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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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# Editorial The Struggle for Identity

The function of the *Evangelical Review of Theology* is to interpret the Christian faith for contemporary living for an international readership. This number alters the established format by focusing on theology and the Bible in the context of the Third World of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. It includes the papers (abridged in the case of four) given at the Third World Theologians' Consultation Seoul, Korea 1982. For further details see the *Seoul Declaration*.

The papers in this number mark an historic moment in the development of third world theological reflection. The degree of unity, achieved in the midst of incredible diversity and tensions of cultures, mission and ecclesiological heritages, economic and political systems is remarkable. It reflects a common determination to uphold the primacy and authority of Scripture and devotion and obedience to one Saviour and Lord. We may find fault with the wording of the Seoul Declaration, but its central thrust is clear and augers well for the theological undergirding of the churches which will embrace three-fifths of the world's Christians by the 21st century.

A central issue for the Third World evangelicals, if not for all evangelicals, is a struggle for identity—living between obedience to the Word of God and searching for relevance in the missiological task of communicating the Gospel across cultural frontiers and in situations of escalating poverty and oppression. Increasingly, it is the poor and those who suffer from man's inhumanity to man who are the unevangelized. This is true of the slums of Calcutta, the villages of the Chad and the Indian settlements of Bolivia. The struggle for identity as biblical Christians and as national citizens is both individual and communal. It involves living in the tension between the analytical and linear ways of thinking of the west and the syncretical and cyclic ways of thinking of much of the "Third World". It calls for an evaluation (as objective as possible) of existing theologies, western and third world. The papers in this volume reflect these struggles. The development of theology in the Third World is perhaps 20 years behind its western counterpart, but the gap is closing. A theology orientated to evangelism and to growing and maturing churches will of necessity take risks but it will also take care. The call to all of us is to be patient, reserve judgement, trust in the sovereignty of our triune God, and be obedient to the Word of God. In the words of the Seoul Declaration "For us, to know is to do, to love is to obey." [p. 8](#)

## The Seoul Declaration Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World

Fifty delegates and 33 observers from Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands met together in Seoul, Korea, from August 27 to September 5, 1982, in order to consider our theological task. Having as its central theme, "Theology and the Bible in Context", this consultation was organized by the Asia Theological Association, the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar, and the Latin American Theological Fraternity; it had a fourfold purpose: (1) to deal with

theological issues which are vitally related to evangelism and church growth and which are common to churches in developing countries; (2) to exchange ideas and information among evangelical theologians in the Third World; (3) to encourage fellowship and co-operation among these theologians; and (4) to learn from the church in Korea, which is one of the fastest growing churches in the world. We are grateful to this country and particularly to the Evangelical churches that have hosted us for their kind hospitality. We are grateful to God for the opportunity of discussing a number of theological issues in a context of Christian fellowship, mutual trust, commitment to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and to His Church, and a common acceptance of the authority of Scripture. The present document is a brief summary of our discussion.

## **1. CRITIQUE OF WESTERN THEOLOGY**

We give thanks to our sovereign God who has preserved and renewed the church during the past 19 centuries. We express our indebtedness to the creeds of the Early Church, the confessions of the European Reformation, and the spiritual awakenings of the revival movements of modern times. We recognise the contributions of western churches and missionary agencies in the birth and growth of churches in many parts of the Third World.

We have no desire to articulate our theology merely in reaction to western theology, whether liberal or evangelical, conservative or progressive. Our concern is to interpret the Word of God in the light of our own historical context for the sake of Christian obedience.

The western approach to theology has deeply affected our own understanding of the theological task. We have, therefore, dealt with a number of pitfalls into which western theology has fallen and which we must avoid. Western theology is by and large rationalistic, moulded by western philosophies, preoccupied with intellectual concerns, especially those having to do with the relationship between faith and reason. All too often, it has reduced the Christian [p.9](#) faith to abstract concepts which may have answered the questions of the past, but which fail to grapple with the issues of today. It has consciously or unconsciously been conformed to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. Sometimes it has been utilised as a means of justifying colonialism, exploitation and oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations. Furthermore, having been wrought within Christendom, it hardly addresses the questions of people living in situations characterised by religious pluralism, secularism, resurgent Islam or Marxist totalitarianism.

We have recognized that if Evangelical theology is to fulfil its task in the Third World it must be released from captivity to the individualism and rationalism of Western theology in order to allow the Word of God to work with full power. Many of the problems of our churches are, in part, the result of this type of theology. Consequently, we insist on the need for critical reflection and theological renewal. We urgently need an Evangelical theology which is faithful to Scripture and relevant to the varied situations in the Third World.

## **2. CRITIQUE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIES**

We have taken a critical look at current theological trends in the continents we represent. We have recognised the similarities in our historical past, vis-à-vis colonization and oppression, our present struggle against injustice, poverty and religious pluralism, and the imperative to articulate the Gospel in words and deeds in our various contexts.

We have found that some of the presuppositions, sources, and hermeneutics of theologies such as ethnotheologies, syncretistic theologies and liberation theologies are inadequate. Ethnotheologies are often politically motivated and do little or no justice to the Scriptures. Syncretistic theologies often accommodate biblical truth to cultural variables. Several liberation theologies have raised vital questions which we cannot ignore. But we reject their tendency to give primacy to a praxis which is not biblically informed in the doing of theology. Likewise we object to their use of a socioeconomic analysis as the hermeneutical key to the Scriptures. We reject any ideology which under the guise of science and technology is used as a historical mediation of the Christian faith.

We unequivocally uphold the primacy and authority of the Scriptures. For us, to know is to do, to love is to obey. Evangelical theology must root itself in a life of obedience to the Word of God and submission [p. 10](#) to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The theological task must be done under the constant operation of the Holy Spirit with adequate hermeneutical tools and a keen awareness of God's continuing activity in history.

### **3. OUR BIBLICAL FOUNDATION**

We have concertedly committed ourselves to building our theology on the inspired and infallible Word of God, under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. No other sources stand alongside. Despite our varying approaches to doing theology, we wholeheartedly and unanimously subscribe to the primacy of the Scriptures. Our commitment takes seriously the historical and the cultural contexts of the biblical writings.

We have felt the need for a theology that addresses both traditional spirituality and the contemporary situations of our peoples. A bold proclamation of God's redemptive activity culminating in Jesus Christ and concretized in history is imperative.

A biblical foundation for theology presupposes the church as the hermeneutical community, the witness of the Holy Spirit as the key to the comprehension of the Word of God, and contextualisation as the New Testament pattern for transposing the Gospel into different historical situations. We affirm that theology as a purely academic discipline is something we must neither pursue nor import. To be biblical, Evangelical theology must depend on sound exegesis, seek to edify the body of Christ, and motivate it for mission. Biblical theology has to be actualised in the servanthood of a worshipping and witnessing community called to make the Word of God live in our contemporary situations.

### **4. OUR THEOLOGICAL AGENDA**

We have been made aware that we have not given adequate attention to theological reflection dealing with the missionary task and the crucial issues of our own historical situations. Recognising the importance of theology in our ministry and the limitations of our theological production, we have been motivated to work out a tentative theological agenda.

Those of us in *Asia* will have to grapple with such questions as the resurgence of indigenous religions, the struggle for justice in the face of oppression, totalitarian ideologies and regimes, the tensions [p. 11](#) between traditional values, corruption, and modern consumerism. To this end we need to develop our hermeneutical tools. We must proclaim the finality of Jesus Christ in the context of universalistic and syncretistic tendencies expressed in some Asian theologies. The distinctive Asian qualities of spirituality, meditation and devotion, self-sacrifice and servanthood are to be tested and

utilized in developing our theology. We identify with suffering people in Asia and will seek to develop guidelines for our churches' life and witness in oppressive societies.

Those of us in *Africa* will have to take seriously the traditional African worldview, the reality of the spirit world, the competing ideologies, the resurgence of Islam and the contemporary cultural, religious and political struggles. Theology will have to explore ways of presenting the personal God and Jesus Christ as the only Mediator between God and man. Also, it will seek to respond to the quest of human identity in the context of the dehumanizing history of colonial exploitation, tribal feuds and racial discrimination.

Those of us in *Latin America* will have to forge theology from within a context in which the social, economic and political structures are in a state of disarray, unable to close the gap between the rich and the poor and to solve the problems created by economic and technological dependence. Theology will have to give priority to problems relating to justice and peace, the control of the arms race, the evangelistic implications of demographic and urban growth, the pathetic conditions of aboriginal peoples and other ethnic groups, the missiological challenge of popular religiosity and syncretism, the emergence of biblical and ecclesiastical renewal movements in and outside the Roman Catholic church, and the quest for Christian unity among Protestants of all persuasions.

Those of us in the *Caribbean* will have to address ourselves to the immanence of God in the past and present life situations of the Caribbean people; the relevance of Christ to their unique life situations; the dignity of man despite his depravity; the corporate dimension of sin; the horizontal dimension of salvation; the church as genuine community, its relationship to the world and its relevance to both itself and the world and the ethical imperatives of the interim period lying between the Christ event and the parousia.

Those of us in the *Pacific Islands* will have to address ourselves to such issues as the traditional worldview, the reality of spirit powers and nominalism within the churches. It will have to grapple with the tension between traditional values and the values being introduced by the processes of westernization, the problems produced by [p. 12](#) economic dependence and the presence of world powers using the region as a nuclear test site.

We all hold fast to the authority and inspiration of the Bible and to basic evangelical convictions such as the personality, love and justice of our sovereign God, the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, the regenerating and empowering of the Holy Spirit, the sinfulness and lostness of the human race, the need for repentance and faith, the life and witness of the church and the personal return of Jesus Christ. We express our unity and joyous commitment to God's mission in the world. As we theologize, we will seek to be faithful to the Word of God in spelling out the meaning and significance of biblical truth within our own particular contexts for the sake of obedience that comes through faith and to the glory of God.

## CONCLUSION

With all our different emphases and varying cultures, we have experienced the reality of our oneness in Jesus Christ. Our time together has deepened our understanding of the nature of the theological task and the urgent need of a theology that will enrich the life and mission of the church today. Therefore we commit ourselves to God for the building of a theology in obedient service of our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. [P. 13](#)

# A Latin American Critique of Western Theology

Ismael E. Amaya

*This article is abridged.*  
(Editor)

As the title of this paper suggests, its purpose is not academic, but rather practical; not so much to pursue investigation in order to break new ground, as to reflect on the theological situation already in existence in the Western world. In doing so we will touch on certain issues which I believe call for urgent consideration. This will be done not in a destructive critical spirit, but rather with a sincere desire to be objective and to confront reality. Therefore, in line with the realistic approach of our reflection, many quotes and examples are not necessarily taken from books, but rather from the historical reality of our Western world, and from personal reflection.

## TRADITIONAL WESTERN THEOLOGY

Traditionally, Western theology has been characterized by its systematic approach to the subject. The greatest Western theologians have been systematic theologians. In analyzing a bibliographical list of about one hundred theological books written by American and European theologians before 1940, I found in the titles the words “systematic”, “system” or “dogmatics” 26 times. As a contrast, the word “Biblical” appeared only once.

The main characteristic of the systematic theologian is that he begins his theologizing with theological categories like God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, etc., and attempts to give a systematic presentation of the doctrines of the Christian faith. The approach is dogmatic and the reasoning is philosophical and traditional rather than Biblical.<sup>1</sup> Under this approach, Biblical study is completely subordinated to ecclesiastical dogma. That is, the Biblical study is used only to reinforce the dogmatic teachings of the Church. Therefore, the source of dogmatic theology is not the Bible alone, but the Bible as interpreted by Church tradition. This was the theological mentality which prevailed in the traditional Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and even to our day. This mentality has also prevailed in most Protestant theology since the times of the reformation until the p. 14 beginnings of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> It is true that the reformers reacted against the unbiblical character of dogmatic theology and insisted that theology must be founded on the Bible alone. *Sola Scriptura* (“only the Scriptures”) became the motto of most reformers. They insisted on the study of the Biblical languages and emphasized the importance of a consciousness of the role of history in Biblical theology. They also insisted on the literal rather than the historical interpretation of the Bible. However, all this was soon lost in the post-reformation period, and the Bible was once again used uncritically and unhistorically to support orthodox doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> See Orlando Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Coverdale House Publishers, Inc., 1974), pp.221–231, where the author says that the theology of liberation is a “theological rebellion” against this form of doing theology.

<sup>2</sup> Some believe, for instance, that John Calvin was more dogmatic and authoritarian than the Pope.

But this Biblical theology which the Reformers fail to establish in the sixteenth century, was destined to resurrect again at a later time. After struggling through the rationalistic-philosophical-liberal historicism approach of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Biblical theology established itself on firm ground during the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The greatest contribution that Biblical theology has made to Christian thought is threefold: (1) the insistence that the Bible must be allowed to speak for itself, (2) that Biblical theology must be done from a starting point that is Biblical-historical in orientation, and (3) its commitment to sound, scholarly approach to exegesis.

But once again the “Biblical theology” movement has been pronounced dead and some have attempted to bury it for good.<sup>4</sup> According to Brevard Childs in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970), this crisis is due to the fact that the Biblical theology movement tried to combine a liberal critical methodology with a normative Biblical theology. In his opinion, Biblical theologians failed to bridge the gap between exegesis and theology. Whether this crisis in Biblical theology is temporary or permanent remains to be seen.

## WESTERN THEOLOGY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Western theology during the first half of the twentieth century has been characterized by the intense confrontations caused by the upheavals in the intellectual, economic and social spheres. These upheavals were produced by the scientific revolution which took place during the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

The scientific revolution was characterized by the inductive method of inquiry. This method is based on two assumptions in the quest for authentic knowledge: (1) direct observation and experimentation is the most reliable way of learning about any subject matter, and (2) rational analysis is the best judge of the reliability of knowledge. The scientific method works on the premise that truth must be found and tested by human experience and inductive thinking.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a succession of new intellectual developments based on the scientific method that decisively challenged orthodoxy, compelling Christianity to rethink and restate its traditional doctrine. One of these intellectual movements was introduced by Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* (1859), and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Such was the impact of his writings that within a decade or two most American scientists had been converted to the “new biology” with its theory of natural selection. But the influence of Darwin was not confined to biology. Evolutionary thinking permeated almost all intellectual areas. Especially, Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* was seen by many conservatives as a frontal attack on the Genesis version of the creation of man.

Even the study of the Bible was not exempt from the inroads of the new intellectual climate. A second challenge to orthodox Christianity developed when the techniques of “higher criticism”—originating mainly in German universities—were applied to the study of the Scriptures so that the Bible was studied with the same attitude and the same objective and scientific methods as those applied to any other ancient documents. What appeared to the critics to be errors and contradictions in the Biblical text were pointed out; questions of the date and authorship of the various books of the Bible were raised. Time-honoured beliefs, such as the conservative assumption that Moses himself had

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive survey of the literature on Biblical theology, especially New Testament theology, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the editorial in *Interpretation*, 23 (1969), pp.78–80, where R. Grant pronounced the movement a failure.

written the Pentateuch, were denied. From the perspective of the new sciences, the belief that the Bible enjoyed a unique status as a reliable, authoritative source of truth was challenged.

These developments and others, such as the beginnings of the studies of comparative religion, helped to create an atmosphere of intellectual ferment that put conservative<sup>5</sup> religion on the defensive, p. 16 encouraging the further spread of religious liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Among the Protestant Christians three broad positions of response to the new intellectual climate emerged.

First, some Christians, accepting wholeheartedly the discoveries and theories of science as well as the findings of the higher critics, sought to modify the traditional faith drastically in order to make it conform to the new scientific world view. This position became known as “scientific modernism”.

A second group tried to find an intermediate position somewhere between the extremes of total acceptance or total rejection of the new sciences, hoping that the essential of the Christian faith and the new sciences could be reconciled. This movement has been referred to as “evangelical liberalism”, and sometimes as “Christocentric liberalism.”

A third group resisted the new developments strongly, insisting on the retention of the traditional doctrines in an unchanged form and without compromise. Any modification of those doctrines was viewed as heresy, to be resisted at all cost. The conflict between liberals and conservatives that raged in the nineteenth century erupted in its most violent form in the Fundamentalist-<sup>7</sup>Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century.

The major Protestant theology from the late 1930s to the late 1950s has been labelled Neo-Orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> Its chief concern was the deliberate attempt to return to the teachings of the early Reformers, particularly Luther and Calvin.

The theologians representing this position were convinced that liberal Protestantism had perverted its heritage and changed the Christian faith into a religion different from that which was intended by the early Reformers. Theirs was a protest against liberalism, but not an affirmation of conservatism, although they held to some beliefs to which conservatives also subscribed.

This new movement was essentially a European phenomenon—virtually all of its original leaders were German, Swiss, or English. Its p. 17 influence on American theology was felt mainly in the theological seminaries and among the intelligentsia and less in the local congregations. It did not begin to dominate in the United States until the effects of the depression of the early 1930s began to take their toll on the human spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> A “conservative” has been described as possessing some of the following characteristics: theocratic, otherworldly, revelation, traditional, dogmatic.

<sup>6</sup> A “liberal” has been described as possessing some of the following characteristics: anthropocentric, naturalistic, rationalistic, revisionistic, pragmatic.

<sup>7</sup> A “fundamentalist” is one who subscribes to the five “fundamental” or basic doctrines of Christianity as defined by the Niagara Bible Conference of 1958: (1) the inerrancy of the Scriptures, (2) the virgin birth and divinity of Christ, (3) the belief that Christ took the place of sinners in his death on the cross, thus providing a “substitutionary atonement”, (4) the physical resurrection of Christ from his tomb, and (5) the bodily return of Christ to the earth in his Second Coming.

<sup>8</sup> Although “Neo-Orthodoxy” is the most common designation, it has also been labelled “Neo-Protestantism,” “the New Reformation,” and “Dialectical Theology”.

The problems with which these four responses dealt still remain very much part of the contemporary scene.<sup>9</sup>

With the “death” of the Death-of-God Theology and the spirit of secularism at the end of the sixties, theological thought expressed a peculiar interest in social issues.<sup>10</sup> Another phenomenon which is observed is that theologians confined their efforts primarily to one area of social change. The result was that in the 70’s we witness a splintering of theological thought giving rise to the different contemporary “theologies,” like Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology, etc.<sup>11</sup> We also witness a challenge to the spirit of secularism which has been labelled “new evangelicalism.”<sup>12</sup>

After having briefly surveyed the theological development in the North-Atlantic countries (Europe and the United States), we would now like to reflect on some of its weaknesses. In an attempt to be objective and realistic in our criticism, we would like to express in a very candid manner the way in which European-American theology is perceived from the Third World. This will not be done in a destructive critical spirit; rather our intention is to provide a constructive criticism. This does not mean either that there is nothing good to be said about Western Theology.<sup>13</sup>

In my concept most of the weaknesses of Western theology are p. 18 related to two main factors: ideology and technology. First we will analyze these two phenomena and then we will see how they have affected Western theology.

## THEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

When the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he made two profound observations about the religious life of America (United States). First he said that he found the “religious atmosphere” to be the first thing that strikes a visitor from abroad and concluded that “there is no country in the world where Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”<sup>14</sup> The second observation was much more meaningful. He described the religiousness of the New World as a religiousness “which I can only describe as democratic and republican.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent treatment of the literature and positions of the different theological currents during the first half of the twentieth century, see Deane William Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies—A Critical Survey* (New York: The Seabury Press), chap. 1. For an excellent treatment of the controversy during this same period, see George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, *Religion in America* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1975), chap. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of this, for instance, are “The Chicago Declaration” in which over forty leading evangelical leaders expressed their concern for the proper relationship between their faith and the world’s issues, and also the monthly magazine *Sojourners* founded by the People’s Christian Coalition.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the literature of these different theologies, see Deane William Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies—A Critical Survey*, *ibid.* chaps. 3–5 & Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom—Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> See Deane William Ferm, *ibid.*, chap. 6.

<sup>13</sup> It is a well known fact that Christians from all theological persuasions and traditions in the Third World benefit today by studying the Bible using the tool, the disciplines and the methodology developed by the excellent scholarship of the North.

