social, political and cultural terms, Buddhism has experienced a powerful renaissance since the post-independence period, especially under U Nu (1954–56) and Ne Win (1962–1987). For decades, it has been stressed that all Myanmar nationals owe loyalty to Buddhism. Since the Bagan period (1044–1287), the reunited Myanmar people (under King Anawaratha) began to see Theravada Buddhism as the main source of their political unity, social coherence and cultural existence. Hence, legendary Myanmar finds its own alpha and omega with the enlightened

[19] Mary Dun, "Emerging Asian Women's Spirituality," in *Asian Women Doing Theology* (AWRC, 1988), p. 322.

[20] *Ibid.*

Buddha; its own unique existence is profoundly rooted in Buddhism. To a typical Burmese Buddhist, embracing a foreign faith such as Christianity almost means ceasing to be Burmese. A person who is not a Buddhist is not regarded as a real Burmese.[21] The old Buddhist philosophy, "to be an authentic Burmese is to be a Buddhist" predominates in the minds of the majority. This is also a challenge to Christian mission in Myanmar.

Antidote: Understand Buddhist religion, culture and history. If Christ's message is to be relevant to Buddhists, there is an urgent need to approach mission to Buddhists in ways that are culturally sensitive. The theological significance of Christian-Buddhist relations and the impact of their mutual interactions cannot be ignored. Furthermore, there is a need to develop an understanding of women's equality and a new awareness of women's liberation at different levels of Buddhist society.

Ethnic minorities, cultures and primal religions

The Burmese term, *taing-zin-tha*, coined since independence, is used to designate the diverse ethnic or indigenous groups residing in the highlands, whose religion, culture and language are distinct from the majority Burmese in the lowlands. *Taing-zin-tha* includes not only the eight major ethnic groups but all national races and language groups residing in Myanmar. The status of a minority group is based on its degree of assimilation into the dominant religious group. The dominant religious values are thus the core elements for defining the whole of Myanmar's sociopolitical ideology and national identity, so that society has become more mono-ethnic (Burmanized) rather than multi-ethnic.[22]

In looking at previous mission work in Myanmar, it appears that a greater number of Christians came from ethnic minority backgrounds and only a handful from Burmese Buddhist backgrounds. Consequently, Christianity stood for protecting the rights of ethnic minorities, even challenging the unjust actions of the Buddhist majority. On the other hand, Buddhism stood for securing the power of the Buddhist majority over those of ethnic minorities.

[21] R. Grant Brown, *Burma As I Saw It: 1889–1917* (London: Methuen, 1926), p. 102.

[22] David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge Press, 1994), pp. 33–37.

If the gospel of Christ is to be addressed genuinely to ethnic minorities, it must be done in ways that empower them to gain equality in all areas of life. In order to reach this goal, the religious and cultural values of ethnic minorities have seriously to be taken into account.

Primal religions and cultures serve not only as *preparatio evangelica* but also as the *locus theologicus*, not only as objects of mission but as potential aspects of Christian faith and life. The people are able to develop theologies with their own cultural resources. In the past, Christian missionaries ignored noble spiritual virtues such as ecological spirituality, communal spirit, social concern, veneration of life, which already pointed to the revelation of God's grace in the religions and cultures of ethnic/tribal peoples. Spiritual virtues can be discovered in the lives, religions and cultures of ethnic/tribal peoples, which Christian missionaries often thought of as "heathen" or "pagan." Ethnic/tribal religions also contain elements of ultimate reality and value systems that shape the life patterns of ethnic communities. For instance, "Nat worship serves as the underlying web of religiosity for the people of Myanmar by which they can grasp the gospel truth." [23] The gospel was never brought to people in a cultural vacuum, but reached people living within religions and cultures that have sustained them for many centuries.

Antidote: Develop theology that draws on ethnic/indigenous religious, social and cultural resources.

The challenge of religious pluralism for theological education

All of us experience the impacts and influences of globalization today. We are forcefully affected, even uprooted, simultaneously at the global and local levels. High-tech communication and transportation are connecting us more in the global village, yet globalization tends to lessen the hold of existing local cultures and value systems. It indirectly enhances personal religious identity and wisdom, including the uniqueness of local religious beliefs and practices. It becomes more important for religious adherents to value their religion's distinct differences, and to bring understanding, cooperation and solidarity out of those differences, for

[23] Simon Pau Khan En, "Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology for Myanmar" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Theology, University of Birmingham, 1995), p. 171.

the sake of tolerant, diverse identities. A tolerant identity that reduces religious intolerance, feelings of rivalry, tension and competition among religions, is derived from the awareness of being interconnected with others. Christians can learn from Buddhists about interconnectedness (*paticcasmuppada*), mindfulness and wisdom through the practice of insight mediation (*vipassana*). Practicing mindfulness in action, as emphasized in Buddhism, indicates an awareness of the interconnectedness that leads toward a just, participatory and sustainable society. In this sense, exploring and learning about the religion of others is likely to deepen our own belief. That is to say, the more one deals with religious diversity, the more one's own religious identity is sharpened.[24]

Christian missionary traditions, with a negative and exclusive approach to other faith traditions, have for a long time dominated patterns of theological education in Myanmar. This has been largely confined to a proselytizing form of mission and to a maintenance model of the church's ministry. It has paid little or no attention to questions posed by multi-faith traditions, their spiritual experiences and moral values. Liberating spiritual values and moral virtues in other faith traditions and cultures have been largely ignored.

A paradigm shift is needed, toward more inclusive and multifaceted approaches in theological education.[25] Through this shift, Myanmar theological educators would be better able to see the real situation of the poor and marginalized, whose languages, religious traditions, myths and folklore have inspired their struggles to reclaim their rights, identities and dignity. A theology that is not heard in the midst of the voices of the struggling peoples can end up being self-complacent. How can Christians and theological educators speak of quality theological education while ignoring the emerging multiple issues of life in Myanmar? How can church leaders and theological educators best foster appreciative understandings of people of other faith traditions and cultures—especially of Buddhist neighbors—in theological education in Myanmar?

Antidote: Rethink and restructure theological education. The above issues and questions call for rethinking and restructuring the

[24] Parichart Suwanbubbha, "Teaching & Learning Buddhism and Christianity in the Pluralistic Age," lecture given at the Second Ecumenical Workshop at the Myanmar Institute of Theology, Yangon, Insein (30 September–1 October 2004), p. 5.

[25] Samuel Ngun Ling, "Contextual Teaching Methodologies: Evaluation and Proposal for Myanmar Context," in Myanmar Institute of Theology, *Engagement: Judson Research Center Bulletin*, vol. 1 (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2004), p. 29

structure, assumptions and patterns of theology and theological education in Myanmar, especially in relation to themes such as soteriology, ecclesiology, mission, Christian education and pastoral ministry.

How to communicate Christ cross-culturally in Myanmar

Cross-cultural readings of the teachings of Christ, of the Buddha and of other faiths

Christ and the gospel must not only be communicated in Burmese ways and forms. The Burmese (cultural) and Buddhist (Buddhist tenets) understanding of human beings, nature, salvation and Ultimate Reality must also be included as vital aspects of Christian theology.[26] Burmese Buddhism, including all its associated folk elements, should be the main theological resource for articulating a living Burmese Christian theology in the context of Buddhist Myanmar. This is to say that the teachings of Christ, of the Buddha and of the primal religions should all be reconsidered, reread or reinterpreted interactively. This would make them more theologically relational and critical in the whole community of these different faiths. In so doing, there can, on the one hand, be complicated similarities in substance with differences in form and, on the other, complicated differences in substance with similarities in form.

A cross-cultural reading of the teachings of the Christ and the Buddha has led me to conclude that the common ground where both Christ and Buddha stand appears to be much closer than most Christians have thought. The indifference of the Buddha towards the notions of a personified God or Ultimate Reality, for example, helps warn Christians not to rely too much on the phenomenal features of the divine but to contemplate the depth of Ultimate Reality or God beyond traditional and theoretical boundaries. In light of important concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, *nibbanna*, *dhamma*, *anatta* and *vipassana*, it is apparent that lying beneath the differences is a significant conceptual, moral and ethical relationship between the teachings of the Buddha and the basic tenets of Jesus Christ. We see one aspect of this in how Christ's teachings relate as possible answers to some of the questions that were kept silent in the

[26] Khin Maung Din, "Some Problems and Possibilities for Burmese Christian Theology Today," in *Collections of Professor U Khin Maung Din's Papers & Articles* (in Burmese and English), published by Dialogue Committee, UNIT-I, Myanmar Council of Churches (March 2002), p. 149.

teachings of the Buddha. Another aspect is how the Buddha's teachings provide psychological and empirical solutions to some of the metaphysical questions (e.g. human suffering and eternal life) that were difficult to understand fully in the teachings of Christ.