<sup>14</sup> *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp.268 and 271.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.265

Tocqueville makes this statement based on his theory that “every religion has some political opinion linked to it by affinity.” Not just any “political opinion”, but a “congenial” political opinion. He believed that “the spirit of man, left to follow its bent, will regulate political society and the city of God in uniform fashion; it will ... seek to harmonize earth with heaven.”<sup>16</sup> Tocqueville’s observation seems to make sense,<sup>17</sup> except that in the case of the United States he could have turned it around for in this country it appears that the government has a congenial religious opinion linked to it, a civil religiousness.

The religious experience which has characterized the American context came into being at about the same time as the formation of the American Republic in the late eighteenth century. It is a well established fact, for instance, that one of the most cherished principles of American democracy, the principle of freedom of religion was established, not by the religious leaders of this country, p. 19 but rather by the political leaders who framed the American constitution, like Thomas Jefferson and Samuel Adams.<sup>18</sup> In the minds of these great leaders the principle of freedom of religion stood side by side with the other three freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

This civil religion<sup>19</sup> which has characterized the American religious context, has been expressed throughout the last two hundred years by both political and religious leaders. Nearly all colonial settlers thought of themselves as participating in the birth of a New Israel and couched their rhetoric in the language of the Old Testament. They constantly used the Exodus metaphor around which to organize their thoughts about their life in America. They thought of themselves as having been freed from the bondage and decadence of the Old World in order to enter into the New World—a land flowing with natural riches and spiritual freedom. This attitude was typical of virtually all colonial groups. In requesting a clergyman for South Carolina, for instance, the first governor wrote back home: “The Israelites’ prosperity decayed when their prophets were wanting, for where the ark of God is, there is peace and tranquility.”<sup>20</sup>

Samuel Adams was one of the first prominent political leaders to articulate American civil religion by putting the conflict with England in a Biblical framework. In his speech on

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> This is the case also of proponents of liberation theology, which is fighting for the oppressed class and preaching equality for all men, find a natural link with the political opinion of Marxism which also preaches equality and claims to stand in favour of the oppressed. See for instance José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975). He champions socialism as the vehicle of Latin-American liberalism and declares, in support of Karl Marx, that the proper role for theology is to transform, rather than to understand the world, and that Christians are called to participate in the class struggle by identifying with the oppressed.

<sup>18</sup> Most of the religious groups during the colonial period (Congregationalists, Anglicans, etc.), attempted to establish their own religion and impose it on others.

<sup>19</sup> “Civil religion” is a term utilized by scholars to express a sense of destiny in the American nation. The idea, for instance, that God was behind the formation of the United States, as he was behind the formation of the nation of Israel. This is seen, among other things, in the motto “In God we trust”, printed on the coins and bills of its monetary system. This is seen also in the idea that God is on the side of democracy, and therefore will never allow communism to overcome the United States. For a more complete treatment of the theme of civil religion, see George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, in *Religion in America*, *op. cit.* chap. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Edward McCrady, *An Historic Church: The Westminster Abbey of South Carolina—A Sketch of St. Phillip’s Church, Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, S.C.: Lucas and Richardson Co., 1901), quoted by George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, *ibid.*, page 32.

“American Independence” at the State House in Philadelphia on August 1, 1776, he likened America to ancient Israel. And then speaking of the prosperity and the military power of the United States, he adds:

There are instances of, I would say, an almost astonishing Providence in our favor; our success has staggered our enemies and almost given faith to infidels; so that we may truly say it is not our own arm which has saved us. The hand of heaven appears to have led us on to be perhaps humble p. 20 instruments and means in the great Providential dispensation which is completing. We have fled from the political Sodom; let us not look back, lest we perish and become a monument of infamy and derision to the world!<sup>21</sup>

In the religious front, the Puritans dreamed of establishing in the New World what they had been unable to establish in England—the “Holy Commonwealth.” But in a real sense, the overwhelming majority of the new settlers, whatever their religious connections, shared in the Puritan dream of a decisively new and better world.

In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, generally regarded as the greatest theologian produced in America until the twentieth century, saw the Great Awakening—the remarkable spiritual awakening in the eighteenth century—as clear proof that America was indeed the New Promised Land, and so he expresses it in *The History of the Work of Redemption*.<sup>22</sup> In his work *Thoughts on the Revival*, in a section entitled “The Latter-Day Glory is probably to begin in America,” he expresses his conviction that God has chosen America (the United States) as the final scenario for the manifestation of his glory. And then he adds:

And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely, of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise. And, if these things be so, it give us more abundant reason to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day.<sup>23</sup>

This concept, that America is the *New Israel*, the new chosen people of God, has prevailed, perhaps undetected, in the theological thought of American Christianity. Much of the motivation behind the colossal effort to support the gigantic missionary enterprise around the world, is the conviction that God has raised America—especially Anglo-Saxon America—as the *vessel of redemption* of the world.<sup>24</sup>

In the United States, for instance, the “American dream” from the p. 21 beginning of the Republic has been a democratic form of government. The American constitution is based on the four basic principles of human freedom: (1) freedom of speech, (2) freedom of the press, (3) freedom of assembly, and (4) freedom of religion. I personally believe that these four principles are the noblest principles which man could ever have dreamed of. Freedom is the most cherished possession of any mortal being. But freedom, when misused, is a very dangerous thing. That is why democracy is a paradox, because at the

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Moore, ed., *American Eloquence* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), p.329.

<sup>22</sup> *The Works of President Edwards* (London: Hughes and Baynes, 1817), vol. V, p.221

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>24</sup> Until a few years ago the only individuals who could qualify for missionary appointment in some denominations were Anglo-Saxon (Americans, Canadians, Europeans). Those Americans belonging to minority groups, like black, latino, oriental, were advised not to apply.

same time that it attempts to protect man's freedom it leaves the doors open for the abuse of that freedom. Therefore democracy carries within itself the seed of its own destruction.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF THEOLOGICAL "NEAR-SIGHTEDNESS"**

In the western world, democracy, in the process of protecting the principles of human freedom, has fostered some "illegitimate children" which now threaten to destroy it. In my opinion, one of the problems with western theology is that because it has developed within the democratic system and it is congenial with it, it has developed a theological "near-sightedness" which has prevented it from detecting these evils and therefore it has not let its prophetic voice be heard on these issues.

One of the direct by-products of democracy is capitalism. Capitalism is based on the principle of "free enterprise," that is the "unlimited freedom" that a person or a corporation has under this system to accumulate goods. But when one puts this principle of free enterprise with the basic greedy spirit of man's nature you are bound to have a problem. This peculiar combination has produced in the Western world some phenomena with which Western theology has not dealt adequately. We shall mention but three of them.

### **(a) The Problem of Riches**

One of the direct results of democracy is riches. The principle of free enterprise has given rise to gigantic and powerful corporations.<sup>25</sup> At the same time it has produced some unbelievably rich individuals who own their own financial empires and control a large part of the world's riches.<sup>26</sup> Below the "multi-millionaire class" is the much p. 22 larger "rich class," and below it is the "middle class" which comprises the majority of the population of the North Atlantic nations. It is estimated that in the United States, for instance, out of a population of almost 250 million, nearly 200 million belong in one of these three categories. Among them are most of the more than 60 million Americans who can be found in a Christian church almost any given Sunday. Prosperity is one of the main characteristics of the American church-goer. The typical Anglo-Saxon congregation is made up of well dressed and well groomed people, representing at least a middle class mentality, among which a poorly dressed and uneducated person would feel uncomfortable.

But in spite of this reality Western theology has not dealt adequately with the issue of riches. Although the Bible had much to say about riches, the Western theologian—consciously or unconsciously—has failed to deal with this important issue. Do the words of Jesus "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" ([Matt. 19:24](#)), have any meaning for a rich society?<sup>27</sup>

### **(b) The Problem of Abundance and Waste**

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<sup>25</sup> So powerful are some of these corporations that it is estimated that during the current recession the three largest auto-makers combined have lost during the last two years more than 2 billion dollars and still managed to stay in business.

<sup>26</sup> As an example of this affluence, Jacqueline Onassis boasts of the fact that she possesses over 1,200 coats.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that there are no poor people in the United States. The latest issue of *U.S. News and World Report* (August, 1982), reports that there are 32 million Americans who are classified in the category of poverty.

Very closely related to the problem of riches is the problem of abundance and waste. It is estimated that the food and clothing which is wasted in the Western world would be enough to feed and clothe the poor population of the world. But although politicians have expressed deep concern about this issue,<sup>28</sup> Western theology has not addressed the issue of the relationship of abundance and waste to the Christian responsibility to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and help the sick.

### **(c) The Problem of Overeating and Obesity**

While one third of the population of the world goes to bed every night hungry and worrying about what they are going to eat the next day, the average American Christian goes to bed worrying about how he or she can eat less in order to lose weight. While thousands of people starve to death every day around the world, the problem of the typical American child is to decide every morning which kind of [p. 23](#) cereal to have for breakfast, and the problem of many adult Christians is to decide in which restaurant they are going to eat.

In spite of the relevance of this situation, to the Christian life Western theologians have remained strangely silent concerning the relationship of obesity and gluttony to the Biblical principle that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 6:19](#)).

## **THEOLOGY AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY**

The second phenomenon which has influenced Western theology, especially in the United States of America, is modern technology.<sup>29</sup> We live in the age of explosions. And one of the most amazing of them is the “technological explosion.” This technological explosion through the aid of computers and artificial satellites has increased man’s knowledge and his capacity to learn at an unbelievable pace. This in turn has forced on us the age of “specialization”. In the United States to have a degree is not enough. Unless you can add the word “specialist” to your degree you are doomed to fail in your profession. The degree of specialization is such that a lung specialist will not dare treat a heart patient, or vice-versa. The same could be said about automobile mechanics.

Teaching has not escaped the age of specialization. The most coveted degree in the United States is a Ph.D., a very highly specialized degree.<sup>30</sup> To obtain a Ph.D. is a sign of “having arrived”. For a northern theologian to be well versed in other disciplines like Biblical Literature, Church history, Philosophy, etc., is the exception rather than the rule.<sup>31</sup> When to a colleague of mine—a specialist in theology—it was suggested that he might have to teach New Testament introduction for one quarter, he blushed, and excused himself by saying, “Oh no, I can’t teach New Testament; I’m a theology man.” [p. 24](#)

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<sup>28</sup> A recent dispatch said that a group of concerned U.S. Senators, in order to dramatize the problem of waste, organized a banquet entirely with wasted food picked up from garbage cans.

<sup>29</sup> In the last regional meeting of the Institute Research Westcoast (March, 1982) a specialist on computers spoke of a monumental project in which she is involved in programming the Bible in its original languages, added that “those scholars who are not experts in computers will not be able to compete in the new generation of computer-minded scholars.”

<sup>30</sup> I was told of a Ph.D in English who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the use of the word “if” but said he didn’t know much about the preposition “but”.

<sup>31</sup> The Latin American Theological Fraternity is one such exception. The members of the Fraternity are not necessarily “theologians” but rather representatives of many different disciplines—Church historians, secular historians, sociologists, anthropologists, pastors, etc.

## CONSEQUENCES OF SPECIALIZATION

This phenomenon of specialization has isolated the North Atlantic theologians in their own discipline depriving them of the benefits of an inter-disciplinary scholarship. This situation has produced two major problems which have characterized much of northern theology.

### “IVORY-TOWER” THEOLOGY

This profound sense of “specialization” and “professionalism” has led the theologian to develop an “ivory-tower” theology, produced mostly in the office and in the library. This type of theology, which is a mere academic exercise and is usually out of touch with reality, is destined to be shortlived.

The best example of this is the death-of-God theology, and the spirit of “Secularism” of the 1960’s. By the end of the 60’s the death-of-God theology, which made headlines at the beginning of the decade even in the secular press (*Time* magazine dramatized the proclamation of the “death of God” on the cover of one of its issues), had virtually vanished. By the end of the decade most death-of-God theologians and those theologians who were proponents of secularism had either greatly modified their position, or were not taken seriously, or had stopped doing theology.

Although the fleeting popularity of the death-of-God theology was due in part to exaggerations by the public press which precipitated both its dramatic rise and rapid fall, the weakness of this type of theology was clear. Not only was it an “ivory tower” theology which consisted only of an academic exercise, but also it tended to accept uncritically the notion that secularization is a good thing, and capitulated to the narrow and arbitrary concerns of the modern world. As Deane William Ferm says, “the death-of-God theologians failed to heed the warning of the philosopher George Santayana that he who becomes married to the spirit of the times is destined to become a widower in the next generation”.<sup>32</sup>

### LACK OF TOUCH WITH REALITY

This phenomenon of specialization has produced theology out of touch with reality. Although the new sub-theologies are attempting to correct this, still it is an unquestionable fact that North American P. 25 theology has not dealt with some of the basic issues which prevail in western society. We will mention only three of them.

#### Ecology

We have always taken the beauty of this world for granted. We thanked the Creator for its grandeur and majesty in our hymns and prayers, but at the same time failed to relate to creation. The command to subdue the earth and have dominion over it ([Genesis 1:28](#)), has been interpreted by man as permission to exploit it.

As a consequence, the ecological crisis is more serious than many of us believe. The experts who are analyzing the information which is available are alarmed at the gravity of the world situation today. We are contaminating the atmosphere, the oceans, the rivers

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<sup>32</sup> *Contemporary American Theology—A Critical Survey, op.cit., p.35*

and the fields. Not only that, but the earth is running out of resources so essential for the survival of mankind such as water, air, energy and food.<sup>33</sup>

Although we believe that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” ([Psalm 24:1](#)) the neglect of the natural world in the theology of the North-Atlantic is undeniable. Only in the last decade have we witnessed some theological concern for the condition of the world in which we live.<sup>34</sup> But no in-depth treatment has been attempted on this subject.

### **The Social Problems**

Northern theology has failed to deal with the social problems which are undermining the very moral foundations of the northern nations.

The problems of divorce seem to be getting out of control. After generations of indiscriminately condemning divorce and refusing to deal with this issue, suddenly the church is discovering that a great number of the people who sit in the pews on Sunday morning are divorced people.

The problems of drugs among the adult population, especially in professional sports and the entertainment world is appalling. Also youth are caught in the drug problem. A law officer said not long ago concerning this problem, that if they had to put behind bars all those who engage in the consumption of drugs in California, they would have to jail half of the population. Many churches are beginning to p. 26 have serious problems with drugs among their youth, but as yet, theology has not addressed this problem.

The problem of corruption and immorality both private and public in the United States is shocking the public. Crime is running rampant. The underworld seem to have a free hand in the government, the unions, and the business world in general. Why is it that Christian ethics have not made a greater impact in American society? In a recent trip to communist China, the author was impressed by the high degree of personal ethics of the average Chinese, a people who do not claim to be religious.

### **Civil Rights**

The struggle for civil rights has been a perennial one in the United States, a struggle which almost tore the country apart in the 1960s. Politicians, students and the average citizen could not avoid being involved in it. But somehow the church managed to keep silent during the turmoil. Theology had nothing to say.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is the responsibility of each generation to declare the Christian truth within the framework of its own time and situation. Therefore, if our theology is going to be relevant for the “here and now” we must have cultural sensitivity. Our task is not to make theology *per se*, but rather, we must be concerned with what Charles H. Kraft calls Christian “ethnotheology”,<sup>35</sup> which he defines as that discipline “that takes both Christian theology

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the ecological crisis see Dayton Roberts, *Running Out* (Glendale, California: Regal Books, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> For a survey of what has been written on the subject, see John Carmody, *Theology for the 1980's* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), chap. 2.

<sup>35</sup> See Kraft’s excellent essay on the subject, “Towards Christian Ethnotheology,” in *God, Man and Church Growth*, ed. A. R. Tippet (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973) pp.109–126.

and anthropology while devoting itself to an interpretative approach to the study of God, man and divine-human interaction.”<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, what relevance does this situation have for the Third World church? Very much indeed, for at least two reasons:

First, whether we want to admit it or not, the Third World church is the “daughter” or the product of the so-called “mother church” in the north. As children the Third World churches have inherited the North Atlantic theological mentality. Until a few years ago all we had was an imported theology, which was being applied around the world without any attempt to contextualize it.<sup>37</sup> p. 27

Second the difference between the political, economic, sociological and ecclesiological situation in the countries of the North Atlantic and the countries of the Third World, is as great as the difference between day and night. The contrast between riches and poverty, abundance and hunger, gluttony and starvation, is obvious. But in spite of these differences as members of the same body of Christ, the church, should not forget that our task is first and foremost missiological.

I agree with the northern theologians that it is high time that the Third World and North Atlantic theologians entered into a meaningful dialogue.<sup>38</sup> But I disagree with them in that we Third World theologians refuse to dialogue with them. I believe that Third World theologians are as anxious to dialogue as our North Atlantic counterparts are, but I believe that this dialogue will not be possible until the theologians of the North Atlantic experience what René Padilla calls “an epistemological conversion”. Then and only then will we engage in a meaningful dialogue.

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**Dr. Ismael Amaya teaches at Nazarene College, San Diego, California, U.S.A. p. 28**

# **An African Critique of Western Theology**

**Billy K. Simbo**

The topic under consideration is very extensive and challenging. One could pursue many possible angles of approach and points of emphasis, but time and space do not allow for a detailed, technical study. I have, therefore, chosen to give a non-technical, brief analysis. I will examine western theology purely from the perspective of a Third World person from Africa.

By western theology we mean the western Christian’s beliefs and formulations concerning God and man’s relationship with Him. We shall treat the subject under two headings. Under the first we will examine the origins and background of Western

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, page 110.

<sup>37</sup> In 1970, in the first consultation of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Samuel Escobar dealt with this phenomenon in his paper “The Biblical Content and the Anglo-Saxon Trappings in Latin American Theology”, in *Occasional Bulletin*, §3, Oct., 1972.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance, “An Open Letter to Josée Miguez Bonino,” in *Christianity and Crisis*, March 29, 1976, in response to his book *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*.

Theology. Under the second heading we will examine what we see as the outcome of this Theology.

## THE ROOTS OF WESTERN THEOLOGY

Western Christians and their theology have, on the whole, failed to apply Christian principles to their societies. The edifices and institutions of Christianity are still there, but their marks on their social, political, economic contexts are often minuscule, if not in most cases absent altogether. Western society has, to a large extent, been portrayed by its Christian representatives as a “Christian” society but unbelief, as seen in secularism and materialism, can easily be found in this society upon casual examination. And these pagan value systems are rapidly being exported to Third World countries at alarming rates.

Because the context of western theology has its milieu in western culture, it will be helpful to begin this critique with an examination of western culture and how it has affected western theology. Without doubt, the key emphasis in western culture and the context that sets it apart in our world is its philosophical and empirical bent. Almost unanimously, Third World observers are struck by the philosophical orientation of western culture. This intellectual and scientific orientation forms the dominant characteristic of western society as we know it today. Later, we shall show how this cultural trait affects western theology. Descartes would express this mentality in the phrase “Cogito, ergo sum,” i.e., “I think, therefore, I am.”<sup>1</sup>

The westerner interacts with reality on a philosophical level. The p. 29 world views and cultures of the Third World do not generally have this interest, almost fascination, with abstract ideas and intellectualism.<sup>2</sup>

From where then did western culture and its theology get this philosophical orientation? The roots of this orientation can be traced back to Hellenistic culture. The Greeks were preoccupied with “knowledge” for its own sake and as an end in itself. For them knowledge was detached, impersonal learning.<sup>3</sup>

This interest is similar to western pursuits in education where each year hundreds of theses and dissertations are written that have no bearing on the realities of life. Plato’s *Republic* elevated philosophers to the top status in society. Although philosophy as an academic discipline does not patently exert such strong influence in western society today, we cannot help but observe that the mental or intellectual approach to life permeates every aspect of western culture. There is no other area in which this is so clearly displayed as in theology. A good proportion of western theology operates on such an abstract philosophical level that the average lay-person is often unable to understand what the theologian is saying. Also, pastors find that upon graduation from seminary they

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse* (1596–1650), Part IV, p.26, quoted Collin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> We see this vividly demonstrated when one compares the concepts of heaven as held by western oriented believers and Third World oriented believers. The westerner will speak of heaven as a place of peace, love, joy, and contentment, which are all abstract concepts. By contrast, the Third World person will speak in concrete terms of food, friends, home, fruits, etc., which are all tangible realities to which he can relate. Compare his concept of heaven with the graphic description of heaven given by the Apostle John in [Revelation 21:9–22:5](#).

<sup>3</sup> See J. L. Leuba, “Know,” *A Companion to the Bible*, J. J. von Allmen, ed: (New York, 1959), p.221. For the African, knowing is more than just intellectual comprehension, it is experiencing.

have to leave behind their sophisticated theological discussions and concerns in order to deal with real-life situations in the parish ministry.<sup>4</sup>

We also observe that just as the discipline of theology has been affected by the discipline of philosophy, so theology has been influenced by prevailing philosophical trends.<sup>5</sup> An acquaintance with p. 30 church history of the latter Middle Ages underscores this point. Thomas Aquinas (The Angelic Doctor) and other theologians of his day used philosophical arguments to substantiate Christian truth. For them *Natural Theology* with its secular philosophical arguments provided the intellectual basis of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

We are acquainted with western theologians today who have rejected supernatural realities because they did not conform to secular philosophical trends of the day. We are not advocating, however, that Christians should abandon their intellects or refrain from relating Christianity to philosophy. As someone has pointed out, "Theologians should be more than philosophical apologists. Their critical role should be one of evaluating the faithfulness of the church to her calling."<sup>7</sup>

Western theologians have tended to reduce Christianity to a mere "philosophy" understood only in terms of intellectual "belief;" that is, something to which one gives intellectual assent but which does not necessarily produce life-changing commitment. So far we have tried to explain the roots of western theology. This theology has come out of a rationalistic and intellectual approach to life. The context is scientific empiricism. Its modern roots can also be traced to the intellectualism and scholasticism of the Renaissance.

## THE RESULTS OF WESTERN THEOLOGY

As Third World Christians, we owe a debt of gratitude to western Christianity and its theology. We give thanks for many valid and costly contributions to the spread of the faith in the Third World made by missionaries and other workers from the Western World. They have enjoyed a substantial degree of success in many places because the original planting of the gospel and the immediate instructions in discipleship training were done by western missionaries. Western theology with its philosophical and intellectual emphasis has helped us to "be always prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls us to account for the hope that is in us" ([1 Peter 3:15](#)). Furthermore, western theologians have, in great measure, grappled with their cultural realities and have made the Gospel meaningful and acceptable to their cultures. However, this attempt to be meaningful and relevant has been abused, resulting in what could be described as "accommodating theology." P. 31

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<sup>4</sup> Western Christians are often amazed by the power to communicate of Third World preaching. This preaching is down-to-earth and employs real-life situations in story or parable form. (The same is true of Black preaching in the U.S.A.). Consequently, this preaching produces commitment and is the only kind of preaching that captures and holds the interest of Third World listeners.

<sup>5</sup> Brown says, "For good or ill (and all too often it was the latter) philosophical ideas entered the blood stream of medieval theology and this, in turn, affected the life and thought of Christianity in the later ages" (page 12). The same idea is expressed by Francis Schaeffer in *Escape From Reason* (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Brown, page 34, and also church history of the late 1300's and 1400's.

<sup>7</sup> "Organic Christian Faith," an unpublished class paper by Ronald G. Mitchell at New York Theological Seminary.

Our Christian faith is not mere “believism” but is based on sound historical revelation. So we thank our western brethren for their enormous contribution. The points that follow are, therefore, meant not to deride western theology or to condemn it as worthless, but to examine its out-workings in both western and Third World contexts. This will help us avoid the same mistakes and pitfalls as we formulate our own theology for the Third World.

If I were presenting a sermon or Bible study at this consultation, I would have expounded James chapter two which deals with the theme “faith without works is dead.”<sup>8</sup> Western theology has failed to deliver the goods it promises. The roots and context of western theology would seem to justify its failure to put belief into action. We may catalogue the failures of western theology as follows.

Western theology emphasizes the intellectual and theoretical. People who accept a set of beliefs are called Christians even though, in actual practice, these beliefs have no effect on their life styles. It had been assumed that western nations were “Christian” because the people in those societies professed Christian beliefs. We see now, however, that Christian principles do not actually dictate how most of these people live. Rather, secular culture shapes their lives and values. In most cases, western Christianity has generally conformed to secular culture. To a Third World person, this dichotomizing of personality is a major problem. This dichotomy often separates Christianity from western political, economic and social life. Third World peoples have often wondered where the theology and Christian principles of their western brethren were when they needed answers to burning issues such as slavery, racism, apartheid, economic and social exploitation and oppression of the masses. Western theology either became a silent by-stander or in many instances, such as slavery, racism, and apartheid, it was used to justify the status quo. Little wonder then that alternate systems of theology, with roots in the Third World, have been developed to try to find scriptural answers to social problems. Our faith *must* confront the issues of our society. Western theology has often lead to an “Ivory-Tower” mentality among theologians who live in their own world in the clouds while the real world struggles with problems as to what to eat, wear, and drink. Western theologians are busy discussing how many authors wrote the book of Genesis or are fighting over biblical inerrancy, while Third World Christians take every word in the Bible as inerrant. Are Third World Christians naïve [p. 32](#) or stupid?<sup>9</sup> No! We just begin with God and life realities and everything else is possible. But when theology begins with human reason, then God’s sovereignty is ruled out.

Western theology has failed to address the real issues which affect how a person lives out what he claims to believe. This theology has been silent for too long and has often been manipulated to conform to “the system”. No wonder people in western society have turned their backs on the established churches. We are seeing unprecedented rebellion amongst youth. They hear the creeds of western Christians and they also see their contradictory practices. As Third World Christians we should learn from their mistakes and learn quickly. The so-called “indigenous Churches” of Africa are thriving because they don’t dwell on catechism or creeds but their whole life is one entire religious continuum encompassing birth, marriage, sowing, growing, and harvesting.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A good treatment of this point is by Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm in *Your God Is Too White* (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Doubleday, New York, 1970).

On the mission field, western theology has tended to be very paternalistic. It has failed to adapt to life situations and often makes unreasonable demands on people, rewarding only those who break away from their culture and become “westernized.” The failure of missionaries to develop indigenous churches is due, in part, to the fact that subjects such as cultural anthropology and social sciences were not considered relevant to mission work until the church growth movement underscored their importance. Previously, the goal was “to change the people” and make them “Christian” and “civilized.” Western Christianity was equated with “civilization.” As Third World Christians, we are grateful for the attitudinal changes of missionaries in this area which have led to greater results in winning people to Christ.

What then is the difference, if any, between western theology and Third World theology? The secret lies, as Mitchel has pointed out, in the Hebraic thought pattern of Third World Cultures. There are amazing similarities between the Old Testament world-view and cultures and that of Third World cultures, particularly African culture.<sup>11</sup> p. 33

For western theology to survive it must produce a new understanding of faith which places emphasis not on philosophizing and theologizing (there is a place and time for these) but on faith that can be translated into life styles that are distinctly Christian and God-honouring. We Third World theologians must learn from the mistakes of the past but avoid isolationism in our theologizing. At the same time we must also avoid the strong temptation to legalism which would lead to “works without faith.”

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The Rev. Billy K. Simbo is Principal, Sierra Leone Bible College, Freetown, Sierra Leone. p. 34

# An Asian Critique of Western Theology

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<sup>11</sup> The following are two of many possible examples: (1) Hannah’s suffering over her barrenness and the taunt of the other wife ([1 Samuel 1-2](#)) will be easily understood by women in Africa because similar situations are common in Africa. (2) The parable of the friend at midnight ([Luke 11:6ff](#)) arouses sympathy in the heart of a typical African because the sleeping arrangements in his home are similar.

# Han Chul-Ha

## OUR CONCERN

What is our concern as we, evangelical theologians, come together to share our views on “Evangelical Theology”? Our common concern is to hold fast to the biblical faith which has been distorted by and large by various forms of western theology. Not all western theology caused this distortion. Until recently the biblical faith has been seriously recognized as the eternal truth. Attempts have been made to comprehend and expound the Bible in all its portions and aspects. Until the modern period, that is, when natural science made a rationalistic impact upon the mind of mankind and technological culture transformed the actual lifestyle of modern man, the truth of biblical revelation has maintained its integrity. Of course, there arose various forms of heretical faith because of the impact from non-Christian or extra-biblical religions. But there was not a basic disbelief in the invisible realities and metaphysical worlds. It is at the point of this disbelief of modern scientific rationalism concerning anything beyond the world of time and space or the sensible world, that modern western theology came in conflict with biblical faith. Modern western theology, however, made an attempt to escape from this fundamental conflict with the biblical beliefs through its typical methodology. This attempt to escape has been made by abstracting out a certain meaning from the integral faith of the Bible. Instead of taking the literal truth of the Scriptures, the method of abstraction is used, helping the modern western theologian to eliminate most of the stumbling blocks of biblical truth except for certain fundamental truths which vary, in fact, according to the system builder. It is with this background that “hermeneutics” has become a most important factor in recent years. The fundamental message of the Bible is considered to be culturally conditioned. Consequently, the dynamic equivalence of the biblical truth must be formulated in terms of every new cultural situation. Some scholars call this a process of demytho-logization as well as a process of mythologization in terms of a new mythical structure.

## THE METHODOLOGY OF MODERN WESTERN THEOLOGY

In this methodology of theology, i.e., the method of reductionism or reducing the entire Christian truth to one particular idea, there is no distinction between the nineteenth century theology which Karl P. 35 Barth named, “Bewusstseins theologie” and the twentieth century theology influenced by existentialism. While nineteenth century theology took a certain biblical message in the form of a philosophical concept as a hermeneutical principle, the Bultmannians took the existential self-understanding of man as an hermeneutical principle. In spite of the extreme variety of western theology, there are several common characteristics in all of those systems. First, they are logically consistent systems which are established upon certain fundamental concepts, such as the idea of “moral conscience” in the system of Immanuel Kant, Schleiermacher’s “the immediate consciousness of absolute dependence,” Ritschli’s “the moral kingdom of God,” Hegel’s “the Weltgeist,” Berdjaey’s “the freedom,” Teilhard de Chardin’s “the evolutionary Cosmogenesis,” Tillich’s “the being,” Bultmann’s “the existential self-understanding,” Pannenberg’s “revelation in the mirror of history,” Moltmann’s “hope,” etc.

## THE POWER HAS BEEN LOST

Secondly, since all these Cartesian theologians appropriate biblical revelation to various forms of human understanding, the reality and power are stripped from God and His revelation. The spiritual reality of God and the manifestation of His power in redemptive history is indeed the fundamental characteristic of God, the Lord of Israel, and Christ Jesus, the Lord of the Church. The unanimous teaching of the Old Testament is to worship, trust and love only Jehovah, the God of Israel, and no other God. The fundamental element in this faith is the reality of this God who will not fail to save one who trusts in Him. Consequently, the history of the Old Testament is the history of the manifestations of the saving power of Jehovah, the God of Israel. The fundamental teaching of the OT is that God is reliable and He is the only existing God. His power, His wisdom, His righteousness, His love and mercy are constantly praised as of the eternal, infinite, and incomprehensible God.

In the New Testament we discover that the same faith continues among the apostles. It was their concern that the God of their fathers continue to manifest His power through Jesus Christ, His Son. The same God of the OT now approves the new way of salvation with the accompaniment of signs and wonders. At Pentecost, Peter stood up before the Jews and all foreigners and declared that Jesus of Nazareth was a man approved of God by miracles and wonders and signs which God did through Him. It was the power of God which was [p. 36](#) demonstrated through Jesus Christ when the lame man at the gate of the temple stood up and walked. Peter declared that the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified His Son Jesus. When Philip preached Christ at Samaria, the same miracles and signs were performed through him. At Ephesus "God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them" ([Acts 19:11](#), 12). Therefore, He declares that He is "not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth ..." ([Rom. 1:16](#)) and he wrote to the Thessalonians "... our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance ..." ([1 Thess. 1:5](#)). He wrote to the Corinthians the same words: "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" ([1 Cor. 2:4, 5](#)).

Now the modern western theology is doing exactly the opposite of what Paul did, that is, it presents the gospel in terms of "enticing words of man's wisdom" rather than in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Thus, the faith of modern western theologians stands mainly on the wisdom of men rather than on the power of God.

Of course, the reality and existence of God and the manifestation of His power are not the only principles of God which we hold fast according to biblical faith. In the Bible we can find immense spiritual riches which are indeed beyond human comprehension such as the classical formulations about His perfections: *His aseity*, that is He is none other than He Himself. God is the Initiator and no one can dare to take an initiative before Him unless the power of initiative is given to him from God. God is indeed self-caused as His name indicates in the Bible, namely: "I AM THAT I AM" ([Ex. 3:13](#)) and "I AM THE LORD, the First and the Last: I AM HE" ([Is. 4:4](#)). *His immensity*, that is, His replete omnipresence within His created worlds and all things therein. *His eternity* as the perfection of God as often expressed by "the incommunicable attribute" and those perfections of God as the personal Spirit: wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, mercy, and love in all their absolute, divine, majesty.

Even though these expressions in human words are not adequate to guide us to the very divine Source Himself, yet they try to assess the biblical faith of God, distorting less

than those modern western theological formulations which take their wrong methodology from [p. 37](#) the very inception by not taking seriously the biblical literal teaching. Consequently, those formulations are doomed to depart from the biblical faith from the very beginning. Since they are concerned with their own “ideas”, they screen the divine perfections through the glasses of their “ideas” and lose sight particularly of the reality of God and His power!

## THE INVISIBLE DIMENSION WAS LOST

Because of the secularistic spirit of modern western theology, it has completely lost the spiritual dimension of the biblical faith, that is, the major portion of the reality in the divine economy of creation and redemption. Since their view is confined to the space, time, and lifespan of human individuals, biblical faith of the larger and wider economy of God, which goes far beyond the scope of the visible world, has been lost. Scripture starts with the account of the creation of heaven and the earth.

The Bible, however, proceeds immediately to describe the creation of the universe. This does not signify that we have nothing to do with heaven; otherwise, it would not be mentioned at all. The grand reality of the glorious heavens is always taken for granted in biblical faith primarily because the reality of God goes far beyond the visible world. In [Genesis 2](#), in regard to the creation, it is written: “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” ([Gen. 2:4](#)). Then the Bible proceeds to teach the creation of the earth. Here again the Bible does not give a detailed account of the creation of the heavens; instead, it was taken for granted. In fact, the whole purpose for the creation of man in this universe should be to bring up children of the heavens. The invisible things are revealed only through the visible things.

Now the Bible teaches that the glory of God is far beyond the heavens. The Bible is the book which tells what has happened on the earth from the beginning to the last day. But from the first page to the last, it presupposes the reality of the heavens which encompasses the earth, the seas, and all things therein. The visible world is a smaller portion of the entire created world so that the grandeur and glory of the invisible things may manifest the greatness and glory of God. “O LORD our Lord!” the psalmist exclaims, “How excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens” ([Psalm 8:1](#)). “For thy mercy is great above the heavens: and thy truth reacheth unto the clouds. Be thou exalted, O God, above the [p. 38](#) heavens: And thy glory above all the earth” ([Psalm 108:4, 5](#)). The proper place of God is always conceived to be above the heavens, although His glory is manifested in all of His creation. “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high, who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!” ([Psalm 113:4–6](#)). Throughout the OT it is written that His place of dwelling is in heaven, but He comes down to the earth to tabernacle. Solomon after constructing the Temple prayed to the God who hears from heaven, His dwelling place: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee, how much less this house that I have builded?” ([1 Ki. 8:27](#)). The heaven of heavens cannot contain God, yet He hears “in heaven His dwelling place” the prayers offered in the Temple.

God, who is a Spirit, is invisible. Because of the invisible spiritual nature of God, the spiritual invisible realm which is directly related to Him is considered to be more primary than His visible creatures. In fact, this world is limited with finitude and consequently everything is relative. Then how absurd it is to put the ultimate reality in terms of this relative world and deny the reality of things which pertain to the spiritual and the

absolute. When it is said that “things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” ([Heb. 11:3](#)), it indicates that the primary existence and reality must be attributed with “things hoped for” and “things not seen” ([Heb. 11:1](#)), because the relative, finite, and visible things must be determined by something other than themselves.

The contemporary western theology cannot attribute to God the expression “existence.” When this is done, God is placed side by side with other existing things. Therefore, Tillich declares: “God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him (Syst. 1. p.205). The problem arises when the modern mind ascribes the final and ultimate reality to the existence of the visible world. Biblical faith, on the contrary, views the primary and absolute reality only in God and conceives His existence above all; other created beings derive their existence only from God. It was from this secular spirit that the Confession of the U. P. Church in the U.S.A. in 1907 came to limit its scope to the world of space, time, and lifespan from birth to death and a wide complex of social relations.

In this situation, indeed, there is no way to truly overcome “the anxiety of finitude” which Tillich discusses. He cannot deny the fact that “even a physical doctrine of the finitude of space cannot keep [p. 39](#) the mind from asking what lies beyond finite space” (*ibid.*, p.190). Tillich admits “the potential presence of the infinite (as unlimited self-transcendence)” or the concept of “infinity” directing the mind to experience its own “unlimited potentiality”. Although he insists that this concept of infinity does not establish the existence of an infinite being, yet he admits that human beings cannot be content in being limited to this finite world and even experience the potential presence of the infinite. This seems to go far beyond the presupposition of the U. P. Church’s Confession of 1907.

If we limit our scope of life to the world of space, time, and lifespan, are we any different from the animals? The apostle Paul argues, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” ([1 Cor. 15:19](#)). He warns us not to be deceived. “If ... I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die. Be not deceived ...” ([1 Cor. 15:32–33a](#)).

Jesus taught that our God is our “Father in heaven”. He commands us to do our alms in secret so that “thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly” ([Matt. 6:4](#)) and to pray to “thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward the openly” ([Matt. 6:6](#)). He also taught us to pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. How comforting are the words in John chapter [14](#) to the believers

Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you ... and I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also ([Jn. 14:1–3](#)).

In response to this promise, Paul declared that he had “a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better” ([Phil. 1:23](#)). Therefore, He admonishes us to “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” ([Col. 3:1](#)). Paul was thoroughly convinced of the matter: “For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” ([Phil. 3:20](#)).

What I am trying to indicate is that the modern western theologians lost a very important dimension of man, that is, the spiritual. This has been an important heritage of mankind because human beings are spiritual beings, a distinction from the beasts. The modern scientific worldview created a secularistic spirit, and so modern man has lost scope of the larger world beyond the visible world. If we recover biblical faith, we may

cure the eyes of modern man and restore his [p. 40](#) sight, "If, therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" ([Matt. 6:23](#)).

## **THE WORD OF BARTHIAN THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW**

It is surprising to discover the resurgence of Barthian theology even after repeated vital criticism made by both conservatives and modernists, such as Cornelius Van Til, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, etc. It seems that the theology of "Word" has its deep root in the very heart of Christian religion. Thus, the reason for this resurgence seems to be first of all that this theology satisfies to a certain extent the conservative mind of the church which upholds the essential contents of Christian faith, that is, the Word. Secondly, this theology believes that it could successfully save the intelligence of modern man from the stumbling blocks of the outdated biblical worldview by rejecting conservative theology which upholds the authority of Scripture in all of its teachings. Helmut Thielicke in particular sharpened this point. He tries to divorce the essential point of biblical revelation, that is, the Word, from the biblical worldview. He makes an attack on conservative theology stating that it does not uphold biblical revelation in its purity because it professes to believe everything. He feels that it is meaningless to profess to believe everything in the Bible without professing a certain particular truth of the Bible or relevant way to the contemporary situation.