Looking at Jesus' earthly ministry in relation to other religions of his time, we see that he neither critiqued Greek or Roman religion, nor rejected the formal structures of traditional Jewish practice as such. His teachings and practice focused on a new lifestyle that transcended the old, as his parables of the new patch and old garment and of new wine and old wineskins (cf. Mk 2:21–22) demonstrate. It is most likely that, were he living in Asia today, Jesus Christ would purify rather than destroy Asian religions and cultures. Based on such observations of Christ's reactions to other religions and cultures, we can say that Christ and Buddha are closely related as part of a larger pattern of religious and cultural meaning. Neither Jesus Christ nor the Buddha is a destroyer of the other's religion or culture. Rather, both comparably and mutually fulfill, complete and build on the other. Jesus words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17), can be understood as fulfilling in some measure the teachings of the Buddha and vice versa. To speak in a Buddhist context, Christ may not come to abolish the law of *dhamma* and the teachings of the Buddha; rather, he may use them and bring both to a broader fulfillment.

Furthermore, in both Christ's and the Buddha's teachings on self-denial—which in Christianity implies the cross (Lk 22:42) and in Buddhism the supreme victory over delusion of self (*anatta*)—we sense the work of the same impelling spirit of Reality or God. In both traditions, the real self is found where the barriers of egocentricity—self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement or the self alienated from God—are let down in the presence of the Ultimate Real, the Eternal. This reality, which is both against the delusive self and for the real self, became apparent in the life and teachings of both the Buddha and the Christ.

Decalogue for cross-cultural dialogue between religions in Myanmar

- Dialogue is not to be seen as a tool for proselytization
- Dialogue is not between religions but between persons
- Dialogue not only in words but in action
- Religious tolerance is the basis for dialogue
- Common points are the basis for dialogue

- Dialogue is a lifestyle
- Dialogue builds friendship
- Dialogue builds community
- Dialogue searches for common truth
- Dialogue is learning and sharing.

Decalogue for interreligious peace and harmony in Myanmar

Decalogue for Christians

- Repent of past Christian missionaries' wrongdoings or mistreatments and ask non-Christians for forgiveness
- Change the Christian attitude of indifference toward what other religions think, believe and practice
- Renounce the absolute claim or supremacy of the Christian faith over other religions including Buddhism
- Recognize whatever the other religion claims as good, valuable and truthful and see neighbors of different faiths as equal seekers of the truth
- Avoid offensive views of other religions
- Avoid a holier-than-thou mentality or viewing other religions in terms of good and bad
- Rearticulate the exclusive forms of the missionaries' teachings in terms and ways relevant to other religious terms and ways of expression
- Reconstruct commonalties, parallels and differences of Christianity and other religions with a view to helping provide a common ground for all religions
- Relate other religious worldviews, concepts and elements to the Christian faith and seriously consider them as vital components for Christian theology
- Avoid religious isolationism and try to engage in creative dialogue with adherents of other faiths and religious traditions.

Decalogue for Buddhists

- Overcome the Buddhist nationalists' understandings of Christianity as a religion of Western colonialists and the embodiment of Western culture

- Avoid using Buddhism either as a political channel of dominance or as a sociocultural unifying factor
- Avoid offensive attitudes toward Burmese Christians; do not regard them as aliens or enemies to Buddhism and the Buddhist community
- Bury the past wrongdoings of the Christian missionaries and their mistaken religious conceptions and understandings of Burmese Buddhists and Buddhism
- Renounce all exclusive Burmese Buddhist concepts, views and philosophy such as "to be an authentic Burmese is to be a Buddhist"
- Change the Burmese Buddhist concept of non-interference in what other religious people think, believe and practice
- Renounce the absolute claim or supremacy of the Buddhist faith and practice over minority religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and animism in Myanmar
- Maintain and live out the salient teachings of the Buddha on compassion, love, tolerance and non-violence, so as to affect every sector of life in the religiously pluralistic society of Myanmar
- Relate Christian worldviews, concepts and elements to the Buddhist faith, and seriously consider them as vital components for interpreting and practicing the Buddhist faith
- Avoid religious isolationism and try to engage in more creative dialogue with adherents of other faiths and religious traditions.

Decalogue for all faith traditions

- Develop dialogical processes to promote harmony and peace between religions
- Explore broader concepts of religious harmony and cultures of religious diversity from each religious tradition and experience
- Promote mutual learning and sharing so that each religious tradition might develop a culture of religious cooperation and peace
- Exchange ideas, concepts and worldviews between religions so that each religious tradition enriches itself by learning from and sharing with the other
- Build mutual trust, recognition and respect among adherents of all religions
- Transcend all traditional, doctrinal and racial boundaries of religious claims

- Develop a working relationship that can promote both intra- and interreligious cooperation, thereby improving life in common across religious traditions
- Attempt to address common issues, problems and concerns in society and look for ways to establish a network of creative friendship and solidarity at different levels
- Pursue religious mission only in the form of humble dialogue or two-way communication, rather than through monologue or teacher-student relationships
- Always avoid extreme, one-sided, aggressive, offensive and exclusive religious language, motives and expressions.

Conclusion

It is not my concern here to introduce a new agenda for Christian mission but to provide guidance for Christian-Buddhist dialogue, demonstrating a unique break with the past Christian missionaries' ways of communicating Christ in Myanmar. This was carried out with aggressive convictions and an imperative of imposing conversion and proselytization. The time of such an imperialistic form of Christian mission is over. The goal is a radical transition from mutual antagonism to friendly dialogue or communication, particularly between Buddhists and Christians. In order for Christians to dialogue effectively with their Buddhist neighbors, both the historical and conceptual relations between the teachings of Christ and those of the Buddha have to be understood in interactive ways that can mutually enrich both Christians and Buddhists.

The whole pattern of the traditional missionaries' exclusive Christian theologies must be changed by employing Buddhist resources so that the Christian message can be better communicated in a more contextual "Myanmarized" way. Toward this end, a comparative and a constructive study of the worldviews and concepts inherent in both religions is necessary. The primal aim of the teachings of both the Christ and the Buddha is to put an end to egoism, selfishness and self-centeredness and to promote a self-denying or interconnected communal life. Both religions seek salvation, one by accumulating self-merits or self-good deeds, and the other by relying on the compassion and grace of God.

Finally, in a Burmese Buddhist context, a genuine Christian theology seriously takes into account the faith and practices of Burmese Buddhism. A Myanmar Christian theology should be concerned not only

with the forms but also with the content or substantial realities of both religions. The message of Christ should not only be communicated in a Burmese Buddhist way but with Burmese Buddhist understandings of the Ultimate Reality. *Anatta*, *kamma* and salvation should also become inclusive as vital, essential and creative components in articulating the overall contents of Christian theology in Myanmar.

Both Christ's and the Buddha's teachings should be interrelated in ways that make them mutually enriching and theologically convincing to the communities of both faiths. In doing this, constructive commonalities and creative differences have to be taken into serious consideration for the further articulation of a theology of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. To make sense of Christ to people of other faiths, Christ should be communicated only in the form of open dialogue and mutual interaction.

An open Christian dialogue with other faith traditions implies neither a denial of the finality and centrality of Christ, nor any loss of love and commitment to Christ. Rather, a genuinely Christian approach to others must be humane, personal, relevant, humble and open. Open Christians must at all times be actively involved in building up a truly universal community of freedom, love and justice, "[f]or he [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us … for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:14-18).

Strategies for Christians Under Threat[1]

Kajsa Ahlstrand

It is an incontrovertible fact that today there are Christians who are persecuted or threatened. Some are attacked because they openly profess their belief in Jesus Christ, others because their faith has led them to act in solidarity with oppressed groups and individuals. Thus, it has become impossible to distinguish between persecution for the sake of love of Christ and persecution for the sake of love of neighbor. This discussion begins to explore how Christians who find themselves under attack from neighbors of other faiths might react and act.

Many Christians, especially those living where Christianity has been closely linked to political power, find it difficult to accept that Christians in other parts of the world must struggle to survive both as individuals and as communities. They are convinced that it is possible to defend both the rights of non-Christians in Christian majority countries and the rights of Christians in countries where they are in minority. Freedom of religion is considered a universal human right, and Christians can only be credible in defending this right if they, when in the majority, are as concerned with the rights of religious minorities as they are committed to defending the right of Christians to practice their faith. Christians from established and mainline churches have generally been less open to the plights of minority Christians than Christians who come from dissenter churches.

We should neither ignore nor overestimate the threats that Christians in various parts of the world encounter from members of other religious communities. In his response to *A Common Word*, the dialogue initiative by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars, Fr Daniel Madigan SJ has rightly commented that

> Over the centuries of undeniable conflict and contestation between members of our two traditions, each group has had its own internal conflicts that have claimed and continue to claim many more lives than interconfessional strife. More Muslims are killed daily by other Muslims than by

[1] Reflections based on the group work at the TLC seminar, Hong Kong, January 2008.