Neo-orthodox theology tries to distinguish itself sharply from modern theology. Helmut Thielicke sharply distinguishes between Cartesian theology (Theology A) and non-Cartesian theology (Theology B). In Cartesian theology, a thinking subject takes a primary role as the very starting point of theologizing by appropriating revelation to the measure of the thinking subject, while in non-Cartesian theology, the Word of God takes a primary role in any theological activity. Although the two theologies are sharply distinguished by Thielicke, yet both stand on the same presupposition, that is, the adulthood of man and the emancipated world of Enlightenment. Only the method of approach is different between them. Cartesian theology takes as its starting point the Cartesian ego, non-Cartesian theology, the revelation as the Word. Consequently, according to the former, the kerygmatic contents are screened out through the net of the prior conditions of the Cartesian ego. This means that the messages are put under human control and the result is that revelation loses its autonomous power and the human ego is "openly or secretly editing messages" (Thielicke, p.54). [p. 41](#)

This form of inquiry carries with it a filtering of the content of the kerygma. Only that which can become the content of my self-consciousness and which can be localized in the self and its categories is acceptable to my faith and understanding (Thielicke, p.153).

In contrast to this theological method of Cartesian theology, the theology of the Word tries to uphold the essential point of Christian religion, that is, the Word. Here in this theology, the fundamental concept of the Word actually stands as the centre and pivot around which everything turns. This fundamental concept of the Word or the Spirit seems to be sharply distinguished from the literal truth of the Bible which contains things which are unintelligible to the modern rationalistic mind. Thielicke declares:

Apart from some fundamentalists who are better Christians than theologians, there are few conservative theologians who would contest the presence of mythical elements, and hence of temporally conditional forms of expression in Holy Scripture (p.69).

The question arises from the difficulty of making a sharp distinction between the kerygma in the Bible and the mythological expression. Thielicke formulates this question as follows:

How far the outmoded forms of statement can be distinguished from the contents stated. This distinction does not mean elimination of the forms but the need to interpret the tests expressed in them. If in the act of interpretation the invalid and outmoded form is not to be abandoned, however, it must still be separated from the permanently valid kerygmatic content (p.67).

He continues to articulate this question further in the footnote:

We have greatly simplified the alternatives here, for even if the resurrection is accepted as a fact the influence of the ancient view of the world has still to be investigated. One must still ask what is fact in the story and what is legend. Have the angels the same factuality as the empty tomb? (p.67).

The difficulty which we find here is the seriousness about the factuality of the empty tomb. If Barthians seriously believe in the empty tomb, why do they not believe in the angels? If Thielicke is serious about Jesus walking on the sea, why can he not believe in Jesus' power to make Peter walk on the sea? Perhaps Thielicke may be making a sharp distinction between the original creative power of the Word incarnate, which exercises its ruling authority over the raging sea, and Matthew's "interest" in the miracle itself. This theological "interest" may be considered as "the interpretative Word." p. 42 In actuality you cannot make such a sharp distinction between the theological interpretation of any "miracle" and the creative word revealed in Jesus' walk on the sea! In the last analysis, one of two positions must be chosen: either taking the entire Bible seriously in its literal sense or paying attention only to certain aspects of the total event. In this case, a sharp distinction is made between the Christ of kerygma and the historical Jesus of Bultmannians. Thus, we are again faced with the fundamental issue which the western theologians have been raising for the last two centuries: the issue of the contact point of revelation and history. Clearly Barthians want to hold to the historical revelation. If you divorce these two, you cannot avoid falling into doceticism. On the other hand, if we are going to literally adhere to biblical revelation, we cannot avoid conflicting with the scientific outlook. Therefore, in the last analysis, there seems to be no other way to solve this issue than by a critical evaluation of the scientific outlook itself.

## **THE ABSTRACT CHARACTER OF THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW**

Herman Dooyeweere, a Dutch philosopher, in his monumental work on the critique of theoretical thought made it clear that the Gegenstand of theoretical analytical thought is an abstract from the concrete object of naïve experience.

The modern physical scientific worldview is nothing but an abstract world seen through the eye-glasses of mathematics and physical hypotheses. These are very useful because they are actually the normative laws by which this physical world actually operates. But when we come to the actuality of this world, even the physical objects themselves are something more than physical science can ever exhaust. Physics itself always operates on certain presuppositions. Mathematics, for example, constantly deals with the infinite number. The object which can be handled only with infinite numbers retains in itself a certain mystical element which cannot be comprehended with finite rationality. After a long struggle to construct an external world with sense data and

mathematical logic, when in confrontation with the concrete realities of our world, physical science can only stammer. For example, a small garden strip on the roadside has such an enormously complex natural reality: earth, grass, leaves, and flowers, all different sizes and irregular in their concrete particularities.

The naive scientific worldview always breaks down when it simply confronts a human being. Man can never be explained with mere [p. 43](#) physical science. Often an attempt to chemically analyze the tears of a mother is taken as an illustration of the abstract character of modern physical science. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16.26). Does a soul have any place in modern natural science? By the end of the Age of Reason, Immanuel Kant indicated that freedom puts rational thinking into a dilemma of antinomy and simultaneously postulates a new world of metaphysics which is actually beyond the boundary of theoretical reason. Now we will not compartmentalize the world of reality as some followers of Kant did, but the necessity to compartmentalize shows that our concrete world is somewhat different from that of rationalistic abstraction. Modern physics shows that all things are alike. In actuality there is nothing alike in the concrete world. Rationalism insists that the biblical message must be demythologized even though our lives are full of wonders and mysteries. Science declares that life is mechanically bound by the casual nexus of this universe. Man, as a morally responsible person, makes a solemn decision to take his course of life even in opposition to the various natural propensities of his inner urge.

## **THE DISASTERS OF A THEOLOGY WHICH UNCRITICALLY PRESUPPOSES THIS OUTLOOK**

The above all-too-brief critical evaluation of the modern scientific outlook indicates that it must not be absolutized even in respect to our ordinary life. Then, if it is uncritically presupposed as the fundamental truth in respect to our theological perspective, how much more disastrous the results would be! Above all, its atheistic presupposition is most harmful to the modern mind in that through its influences the modern mind falls into sheer atheism or at best agnosticism. The modern mind confuses itself to become of age, forgetting about its dependence upon its Maker and Sustainer.

The fundamental issue arises from the basic differences between the two worldviews: one, the atheistic, and the other, theistic. One presupposes that this world is not created but exists of itself; the other that this world is the handiwork of the Creator who is to be glorified alone and forever. In other words, the Bible teaches that the whole world and the entire creation is to honour God who alone is to be praised forever. The modern worldview, however, deprives God of His power and His existence. Consequently, modern man who has been influenced by this view does not have the real source of [p. 44](#) comfort and hope. The God who exists in His reality and who is really trustworthy can only be the true God whose fellowship we can enjoy. Of course, modern theology made various systems of meaning in relation to Christian religion, but lacking this fundamental basis, all of them virtually fell into mere human attempts of autosoterism. If neo-orthodoxy, or the theology of the Word, takes revelation seriously as it professes to do, why does it not go one step further to accept the full authority of God in respect to His creatures, so that we can truly fear Him, worship Him, and enjoy His blessings with gratitude?

Another disastrous result of the modern atheistic worldview is that modern man loses the true Alchimedean point from which he can make a critical evaluation of the modern world. Since the modern scientific worldview is absolutized, how can man be liberated from this worldview? Consequently, the modern technological world will be left without

being healed from its dehumanizing character. Perhaps the communism of extreme monotheistic and monistic materialism may be examples of this disaster.

## **THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL CONCERN RECONFIRMED**

Since the day of Galileo, there have been death and life conflicts between the biblical worldview and the modern scientific outlook. If we borrow Helmut Thielicke's terms, we can see that the same conflicts are still continuing between "the emancipated world" of "secularization" and "the outdated cosmology" of the Scriptures (p.11). He proposes a theology as an outcome of "confrontation between Christian truth and the modern mind" (p.23).

In the foregoing discussions, we discovered that all modern western theologies, both Cartesian and "non-Cartesian," assumed the contemporary scientific worldview as the basic premise of their cosmology, rejecting the biblical worldview as "outdated." Particularly the Barthian as well as the Bultmannian insists that it is not the intention of the Bible to enforce the biblical outdated worldview upon the modern mind. Both try to divorce the kerygma and the myth in Scripture, even though Helmut Thielicke makes a certain proposal "re-mythologizing" as a kind of compromise. But, however much compromise they may attempt between the contemporary secularistic spirit and Christian faith, as long as they reject the conservative position which tries to uphold to the traditional Christian faith without compromise, they do not come to the full satisfaction of Christian faith. [p. 45](#)

In the last analysis, with all honesty, we discover that the western theologies could not help but fall into atheism or agnosticism because of the very first presupposition. The Barthian may reject this conclusion in trying to uphold to the very essence of Scriptural revelation, that is, the creative Word. It may be so. But when it comes to the question of this world in which we live, their conclusion can be no different from the presupposed assumption. Since they presuppose the contemporary atheistic or agnostic worldview where God is either dead or silent, they come to this conclusion.

Among numerous defects involved in this kind of theology, only two have been indicated: the question of the reality of God and the loss of the invisible dimension of the biblical worldview. At the same time, I have proposed a Copernican revolution in our thinking that we may make a critical approach to the scientific outlook taking the biblical worldview as our starting point. By doing this we have argued that the contemporary scientific worldview represents only a certain abstract aspect of reality. In that world we do not have any individuality, humanity, or historical direction. On the other hand, the biblical perspective provides the modern worldview with its metaphysical basis and future in terms of God's creation, judgment, and redemption in Jesus Christ.

## **GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN PRAXIS**

*Ministry.* The text will not work directly to our context but only through human ministry. Ministry, however, must be God's ministry. God is the primary agent of His own work of salvation. Therefore, human ministry is subservient to God's own ministry. God calls His ministers to become His own mouthpieces. Through the preaching of the gospel, God will exercise His power to call the people to repentance and transformation and final salvation.

*God-Centric View of the Historico-Cultural Context.* The context must be seen primarily as being under the wrath of God because of men's perverse and depraved character both

individually and corporately together with its various manifestations in life. On the day of wrath and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God He will render to every man according to his deeds ([Rom. 2:5, 6](#)).

The love of God comes upon man primarily as His long-suffering and as His self-giving love was manifested at the cross of his Son. This love of God comes to our context first as the promises given through the OT prophecies of the restoration of both Israel and the Gentiles [p. 46](#) under His kingdom and then as the eschatological fulfillment of the promises in the Gospel. Even though Jesus Christ brought to us this fulfillment first spiritually, then as gradual transformation, still we must look to the final fulfillment of the promises of God that He will swallow up death in victory and wipe away the tears from all faces.

The Western theology which deals with our contemporary historical context makes exactly the same mistakes of reductionism as their systems do in general by reducing our total context into certain themes, such as “politics” in the case of Harvey Cox or “oppressor-oppressed structure” in the case of Gustavo Gutierrez. The mistake here is not in their dealing with our context in those modern aspects of life, but in reducing our context into those terms which lose sight of the God-centric view.

Therefore, the Christian principle of praxis is to repent. Repentance means primarily to turn to God. As we turn to God, our old self must die and our new self must be formed in God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

The denial of ourselves is the sum of the Christian life. The self-denial in relation to God leads us to a total devotion to and trust in God and the self-denial in relation to our fellow man gives us a right attitude and service to him. We must consider the present world as the place of service, even as the place where we take the cross assigned to us, with a firm conviction that “our light affliction worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, because we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” ([II Cor. 4:17, 18](#)).

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Dr. Han Chul-Ha is Dean, Asia Center for Theological Studies and Mission, Seoul, Korea. p. 48

# A Latin American Critique of Latin American Theology

Samuel Escobar and Pedro Arana, Valdir  
 Steuernagel, Rodrigo Zapata

## THE SETTING OF THIS REFLECTION

This reflection would like to be “Evangelical” and “Latin American”, and consequently demands an explanation for our brethren in other parts of the so-called Third World. From the viewpoint of statistics, Latin America is Christian. More than 90% of the population in most of our countries are registered as Catholics in the census. Within a century after Columbus’ discovery in 1492, millions had been baptized, churches had been built in every important town and city, thousands of tons of gold and silver had been taken to the treasuries of Rome and Spain as tithes and offerings from the new Christians and several universities had been founded that had a theological school as the center of their life. It was a marvellous example of what the engineers of mission call today “Church Growth”!

Such facts explain why in 1910, when the great churches of Europe gathered in Edinburgh to consider the evangelization of the world, they discarded Latin America as a mission field. It was already Christian! It was precisely the “Evangelicals” inside the great denominations who insisted that ours were pagan lands in need of the Gospel. We thank God for them now. It was their insistence on faithfulness to the Gospel as a real mark of Christianity, rather than a naive acceptance of statistics and external signs, that explains now the existence of a growing Evangelical minority in search of identity and mission. Thus for us, faithfulness to the Gospel is a value which we place above a desire for numerical growth. That may help others to understand the nature of our theological commitment.

Furthermore, we are close neighbours of the United States of America and it is impossible to avoid reference to our big neighbour in any effort to understand our own reality. Waldron Scott, the former Secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship wrote an enlightening paper about the role of the multinationals in “controlling the fortunes of nations and peoples ... in the third world”, and pointed out the fact that the American companies dominate the scene. Consequently, though already in 1902 the book *The American Invaders* was published in London, and in the sixties Servan Schreiber wrote in Paris about *The American Challenge*, it has been in Latin America that economists, sociologists and theologians have made the p. 49 imperial presence of the USA, and its physical and spiritual consequences, the object of more systematic and articulate study.<sup>1</sup>

## TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC THEOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

The process of “Christianization” of Latin America in the XVIth century was closely linked to military conquest by Spain and Portugal. “Evangelization” was the moral justificative of the imperial adventure. The cross was imposed by the sword. So during the three centuries of the colonial period some features of Catholic theology were:

### Scholasticism

Spain transplanted medieval Thomist (Aquinas) theology. Theological teaching and activity was simply the repetition and commentary upon what the “Angelic doctor” had already defined. The Bible was completely absent from the missionary efforts.

### Ideology for conquest.

Theology provided an explanation of the conquest and was used to create intellectual consensus to the Iberian presence. Especially as taught to natives it stressed other-worldliness. Jesuits developed dispensational eschatology.<sup>3</sup>

### Anti-Protestantism

Spain saw itself as the defender of the faith against Protestants. The Inquisition was very active in combating heresies. People who never had a chance to read Calvin or Luther would refer to them as “children of the devil and enemies of mankind”.

Though there were some theologians and priests who opposed this praxis and this theology,<sup>4</sup> this is the dominating line that lasted until the late part of the XIXth century. Syncretistic manifestations of faith still take masses of Catholics to the streets. There are rural parts of Latin America where this traditional Catholicism still predominates, and is taught in schools and the army. p. 50

## THE PROTESTANT IMPACT

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<sup>1</sup> Waldron Scott in *Church and Nationhood*, WEF Theological Commission.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ*. Recently a liberation theology historian has delved deep into this, Enrique Dussel.

<sup>3</sup> Spanish Evangelical theologian José Grau has shown the Catholic origins of Dispensationalism in his book *Escatologia*, CLIE, Barcelona, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Hanke, *The Fight for social justice in the conquest of America*.

Protestantism arrived at the beginning of the XIXth century and in the wake of revolution against Spain. The basic message of the Reformation—Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Solo Christo—had a powerful impact and had elements that were part of the modernization process. The theological heritage thus received was transmitted and following notes are important:

### **The liberating role of the Bible**

In many places the Bible arrived before the missionaries. People then entered into a religious experience that required literacy and stimulated an open mind for free examination of the text. Love for the Word and an emphasis on “Bible without notes” characterized early protestantism.<sup>5</sup>

### **A polemic faith**

Sola Fide (and not good works), Solo Christo (and not the Virgin Mary also) were points of constant polemics in evangelization. The debate of the Reformation was not out of place or “foreign” because the reality of Catholicism was that of the Pre-Reformation. Christology emphasized the resurrected Christ in contrast with the infant or suffering Christ of popular Catholicism. The correlate was an emphasis on the transforming power of the Gospel.

### **An Anabaptist stance**

Rome’s reaction, and use of social coercion and police against Protestants, created in the latter an attitude that was basically critical of society and eager to change it. Evangelicals became suspicious of the marriage of church and state, and fought for secularization of education and life that would free society from the grip of Rome. Their ecclesiology was that of a faithful minority, but committed to gain the whole population for Christ, for the true Christ.<sup>6</sup>

This militant Protestantism was basically Evangelical and it grew fast. Its hopefulness and sense of mission was well expressed by Brazilian theologian Erasmo Braga who wrote in 1916 after the Evangelical Congress of Panama: “... (the) lesson from history allows us to hope that under the impact of a simple but sincere Gospel [p. 51](#) message, such as that preached by the Apostle in ancient Rome, there will also come for Latin America an end of paganism”.<sup>7</sup>

## **DEVELOPMENTS LEADING TO THE CURRENT SITUATION**

If the Second World War is taken as a milestone to understand the current social and religious situation, we could say that between the wars a process of ferment was taking place in church and in society. Within Catholicism, the forces that exploded in the Vatican II Council had been at work for decades. The Biblical movement of Cardinal Bea had already started in the twenties and with it Ecumenical cooperation between Protestants and Catholics in Bible scholarship. The two wars and the rise of Communism had forced

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<sup>5</sup> Bible Societies agents were the *avant garde* of Protestant missions in A.L.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Escobar, *The Kingdom of God, Eschatology and Political and Social Ethics in Latin America*, LATF Bulletin, 1975/1.

<sup>7</sup> Erasmo Braga, *Panamericanismo: Aspecto Religioso*, New York 1916.

the Catholic Church to new definitions in the area of the relationship between church and society.<sup>8</sup>

Within Protestantism the forces were split by the Liberal-Fundamentalist debate, especially in the English-speaking world, which was the one with a larger missionary force overseas. The Neo-Orthodox reconstruction was not complete from an Evangelical perspective<sup>9</sup> and serious theological work was paralyzed by the extremism of Fundamentalism with its reductionist theology and police methods. Only in the forties did we start to see the beginning of serious scholarship, especially Bible scholarship in England.<sup>10</sup>

The post-war period after 1945 became the cold-war, with tensions of a world divided in two camps, bitterly opposed and engaged in an arms race that has not stopped since. The end of European colonialism in Asia and Africa gave birth to the appearance of the Third World. To the surprise of many, Independence and Nationalism did not mean the end of Christianity in the former colonies, and vigorous national churches developed in many of those places where two-thirds of the population of this world live. However, theology among Evangelicals has not yet explored with Biblical perspective the real significance of this new fact. We are in a way taking first steps in this consultation!

## **REPERCUSSION OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA**

The fifteen years between the end of World War II and the Cuban P. 52 revolution triumphant with Fidel Castro, were a period of loss of hope about the possibilities of democratic reforms that would change the deep-seated evils of Latin American society. Though at the end of World War II many Latin American leaders were enthusiastic about democracy and suspicious of totalitarianism, their efforts to achieve rapid change through democracy were hindered by the repeated military coups at the service of the more conservative forces. The foreign policy of the United States, committed in Europe to defend democracy and a free world against Communism, was supportive of strong military regimes and thus destructive of democratic hopes in Latin America. In the atmosphere of a cold-war it is easy for any dictator in Latin America to label his enemies as Communists and thus justify terror, corruption and postponement of desperately needed reforms.

The brief interim of encouragement to democratic structural reforms through Alliance for Progress, during the Kennedy era, ended in blood and shame when the U.S. marines invaded Santo Domingo in 1965, and helped to destroy a democratically elected government. Latin American countries are thus forced to accept a false alternative: either they accept the model of development imposed by U.S.A. through the World Bank and the multinational corporations, or else they have to accept the model of violent revolution proclaimed by different forms of nationalism with the aid of Russia and China.

It is within this situation that we can understand the movement towards breaking away from the hegemonic dominance of the North Atlantic nations, which is seen by some

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<sup>8</sup> The best summary of this is G. Thils, *Corrientes Actuales de la Teologia*, Troquel.