> Christians or anyone else. The huge numbers who went to their deaths in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s were virtually all Muslims. Scarcely any of the tens of millions of Christians who have died in European wars over the centuries were killed by Muslims. The greatest shame of the last century was the killing of millions of Jews by Christians conditioned by their own long tradition of anti-Semitism and seduced by a virulently nationalist and racist new ideology. The last 15 years in Africa have seen millions of Christians slaughtered in horrendous civil wars by their fellow believers. A Catholic missionary is dozens of times more likely to be killed in largely Catholic Latin America than anywhere in the Muslim world.[2]

While this remark puts the conflicts between Christians and Muslims into perspective, it is still necessary to address situations where Christians are indeed under attack by religious and/or political adversaries. On the one hand, Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek and to walk the extra mile. On the other, Christians who live as vulnerable communities among neighbors or systems that target them for persecution have the same right as any other group to defend themselves. How Christians have solved this dilemma varies according to particular situations and historical circumstances. In the following, we will mention some of the tactics that Christians have employed. This is only the beginning of a theological-ethical agenda that needs to be pursued further.

Martyrdom

This strategy has been theologically tested and also practiced throughout the centuries. The classic image of the martyr is someone who is placed in a situation where they can either choose to hold on to their Christian faith and be killed, or to renounce their faith and be spared. Faced with this choice, martyrs witness their allegiance to Christ with their blood. St Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles is the first martyr. Every martyr imitates Jesus in their readiness to embrace death rather than to betray their faith. There is no doubt that martyrdom is the exemplary Christian option in face of persecution, but martyrdom can never be a

[2] Madigan is an Australian Jesuit, founder of the Institute for the Study of Religions at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, and member of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. Daniel A Madigan SJ, *A Common Word Between Us and You: Some initial reflections*, at www.acommonword.com.

recommended strategy. It is very rare that the situation of persecution is as unambiguous as in the case of St Stephen. Although martyrdom may always be a possibility it is never to be sought out; to aspire to become a martyr is tantamount to spiritual hubris. It might be encountered on the way of striving for justice and life for others, but martyrdom itself cannot be the strategy. In the common Christian heritage, martyrs are regarded as saints. A Lutheran understanding of sainthood is of a person who in their life and sometimes also in their death points to Jesus in such a way that others rejoice in the knowledge that God's grace is present in the world. But one cannot choose to be a saint; it is others who may come to recognize a life as being saintly.

Avoiding contact

It has often been the case that Christians who are threatened or persecuted have chosen strategies that will reduce opportunities of contact with the persecutors. One way of doing this is physically to remove a Christian community from contact with "outsiders" by creating a separate society of Christian villages, schools, hospitals, etc. Another way is to make sure that Christians do not marry outside the Christian community, and that the faith is kept within the community rather than bearing witness to the faith in encounters with strangers. In some cases, the faith has been kept as a private secret and denied when outsiders have inquired. For example, the Christian faith has been kept this way for generations by some Japanese Christians. Although this is how the faith has survived in some extreme circumstances, and judgment should not be passed on Christians who have chosen this strategy to retain their faith, a wider community is normally needed where the faith can be openly proclaimed and practiced in order to contribute to human flourishing.

Non-violent resistance

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges his followers to "love your enemies." In spite of our failures to live up to this ideal, it remains the preferred strategy for Christians when they are under attack. The strategies of non-violence have developed methods to realize this. Non-violence is grounded in the gospel, but in situations where churches have been

aligned with political power, resistance to power, even if non-violent, was not encouraged. It is a shameful fact that historically many Lutheran churches in Europe have been so close to political power that they have failed to encourage theologies and practices that challenge the powers that be. It belonged mainly to the dissenter churches such as the Society of Friends (the Quakers) to develop and practice non-violent Christian resistance to oppressive political power, which often operated under the name of the Christian regime or empire.

During the twentieth century, the two best known proponents of this strategy were M. K. Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Non-violent resistance is not limited to people of the same faith, but seeks to include all those who strive for a just society where every citizen's human rights are respected.

One of the theological presuppositions of non-violent resistance is that since Christians are urged to love their enemies, they should help their attackers to realize that the violence they are inflicting is harmful not only to those who are attacked but also to the attacker. If the attacker can see the wrongfulness of their actions, the persecuted are spared and the attacker is converted to a better way of life. Thus, a foundation for a just and peaceful society is laid. Non-violent resistance can take many forms: peaceful demonstrations, hunger strikes, public debates, sanctions, legal actions, education, boycotts, lobbying, etc. Recently, the tactic of international accompaniment has been employed. For example, it has been used in Guatemala since the mid-1980s. International activists have accompanied returning Guatemalan refugees and monitored investigations into genocides perpetrated during the years of terror in the early 1980s as well as recent human rights violations. The purpose of the current ecumenical program of accompaniment in Palestine

> is to accompany Palestinians and Israelis in their non-violent actions and to carry out concerted advocacy efforts to end the occupation. Participants in the programme monitor and report violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, support acts of non-violent resistance alongside local Christian and Muslim Palestinians and Israeli peace activists, offer protection through non-violent presence, engage in public policy advocacy and, in general, stand in solidarity with the churches and all those struggling against the occupation.[3]

[3] At **http://eappi.oikoumene.org/en/about/overview.html**

Legitimate self-defense

This strategy comes close to the "just war" thinking. Christians, like others, have the right to defend themselves when they are under attack. The classical just war doctrine addresses nations, not religious communities, but it can be adapted to a broader use. The doctrine can be presented this way:

> The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.[4]

The most important point here is that violence is the last resort; all other means to reach a just solution must have been tried before a community may decide that self-defense is the lesser evil. Many would argue that we can never exhaust the possibilities of non-violent resistance and that non-violence thus remains the only permissible way for Christians under attack.

Measured attack

Is it permissible for Christians to attack an aggressor? In the history of the church this has been addressed in terms of the legitimacy of tyrannicide. This reasoning took place in medieval Europe with regard to a Christian ruler, whose power was thought to be God-given and who was thus responsible to God, but who turned into a tyrant. Medieval theologians identified two types of tyrants: usurpers and oppressors. The case of the usurper was less complicated: because they did not rule legitimately, they should be deposed and punished (by capital punishment). The oppressor had come into power legitimately but had later begun to oppress the people. In this case, the medieval theologians were much less inclined to allow the tyrant to be deposed and killed. The people should try to bear with the tyrant and set him right. Only if everything else failed and the

[4] Paragraph 2309 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, at **www.catholic.com**

cruelty of the tyrant was excessive did some theologians permit for the tyrant to be killed. An example from the twentieth century is the group of Christians in Germany who conspired to kill Hitler.

Most Christians who are under attack today risk retaliation, not only for themselves but for the entire community, and escalating violence if they resort to violence in the form of tyrannicide. The criterion of "serious prospects of success" can rarely be fulfilled if a minority group take it upon themselves to attack oppressors from a majority group. This course of action is to be rejected because it is dangerous, may lead to more violence, and because it implies that individuals take it upon themselves both to judge and enforce capital punishment.

It is cynical to the extreme if Christians who live in societies where they can enjoy freedom of religion demand that Christians who are persecuted should vicariously witness with their lives to Christ. It is also quite irresponsible to encourage Christians in difficult situations to resort to violence. Lutherans, together with other Christians, need to study and train for non-violent responses to persecution and religiously motivated violence. This implies a readiness for those of us who live in safety to listen attentively and to share the lives and the struggles of those of us who now strive to defend their rights to live as Christians in the face of their adversaries.

Charismatic Influences in the Protestant Churches of Sabah/Malaysia

Chung Song Mee

Over the last thirty years, the charismatic movement has been changing the face of many churches worldwide. Its impact has been assessed and critiqued by many scholars. Understanding what has occurred, and why, can lead to appropriate ways of responding to the challenges posed by the growing influence of the charismatic movement. In the following, I shall briefly look at what has been happening in the Protestant churches in Sabah, Malaysia.

In 1857, the first Roman Catholic missionaries landed on the island of Labuan and established churches mainly among the indigenous Malay people. The earliest Protestant church was the Anglican Church, which came to Sarawak in 1846 when Labuan became a British colony. It mainly served the colonists, but also worked among immigrants and indigenous peoples. The Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM) is the second oldest Protestant church. It was established in 1881 by Chinese Hakka immigrants from South China, who had been Christianized by the Basel Mission. In 1939, Australian missionaries began evangelizing the indigenous people and, in 1959, they established the first indigenous Protestant church, Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB). Missionaries from the Basel Mission established another indigenous church in 1952, the Protestant Church of Sabah (PCS).

With the exception of the BCCM, the churches' leadership was mostly in the hands of the missionaries. In 1963, Sabah was declared independent of British sovereignty and joined Malaysia. Under the new government, foreign missionaries were denied work permits and residency and, as a result, the leadership of the churches passed into the hands of Sabahans. However, the teachings and practices of churches remained very Western.

The beginning of revival in Sabah (1970–1989)

In the 1970s, the revival in the churches in Sabah became the seedbed for the spread of the charismatic movement. As early as April 1972, students at the Bible

school of the SIB, comprised mostly of indigenous ethnic groups in Sarawak, were reported to speak in strange tongues, crying, shouting, dancing, praying and worshipping in praise all night long, with some prophesying and those who were spirit possessed being exorcised.[1] This was the result of Petrus Octavianus of Batu Indonesia having been invited by the SIB to speak at evangelistic and revivalist meetings. At a conference in December 1972, many Sabah pastors were touched and spread the revival to other churches in Sabah.[2]

The revival spread from SIB to other Anglican churches, as catechists were sent for training to the Namaus SIB Bible schools in 1975. There was a growing interest in reading the Bible and churches began to overflow. Twenty new churches were built, others were expanded and, in 1979, there were over 1,700 baptisms in the Anglican indigenous churches. Young people yearned to hear the Word of God and youth camps became ever more popular. The youth began using choruses instead of hymnbooks at their gatherings. Worship services became less liturgical and more spontaneous, with public prayer meetings and the sharing of testimonials. The revival spread from the rural indigenous church to the urban English and Chinese-speaking congregations.

When foreign missionaries were no longer allowed to remain in the country, Bishop Luke Chhoa sent out the laity, emphasizing Bible study and prayer meetings. Speakers from Singapore were invited to hold evangelistic and revival meetings.[3] While he was bishop (1971–1990), praying for healing and deliverance from spirit possession were seen as part and parcel of the ministry. Speaking in tongues was not emphasized, although practiced by some.[4]

Revival in the BCCM

The BCCM[5] began to experience spiritual revival as early as 1972, especially through youth camps and leadership training. In November 1973, David Hock Tay of the Campus Crusade for Christ was invited to hold revival meetings and evangelism training. As the young people shared their testimonies, many wept in repentance. Those possessed by spirits were delivered and many

[1] Richard Samporoh, *Sejarah Gereja Sidang Injil Borneo* (Kuala Lumpur: Nipuhawang Publication, 1999), p. 58.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[3] Sylvia Jeans, interviewed by Chung Song Mee, Kota Kinabalu, 18 January 2008.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] The BCCM is a member of the Lutheran World Federation.

dedicated their lives to fulltime ministry.[6] In 1972, over 400 youth attended the statewide youth camps and 100 attended youth leadership training.[7] The Rev. Robert Neff of the Lutheran Church in Singapore was invited to speak at the youth camp in 1974,[8] where he called on those desiring the baptism of the Holy Spirit and instruction for speaking in tongues to meet with him.[9]

In 1973, as a result of the spiritual revival that was also occurring among church leaders, the BCCM's General Assembly supported the promotion of regular Bible study and prayer meetings, led by lay people, in order to develop the spiritual life of its church members. Such meetings normally included choruses, people sharing their stories of repentance and praying. Many were touched, repented, became fervent Christians, spoke in tongues, cried, fainted and were delivered from spirit possession or oppression. Simultaneous praying was introduced at some larger meetings and, by 1975, such prayer and sharing meetings had taken place in most congregations in Sabah.

The forerunner of the Sabah Council of Churches organized a revival meeting and invited Edger Webb[10] to conduct healing services in different churches, including the BCCM, in which people fell down when they were being prayed for. This was the first time that public healing services were held in the mainline churches. The subsequent publicity and commotion led to Webb's deportation by the government.

Effects of the revival on the BCCM

Over the years, these events imbued the church with a new life and completely changed its face. The immediate impact was an emphasis on Bible study. Weekly Bible study groups took place in the parishes, either in private homes or at the church. Pastors normally prepared the material as well as using material prepared by *Daily Bread*. These Bible study groups often became channels to evangelize and convert non-Christian friends.[11]

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[6] The author's own witness.

[7] Wan Hon Phin, "Report of the Central Youth Fellowship," BCCM General Assembly, 28–30 July 1973.

[8] "Report of the Kudat Parish," BCCM General Assembly, 20–23 November 1975.

[9] The writer was one of the group.

[10] Webb also conducted healing sessions at the Anglican cathedral in Singapore in 1973.

[11] One example is in my home church. While around sixty members attended Sunday worship, at one time seventy people attended the Friday night Bible study groups. I regularly led the Bible study on

The zeal for evangelism was overwhelming and evangelism teams systematically went from house to house, handing out gospel tracts, or using the Four Spiritual Laws to explain the message of the gospel. Youth groups were most active, although in some congregations evangelistic team members were adults.

This ardent pursuit of evangelism marked the beginning of a new chapter in the BCCM's history: cross-cultural evangelism. In 1974, two zealous young men, finding that the Chinese in their neighborhood did not respond to the gospel, began to reach out to the indigenous people in the area. Because of the overwhelmingly positive response, a project to evangelize the indigenous people also in other areas was started. The great interest in evangelism spread to other congregations, which were encouraged to present their evangelism plans to the General Assembly in November 1979. These and other efforts led to the creation of Malay speaking congregations and, by 1982, the BCCM's membership had doubled, with an additional 10,000 in the indigenous Malay section.

In the meantime, charismatic churches were making inroads in Sabah. Many members of the BCCM were attending healing services and evangelism meetings organized by other denominations. While prominent lay leaders of the BCCM were attracted by the charismatic movement and demanded more charismatic forms of worship, more traditional church leaders raised objections, leaving members confused. A pastoral committee was formed, which after careful study recommended that the church should maintain an open attitude toward the work of the Holy Spirit, but reject narrow or extreme charismatic practices.[12] A 1987 statement concluded that:

- The BCCM is evangelical and should be distinguished from the charismatic churches in doctrine and teaching. According to evangelical teaching, all baptized Christians have already received the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Every church should maintain its own tradition, doctrine and liturgy. It is not necessary for the BCCM to copy the teachings or worship styles of charismatic churches.
- In order to avoid confusion, the BCCM discourages members from joining activities of the charismatic churches.

topics such as sanctification, justification and what it means to be born again. From 1975 onwards, a number of friends who were brought by the members to the Bibles Studies became Christians.

[12] BCCM, *Minutes of the Central Pastoral Meeting*, 7–9 December 1984.

- The church follows the teachings in 1 Corinthians 14 not to speak in tongues in public nor to teach people to speak in tongues, and will not have faith healing services. However, the church does encourage praying for the sick (Jas 5:14-16).
- Pastors or church leaders who go against these principles will be reprimanded, admonished or disciplined.

By 1988, in the face of the increasing influence of popular charismatic movements, the church was willing to make certain changes in its worship services. In order to make these livelier, a session of praise and short choruses after the invocation and opening prayer were introduced.[13] Drums, electric guitars and loud music began to replace the piano and organ. Worship leaders led the singing and traditional choirs began to disappear. Clapping, responding with "Amen," dancing and other movements and musically accompanied prayers followed. In the beginning, especially older members resisted these changes, which over time became accepted practices.

The BCCM's official position in 1987 did not stop charismatic influences from infiltrating the BCCM, and many church members and leaders continued to attend charismatic meetings. Furthermore, pastors began to embrace charismatic theology and practices in their ministries. For example, Rev. Loh Wah Seng, who had originally opposed charismatic practices, later endorsed them.[14] He personally testified that in early 1975, while he was studying at Singapore Bible College, he was given the gift of speaking in tongues. Returning to Singapore ten years later, he saw how the churches in Singapore, including the Anglican Church, were being transformed by the charismatic movement. On his return to Sabah, he prayed for the miraculous healing of the sick and practiced exorcism. The church grew in numbers, but was divided over these practices because of its 1987 policy. After intense debate, the pastoral committee took the position that pastors serving within the BCCM should either abide by its official policy or leave.[15] In 1992, Rev. Loh left the BCCM and eventually started his own church, which became the first charismatic church to come out of a mainline church.[16] More pastors subsequently

[13] BCCM, *Minutes of the Central Pastoral Meeting*, 19–20 May 1988.

[14] BCCM, *Minutes of the Central Pastoral Meeting*, 7 October 1991.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Today, it has a membership of about 400. About twenty percent have come from other churches, seeking charismatic experiences such as healing etc.

left mainline churches to form independent congregations. Some pastors of the BCCM did not leave but remained in the church, ignoring the church's official policy and continuing charismatic practices. Their congregations have grown.