<sup>9</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology*, Eerdmans, 1957 is the best evaluation of Fundamentalism's failure.

<sup>10</sup> Especially in circles linked to IVF and The Tyndale Fellowship in Cambridge.

as true liberation. *Liberation* means in this case breaking away from the economic, political and cultural dependence in which the Latin American nations live.<sup>11</sup>

Within Roman Catholicism the post war period was a time of ferment. An effort at self-criticism was motivated partly by the Protestant advance, trying to imitate its evangelistic and pastoral methods: mobilization of laymen, special work among youth, music, house churches. The reforms of Vatican II, especially the liturgical reforms and the new emphasis on the Bible, came to help this development, and we see part of this in the documents of the Medellin Episcopal Conference (1968).

However, a more vocal and decisive movement appears among those working among university students, labour unions and p. 53 marginal poor areas in both urban and rural situations. The “praxis” of priests, nuns and laymen in these segments of society puts them in contact with militant political groups active there also. The idea that their religious ministry has to be put within the context of a fight for liberation draws them close to marxists and socialists. It is important to realize that Gustavo Gutierrez, the now famous Peruvian theologian, was adviser to the Catholic Union of University students, adviser to a group of Peruvian priests working among slum-dwellers and professor at the Catholic University in Lima.

When political circumstances seemed to be leading towards a shift of Latin America towards socialism, this movement became publicly known at the Conference of Christians for Socialism (Santiago de Chile, 1971). It became clear that an important segment of the Roman Catholic Church had decided to cooperate with the movements fighting for the socialist project. However, long before that they had become influential at the theological level in the Episcopal Conference of Medellin. The language of this new theology could be detected in the official Document that came out of it.<sup>12</sup>

Within Protestantism the post-war period was also a time of ferment and we can point out two developments. Within some of the so-called historical churches that had the more developed theological institutions, the social situation of Latin America became an object of research and reflection. A para-church group called “Church and society in Latin America” (ISAL) published several books and a magazine where this reflection and research reached the public. Separating itself rapidly from the churches ISAL went through a process of radicalization and loss of its Protestant sources. It eventually became linked to the Liberation movement within the Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup>

The post-war and post-China situation meant also the arrival of a new missionary wave in Latin America. Coming especially from the U.S.A. it shared the militant anti-Communist stance of the cold war attitude in that nation, and the bitter experience of expulsion from China. This trend accentuated attitudes that were already at work in the midst of Evangelicals in Latin America. Different from the initial missionary efforts, some faith missions were quite weak in their Protestant theology and majored in Evangelism at the expense of serious theological training for leaders. This coupled with a rapid p. 54 popularity of Dispensationalism not only stopped theological reflection but also impoverished the heritage already existing.

Applying categories from the Liberal-Fundamentalist debate of North America, an unnecessary gap was created between theological work taking place in denominational

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<sup>11</sup> The first part of José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a revolutionary situation*, Fortress, 1975, gives a well documented summary of this process.

<sup>12</sup> Medellin was a milestone for Catholicism in Latin America. It is the name of the city of Colombia where Bishops conferred in 1968. The final *Document* has probably been published in English by Orbis Press.

<sup>13</sup> C. René Padilla ed. *Fe Cristiana y America Latina Hoy*, Certeza, 1974.

and Union Seminaries and the more evangelistically oriented free churches and missions. The result could be seen in the book *Latin American Theology: radical or Evangelical?* by missionary Peter Wagner. The book tried to fit several Evangelical and non-Evangelical thinkers from Latin America into the simplistic pattern of Liberal-Fundamentalist categories. But at the point of trying to find “Evangelical alternatives” Wagner also demonstrated the utter poverty of theological reflection in the free conservative churches.

Finally, in this period a new phenomenon also became evident. The rise of Pentecostalism as a new force that, though placed among the Protestant forces, represented a new ecclesiastical and theological reality. Without articulate theological expression, its vitality however corresponded to a life that was expressing certain living truths that have not yet found systematic interpreters.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

There is not just one “theology of liberation”; it is more correct to speak today of “theologies of liberation”. However, if for the sake of simplicity we try to find some common general lines we could recognize a threefold challenge from theologies of liberation. Gustavo Gutierrez defines theology as “a critical reflection on the historical praxis in the light of faith”. So we will consider the primacy of praxis, a critical reflection about it and the hermeneutical method.

### **The primacy of praxis**

Severino Croatto, one of the Bible scholars in the liberation theology movement has said:

A theology of liberation is not worked out with books, not even with the deep knowledge of biblical exegesis. The biblical message springs out of the event ... Theology was a logos about the biblical God who is the God-of-history, before being “dried out” into a rationalist system. The saving event is the starting point of all theology. For a Latin American theology of liberation there is no other primary source than the Latin-American-facts-of-liberation. Again, the facts “un-cover” the meaning.<sup>14</sup> p. 55

The theological itinerary is clear: you first perceive God moving in history and consequently throw in your lot with Him; only then you go to Scripture or to Christian truth in order to read. Praxis comes first, it is in their missionary praxis among the poor that liberation theologians say they have discovered where history is going, in what direction God is moving.

When they started to deal with issues like infant mortality, salaries of misery, fight for the rights of the workers, effects of inflation on the daily life of the poor, defence of landless natives, they came to the conclusion that the way out was in a global process that would change the economic system from the roots. These facts had to be dealt with in a scientific way and they came to the conclusion that Marxism was the science that illuminated the facts and offered a way out. Gutierrez says:

We are not in the middle ages, but in the end of the 20th century, nor are we in Europe, but in Latin America. The science of today is not Aristotelian philosophy but Marxist

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<sup>14</sup> Severino Croatto, *Liberacion y Libertad*, Mundo Nuevo 1973, p.20.

sociology. Perhaps it is for all of this that liberation theology proposes to us not so much a new theme of reflection as a new way to do theology.<sup>15</sup>

From the adoption of Marxism as science we can understand the conclusion that non-Marxist political movements are not adequate. Some theologians of liberation use their hardest terms for Social democrats or other parties that propose a reform of existing structures. Nothing but revolution can be accepted as adequate by Marxism. And that is the only acceptable praxis for the Christian, say many liberation theologians.

### **Critical reflections and historical awareness**

One of the immediate consequences of reflecting about your praxis is to revise history, your own personal history and the history of Christians. In the case of Catholics in Latin America there is even an effort now to re-write history from the view point of this revision. A social scientist writing along this line has thus judged the missionary work of the Roman church in Peru:

A mission effort that, save for the very rare and individual exceptions, has never realized or even wanted to realize that it operates as a colonialist dominating force. And we are talking of a church that was founded by a p. 56 revolutionary and oppressed Man, and preached in Peru during the four and a half centuries of its presence here, by a mission that has been consciously or unconsciously at the service of oppressors.<sup>16</sup>

Many Evangelicals would agree with this statement, and we find similar ideas in the missionary literature written by Protestants at the beginning of this century.<sup>17</sup> But the historical revision done by theologians and historians in the liberation movement tends to generalize and apply the rule to all missionary action. Thus the famous *Barbados Declaration* states:

The missionary presence has always implied the imposition of criteria and patterns of thought and behaviour alien to the colonized Indian societies. A religious pretext has too often justified the economic and human exploitation of the aboriginal population.<sup>18</sup>

The final point in this form of revision of history is to conclude that the church has always been classist, i.e. an institution at the service of one social class: the exploiters. It is true that the church has had the poor in her ranks but it has been to teach them to be quiet, obedient and submissive to those in power.<sup>19</sup> This conclusion goes along with the view that history can only be understood as the result of class struggle.

In the case of the Catholic church in Latin America theologians are asking the church to change sides in her political alignment. She has always been involved in politics, but on the wrong side.

### **The hermeneutical method**

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<sup>15</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teologia de la Liberacion*, CEP, 1971. (English translation *Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, 1973) pp.31–33 of Spanish version.

<sup>16</sup> Stefano Varese, "Mission Work, Native Societies and Liberation" in LADOC Keyhole series No.2, *The Theology of Liberation*, p.31.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance, Thomas B. Neely, *South America*, NY, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> "Declaration of Barbados", in W. Dostal, ed. *The Situation of the Indian in South America*, WCC, 1972, p.378.

<sup>19</sup> In this, several theologians of Liberation follow the marxist theory about religion used by Karl Kautsky in his *History of Christianity*.

It is from this praxis and this reflection that we then arrive at Scripture in search of light. The Catholic theologians of liberation have taken very seriously their hermeneutical task. Severino Croatto and Porfirio Miranda are professional Bible scholars. Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutierrez have an evident debt to Bible scholars, mostly Protestant, but also Catholic.<sup>20</sup> There is a need for serious evangelical scholarship to take their challenge. In part of this section we already quoted Croatto's description of his method. His **p. 57** Catholic stance in face of Scripture appears clearly in the following lines:

... it is not by deepening theoretically in the study of Scriptures or the Christian faith that one comes to acknowledge God in the events. Truth is the opposite way: because the Christian has "grace" (that comes from the prophetic "Spirit" which is given through Baptism) he is able to discover God in his history not only individually but also communally and universally and he has also the gift of penetrating the unsearchable riches of God.<sup>21</sup>

We first discover God in history and throw in our lot with Him. Only then can we penetrate into the meaning of His word. It is when we are fighting for the defence of the poor that we understand better the God who liberates Israel in the Exodus. We do not have access to the truth of the Bible from the ground of neutrality or non-commitment.

There is more, however. If Marxist science helps us to understand our own world today, it can also help us to understand the context in the biblical world. Social class analysis can then be applied to Scripture. Thus Croatto makes a distinction between a "factic nuclei" in the Exodus and a theological interpretation. Why not accept the "factic nuclei" and reject the theological interpretation as outmoded or conditioned by the social class of the writer and his interests?<sup>22</sup> Another scholar of this school, protestant Jorge Pixley applies the methodology and dismisses Paul while accepting some parts of the Synoptics.<sup>23</sup>

For an Evangelical it is clear that these theologians generally accept the "scientific" conclusions of higher criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism and the historical scepticism of Bultmann. Evidently, some elements of classical liberalism are here combined with the Marxist analysis. The strength of their argument however, is that because of our praxis or lack of it, because of our belonging to a social class, our way of reading of Scripture is never neutral, we bring to Scripture a pre-understanding of the text. That becomes evident in the choice of books and passages for our hermeneutical task, and so large portions of Scripture like the Exodus, the Prophets, or the more critical sayings of Jesus have remained obscure or untouched.

## AN EVANGELICAL EVALUATION

As was pointed out in the previous section *Repercussion of these* **P. 58** *developments in Latin America* paragraph seven, we cannot say that there is an Evangelical theology in Latin America. In the following lines of evaluation we will be sharing insights that are part of the work of the Latin American Theological Fraternity. The LATF is committed precisely to a theological task that at the same time will be faithful to the Gospel and relevant to the

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<sup>20</sup> It would be important to ask the question why Catholic scholars have not become acquainted with Evangelical scholarship.

<sup>21</sup> S. Croatto, *Int. op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.20.

<sup>23</sup> Jorge Pixley, *Reino de Dios*, La Aurora (English translation by Orbis)

situation and needs of the Church and the world in our continent today. Our common platform was clearly established in our first consultation in 1970. Revelation, Authority of the Bible, Inspiration and Hermeneutics were our subjects. We grappled and struggled passionately to come to a common consensus. We tried there to establish the difference between the Biblical content and the Anglo-Saxon trappings in our heritage. In the initial volume that Peter Savage edited, we had really traced a programme where the seeds for an adequate criticism of Liberation theology were already present.<sup>24</sup>

As we evaluate some challenges of Liberation theologies in detail, we will also be pointing out some of the weaknesses in our own Evangelical community, and some of the gaps in our theology.

### **The primacy of God's Word**

For ourselves as Evangelicals, the Word of God is eternal. It was there before we even existed as people of God. It is the Word that brought the world to be, the call that made of Abraham a people, the Word that produces new life in the new birth. Of course we cannot separate God's Word from God's Spirit in action. Nor are we saying that God's saving events did not precede the written record of them. But what we are saying is that the written Word of God is not a product of the literary activity of the Church. Rather, the Church is the result of the preached Word that we find registered in Scripture. In good Evangelical theology the Church bows before the authority of the Word.<sup>25</sup>

Human traditions and systems, the praxis of the Christian and the non-Christian, every historical moment, all are to be illuminated by the Word of God and judged by it. At every point of their pilgrimage on earth God's people have to subject their praxis to the light and judgement of God through his Word. Here is where we have found the weakness of traditional Evangelical theology as we received it in p. 59 Latin America. It has not dealt adequately with our own situation. René Padilla contended in Lausanne 1974 that the praxis of many Christians was more the praxis of their culture than the praxis taught by God's word, and that they were unable to see it. The Lausanne Covenant warns us: "We need both watchfulness and discernment to safeguard the Biblical Gospel. We acknowledge that we ourselves are not immune to worldliness of thought and action, that is to a surrender to secularism".<sup>26</sup>

### **Disposition for praxis necessary for understanding**

Though for us the Word is the beginning we have to acknowledge that in the Bible: "if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know ..." (Jn. 7:17). This saying of Jesus has a long and rich background in the Old Testament teaching that to know is to do, to love is to obey. Only if we are ready for obedience can we understand and have eternal life. To understand God's Word is not only an intellectual process of grasping some propositions; it is submission to the Spirit of God. It touches the will; it is openness to correction.

There are many humble Christians who practice the two commandments. They are expressing their love to God and their love to the neighbour, and they *know* better than theologians who discuss academically the intricacies of the text and the methodology of its inspiration.

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<sup>24</sup> Pedro Savage, Ed. *El Debate Contemporáneo sobre la Biblia*, EEE, 1972. Several of the chapters of this book were published in the LATF Bulletin in English between 1970 and 1972.

<sup>25</sup> René Padilla, *The Authority of the Bible*, LATF Bulletin No.2/1972. Norberto Saracco, *The Word and the Spirit in the Evangelizing Community*, LATF Bulletin 2/1980.

<sup>26</sup> *Lausanne Covenant*, par. 12.

This openness to correction and obedience demands that theology be contextual, because obedience is located in the here and the now. Theology cannot limit itself to the scholastic repetition of formulas coined in Geneva or Princeton by people who had their own praxis in their own day. During the Second Congress on Evangelism in Lima (CLADE II), several theologians of the LATF took the central concepts of the Gospel and tried to expound them in the context of Latin America today: Word and Spirit, Sin and Salvation, Christ and Antichrist, Hope and Despair. As we examined these basic themes we were astonished to discover that the task had never been done before, and that some Evangelicals were very impatient with it: "If this has already been done in England, Germany or U.S.A. by so and so, why should we waste our time? Let us learn methodologies; that is what counts".<sup>27</sup> p. 60

### **Marxism is not science but an ideology**

To begin with we question that science can be the ultimate source of truth and guidance for man. Scientism is the spirit of this age. Acknowledging the limits of science in no way means denying its value and use. However in the case of Marxism there is more to be said. Marxism is a mixture of science and anticipation. We cannot deny that it has brought to light the economic realities behind every social and political process and that it has uncovered the fact of oppression in economics inside capitalism. However, by making economics the base of every aspect of reality it gives us a unilateral and distorted view of the world. A Christian discovers this in relation to the atheism and the materialistic anthropology of Marxism that cannot be separated from its analysis. There is no factual basis for postulating that history is moving towards a classless society. It is utopianism, not science.

What is the alternative? What ideological alternative comes from the West? is an important question for any Third World person, Christian or non-Christian. If the classless society of Marxist dreams ends in the nightmares of the Gulag archipelago or the Cultural Revolution, what is the hope provided by Europe and North America for our nations? When we examine it we come to the conclusion that it is materialistic, atheistic, nihilistic, and we see its effects upon our youth, defenceless against the pornography, the violence, the cult of material success as the highest value in life. Traditional Evangelical theology has many times been vocal against Marxism, without always understanding the real nature of its challenge. But it has been silent about the evils in the West. Francis Schaeffer has found that when he dared to criticize Western economics and politics he lost the popularity he had when he criticized literature and art.

A critical task is open then for Evangelical theology in the Third World. The Word of God has much to say about justice, a desirable social order, real peace. We have rediscovered in Latin America the biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God as a key to understand God's work and our mission.<sup>28</sup> The theological poverty of extreme dispensationalism and pop-eschatology is completely unable to answer the all-encompassing challenge of Marxist ideology.

### **The urgent need for an Evangelical hermeneutic**

Evangelicals have used too much time fighting about the mode of p. 61 inspiration and unfortunately they have imposed North American debates on realities where they did not

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<sup>27</sup> The papers of CLADE II have been published in English in the Bulletin of LATF beginning with No.1/1980.

<sup>28</sup> C. René Padilla ed. *El Reino de Dios y América Latina Hoy*, Casa Bautista de Pub., 1975. Some articles of this book were published in the Bulletin of LATF in 1975.

exist and were not relevant. We Latin American Evangelicals have no doubts about the Authority of God's Word, the unity of Old and New Testaments, the revealed nature of the Bible. But we are impatient with a hermeneutical procedure that has left the Old Testament out, has spiritualized the New and has turned the Jesus of the Gospel into an unoffensive and unobtrusive professor of theology.

Already in 1970 Pedro Arana criticized the hermeneutical procedure of ISAL with words that could be applied to the hermeneutical procedure of several theologians of liberation: "In the ideology of ISAL, God is translated as revolution. The people of God as revolutionary hosts. The purpose of God as humanization. And the Word of God as revolutionary writings. No one could fail to see that this is Marxist humanism".<sup>29</sup> Andrew Kirk and René Padilla have deepened and systematized Evangelical criticism of this hermeneutic.

By the same token Padilla especially has worked demonstrating that the hermeneutic procedure of the Church Growth movement coming from Pasadena bows before social sciences and pragmatism and accommodates Scripture to them rather than judging them by Scripture. In other words right in the middle of a very popular movement among Evangelicals we find the same hermeneutical procedure of Liberationist hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup>

### **Renewed historical awareness**

As Evangelicals we cannot separate the social and economic history of our countries from their spiritual history. It is too easy for Catholic theologians today to blame American Imperialism for all our evils. But we are the result of several centuries of Catholic domination and teaching that have created social structures, social habits, economic procedures, political systems, etc.

We find some Protestant theologians who have followed the liberationist and marxist analysis of our history and are ignorant of Protestant history. Some of us in the LATF consider that historical research is an important part of theological work. What is amazing is to find that many Evangelical leaders and missionaries are also unaware of Protestant and Evangelical history. Calvin is quoted in relation to the authority of Scripture but his social teachings and p. 62 practices are ignored. Some of his commentaries on passages from the Old Testament would sound like liberation theology to some ears today.<sup>31</sup>

The growth of Evangelicals has brought them to positions of power and responsibility as individuals and as communities. Unfortunately, because of their lack of theology of social realities and power, they have been tempted to become blind supporters of the government instead of critical cooperators. Constantinianism and the temptations of power and benefits should not be something that take us by surprise, theologically unarmed. We also need a careful examination of Church history and our own history.

### **A theology of the Spirit**

The growth of Pentecostalism in the great urban centres of Latin America and the advance of the charismatic movement among Protestants and Catholics is posing many new questions. How is the Spirit blowing today? Are traditional theological categories enough

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<sup>29</sup> Pedro Arana y P. Savage ed. *op. cit.*, p.78. See Andrew Kirk, *Liberation*.

<sup>30</sup> *Theology: an Evangelical View from the Third World*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980. See the seminal chapter by René Padilla in Stott-Coote eds. *Gospel and Culture*, William Carey, 1979, pp.83-108.

René Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 1982.

<sup>31</sup> See the massive work by André Bieler, *La pensée social du Calvin*, Univ. of Lausanne.

for discerning these times? In relation to this, Liberation theologies apply their concept of the social origins of religion and the way in which religion as a social force can be manipulated for political purposes. The same is valid for popular religiosity. But for us Evangelicals a whole new set of questions is opened.