Most of the charismatic churches, whether independent or within established churches, have cell groups or cell churches in their ministry. The cell church model does away with traditional groups such as the men's fellowship, women's or youth groups. The whole congregation is divided into cells of seven to fifteen members, each with a leader and assistant. Each cell constitutes a church, with the leader serving like a "pastor" of a congregation. The actual pastor functions like a bishop, setting the goals to which the leaders are required to submit. The success of the cell church lies in the care and love in action that members experience, along with the vibrant praise worship and prayer ministry.[17]

The responses of the BCCM and the Anglican Church to the charismatic influence differed significantly. The BCCM tried to keep its traditional church identity by resisting major charismatic traits (speaking in tongues, public healing services) but absorbed some of its strengths, such as its lively style of worship, pastoral ministry model and educational materials. The Anglican Church took a more tolerant stance toward these practices. In both cases, charismatic practices have remained vibrant in the mainline churches of Sabah and are exerting a significant impact on their life and ministries.

The impact on mainline churches in Sabah

Blurring of the denominations' distinctive identities: The most visible impact is in the areas of worship and spirituality. Today, worship services in Sabah—whether Anglican, Methodist, BCCM, Baptists, SIB, PCS, in English, Chinese or Malay—have a time of praise worship with choruses. Liturgies have been simplified and instead of traditional choirs, worship teams lead singing "on stage." Musical band instruments have replaced pianos and organs. Lifting up hands and clapping are common. People pray aloud all at once and prayer, fasting and prayer walks are emphasized. These practices are common in churches of all denominations.

[17] Pattern of the cell meeting: welcome, worship, warmth, Word, works.

Churches also use charismatic materials for teaching and training. The BCCM will be using Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* for the next five years. The Alpha course[18] is used by many churches across denominations, which has led to a narrowing down of denominational distinctions as well as a loss of the churches' traditional identities.

Church growth: Due to this revival, the BCCM has increased by more than thirty congregations in ten years and its membership has doubled due to the evangelization of the indigenous people. From 1971—1986, the number of fulltime workers in the Anglican Church grew from five to twenty-four, and over 5,000 people were confirmed. Although initially the revival was not due to the charismatic movement, subsequently churches were more open to the later charismatic influences. In the 1980s, charismatic emphases on prayer, boldness in witnessing, exorcisms and cell groups contributed to many conversions.

Shifting paradigms: The pastoral paradigm has shifted from the pastor as a one-person show to the cell church model. The cell group/church rests on the principle of mutation, mobilization of believers and delegation of leadership. The cell church model focuses on in-house discipleship training in contrast to more traditional styles of theological training. Cell church leaders are trained entirely by pastors. Although some members of charismatic churches are now seeking more formal theological education, a common feeling is that this stifles spiritual life and zeal for ministry; the power of the Holy Spirit is all that is needed

The emergence of more independent churches: Before 1970, it was unheard of that churches became independent of the BCCM and the Anglican Church. Today, there are at least a handful of them. The cell church paradigm tends to encourage an independent rather than interdependent mindset. One suspects that this mindset encourages churches to split over various disagreements.[19] A mentality of "it is alright to divide and grow" rather than one of "growing together through

[18] The Alpha course is a basic course on the Christian faith, commonly advertised as "an opportunity to explore the meaning of life." Originating with the Church of England, the course is currently offered in 152 countries by many different denominations including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Orthodox churches.

[19] We are already seeing some instances of this. In the BCCM, at least three pastors left because they were not happy with the church transferring them to another place of ministry (all three are pro-charismatic).

resolving conflict" is reinforced, contributing to the diminished sense of loyalty toward the parental body.

Mystical/experiential rather than confessional/rational spirituality: Praying in strange tongues, praying for miraculous healing, being able to predict one's destiny and the reality of demonic and satanic power are no longer strange to Sabah's churches. These are considered to be evidence of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, whereas confessional and rational types of spirituality are often thought boring, uninteresting, stifling the work of Holy Spirit and devoid of spiritual power.

The growth and survival of the church in Sabah

Are charismatic influences making the churches in Sabah better, stronger or more effective in their Christian witness? The answer to this is twofold: while a vigorous evangelism attracts new church members, this is often at the cost of being hostile toward those who adhere to other faiths. Demonology is overly emphasized, to the extent of considering everything secular and every nonbeliever as demonic. Practices such as prayer walks around temples are regarded as arrogant. Charismatics and traditionalists often try to avoid each other, both within or across denominations, and there are obvious separatist tendencies.

Has the quality of the church improved? Michael Green comments that "if government pressure were to close churches, as it might in many countries…these churches would survive, since they consist of numerous small cells, meeting at unpredictable hours in private homes under lay leadership."[20] This has yet to be tested because at present, the churches in Sabah are thriving. So far, they have not been confronted with any large-scale human or natural disasters. This would be the real test as to whether these churches can survive.

Akerman and Lee suggest that the revival of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism in the 1970s in Malaysia was in response to Islamic resurgence. Under the threat of Islamization, non-Muslims felt increasingly

[20] Michael Green, *Asian Tigers for Christ: The Dynamic Growth of the Church in South-East Asia* (London: SPCK, 2001), p. 48.

marginalized, in economic as well as political terms. They resorted to asserting their ethnic identity through their religion.[21]

When Sabah became a part of Malaysia in 1963, churches and most Sabahans were caught by surprise, uncertain of their future in an officially Islamic country. The 1966 Immigration Act decreed that no foreign priest or religious worker would be given permanent residence. When Tun Datu Haji Mustapha bin Datu Harun (Tun Mustapha) became Chief Minister in 1967, he did not uphold the freedom of religion guaranteed in the constitution. A number of indigenous Christians converted to Islam. In 1969, a number of missionaries were expelled or had their work permit revoked. Mission schools were taken over by the government and Christian education in schools was restricted. All these factors could have driven Christians to pursue their faith more intensely than before. However, at the same time, churches in Singapore were also experiencing revival, although Singapore had pulled out of Malaysia.[22]

As the revival become more charismatic during the 1980s and 1990s, the churches in Sabah began to grow rapidly, due in part to ardent evangelism. Furthermore, the churches were receiving some government support, since many indigenous Christians held leadership positions in the government. Churches received grants from the government, especially for constructing new churches. The government's openness toward churches made it possible for churches to invite many foreign speakers, including charismatics and Pentecostals.

Could this religious revival be a reaction towards modernity and Westernization? In the Western churches, early charismatic features emerged from the Wesleyan revival in England and the Great Awakening in the USA in a context of rising rationalism, rapid industrialization and moral decay. In the early 1970s, Malaysia aspired to be an industrialized country and imported Western science and technology. The pursuit of transcendent and supernatural experiences was revived especially among middle-class Muslims, Buddhists (Chinese), Hindus (Indian) and Christians. For Christians this was manifest in the emphasis on attaining spiritual power through the Holy Spirit to solve everyday problems of life, practices of prayer and exorcism for the sick instead of medical treatment, in other words, charismatic practices. It has been

[21] Susan Akerman & Raymond Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Renovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), p. 4.

[22] See Green, *op. cit.* (note 20), p. 5.

suggested that this was part and parcel of the reaction to modernization and secularization: indigenous beliefs in the magical and spiritual realms were transformed and reworked into the structure of organized religion, and continue to thrive.[23]

In the context of SIB, charismatic tendencies could be attractive among the indigenous people because of the focus on supernatural, miraculous healing, similar to the animistic background of indigenous people. However, in the indigenous congregations started by the BCCM as result of the revival, charismatic emphases were not pursued. On the contrary, supporters of the charismatic movement were mainly urban intellectuals and English-speaking professionals.

Perhaps it is the dynamics of the movement itself that account for why it attracts people: its lively worship and practical ministry and fellowship organized through cell groups around people's needs. Perhaps also these are under God's providential working of the Holy Spirit to empower churches to bear witness in contexts of need.

Papua New Guinea, covering numerous offshore islands, is home to over 800 different language groups. This considerable number of languages and subcultures results in many tribal allegiances and differences. The life of the church in Papua New Guinea is permeated by the numerous social attitudes and character traits of the different ethnic groups that seek to live together in one country. We often try to understand ourselves as being in the process of nation building. Living inside such a complex web of different cultural values, norms, practices and beliefs, while at the same time upholding Christian principles, can be difficult. The presence and influence of religious movements is steadily increasing. A growing resurgence movement, emphasizing renewal, revival and reform, has become popular both around as well as within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea. In theological terms, these movements are questionable. One of the problems is that Lutheran approaches to theology have been too dogmatic and too self-confident that God will somehow ensure that these movements die out. However, the reality is that these movements have become more organized. *Igorir Saul*

[23] Raymond Lee and Susan Akerman, *Sacred Tension: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia* (Columbia: University of Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 48, 71, 101, 129, 143–146.

Implications for theological education

Of a total population of 2.6 million, 900,000 Sabahans are Christians. Unity and love among Christians are crucial if the gospel of God's love is to be shared effectively in a multiracial, multi-religious, pluralistic society. It is estimated that over seventy percent of Christians (including Roman Catholics) are pro-charismatic. Students at a seminary such as the Sabah Theological Seminary come from different denominational backgrounds. Many have had charismatic experiences and have been nurtured under charismatic forms of pastoral ministry, or have been part of cell groups or churches. Their experiences must not be rejected or denied. Rather they must be helped to engage the texts critically in relation to their experiences and contexts, so that their lives and communities might be transformed by the gospel. The following guidelines should be kept in mind:

- ***Train students to reflect biblically and theologically*** on issues pertaining to the traditional and charismatic churches. Charismatic churches are often criticized for a lack of theology with regard to what they practice (such as prayer walks, music accompanied prayer, etc.). Theological education should provide avenues for students to think through these practices and the theology behind them, so that expressions of piety might be more consistent with biblical teaching. Phenomena related to revival and charismata—such as speaking in tongues, baptism of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, exorcism, prophecy, new forms of worship and models of spiritual care—should have a place in the curriculum.

- ***Provide platforms for dialogue between charismatics and traditionalists.*** Recently, theological education has put much emphasis on interfaith dialogue due to the resurgence of other religions. However, inter-church dialogue is absent from the curriculum. Zealous charismatics are willing to make friends with people of other faiths in order to share the gospel. Zealous traditionalists are willing to talk to people of other faiths and work together for the common good of society. Why can charismatics and traditionalists not find ways to work together, in order to witness faithfully to Christ in minority contexts such as Sabah/Malaysia? Seminaries should try to avoid the further polarization of traditionalists and

> charismatics. Theological training should help bridge the gap between traditional theology and charismatic practices so that both are open to appropriate each other's strengths and overlook weaknesses. In seminary, both sides should have a platform to dialogue and interact with one another for mutual understanding and enrichment. Here, experiments with creative, diverse forms of worship should take place. Different types of theological beliefs, pastoral models and practices can be examined for the sake of becoming more effective transformers of society.

Both traditional and charismatic trends have been inherited from the West. The goal of theological education should be to "form students for critical thinking and to acquire the ability to reflect theologically with discernment."[24] In the Malaysian context, where education is more about "filing information," it is a challenge for seminary administration and professors/lecturers alike to develop curricula, syllabi and methodologies to help students develop critical reflection and discernment. Such are vital as they appropriate knowledge, traditions and norms from another culture and context in order to become effective Christian communities within Malaysian society.

[24] D. Preman Niles (ed.), *Critical Engagement in the Asian Context: Implications for Theological Education and Christian Studies* (Hong Kong: Asian Christian Higher Education Institute, 2005), p. 38.

Ten Theses on Worship[1]

Simone Sinn

I: Worship renewal not only transforms worship itself, but also makes a difference in congregational life. Worship renewal and congregational renewal are interconnected. For the sake of more meaningful and participatory worship, pastors need first of all actively to involve parishioners. Secondly, renewed worship empowers parishioners to take responsibility and participate in decision-making processes.

For example, each member could be asked what they would like to see changed in worship: what kind of music, instruments and other aspects or elements they would like to see incorporated into worship. Neighborhood groups in the congregation could take turns in being responsible for ushering, doing prayers, leading songs, counting the offerings, etc.[2]

II: Different forms of worship can exist next to one another. There is no need to have identical worship everywhere every Sunday. The basic structure of worship, however, should still be recognizable. Furthermore, workshops and study groups on worship and liturgy could enhance sensitivity and knowledge about the meaning of the liturgy.

A congregation might alternate between the traditional liturgy, a renewed liturgy, a liturgy that gives attention to those who have their birthday, a liturgy in the local language and family worship. Within Lutheran churches, there are significant differences in how the liturgy is practiced. Space needs to be given for different emphases.

III: We urgently need a theology of music for our time. Luther and Calvin had distinct theological views on the lyrics and tunes of hymns. We lament

[1] Reflections based on the group work at the TLC seminar, Hong Kong, January 2008.

[2] These suggestions, and those under II, come from Rev. Rudolph Pasaribu, who is attempting to renew worship in his church in Indonesia.

that some of the lyrics of our time represent poor theology. We call for contemporary music and lyrics that are theologically sound. We cherish the deeply theological lyrics that are a part of our heritage, but we also see that this "old" language is sometimes not accessible. How can we rediscover the theological depth and pastoral care that is in those hymns?

As a teenager in Germany, Christoph was very active in the YMCA and he liked the international (mostly American) praise songs. But when he was in the navy and sent to Iraq, he started to learn by heart some seventeenth-century hymns by Paul Gerhardt. "When you are going through hard times, you need theological substance."

IV: Creativity is an essential dimension of worship. Creative worship comprising symbols, drama, dancing, movement, performance art and poetic/metaphorical language "speaks" to the congregation in an holistic way. It is important to involve the body and all the senses in worship. Different elements should be knit together so that a meaningful whole is presented. There should be a clear and recognizable thread running through this. The liturgy is a way for the congregation to walk together. It is important to tap into biblical readings that offer rich symbolic and metaphorical resources. In the ecumenical movement, creative liturgies have been developed and have inspired those involved to bring these into local congregations.

V: The atmosphere in worship is very important. Is our worship welcoming and warm? Do we really celebrate worship? If the theology of grace is at the center of our faith, how is it reflected in worship?

VI: Worship should be holistic, in the sense of consciously including spiritual, emotional and cognitive dimensions. Worship should make people both feel and think. Whereas in charismatic worship the reflective dimension is often left out, or even seen as negative ("don't think about it, just feel"), in traditional worship the emotional dimension might not be sufficiently nurtured. However, traditional liturgy can also provide space for the expression of deep emotions, as in the Psalms.

VII: What are criteria for good worship? Consciously or subconsciously we often think that the worship which is most attractive to people is

best. While it is important to ask what appeals to the congregation, especially if we want a participatory worship, "attractiveness" might not be the most appropriate criterion. We propose "meaningful" and "empowering" as criteria.

VIII: It is misleading to pose charismatic and traditional worship as if they were opposites. We need contemporary worship that relates to the tradition but also to people's real concerns. We need a wide spectrum of contemporary worship. Pastors and parishioners should be encouraged to be creative and musicians and poets should be encouraged to write new songs. We need a theology that reflects on the interrelationship between Word and Spirit in relation to worship.

IX: There is a need for deepened theological understandings of the Holy Communion. Some Lutheran churches celebrate Eucharist every week, others only four times a year. Behind these considerably different practices are different theological and liturgical understandings, which need to be explored.

X: Most importantly, worship is about being in God's presence. God is with us and we are in front of God. The purpose is as Luther said on the occasion of the inauguration of the castle chapel in Torgau, "… that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise."[3] As we prepare for and celebrate worship, this should always be remembered. In this light, the creativity we exercise in worship is transparent for God's creative power, the loving kindness we enact is transparent for God's steadfast love and the spirituality we live out is transparent for God's Spirit.

[3] Martin Luther, "Sermon at the Dedication of Castle Church, Torgau (1544)," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 333.

Toward a More Public Witness of Churches

Karen L. Bloomquist

Attention needs not only to be given to how individuals but also how churches engage with their societies. Through their baptism, individual Christians are called to live out their vocation at various intersections in society. Congregations in Asia and elsewhere serve the needs of their members, their immediate communities, or ethnic groups in many ways—especially through diaconal work in education and health. But how does the church as an institution engage with the social, economic and political realities that affect all people in a society? How does the church exercise its public calling in society—engaging with and challenging wider policies affecting justice, peace and the welfare of all?

Throughout Scripture, this is a pervasive mandate and at the core of the calling of the church as the people of God. The biblical witness as a whole is about far more than only personal salvation. We cannot read the Bible—both the Old and New Testaments—without seeing how God's dealing with the world relates closely to social, economic, political and environmental factors, such as greed, corruption, disparities and the abuse of people and creation.

Yet, there are factors that hold churches back from living this out:

- Many churches have been organized according to ethnic or tribal identities, which become the non-negotiables to be preserved or defended.
- Privatized understandings of faith are focused primarily on the individual's relationship with Jesus and immediate family and friends—those most familiar, whose interests are common to "mine." This is in contrast to the "public," where we engage with those who are different from ourselves—the strangers—and where "my" interests cannot be assumed to be synonymous with those of the others.
- Living under repressive or totalitarian governments, whose policies and practices may be blatantly wrong, corrupt or unjust and call for protest by churches and others, but where prayerful, wise and discerning judgment is needed as to when the risks of speaking out and acting are to be taken.