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Dr. Samuel Escobar (Peru), Rev. Pedro Arana (Peru), Dr. Valdir Steuernagel (Brazil) and Dr. Rodrigo Zapata (Ecuador) are members of the Latin American Theological Fraternity. p. 63

# **An African Critique of African Theology**

ma Djongwé Daïdanso

*(Translated from French by Tite Tienou)*

## **I PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

### **A The Topic**

The critique of African theology is not an easy matter. The difficulty of the topic resides in its very nature, in the ambiguity and the ill-defined contours of the so-called African theology. There are some expressions which the most serious thinkers use without ever asking themselves about the reality involved. African theology is one of those expressions. We know what critique, theology and the adjective African mean. The word “theology” meaning discourse about God, study of God, or science of God, is easily understood. But, as soon as one adds an adjective (Western, African, American, etc) the expression becomes more difficult to understand. One must, in fact, determine the characteristics given to the experience by the adjective used.

In other words, when we speak of American, Western, European, White, Black or African theology, what do we mean? Can we establish precise and specific details which make theology theology in the general sense of the word but more specifically African and non-European?

### **B African Theology**

What is African theology? What are the traits which distinguish it from theology per se and from other local theologies? What is its content and what are the areas of its application? What makes this theology African? Theologians must elucidate such questions in order to give, if need be, a solid basis to this theology so that we may not build on sand. That is to say that when we speak today of African theology, we must admit that we are walking on quicksand and that we are speaking of a still ill-defined subject for most African church leaders. But, be that as it may, everybody speaks today of “African theology”. Obviously everyone uses the expression in his own way and gives it the meaning of his choice. This does not facilitate our task of critique which will necessarily be incomplete, but discussions and other papers will help to deepen it.

### **C Our Goal**

The idea of African theology, whether it is founded or not, whether [p. 64](#) one approves or disapproves of it, even if it is designated by inadequate and still ill-defined expressions, causes missionaries and national leaders alike to be on the run. As we are gathered as Third World theologians, we must refrain from “third-worldizing” the biblical theology which is dear to all of us. In this context, our aim will be to fully honour the Revelation of God. Our criticisms will therefore be directed at everything said about African theology which seems to us to undermine the supreme authority of the Bible, the infallible Word of God. It is not therefore a matter of appropriating the gospel of salvation in Christ for the benefit of the peoples of the Third World while excluding others.

We would not therefore cut ourselves radically from the theological legacy of the past and we would not ignore or neglect the theological attainments assembled and established by biblical christianity for centuries. I hope that, while we are reflecting together, we may be clear and precise in our language in order to dissipate any confusion or ambiguity so that the theology which will come out of our consultation over a short or long term, will not only be evangelical, not only a scientific endeavour of specialist theologians, but something practical, viable and immediately useful to the local churches which we represent and seek to help.

## II THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When we want to know what have been the sources of the so-called African theology, we can find at least three categories:

### A Oppression

1. *The Slave Trade*. This is an historical fact which has marked the course of the life of the African. He was considered to be and treated like an animal, like an instrument for production. He was reduced to the status of a slave and as such he was waiting to liberate himself one day.

2. *Colonization*. This is also an historical fact which has marked the African in the deepest part of his being. The Africans, members of a society with numerical superiority, were dominated and reduced to living in a society which became sociologically inferior and in the minority. The colonized was so pressed by his master that he was almost reduced to the status of non-being. He was then waiting for an opportunity to emerge. [p. 65](#)

3. *The behaviour of some missionaries*. This behaviour, because of its aggressiveness and its paternalism, is today discredited by many Christians. In fact some missionaries, fortunately not all of them, have, consciously or by ignorance, despised the people whom they came to win to Christ, as well as their values. These missionaries believed, in fact, that “in order to christianize, it was necessary to destroy every evil thing, a certain number of customs, the meaning of which was not readily apparent”.

One could also mention the text of [Genesis 9:20–26](#) which was interpreted as making Africans the descendants of Ham, the accursed. Let us note that the text is not only interpreted out of its context, but also that Jesus Christ has come to the world to remove the curse of man ([Galatians 3:13](#)).

Therefore, be it by their behaviour, be it by an exegetical or theological extrapolations, these missionaries have contributed to the preparation of the awakening of the Africans’ consciousness.

### B The Awakening of African Consciousness

1. *Negritude*. Negritude, developed in the 1930's, is an initiative to shake the ruler's yoke. One of its advocates, L. S. Senghor, presents its programme in the following way: "From this discovery, joined with the vision of 'the great events which unsettle the world', the national consciousness of colonized people had to come. I was about to forget, for Black Africa, the powerful leaven which was the discovery and the exaltation of Negritude: Negro-African values". Following this movement, those colonized by France, for example, ceased saying: "our ancestors the Gauls" and referred to their own ancestors. They began rediscovering their own culture, their own religion, their own languages, etc ... The spirit of this movement is present today in African countries. It expresses itself with an almost unhealthy affirmation of the African, a quest for identity, for authenticity, and for African soul and personality, leading here and there to cultural revolutions and to a movement of "back to the sources" which tends to revive and ascribe value to everything which is African.

2. *The years of independence and decolonization*. For the African who has been, for a long time, neglected and dominated, independence and decolonization come as a framework allowing him to regain the dignity of his being and to affirm his personality. Claiming his rights leads him to present himself as his master's equal. p. 66

3. *The maturity of the Church in Africa*. African Christian theologians rightly feel that, so far, they have lived a theology which they have not reflected on by themselves, but which the missionaries thought for them and brought 'ready baked' from their homes. Having become mature, African Christian theologians legitimately aspire to rethink theology for themselves. Furthermore, the Gospel penetrating African society more and more, is sometimes confronted with social and theological problems specific to Africa which need answers which may not always be apparent in a theology developed for the needs of another people or continent.

Is it mere coincidence to think with A. Vanneste that African theology began in 1960 during a meeting of theologians in Zaire, reflecting on the topic: "Debate on African Theology?" Since then articles, seminars, conferences and books have dealt with the topic.

It is in this three-fold situation of the oppression of the African, the awakening to the consciousness of his dignity and the desire of the African Christian theologian to express his maturity and to provide answers with the Gospel for problems which are specific to his people, that the idea of African theology takes its source and deepens its roots.

### **III ATTEMPT TO ANALYSE THE SO-CALLED AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

The so-called African theology is an idea which is still running its course. It is not yet a clearly established fact with a result which one can analyse and critique. For lack of such a result, we will satisfy ourselves with orientating our thoughts towards three tendencies which can now be seen in African theology.

#### **A Ethno-theology**

Ethno-theologians are those thinkers, either Christian or non-Christian, who have jumped on the band wagon of political claims in Africa and who want to include African religion in the list of African values. Generally they fight with all their might to make people believe that Christianity and colonialism, evangelization and colonialism were one and the same thing and that consequently white missionaries were only colonizers or, at any rate, they helped colonize Africa, through Christianity, their religion. But, so they think, in these times of independence and reviving of African values, it is also necessary to revive the traditional religions of African tribes and to develop from there a theology which would

be called African theology. Such a theology would have as its goal the stating of African p. 67 peoples' thought about God. It is not therefore a Christian, Evangelical or Biblical theology, but a theology of African Traditional Religions as one could speak of the theology of traditional religions of Europe or Asia, or of Islamic or Buddhist theology.

What should one think of this? We must first of all denounce the anti-missionary attitude. We must then recognize that Christianity does not pretend to hold the monopoly over theology as the science of God. The Scriptures teach us clearly that God reveals himself to all men. Therefore, throughout Africa and elsewhere people reflect on God outside of the Christian framework. We cannot refuse them the right to call their thoughts about God theology. Lastly, we would even say that more serious studies than those done so far on African Traditional Religions, will increase our knowledge of these religions and will help us to better communicate the Gospel to those whose mentality has been influenced by these religions.

Moreover, the use of the epithet African is worthy of comment; first because it is related to the word theology which is singular. We have at least the right to ask whether we should speak about *one* or *several* theologies in Africa. The question is not without importance and the way is open to investigation; secondly because the contents of theology here is African Traditional Religions, a kind of ethnotheology. In this case I would suggest that instead of African theology, we use the expression theology or theologies of African Traditional Religions to mean that it is not Christian theology.

It is here, more than elsewhere, that definition and the careful choice of terms acquire their importance. What is African theology? It is comforting to note that more recent articles and books, for example *African Theology En Route*, present efforts at clarification. Thus for many Christian theologians in Africa today, African theology is the reflection or thought of Christian theologians on God and his revelation. However, there is still a long way to go to establish the method, the principles and the presuppositions of such a theological enterprise on the part of Christian theologians in Africa. For they will have to walk on the bridge of the absolute of Biblical Revelation, on the rivers of the problems and religions of Africa as well as on the theological currents with their presuppositions and their *a priori* assumptions which exist in the world.

## **B Syncretistic Theology**

Syncretistic theologians are Christians, or people claiming to be Christians, who find themselves torn between, on the one hand, the politico-socio-religious analysis of the condition of the African and p. 68 the reality of the Christian fact in which they claim to take part and, on the other hand, between the unrestrained quest for African identity and the expression of an authentically African personality and their Christian faith. Not willing to sacrifice one or the other, they decide to weld them together, to mix them and melt them into one single thing. It is the result of this mixture in Africa which would be called African theology. In an equation that would be:

Christian + African Traditional Religions = African Theology.

Christian Faith + Animistic Faith = African Theology.

Let us note that for most of these thinkers Christianity is the religion of Europe, of the Whites. They therefore claim that the Christian faith deculturalized the African.

Obviously, such allegations already contrast very clearly with the liveliness of Christian faith which African Christians manifest and they express it joyously with the multi-coloured originality of Africa; it is not necessary to take time to refute them.

Some of these syncretistic theologians recognize the transcendence of Christianity but they blame it generally for having enslaved itself to European civilization of which it has

become a medium. Before returning to the critique of the equation established, let us note here that many European and American missionaries obeyed the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to go into all the world and to preach the good news to all creation. By obedience to this command, they have dared to go towards other cultures. It is unfortunate that some of them have brought more of their own culture, than they should have, to the people they had to evangelize. But an important question is raised here. Who among men, Europeans, Americans, Asians or Africans, is capable of deculturalizing himself even for the purpose of proclaiming the universal gospel of Jesus Christ?

It is a cause for rejoicing to see the Third World Christians in general, and those of Africa in particular, take part more and more in the missionary task. It is to be hoped that when they go to evangelize Europe, America, and elsewhere, taught by the example of European and American missionaries, they will not “third-worldize” but they will evangelize and give the example of a contextual behaviour so that the Gospel is not blasphemized because of them.

But let us come back to the equation: Christianity + Animistic faith = African theology. The operation of the addition (in whole or in part) reveals the relativistic philosophy which characterize syncretistic theologians. Their purpose is, in fact, to deny the unique and [p. 69](#) absolute characteristic of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. According to them, this revelation is not sufficient but it has to be completed by the revelations of other religions. Christianity therefore becomes a religion among others. Salvation is no longer necessarily found in Christ but it can also be found in other religions. The result of the addition is marked by partiality. For in the logic of the proponents of this position, in other words, the equation means:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Europe} + \text{Africa} &= \text{Africe} \\ \text{Westerner} + \text{African} &= \text{African} \\ \text{White} + \text{Black} &= \text{Black}\end{aligned}$$

The African then becomes the centre of his own theology. For the concern is to exalt the African and everything about him. Such a theology does not agree with the picture of the body of Christ which is a unity in diversity, without a party spirit, without racism and without tribalism.

In fact the real result of the addition, of this mixture of Christianity and the religious practices of Africa and elsewhere, is syncretism. Syncretism is “a religious system which tends to weld together several different doctrines”. Here is raised more particularly the problem of dialogue between Christianity and other religions. Is this dialogue possible? How far can Evangelicals go in dialogue with other religions? Can they avoid syncretism in the process of dialogue?

### **C. Evangelical Theology in Context**

There are sincere Christians who fully respect the revelation of God as well as the essential truths taught by the infallible Word of God. These Christians are concerned not only to maintain the purity of biblical doctrine, but also to live a life worthy of the Gospel and to fulfill their mission towards all those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as personal Saviour. They are therefore concerned to spread the Gospel throughout the world and to communicate it to all men without distinction of nationality, region, tribe, race or culture. For the Gospel of Jesus Christ is transcultural, that is, it reaches men of different cultures, the Word of God being sovereign to judge and purify any culture of the impurities of sin. The Gospel can then go through all cultures without being enslaved to any of them, without being corrupted by any of them and without giving superiority to any of them.

For Evangelical Christians, the revelation of God, the Word of God, is the absolute authority in matters of life and faith challenging men and women, habits, customs and cultures of men of all nations, as [p. 70](#) well as political, administrative and religious institutions established among peoples.

Evangelicals will therefore have a critical attitude toward their cultures, respecting in African habits everything which is not contrary to biblical faith and rejecting everything that is detrimental to the Word of God according to the recommendations found in Thessalonians I [5:22-23](#): “Examine everything, retain what is good; abstain from all evil”. The questions are the following: Is it possible to have an African theology which is biblically orientated? What are the dangers? Can one remain faithful to the Word of God and develop a theology which could be called African?

## **IV SOME CRITICAL REMARKS**

It is not possible to present an exhaustive critique in one single paper. I suggest here four areas of critique.

### **A Terminology and Definitions**

We will never repeat enough times that the so-called African theology is ambiguous at the present time. In Christian circles people have the tendency to believe that the word theology refers only to Christian theology. But analysis (see III above) has shown us that what some call African theology is nothing else than the theology of African Traditional Religions and, as such, it has nothing to do directly with Christian faith.

In the case of Christian theology, we suggest expressions such as “African Contextual Approach to Evangelical Theology” or “Evangelical (Biblical Christian) Theology in Africa”. At any rate, there should be no haste in this. African theologians must take time to reflect in a mature and biblical way and to propose, at the appropriate time, words and expressions with appropriate meanings.

For the time being, let us at least note that the present expressions and definitions seem to be admitted hastily and in a premature way; consequently they are not satisfactory. The precision of theological language will help everybody to see clearly.

### **B The Foundation**

Most of the promoters of the so-called African theology seem to have their minds so occupied with the situation of the African who lived and continues to live in misery, poverty and oppression that they make this human experience the basis of their theology. Founding African theology on a situation which can change, they leave it to [p. 71](#) open to perpetual change at the mercy of circumstances, and human situations and experiences. Man and his problems therefore become the centre of theology. Are we not on the road to humanism rather than theology?

But for us Evangelicals, the Bible is the absolute authority on which we must found all theological and ethical affirmations and formulations. There cannot be another foundation.

### **C The Contents**

Here we note an ejection, a relativization, and a reorientation of the contents of Biblical revelation. So:

Liberation, which, in the Bible, is first of all the liberation of man from sin, his fundamental problem ([In. 8:31-38](#)), takes another meaning in African theology. It is

concerned to liberate man, not first of all from his sin, but from his present oppression. The one who helps materially to alleviate misery or even militarily to remove the oppressor, becomes the saviour god of the oppressed. God Almighty is therefore dethroned and man is crowned in his stead. Jesus Christ, the only Saviour, the only Mediator between God and men, the only way leading to the Father, is relativized and downgraded to the level of human saviours and messiahs. There is an aspiration, a desire, to have African saviours and messiahs.

The so-called African theology wants to be original and independent, uniquely African. But can we ignore history? Moreover, many of those who speak of African theology take a contrary course. Their tutors are the liberal theologians of Europe. So, under the cover of so-called African theology, is it not liberalism which is subtly finding its way in Africa? It is also here that we see clearly the importance of Evangelical theology in Africa.

### **D Areas of Application**

It is here particularly that opinions differ. The fight is between those who believe that there is only one theology which is scientifically established for all and those who hold the opposite view. A. Shorter writes: "Until there is room, in the Universal Church, for an African theology, for African rituals and for church structures, which are African-inspired, African Christianity will never be a reality". The debate divides the proponents of African theology into two groups. "For the advocates of African theology, there must be africanization in all areas of the life of the Church and at every level of theological task". So T. Tshibangu thinks that "even at the level of scientific work ... one can rightly speak of African theology". But the Malagasy [p. 72](#) Ralibera admits an "African transculturation of Christianity, an effort to rethink Christian teaching in relation to concepts and categories which are peculiar to Negro-Africans, but at the level of scientific theology; he does not see any room for an African theology whatsoever". The debate can last. But more than a question of delimitation of areas, should we not see in the debate this attitude of demand and reaction which characterizes generally, the proponents of the so-called African theology? Someone has said: "Europe has christianized Africa; we must africanize Christianity". This means: "we have suffered this; let us react this way".

It seems to me that there is a problem concerning the goal. What is the real goal that African theology seeks to achieve? Be that as it may, we must give credit to all Christian theologians who have been aware of their frustration and of their theological task in Africa and who have worked so far. Let us hope that the result of the labours will not be lost, but will be taken up, clarified and perfected with respect for the Word of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There are few ideas expressed but, above all, many questions. Such is the content of my report which seems to me to be in agreement with the stage reached by theology in Africa—that is, that it is still a theology seeking its way. If our reflections here in Korea help us make some progress, we will not have wasted either our money or our time.

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**Rev. ma Djongwé Daïdanso of Chad teaches at the Bible Institute of Brethren Assemblies, Marova, Cameroon. [p. 73](#)**

# An Asian Critique of Church Movements in Japan

Gyoji Nabetani

## STAGNATION OF CHURCH GROWTH IN JAPAN

After the Korean War ended in 1953, Japan started to move in the direction of gigantic economic growth. It led the people's minds to the materialistic and economic world rather than to the spiritual one. The radical students' movement started in 1968 and badly influenced the Christian Church and hampered the organizational function of many church groups: the United Church of Christ (Kyodan), the Free Methodist Church, and so on. A pessimistic mood now prevails over the church. In 1977, AP journalist Anderson sent a report from Tokyo to the U.S.A., saying, "Mission work in Japan in these thirty years has failed, after all." He had met Shusaku Endo who said, "There was a large growth of Christian numbers for seven or eight years after the war, but many of them came to the church for their needs: food, spiritual trustworthiness, learning English, and so on. When society got back its stability and prosperity, people no longer felt the need to go to church." Anderson also met another Christian writer, Hisashi Inoue, who no longer is a confessing Christian. He said, "I owed much to Christianity, for I was brought up in a Christian orphanage. I shall never forget the kindness of a Christian missionary who devoted himself to serve orphans. I sometimes wondered why he was so kind. 'Does he have a hidden motivation to sell us to a circus?' But he served us with a sincere heart. I found his god to be different from ours. For Japanese, human relationship itself is god. There is no absolute god. Therefore, the motivation of our baptism itself is the motivation of leaving the church. One who was baptized with the motivation of satisfying self-respect leaves the church with one of self-respect. One who was baptized in a process of learning English from a missionary leaves the church when he is able to speak English. I was baptized when I was poor and left the church when I was no longer poor. One who had trouble with a girl and sought salvation from the church leaves there with a new girl. We do not deepen our motivation but live in a delicate human relationship. We do not need an absolute god." From the words of these Christian writers, it is natural that Christian Church growth has stabilized in the present situation where everything is possible.

### Four types of the church

Ordinarily, the Protestant churches are analyzed into four types of **p.74** the church. These types are called by the names of places, or by the names of the representatives.

- (1) Yokohama band: Uemura type.
- (2) Kumamoto band: Ebina type.
- (3) Matsue band: Nakata type.
- (4) Sapporo band: Uchimura type.

*1) Yokohama band: Uemura type tradition.*

The first Japanese Christian Church of the Protestant tradition was organized in Yokohama on March 19, 1872. It was constituted by a company of young Japanese Christian men who studied under Dr. Brown. Among these were some who were to become outstanding Christian pastors and educators over the next two generations, men

such as Kajinosuke Ibuka (1854–1940) and Masahisa Uemura (1858–1925). Uemura became the most influential pastor in Japan in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition and is regarded as the one who established the “church-type tradition” in Japan.