- Churches who are in an extreme minority amid an interfaith or secular majority, such that they feel their public witness would be discounted or even that they would be persecuted for such.

Why are some churches in certain countries far more involved than other churches in addressing injustices such as human rights abuses? Is it because in many parts of Asia churches are becoming increasingly affluent, despite the huge pockets of poverty in their midst? It is not surprising that those who are churches of the poor often tend to be more publicly outspoken.

If there are clear biblical warrants for speaking out against injustice and corruption, why do some churches remain so quiet and complicit? This call is rooted theologically in the Old Testament prophets and in the incarnation—God becoming human in Jesus Christ. God enters fully into our realities as human beings. The institutions and powers that shape those realities, including that of the empires which this region has experienced throughout its history, must be addressed. Churches are called to be incarnate in their societies, to be with those suffering and in pain, as Jesus' words made clear at the onset of his ministry (Lk 4).

Do we really believe that the Triune God is active not only in our hearts, not only in our churches, but also in our societies—creatively, redemptively, eschatologically? If we believe this, how can we not be involved? How do we bear witness to this God not just in words but in our actions? If we stop short of that, our witness is truncated—it is not the whole of God's witness. God acts transformatively, not only in our hearts but in our wider communities, in our world, through economic and political institutions, not just through individuals, and certainly not just through Christians. Our faith is tested especially at those points where other forces also prevail, forces that can feel so powerful and all-determinative that we lose faith, hope and courage.

Who is God, and what is God about in our world? Not in ways that seek outright defeat of those whom we perceive as our enemies or opponents, but in ways that bring people together for the sake of justice and the common good. We are called to act in ways that take seriously what God promises, how God is active, but also humble enough so as not self-righteously to mistake our judgments for God's. A public God is active throughout the universe, and is not just a tribal God of "our" people. A God known not through conquering actions that breed resentment, as centuries of so-called "Christian" campaigns have inflicted on

Muslims and countless indigenous peoples, but is a God who opens up space, freedom and liberation for all, and who does that in public spaces, where the shaping of the common good can and does occur.

Do we really trust in the Spirit's public power? Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes about the Holy Spirit as the power for confessing in the midst of forces that seem so dominating.[1] She points out that, in the biblical texts, the work of the Holy Spirit is rarely a private affair between an individual and God. The Spirit has public or community presence or impact (the first Pentecost being a case in point). She writes,

> In ordinary times, Christians are called—after prayerful, community-based discernment—to evangelical defiance of dominating forces that breed death and destruction. In extraordinary times, certain life-defining circumstances may bid us, in addition, to confess our faith (Luther) at precisely "that little point that the world and the devil are at that moment attacking." Discerning what that means, in word and deed, at any given movement in history is the work of all who would confess faith in the Triune God.[2]

How churches relate to their societies

There are at least four ways of viewing the relationship of churches with their societies:[3]

- First is an apolitical, dualistic and pietistic emphasis on salvation of the individual soul and the holiness of personal life. The problem is that such a privatization of faith plays a role in keeping unjust relationships in place without questioning them. One of the strengths is that this takes the individual seriously, but ignores that human integrity is deeply affected by life's wider communal dimensions. Both love of God and of neighbor are called for, not just individual moral behavior but also social ethics.

[1] Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Holy Spirit: Power for Confessing Faith in the Midst of Empire," in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire. Theology in the Life of the Church*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation, Lutheran University Press, 2007), p. 141.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 125.

[3] The four categories that follow are loosely based on those of Yahya Wiyaha, "Church-State-Market Relations in the Context of Indonesia," in *Asia Journal of Theology* (October 2007), pp. 345ff.

- Second, in order to accommodate, or serve as a chaplain to society, or at least to a given ethnic group, churches become embedded in a given society, endorsing its values and ways of operating. Sometimes this is seen as "contextual," under the guise of being pastoral, serving people's needs. But in the process of doing so, churches unsuspectingly support the interests and powers that uphold the *status quo*. Citizenship and discipleship become closely intertwined. The church may provide a variety of diaconal services, but of the type that tends to support or perpetuate the way things are—as churches wedded to empires have done in every age and place. An example of this is the official government-sanctioned church in China, in which to be faithful is to be patriotic. Although the situation of churches in Hong Kong is somewhat freer, one senses that they function in ways compatible with an extremely competitive, capitalistic society, where striving for success is paramount, including through church growth strategies.
- Third is prophetic critique of society—especially of greed, injustice, conflict, corruption—from the perspective of those left out, behind or oppressed. This involves analyzing the structures, powers and policies that perpetuate injustices, and speaking out against them. This could be neoliberal globalization, oppressive rulers and discrimination on the bases of race, caste and gender. This is a critical contextualization that engages the actual realities but asks critical questions about what is behind them (cf. Micah 3:5–12). A prophetic church takes the risk to speak the truth to power and to act, although admittedly this can also lead to self-righteousness and a sense of martyrdom.

  Mary Joy Philip, an Indian biologist and theologian, proposes that the church, being at the margins, needs to be a pest or parasite, creating a pestilence, disturbing the order of things, threatening the *status quo*, calling the center into question. The church's calling is to be socially dysfunctional in order to signal the kingdom that is not of this age. Parasites inhabit the in-between spaces, living both in and outside. In its parasitic function the church is not only annoying but also upsetting. The church is called to put the empire's "nose out of joint." This corresponds to the church "of the way" (as described in Acts) in the sense being called out of our comfort zones.

> Jesus is the parasite *par excellence*, a hybrid, born of the union of the divine and the human, who lived at the margins. He crossed lines, whether social, religious, cultural, ethnic or gender—constantly challenging and

> calling the center into question. Church is this parasitic space that shakes the empire. Wherever the empire is shaken by the power of the kingdom, there is the church. Church needs to be the parasite that lives within the body of the empire, gnawing at its very foundation and venturing into the promises of its peripheries.[4]

- Fourth, in public partnership with others, churches work for the common good through dialogue and cooperation, collaborating with others in a society, including with those of other religions. What is emphasized are common values that call into question patterns and practices of greed, injustice, conflict and corruption and working together to change such over the long term. Various community organizing efforts are examples of this, including coming together with others after disasters such as tsunamis.

Here, the two kingdoms framework that is part of the Lutheran tradition can be revisited: how God's purposes are done through those who do not necessarily share our faith. A distinctive feature of a Lutheran political ethic is that, from a Christian point of view, the political realm is where God is also active. Yet Lutherans view this much differently than do Islamic or Hindu fundamentalists! This framework keeps us humble about religiously imposing any political order, which may be one reason why calls of Muslims to impose shari'a law make us anxious. But this framework also helps guard against triumphalism, or trying to repristinate a Christian order, which is foreign to nearly all Asian contexts anyway.

How can this lead instead to engaged critique, resistance and transformation of society, in collaboration with others in civil society? If political and economic powers feel so out of reach, how can a sense of empowerment, citizenship, democracy and thus of human dignity be restored? This does not occur by beginning with abstract assertions regarding individual dignity but by discovering this in community with others, through naming the contradictions, the exploitation, the injustices and beginning to live out alternatives. We rediscover who and whose we are theologically. The two realms understanding affirms how the Triune God is related to all of life, not just through Christ, not just through the saving gospel, but also through the power of the Spirit,

[4] Mary Joy Philip, "The Space in between Spaces: The Church as Prophetic Past/Parasite," in Bloomquist, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 101.

in community with others and with the rest of creation. Although not explicitly operating from such a framework, Samuel Ngun Ling seems to be advocating something similar.[5]

This suggests a critical dialectic that transforms any dualistic tendencies: "both/and" instead of "either/or," without collapsing one into the other. Are there not resonances here between such a critical dialectics and the cultural-religious worldviews characteristic of Asia and its various intellectual heritages? How might we revise the relation between sacred and secular in contexts that do not have a secular tradition, but whose very culture is pervasively religious?

However, at this point, struggles for survival and identity still remain the more defining characteristics of these Asian churches than does this kind of transformative social witness to what God is about. How might this be changed?

[5] Cf. Ling, pp. 87ff. in this publication.

From Identity and Survival to Public Witness

Martin Lukito Sinaga

A public church engages in the discourses of public life so that the church's witness might become more visible in society. Thus, a public church not only focuses on the Christian faith and culture of specific communities, but also on shaping the material life of all people in a society. We need to consider how far Christianity has influenced the hope of the common people, and how a social space can be opened up in which people can continue to grow.

Conversion and public space

It is generally agreed that the churches in Asia are the sons and daughters of the missionary movement. This explains much of the history and development of Christianity in Asia and especially the church's public engagement.

Although missionaries arrived in Asia during the colonial era, by and large Christianity was embraced willingly rather than by force. In the context of the social vacuum created by colonialism, the conversion of indigenous people in Asia to Christianity was through personal choice. People willingly converted so that they had something to hold on to, as their own culture seemed to be sinking into the sea of an imposed modernity. The missionary discourse on conversion was accepted by the indigenous people, who appropriated it in order to join the new world of modernity.