### *2) Kumamoto band: Ebina type tradition*

The Kumamoto band was formed in Kyushuu. Captain L. L. Janes, a graduate of West Point, was invited in 1871 by the daimyo (lord) of Higo, through the secretariat of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church, to open a school in the castle town of Kumamoto. His Christian influence was very strong so that many young students became Christians. This was a terrible shock to their parents who had never thought about religions other than Shintoism or Buddhism. About thirty students who persisted in keeping their Christian faith were forced to leave Kumamoto and were sent to Kyoto, where Nijima (1843–90) started Doshisha university and formed the Kumamoto Band tradition. As Nijima died young, Ebina (1856–1937) became the representative of its tradition. It emphasized social action from the beginning and established the social action tradition in Japan.

### *3) Matsue band: Nakata type tradition*

The Matsue band was started by Barclay F. Buxton (1860–1946) who started the work in Matsue. But this tradition is called by the name of Jyuuji Nakata (1879–1939) who founded the Holiness church in Japan. He emphasized renewal, holiness, healing and advent, while his group has been strong in evangelism, which made him the representative of the evangelism-type tradition. After the Second [p. 75](#) World War, many missionaries came to Japan, most of whom have joined into this tradition, which is now called “Fukuin-ha” (“The Evangelicals”). The recent Billy Graham crusade has been carried mainly by the leaders of this group. Japan Conference of Evangelism held at Kyoto on June 7–10 1982 was also promoted mainly by this group. The Japan Evangelical Theological Society has also many members of this group, while it has also many members from the church tradition group, such as the Reformed, the Lutherans, etc.

### *4) Sapporo band: Uchimura type tradition*

The Sapporo Band was founded in the capital of Hokkaido and is hence called “Sapporo Band”. William S. Clark who was invited by the national government in 1876 to establish an agricultural school served only one year, but his influence upon young Japanese students was so great that they formed the Sapporo band tradition, from which Kanzo Uchimura (1861–1930) appeared as its representative. This group emphasized Bible study and Uchimura began the Mukyokai (Non-church) movement.

## **CRISIS, NOT OF CHRISTIANITY, BUT OF THE CHURCH-TYPE TRADITION**

Even though Christians are few, the Church’s ethical impact, contribution through education, social welfare work, YMCA and YWCA, etc. are very big. The members of the social action tradition, the evangelism-type tradition and the Bible study tradition never think they have failed. But the church-type tradition is in crisis. From 1968, the biggest church, Kyodan has been thrown into chaos and the number of members is decreasing in these years, from its peak of 200,000 in 1970 to 190,000 in 1980. The number of church attendants on Sunday is about 59,000. The total congregations are 1,690, the number of ministers are about 2,200. The average Sunday attendance is 30 for a congregation. The

total budget of '80 was about 4.7 bil. in which 62% was spent for salary. Next is the Anglican. The total numbers are 55,000; there are 275 congregations with 340 ministers. The average Sunday attendance is 34. The third is the Baptists. Members: 35,000. Congregations, 500 with 630 ministers.

Lutherans	28,000
Nihon Kirisuto	13,600
Immanuel	11,000
Seventh Day Adventist	9,500
Nihon Iesuo	8,500
Salvation Army	8,200
Holiness	8,100
Reformed	7,600
Assembly of God	7,500
Domei	6,000
Nazarene	4,500
Free Methodist	3,500

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According to the statistics in '81, the total number of Christians is 1,220,000, which is about 1% of the total population of Japan. Catholics are 396,000; Jesus no Mitama, 140,000; Genshi Fukuin, 50,000; Watch-Tower, 54,000 (besides, Toitsu Genri, 270,000?). The Protestants are less than half a million and only 1/4 seem to attend the Sunday service, which indicates a crisis of the church-type tradition (and also a warning to the evangelism tradition). Besides the number reported in statistics, there are many Christians who belong to the Non-church movement. It is very difficult to count them, for they have no organization, no office, no committee; the definition of a Christian is completely different, because it depends on their inner conviction whether they think themselves to be Christians or not. In the year book of Christianity, there are only about 50 meetings of Non-church movement, or Bible study groups, but some say that more than a million people are non-church people. The most important point is that they do not think that they have failed, but rather been successful especially through many influential persons, such as the late prime minister Ohira, the late Yanaibara (President of Tokyo

University), Fujibayashi (the former head of the Supreme Court) and many, many professors, especially related to Tokyo University. They emphasize Bible study, a simple fellowship and a prayer life. More than 1.3 mil. Bibles are sold every year and the complete work, or selected work of Uchimura are one of the hidden best sellers even today.

## KANZO UCHIMURA

Kanzo Uchimura was born in 1861 as a son of the Samurai class. He had an ethical background of Confucianism and of the Samurai spirit. He graduated from Sapporo agricultural school in 1881, where he was baptized. When he went to the States in 1884, he was shocked to see the immorality and evils related to the churches, while he was convinced of the truth of the Bible and the redemption by Jesus Christ. He says about the Bible, "To the Christian, the Bible is a single book, as certainly as is Hamlet or Divina Commedia. The author is one, the plan is one, the spirit is one, and the truth is one. The Bible is a cosmos, a unity in diversities. He who lived the Bible, and not merely read it, knows that it is so. Apart from orthodoxy, by the sheer force of logics of experiences, he is compelled to believe that it is so. Not a word is to be added unto it, nor a word is to be taken away from it." (The complete works of Uchimura Kanzo. Vol. III. p.122). He says about the States, "Modernism and Americanism—Modernism **p. 77** in all its phases is nothing but love of pleasure rather than love of God. It is an attempt to get the greatest amount of pleasure out of this globe of only eight thousand miles in diameter, in a span of life of only three score years and ten. Instead of saying, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, Modernism says: earth is man's and the fulness thereof. It exhausts one source of resources after another, and never gives thanks to the Creator; and in its eagerness to enjoy the present life, it pays no attention to the welfare of the future generation. And Americanism is the most developed form of Modernism, and in the name of science and progress, it is leading the whole world into swift destruction. May God deliver us from Modernism and Americanism!" (*op. cit.* p. 196)

Seeing the evils caused by many denominations, he distinguished between Jesus and the Church, saying, "It is certain that Jesus had no idea of founding what we mean by the Church. He expected the 'little flock' that he had gathered around him to endure as such, but only till the Father's purpose to give the Kingdom was fulfilled ... The word 'Church' never occurs in the gospels, save in two passages of Matthew, one textually doubtful, both recognized by all modern students as belonging to that element of Matthew which is latest and has the least claim to authenticity." (*op. cit.* p. 28)

He came back from the States in 1888 and started to teach in the new government academy in Tokyo, the Dai Ichi Koto Chu Gakko, which is now included in the course of Tokyo University. In January 1891, the teachers of Tokyo school were compelled to participate in a ceremony of bowing head to a personally signed copy of the Imperial Rescript on Education. Uchimura boldly took his stand and did not bow. He was disemployed and suffered from poverty, enmities of friends and enemies, during which he wrote famous books such as *A Comfort as a Christian*, *How I Became a Christian* etc. In 1897, he became a journalist in Yorozu Choho News Paper in Tokyo, and in 1900 he started to publish "The Bible Study" and started his Bible study class in his home at Tsunohazu near the academy, from where many professors and leaders of Japan came out. As the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 approached, Uchimura opposed this war and resigned from his post as journalist. He had been concentrating on publishing "Bible Study" and to continuing the Bible study class, and he never intended to establish any organization. **p. 78**

## EVALUATION OF NON-CHURCH MOVEMENT

There are many things that emerge from Uchimura's personality as a Christian,

1) his bold attitude in criticizing Western civilization and church denominationalism, etc. and also in taking a stand against Imperialism and Emperor-worship although he lost his position.

2) But he also had weaknesses. His influence has been rather limited to the circle of intelligent people near Tokyo University.

3) As Uchimura committed himself to the Bible and all his followers love and diligently study the Bible (many of them read the Bible in Greek), it is impossible to criticize his movement from the stand that the Bible is the word of God. It is the matter of interpretation when they deny the doctrine of the church and of the sacraments.

4) As Carlo Calderola clarifies indigenization into three categories, acceptance type, protest type and compromise type, Uchimura's theology is clarified into the protest type. Today, the world has become small and it is not the time of one-way traffic but of mutual fellowship and co-operation. The strong inferiority complex which made Uchimura's theology sharp must be re-evaluated from the perspective of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Church.

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Gyoji Nabetani is President of Kobe Lutheran Theological Seminary, Kobe, Japan. p. 79

## Biblical Foundations: A Latin American Study

C. René Padilla

An *evangelical* theology can never be less than a *biblical* theology. God has spoken and his Word has been scripturated in the Bible. If theology is to keep continuity with God's Word, therefore, it must necessarily be under the authority of Scripture. An evangelical theology is by definition one that recognizes the normativity of the Scriptures in which the Evangel has been recorded. In practical terms, it is a theology which constantly takes into account the classical principles of biblical hermeneutics related to the literary context, the language, history and culture.

An evangelical theology, however, cannot be biblical in the sense of being limited to a grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture. Theology includes but is far more than exegesis. It is the result of a process of transposing the Word of God from its original Hebrew or Graeco-Roman *milieu* into a contemporary situation, for the purpose of producing in the modern readers or hearers the same kind of impact that the original message was meant to produce in its original historical context.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the purpose of hermeneutics, see my paper on "Hermeneutics and Culture—a Theological Perspective" in *Gospel and Culture*, eds. John Stott & Robert T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979).

The very purpose of Scripture, according to a well-known definition of it, is “that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). If theology is to fall in line with that purpose, besides being biblical in a narrow sense it must also be communal, pneumatic, contextual and missiological—it must be biblical in a wider sense. In other words, it must take into account the whole process through which the Word of God is made flesh in the people of God within a particular historical context by the power of the Holy Spirit. *It will have a biblical foundation not only in the sense of responding to a grammatical-historical exegesis but also in the sense of being in harmony with the purpose of biblical revelation.* The present paper is an attempt to look at the various dimensions of a biblical foundation (and therefore of hermeneutics) in the light of God’s purpose in revelation and with special reference to theology in the Two-thirds World.

A biblical foundation presupposes: (1) that the purpose of the Word of God is to create a people who are distinctively God’s very own, “eager to do what is good” (cf. Titus 2:14); (2) that the comprehension of the Word of God, including both the understanding and the appropriation of the biblical message, requires the p. 80 inspiration of the Holy Spirit; (3) that the interpretation of the Word of God involves a hermeneutical circulation between the horizons of the biblical text and the horizons of the contemporary situation, aiming at “the obedience that comes from faith” (cf. Rom. 1:5); (4) that the works of love through which faith expresses itself are a witness to the power of the Word of God acting in and through the people of God. In other words, a biblical foundation presupposes communal, pneumatic, contextual and missiological hermeneutics.

## COMMUNAL HERMENEUTICS

One of the most perceptive commentaries on the Gospels ever written is *The Gospel in Solentiname*, in which Ernesto Cardenal reports the comments of humble *campesinos* (farm workers) on Gospel readings. The procedure adopted at the meetings out of which these comments emerged is described by Cardenal in the following terms:

Each Sunday we first distribute copies of the Gospels to those who can read. There are some who can’t, especially among the elderly and those who live on islands far away from school. One of those who read best (generally a boy or a girl) reads aloud the entire passage on which we are going to comment. Then we discuss it verse by verse.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have a good illustration of communal hermeneutics. John Stott provides another one, taken from the experience of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin in Madras Diocese (South India):

“Once a month clergy from a group of pastorates gathered either for half a day or for a full day.” They began with “thorough exegetical study of the passages prescribed for the Sunday in question.” This was done both in plenary sessions and in groups, four or five groups being asked to prepare a sermon outline each for the Sundays of the ensuing month. “The outlines would then be submitted to the plenary for comment, criticism and discussion.” Usually, the sermon texts would be chosen from the lectionary published by the Church of South India. “On some occasions, however, especially when something of overriding importance was happening in the life of the Church or in the life of the nation ... the groups would be asked to consider what the proper Christian response to the situation should be, and what passages of Scripture would be appropriate for the worship of the Sunday in question.” Bishop Newbigin’s final comment was that, although “in the end each one had to go home and p. 81 prepare his own sermons,” yet “these exercises

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<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), Vol. I, p.viii.

helped to ensure that there was more meat in them than would otherwise have been the case.”<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of communal hermeneutics, the Christian community is the place where the Word of God finds its home and releases its transforming power. Such an approach is quite in keeping with the purpose of biblical revelation. No portion of the Bible either in the Old or the New Testament was written for the sake of academic theological study. Scripture was given to enable people like Irene, Teresita, Juan, Alejandro, Elvis and Laureano—members of the Solentiname community—to live according to God’s will. The gathered community of believers is meant to be the organ through which the Word of God takes up a fresh meaning in relation to a concrete historical situation.

Theology in the West has all too frequently been conceived as an academic discipline in which only a few intellectually qualified experts, who may or may not participate in the life of the church, are able to engage. Theological reflection is usually a highly individualistic enterprise, totally or almost totally unrelated to the life and mission of the church. The *novelty* of theological theories is a high priority. A theologian is a professional concerned with the interpretation and explanation of a religious tradition which does not necessarily affect life here and now. As a result, theology is divorced from the church and the Bible is assumed to be a book closed to ordinary people.

Theology as a predominantly academic (and oftentimes speculative) discipline is a luxury that we Christians in the Two-thirds World cannot afford either to produce or to import. The only theology we need and must therefore afford is one intimately related to God’s purpose expressed in Paul’s words: “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, *together with all the saints*, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God” ([Eph. 3:17b–19](#)). Accordingly, it will have to be a theology based on a communal hermeneutics—a theology growing out (and responding to the needs) of the Christian community. As I put it in my paper on “Hermeneutics and Culture” read at the Willowbank Consultation on Gospel and Culture in 1978,

If the Gospel is to become visible in the life of *the Church, the whole* p.82 Church has to be recognized as “the hermeneutical community,” the place where the interpretation of Scripture is an ongoing process. God’s purpose in speaking through Scripture is not to provide a basis for theological systems, but to shape a new humanity created in the image of Jesus Christ. Biblical hermeneutics is a concern of the whole Church for it has to do with God’s creation of a community called to manifest his Kingdom in every area of life.<sup>4</sup>

Is there, then, a place for “professional” theologians? There is, provided that their role is strictly understood in relation to the life and mission of the Church. Theologians are meant to be “pastors and teachers” given by God for one purpose: “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until *we all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ” ([Eph. 4:12–13](#)).

The task of interpreting Scripture is a task of the whole Church. The biblical foundation for theology in the Two-thirds World presupposes a church that functions as the

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), pp.221–222.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.104.

“hermeneutical community”—the place where the Gospel is received not as a human word, but as it actually is, the living Word of God.

## PNEUMATIC HERMENEUTICS

The Bible is not a paper pope or a book of Mormon handed down from heaven, but the inspired record of God’s revelation given in a particular historical context whose marks it bears. If people today are to hear the Word of God within their own situation, the transposition of the biblical message from the past to the present is unavoidable. How is that process possible?

Here again, the tendency in Western theology has been to answer this hermeneutical question by appealing to the scientific approach to Scripture—an approach far beyond the reach of ordinary people. The rank and file of the church can do nothing but depend on the priesthood of Bible scholars to tell them what a given scriptural passage meant in its original context and what they can believe.

The importance of the grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture must not be minimized. The illumination of the Holy Spirit does not eliminate the need to study the Bible any more than his power removes the need to take medicine in the case of sickness. The fact remains, however, that the comprehension of God’s truth contained in Scripture is not merely a matter of Bible-study techniques. p. 83 Biblical scholarship is a necessary but not a sufficient recourse for that purpose. Why so?

The answer is that there is in Scripture a mystery which transcends human reason. Behind the historical records, legends, popular sayings, prophecies, traditions, gospels and letters contained in the Bible, there is a living God who has spoken and continues to speak a message which breaks through from beyond history into the human situation. Consequently, knowing God’s message is far more than mastering the biblical text. It involves a personal relationship—a relationship with the God who is behind the text. Belief in God is far more than an intellectual acceptance of biblical truth. It is, rather, a wholehearted commitment to the God of truth who reveals himself through the written Word and the Spirit of the living God (the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*).

According to the teaching of the New Testament, no knowledge of God is possible without the hidden witness of the Spirit. As Paul puts it, “no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” ([1 Cor. 2:11](#)); if we are to know God, therefore, we have to be “taught by the Spirit” (v.[13](#)). As a matter of fact, “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (v.[14](#)). The witness of the Spirit is connected with the truth of God in such a way that no real knowledge of the truth is possible without the experience of the testimony of the Spirit in one’s heart. The inspired Word externally and the testimony of the Spirit internally are combined together in a single witness to the reality of God and his saving power. The action of the Word and the action of the Spirit are inseparable. For this reason the new birth can be alternatively regarded as “by the Word of God” ([1 Peter 1:23](#)) or “by the Spirit” ([John 3:5, 6](#)).

It follows that no true evangelical theology is possible apart from the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Doing theology is not merely a scholarly but also a charismatic task. The same Spirit who inspired Scripture in the past is the Spirit who enlightens the heart and enables it to comprehend God’s truth in the present. Consequently, the biblical foundation for theology presupposes a pneumatic hermeneutic—a hermeneutic which enables the Christian community to respond to God’s truth and to address the questions which are raised within its own concrete situation, with the freedom of the Spirit. Here

too, in relation to the hermeneutical task, Paul's dictum, that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" ([2 Cor. 3:17](#)), is applicable. p. 84

Theology in the Two-thirds World must break away from the rationalist captivity in which much of Western theology has been held. It must fully reflect the God-breathed character of Scripture and allow the Spirit to exercise his mysterious power in unexpected ways so as to challenge our theological concepts, ideological assumptions, and lifestyle, and to bring us to conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment through the Word of God. It must be biblical not only in the narrow sense of making use of the biblical text, but in the sense of allowing the written Word to be the means through which the Spirit of God communicates the new life in Christ and brings that life to maturity within each particular historical context.

## CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Consultation on Gospel and Culture held in Willowbank, Bermuda, under the auspices of the Theology and Education Group and the Strategy Group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, in January, 1978, was the placing of the contextualization issue at the top of the agenda for evangelical theology. On the question of the contextual approach to Scripture, the official report on that Consultation—*The Willowbank Report*—states: "It takes seriously the cultural context of the contemporary reader as well as of the biblical text, and recognizes that a dialogue must develop between the two." It then describes this dialogue in the following terms:

Today's readers cannot come to the text in a personal vacuum, and should not try to. Instead, they should come with an awareness of concerns stemming from their cultural background, personal situation, and responsibility to others. These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the Scriptures. What is received back, however, will not be answers only, but more questions. As we address Scripture, Scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected. In fact, we are compelled to reformulate our previous questions and to ask fresh ones. So the living interaction proceeds.<sup>5</sup>

A case can be made to argue that the effort to contextualize the Gospel started quite early in the history of the Church. As a matter of fact, the New Testament provides plenty of evidence to show that the interaction between the original reality of Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the historical situation in which the Gospel was proclaimed, on the other hand, started in the first century and resulted in p. 85 the diversity in unity and the unity in diversity characteristic of early Christianity. In James D. G. Dunn's words, "each community of the Spirit and each new generation of the Spirit felt the responsibility laid upon it by the Spirit to interpret the received tradition afresh and in relation to its own situation and needs."<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Jesus Christ—the crucified and risen One—remained the integrative centre, the fundamental unifying element, the "irreducible minimum" in relation to which the Christian faith had to be defined and any claimant to the title "Christian" had to be judged. But the Gospel was not a static doctrinal formula but a story

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.439.

<sup>6</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977), p.77.

which took new forms in new historical situations.<sup>7</sup> To quote Dunn again, “the NT shows Christianity always to have been a living and developing diversity and provides some sort of norm for the ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation.”<sup>8</sup>

If it is recognized that the dynamic interplay between the past and the present—between the unifying centre of the Christian faith and the diverse situations in which the Gospel was proclaimed—started within first-century Christianity, there should be no difficulty in accepting that contextual hermeneutics is an essential presupposition for the biblical foundation for theology today. The task of contextualizing the Gospel is as necessary today as it was in New Testament times. Perhaps more so because of the time gap between the first and the twentieth centuries.