In the early twentieth century, one of the complaints of the German missionaries to Indonesia was that the local people had bought more into the modern spirit of progress than into the spirit of the gospel. However, one can also conclude that the local people were active subjects who negotiated the gospel and modern life in relation to their cultural location.

Robert Hefner's study, *Conversion to Christianity*,[1] confirms the above analysis. The people of Java (Indonesia) believed Christ to be

[1] Robert H. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

involved in their crisis (around 1965), when they faced gross violence during the conflict between the government and the Communist movement. Their conversion to Christianity provided them consolation in a time of crisis, while at the same time enabling them to participate in modern public life.

In a more recent story from Vietnam,[2] Salemink notes that the Vietnam highlanders (the Dega) joined the Protestant church so as to become connected to a world religion that gave them a chance to develop their lives. For them, Protestantism clearly was a sort of modern ethos, in contrast to the ethos of Vietnamese Communism.

We can thus conclude that conversion also creates a public space for community. To become a Christian is to receive consolation in a changing society, as well as opening up an ethos and space for pursuing the path of modernity.

Self-reliant churches, development and the emergence of a public elite

The missionaries' conversion activities included translating the Bible. While the purpose was to spread the gospel, it also resulted in a growing sense of identity. Indigenous people could use their language as a vehicle for talking about God. They experienced an illuminating moment when they recognized that the language of their ancestors was respected and developed a sense of communal independence.

Parallel to this process was a "translation" of the Christian faith into the local culture, as the beginning of a contextualization or indigenization of the faith. Gradually, references to Asia's roots began to appear in public discourse. Although this began in the church, society at large also became "contextual" with regard to its sociopolitical identity.[3]

Translating the Bible and contextualizing the Christian faith confirmed the Asian churches' independence. They slowly freed themselves from the missionary institutions and influence, and during the 1960s began to affirm their self-reliance. Development programs for self-reliance were pursued.

[2] Cf. Oscar Salemink, "A Thrice-Told Tale of Fundamentalism: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions in Vietnam's Central Highlands," in *Renai* 3–4 (July–October 2002) pp. 82–114.

[3] Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997).

The churches as well as the modern nation-states pursued development programs in society at large. In many Christian communities, the notion of "development" became the focus of theological reflection. During this time, Asia was inspired by the YMCA's training development programs and the work of World Vision was an accepted way of fighting poverty. Because development work was seen as a "way of the world," the secularization debate also entered the life of the Asian churches.

At the ecumenical level, the Conference on Church and Society of the World Council of Churches (WCC) became the model for how Asian churches reflected the modern project of development. As the WCC stated, "The churches should welcome the development of science and technology as an expression of God's creative work. They also should welcome the economic growth and social development which it makes possible."[4]

Publicly, the church was recognized as an agent of development; yet it also unleashed a generation of highly educated men and women. They enjoyed a Western education brought by the missionaries, and worked hard to maintain the quality necessary for the Asian governments' modern projects. These Christians assumed strategic positions in Asian governments, and some became leaders or elites in Asian societies.

"Identity politics" in religious resurgence today

As a reaction to the highly secularized life of the modern nation-states—and the interests of global capitalism—identity politics have emerged today. Claiming one's identity is a means of defending oneself against being invaded by the outside world. The arena of identity is a contested one. Cultures, values and the meaning of life are under great pressure from the "culture" of the global market. People are anxious to defend their identity and, in the process, tend to exclude others.

The voices of the subalterns are amplified today, which is why there are competing claims in our public space. These, of course, are reactions to the singular, homogenized culture of the global market. Yet, the process of claiming one's voice can move one backward, to times in which fundamentalism flourishes.

[4] World Conference on Church and Society 1966, *Official Report* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), p. 90.

For the churches in Asia, this is a critical moment. They are at a crossroads where they could either fall into a theological discourse of survival (to defend themselves against the demands of rising voices), or follow the logic of global empire and turn their churches into reflections of empire's interests.

A theological proposal for public life

Today, there is a kind of resurgence in Asian churches, especially in the initiatives being taken in the field of mission. Chinese women work in Cambodian factories in order to begin or plant churches. Korean Christian students work voluntarily as local technology advisors in remote areas of Asia. Migrant workers or Filipina housemaids share their faith, but also invite their "master" to taste their sense of being sisters and brothers in Christ. Tribal Christian people in Myanmar carry the message of Christ to refugees in neighboring Thailand and Bangladesh.[5] In Indonesia, a local Christian community celebrates both Islamic festivals and a contextualized Christian Easter. In Malaysia, progressive Islamic women and men are working closely with their Christian partners. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, the YMCA takes the initiative to clean the northern rivers of Thailand so that communities along the rivers can enjoy a clean environment.

In other words, Christian initiatives to build community are emerging in many places, crossing boundaries and yet sharing the meaning of the gospel in their encounters. The Asian culture of hospitality is living out the biblical message anew: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

These moments of encounter go beyond the logic of today's globalized consumer culture. They name the gospel in the midst of life's difficulties, as experienced in many parts of Asia. Although they experience life as sojourners in Asia, they refuse to be coopted by the lure of the materialistic world surrounding them. Although they are experiencing the brokenness and fragility of everyday life, which is permeated by the money economy, acts of sharing seem to cure the ills of life. They see people in their particularities, just as Christ names them in particular ways.

[5] Vinoth Ramachandra, "The Postcolonial: Confronting our 'Blind-Spots'," unpublished CSCA lecture, 2007.

In Luther's Christology, Christ is understood as "my Lord in order that I might be his own." Our relation to Christ is one of *conformitas*: we are con-formed with Christ.[6] This relationship is experienced especially in the midst of the powers of evil and injustice. In this case, Luther abandoned the objectivity of the creed in order to apply it directly to the person who confesses the faith. To confess faith in Christ, then, is to name Christ amid the anonymous powers of global capitalism. Here we give each person we encounter a particular name, their distinct identity amid the sweeping powers of empire.

A public theology amid religious resurgence today begins by learning every name that is there in the diaspora of our global world. In *Le Différend*,[7] Jean-François Lyotard once said that a name cannot be concluded or interpreted, only learned. By naming the other, we free our space from becoming abstract or from becoming mere consumers. Naming localizes every subject, concretizes their space and makes them a particular person.

Christ is also a name, the name that helps us to understand what is going on in our history. This name makes it possible for other names to remain. S/he will be more than what the world requires of her/him in order to survive. If the name of Christ symbolizes God's unsurpassable love and care, every name we confess will also enjoy the unsurpassable possibilities in each life. By naming someone, we name also the life emerging in every part of this world. This will be what is distinctive about our theological voice and actions.

In theological terms, we know Christ to be God's self-disclosure as the gift of love. This gift is the crossing of love into our common, everyday lives. Our daily lives are being packaged according to what will serve the interests of the global economy, which is enjoyed only by a few. Naming Christ is a way to resist the ways in which patterns of social and cultural life are becoming closed. The global system is structured such that these death structures can only be redeemed through a breakthrough. Naming Christ is a means by which this breakthrough occurs, such that particular subjects begin to walk and act.

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[6] Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p.20.

[7] Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); See Lucien van Liere, "A Critical Postmodern Theology for Indonesia?," unpublished text for a conference in Jakarta, 2005.

Speaking about Christ can only be done in a particular way. Speaking about Christ means speaking about particular initiatives amidst global power structures that seem to determine our world. Through such initiatives, new subjects walk forward, not backward, with others rather than by themselves. These new subjects will raise up the voices of anger in Asia in the name of Christ who himself overcame anger and death. In this case, these initiatives will be an inclusive act and promote hope in the spirit of hospitality.

When, in 1968, Karl Barth was asked about the growing evangelical movement in Germany, he replied by asking those in the movement about their reaction to the conflict of the day, the Vietnam War. They replied, "Vietnam is not important, what is important is the name of Christ." Barth responded, "If we believe in the name of Christ, we must also name what is going on in Vietnam." Naming Christ will compel us to name every person and every place of misery and injustice today. In such situations, we need to take initiatives, initiatives that will be stretched to every name of our neighbors.

In this third book of the Theology in the Life of the Church series, a variety of mostly Asian theologians propose points of departure for theological inquiry, based on particular struggles of their churches to discern who they are (identity), to survive in economically and/or politically threatening situations, and to bear witness to their faith in the midst of religious diversity and resurgence. A question running throughout the book is, What are the lived realities of people in local communities and the questions this evokes that need to be addressed theologically?

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> **"Relevant theology must address people's concerns and answer their questions. The contributors present inspiring and challenging examples of a theological discourse that realistically addresses local questions in a globalized world."**
>
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