Now that the Church has become a world-wide community, Christians in the Two-thirds World have two alternatives before them when they come to the question of their theological task: (1) to import a brand of Western theology such as Reformed, Dispensationalist, Lutheran and at most making an attempt to “adapt” it to their own situation; (2) to struggle for a theology with a biblical foundation in the wider sense—a theology resulting from the merging of the p. 86 horizons of their own situation and the horizons of the biblical text. In light of the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the second alternative alone is in keeping with the pattern established by earliest Christianity, according to the New Testament. In other words, if theology is to have a biblical foundation, nothing less than a contextual approach to Scripture will do. Western theologies may be useful as preliminary expositions of the Christian faith, but must never be allowed to take the place of Scripture.

The contextualization of the Gospel will not consist of an adaptation of an existing theology of universal validity to a particular situation. It will not be merely the result of an intellectual process. It will not be aided by benevolent missionary paternalism intended to help the native theologians to select “positive elements” from their own historical situation which may then be used in the communication of a foreign version of the Gospel. It can only be the result of a new, open-ended reading of Scripture with a hermeneutic in which the biblical text and the historical situation become mutually engaged in a dialogue whose purpose is to place the Church under the lordship of Jesus Christ in its particular context.

## MISSIOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Finally, if theology is to have a truly biblical foundation, it will have to accept a humbler role than that of an absolute master of minds and hearts and become a servant contributing to the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The process of contextualization of the Word of God which took place in early Christianity was mainly motivated by the desire to communicate the message of Jesus Christ in meaningful terms

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<sup>7</sup> In his paper on “The Gospel—Its Content and Communication: A Theological Perspective,” in *Gospel and Culture*, eds. John Stott & Robert T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), pp.135–174, James Packer develops six different ways to narrate the Gospel story, all of which are extracted from the New Testament. According to him, in each of these distinct (though overlapping and complementary) stories “is the Gospel just as all six together are the Gospel” (p. 143). Further on he adds: “As each strand of a rope is a little rope in itself, so each of these six stories is itself authentic Gospel, though the fulness of the message only appears when all six are put together” (p.148). Packer acknowledges that his “stories” are “not necessarily exhaustive” and suggests another one which could be added: “God’s Promise—the Renewing” (p. 148).

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.379.

to people living in a different situation.<sup>9</sup> The basic aim was not “to do theology” *per se*, but to respond to God’s mission, to call people from among all the nations to “the obedience that comes from the faith” (cf. Rom. 1.5). The pattern for the contextualization of the Gospel in each particular historical situation and in each successive generation was thus established. A missiological hermeneutic is therefore essential to a biblical foundation for theology.

A mission perspective will maintain the balance between a proper concern for *faithfulness* to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” ([Jude 1:3](#)), on the one hand, and an equally proper [p. 87](#) concern for the *relevance* of that faith to the concrete historical context, on the other. Whenever and wherever that perspective is absent, one of two things happens: (1) Christians are more interested in the preservation of a theological tradition than in the communication of God’s message of judgment and grace from within their own historical situation. Faithfulness to the Gospel is mistaken for an abstract doctrinal formulation unrelated to the myths, dreams, concerns, anxieties, struggles, problems, questions, values, assumptions and customs of people. The Church becomes a foreign enclave with no relevance to daily life. (2) Christians are more interested in social respectability than in the proclamation of the Word of God. The relevance of the Gospel is mistaken for the adaptation of biblical revelation to the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the age, a mere echo of popular wishful thinking. The Church loses its distinctiveness as the community of the Kingdom of God.

A missiological hermeneutic takes as its starting point the fact that the Word of God has been given for the whole world and for all generations, and that people must therefore be invited to respond to it in their own concrete situation. From one point of view, the Word of God is relevant to every situation because it is God’s Word in Jesus Christ, who is “the same yesterday, and today and forever” ([Heb. 13:8](#)), and because it is addressed to sinful men and women for whom Jesus Christ was crucified and risen from the dead. Relevance is inherent to the Gospel. From another point of view, the proclamation is faithful to the Word of God to the extent that it confronts men and women with God’s Word of judgment and grace in the concreteness of their daily lives, according to the pattern set by the incarnation. Faithfulness to the Gospel demands contextualization.

If theology in the Two-thirds World is to be both relevant and faithful, it must be based on a missiological hermeneutic. Its purpose will be to transpose “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” from its original context into a new situation, with the view of manifesting the Kingdom of God in and through the Church of Jesus Christ. More than attributes of academic theology, relevance and faithfulness are characteristics of a church that expresses faith through works of love and thus bears witness to the Word of God which is active in those who believe.

In conclusion, to speak of a biblical foundation for theology is to speak of a hermeneutic which sees the Church as the hermeneutical community, the witness of the Holy Spirit as the key to the comprehension of the Word of God, contextualization as the New Testament pattern for the transposition of the Gospel into a new [p. 88](#) situation, and the Christian mission as the means through which God calls people from among all nations to the obedience that comes from the faith in Jesus Christ.

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**Dr. C. René Padilla is a pastor and editor in Buenos Aires, Argentina. [p. 89](#)**

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Daniel von Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 64, No. 253 (January 1975), pp.37–55. For a discussion of von Allmen’s thesis, see my article mentioned in footnote 1 above.

# Biblical Foundations: An African Study

Tite Tienou

## INTRODUCTION

The question of the relationship between the Bible and theology is at least as old as the Christian church itself. It has received much attention in our day because we have increasingly been made aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a presuppositionless theology. We have learned to dismiss the claims of those who say that theirs is a pure, unadulterated biblical theology, but have we not fallen into the other extreme where theology is only a matter of opinion (personal or collective)? The finality of theology, its methodology and the use of the Bible are thereby questioned by many. In other words, what do we mean when we say that the Bible is authoritative in our theology? And how do we make that happen?

This raises at once the question of how one approaches the biblical text when attempting to understand and explain it. Some have suggested that presuppositions have little influence on understanding biblical truth. D. D. Rutledge writes:

In itself it matters comparatively little what system of philosophy is employed to explain, illustrate and develop Christian teaching; the choice must always be decided, at least partly, by the racial temperament and tradition of the people addressed (1965:37).

Others have argued that the philosophical and epistemological starting points greatly determine the resultant message perceived from Scripture and ultimately shape doctrine. Writing in a specific Roman Catholic context, L. S. Senghor states:

It is in fact Catholic doctrine, more than its liturgy, which has been marked by the Graeco-Roman seal of *discursive reason*: the *ratio*. Whereas the *Revelation* announced by the Gospel is more existential than rational ... The historical and geographical context of the Bible is that of an *existential* world where *discursive reason* is rooted in *intuitive reason* (1963:291 my own translation, italics in original).

Foregoing comment on the above two quotations for the moment, let us illustrate the problem with two well-known systems of doctrine in Evangelicalism: Calvinism and Dispensationalism. Both claim Scripture as the final authority or norm and yet each one of them is really a different key to Scripture. Calvinism and Dispensationalism reach divergent conclusions about eschatology, for instance, in spite of the fact that they are both in the tradition of rational approaches to Scripture. With this example in mind, one can easily imagine the p. 90 divergent conclusions possible if there are two entirely different presuppositional starting points. In a way, this is what is happening before our own eyes today in the contextualization debate.

We have learned that all systems of thought, theology included, are determined by presuppositions. As D. H. Kelsey puts it, "at the root of a theological position there is an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God's presence" (1975:163). He calls this imaginative act of the theologian a *mode*. He groups theologians in three modes: ideational, concrete actuality and ideal possibility. Theologians of the ideational mode think that God is present in the doctrine asserted by scripture while those of the concrete actuality *mode* consider the presence of God either in an agent rendered present by scripture or through a process of cosmic recreation. For theologians of the ideal possibility mode, God's presence is either

through scriptural statements announcing the possibility of real authentic existence or Jesus Christ making possible the new being (Kelsey 1975:161). Quite apart from scripture, then, one's basic presupposition determines theological content. It is therefore no longer sufficient to claim biblical foundation for this or that theology. One must always go beyond the theologian's claim of faithfulness to Scripture and discover the all-encompassing mode which explains the system proposed. One's hermeneutics always rests on a prior allegiance or world view. In that sense Kelsey's three modes are prior allegiances to which the various theologians commit themselves. They explain the varied viewpoints represented by the different theological schools.

The three modes proposed by Kelsey are helpful for understanding inter-mode theological divergences within one culture or closely related cultures. They are not adequate for the study of intra-mode diversity, particularly when one deals with theologians having different cultural world views prior to their theological allegiance or mode. Take for example the ideational mode. These are its characteristics according to Kelsey:

God's presence is something like understanding the basic truth about oneself and one's world. Or: It is like having personally appropriated a set of concepts with such seriousness that they decisively shape one's emotions, passions, and feelings (1975:161).

In spite of the fact that most evangelical theologians could fit in the ideational mode as described by Kelsey, many of them (particularly [p. 91](#) those of the so-called Third World) would feel quite uncomfortable with the rigidity of the system Kelsey attributes to Warfield:

If, for example, a theologian construes the mode of God's presence in the ideational mode, as Warfield does, then he takes the central theological task to be the analysis of doctrines or concepts with an eye to proposing reforms in current forms of church belief and speech. The centre of gravity in the ensuing "theological position" will fall on believing and on what is believed, and traditional theological topics will be treated in the order of their logical dependence. Hence, for instance, the doctrine of revelation, and especially the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible, will be treated first, to secure the logical ground for what is said on all other topics. Other theological *loci* will be treated in the order in which they may be derived directly from scripture or from scripture and other doctrines together, or solely from other doctrines (1975:161–162, italics in original).

Many Third World theologians would contend that such a conception of the theological task is not only uncultural in its emphasis on logic but that it also fails to interpret the Bible properly and does not bring theology to bear on concrete life situations. The question remains: how faithfully does theology reflect the biblical message for the times and situations it addresses? For if biblical truths are unchanging and unchangeable, the theologian's task is to explain and actualize the Bible's message in such a way that it communicates without being unfaithful. In order to do this, one must rid oneself, as much as possible, of any *pre-understanding* and take Scripture as it is in all its simplicity and complexity.

What, then, is the best method for reaching beyond our preunderstandings in order to grasp the biblical message? Obviously one cannot be so presumptuous as to offer only one method; but a helpful way is to take a major problem of human existence and examine it in biblical perspective, then in a specific cultural milieu and finally seek to correlate the two. This is the approach taken here.

One such major question, both in the Bible and in cultures in general, is: What does it mean to be human in the universe? Or to put it in the Psalmist's language: What is man? ([Ps. 8:4](#)). This all important fundamental question can be studied in the following three

sections: What is person vis-à-vis God? What is person in history? and what is person in the presence of spiritual realities? We limit ourselves here to the first of these questions, namely: What is person vis-à-vis God?

It should be noted that no single method is adequate to guide one's reflection on a question of this magnitude. This is especially so when one attempts to weld together biblical, cultural and theological insights. Consequently, the method employed here is neither primarily [p. 92](#) exegetical, nor systematic nor historical. It incorporates aspects of all three, although there is a slant toward the systematic. This seems to be the best way of bringing biblical revelation to bear on specific cultural ideas.

## WHAT IS PERSON BEFORE GOD?

In a way the basic problem in theology is understanding and explaining the fact of being *before* God. The whole of biblical revelation is clearly concerned with this. Genesis places the entire universe before God the creator and shows the implications of this for humanity. It is no accident that the first commandment (both in [Exodus 20:2, 3](#) and for Jesus in [Matthew 22:37, 38](#)) concerns God and the service due to Him by humans. God is the beginning and the end of all theological discourse. K. Bockmühl is right when he says that the task of Christians and theologians today is "to restate and reapply the first commandment" (1982:48). But, in order for this to take place, changes must be made in the way the doctrine of God is taught in churches and theological institutions. In other words, we must dust off our heritage of cultural and philosophical biases in order to let biblical truths shine. Let us illustrate this by the influence of the Pseudo-Denys or Dionysios the Areopagite on the traditional expositions of the doctrine of God.

## DENYS THE AREOPAGITE AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Nearly all Christians, regardless of their theological training or the lack of it, can enumerate some of the traditionally defined attributes of God, but few realize the cultural and philosophical weight of concepts such as omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience. The question of whether these attributes accurately reflect some aspects of biblical revelation is not the point of the present discussion. Our concern here is to establish the specificity of the theological discourse to cultural realities. And the case of the attributes of God reveals such specificity.

No attempt is made here to give a complete historical account of the discussion on the nature of God in the Graeco-Roman tradition of the church. In all probability it started rather early. How else can one explain the opening words of the so-called Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God, the Father *Almighty* ..."? At any rate, early in the discussion (probably beginning in the fifth century), the writings of Dionysios the Areopagite exerted considerable influence on the church's understanding of God. [p. 93](#)

The writings of Dionysios the Areopagite (or Pseudo-Denys) who claimed to be Paul's Athenian convert of [Acts 17](#), have for a long time been granted near apostolic authority. They reached the Western church in the ninth century through Erigena's Latin translation and they influenced the great Thomas Aquinas as well as the mystical theology of the Christian tradition (Rolt 1951:3). He seemed preoccupied with one problem: the knowledge of God and the nature of the Godhead. The doctrine of the super-essential Godhead (ὐπερουάιος θεαρχία) is the pivotal beginning of his thought. God is defined primarily as super-essence or supra-personality because he is infinite (Rolt 1951:4).

Dionysios' definition of God as ὐπερουάιος θεαρχία illustrates well the relationship between the Bible, theology and culture. He must have realized the problem for he

repeatedly affirms that his teaching, and especially the divine names, derive from scripture (Roques 1958:xxv). Roques notes that:

In reality, if most of the attributes explained are biblical, they are also philosophical, and, at any rate, the way they are systematically explained is more philosophical than biblical ... Denys takes his inspiration from the last neo-platonic (philosophers) (1958:xxvi).

Furthermore, even his two methods for knowing God (the *via affirmativa* and the *via negativa*) are processes of the discursive reason of Greek philosophy. He writes:

It is necessary to distinguish this negative method of abstraction from the positive method of affirmation, in which we deal with the Divine Attributes. For with these latter we begin with the universal and primary and pass through the intermediate and secondary to the particular and ultimate attributes; but now we ascend from the particular to the universal conceptions, abstracting all attributes in order that, without veil, we may know that Unknowing, which is enshrouded under all that is known and all that can be known, and that we may begin to contemplate the superessential Darkness which is hidden by all the light that is in existing things (1949:13).

In light of these thoughts, God is ultimately unknowable by persons because they are “superessential Darkness”. Since Dionysios thinks that the person is the world in microcosm (Rutledge 1965:19), and since God is not person ([Hosea 11:9](#)), God’s attributes (taken as they are from human realities) will be derived by a process of either exaggeration (omnipotence) or negation (infinite) of human attributes.

Dionysios’ approach to understanding God’s attributes, which is p. 94 almost purely logical by Greek standards, has had a lasting influence on theology. Much of the related debate on God’s transcendence and his immanence is therefore of a particular cultural and philosophical orientation. Concepts such as God being supra-personal (Dionysios) or wholly other (the early Barth) may be legitimate in the specific culture of their origin. We must still ask: What is the biblical warrant for making them universal categories for the church? With that question in mind, we now turn to the matter of the biblical understanding of God.

## **PERSON BEFORE GOD IN THE BIBLE**

The main thrust of biblical writings is *not* on understanding the *essence* of God or his attributes in a vacuum. This is especially so in the area of defining similarities and differences between God and human beings. Passages such as [Genesis 1:26, 27](#); [Hosea 11:9](#) and [Acts 17:28, 29](#) leave one guessing at their proper interpretation. Theologians have long debated the meaning of the image of God in persons. They will no doubt continue to do so. Paul even adds to our confusion when he quotes Aratus, the Greek poet, with approval: τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἑσμέν. v. Instead of explaining what “being of the race of God” means, the Apostle stresses what it does not mean: God is not like gold, silver or stone. The point seems to be that whatever God is like, he resembles more a human being than gold, silver or stone. And yet God is not person; he is our maker. Therefore God is in a category quite apart from all other categories of human experience: He is the only one who is Creator of all that exists. This God has chosen to have a deep relationship with a creature of his. He has given this creature (person) a measure of capacity to understand the Creator. The image of God may signify no more than the fact of a human being’s ability to be in communion with God and to represent him in the world.

Whatever else the image of God may mean, the focus of the biblical record is on God’s relationship to humans. From his visits in the garden “in the cool of the day” ([Gn. 3:8](#)) to the first disobedience and to the end of this age and beyond, God is constantly seeking,

even yearning for, a meaningful relationship with people. It is therefore not surprising that, for instance, “the Old Testament possesses no one single definition of God, nor any one formula by which he is to be identified, although probably ‘Yahweh, the God of Israel’ would come closest to this” (Clements 1978:54). If indeed the phrase, “Yahweh, the God of Israel” is taken as an identifying [p. 95](#) formula for God in the Old Testament, it should be noted that the emphasis is on a *personal relationship* of God with people, namely Israel. Biblical writings do not teach us concepts of God; they show us how people encountered God, learned to know him and walked with him. That we today can follow the same process is why these things were written for our instruction.

The biblical record also shows that God reveals himself and his characteristics primarily through encounters with people. Virtually all we know about God in the Bible is by this process of self-revelation. For instance, Abram came to know God as the Almighty (El Shaddai, [Gn. 17:1](#)) in a specific set of circumstances. God had already promised to be a shield for him and to give him a great reward ([Gn. 15:1](#)). Upon Abram’s anxiety of dying without an offspring who could be his heir, God makes the incredible promise to him: “This man (Eliezer of Damascus) will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” ([Gn. 15:4](#)). And God takes him outside to teach him about the great numbers of his descendants; Abram believes God. But with the passing of time, doubt sets in and Abram and Sarai “help” God fulfill his promise through an appropriate cultural means ([Gn. 16](#)): Ishmael is born.

Following this episode of Abram’s life, God comes to him at age 99. He tells Abram two things: I will establish my covenant with you and you will be “the father of a multitude of nations” ([Gn. 17:2](#), 5). All this is prefaced with the declaration: I am God Almighty. Now God knows that Abram already has a son in his household; so what is the point of saying to him twice: “You shall be the father of a multitude of nations” ([Gn. 17:4](#), 5) and of changing his name to Abraham? It appears to be none other than the fact that God accomplishes his purposes sovereignly, unaided by uncalled-for human initiative: He is almighty! So, a little later, God completes the promise with these startling words: “As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” ([Gn. 17:15](#), 16). Abraham’s reaction is rather normal: he does not believe!

God follows the conversation with Abraham by a demonstration of his power. He sends three men to visit Abraham and tell him: “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son” ([Gn. 18:10](#)). At Sarah’s unbelieving laughter, the Lord answers: “Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” ([Gn. 18:14](#)). And “so Sarah conceived and bore a [p. 96](#) son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him” ([Gn. 21:2](#)). God has shown himself, through these unusual circumstances, to be the Almighty. Abraham did not discover God’s omnipotence through a process of logical deduction, this is comparatively easy. God taught him his power through specific events. This is the mystery of divine revelation.

Let us take another example in the life of Abraham: in [Genesis 22](#) Abraham comes to know God as one who provides. Again this came through the dramatic circumstances of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Having obeyed God and trusted him to the point of telling his inquiring son: “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the sacrifice, my son” ([Gn. 22:8](#)), Abraham discovers that God literally does ([Gn. 22:13](#), 14). And this provides the occasion for God to renew his promise to Abraham ([Gn. 22:16–18](#)).

Even the revelation of God to Moses found in [Exodus 3:14](#), the closest formulation we have of God’s being, was given in a specific context. When God appears to Moses in the

burning bush and calls him to go to the Israelites and to the Pharaoh, Moses asks for an identifying name of the God who sent him. God replies: "Tell Israel I am has sent me to you. I am who I am" ([Ex. 3:14](#)). The phrase "I am who I am" does not only "signify that God is a category of being that cannot be defined by reference to any other category" (Clements 1978:63); it is also a reference to God as a living and dependable God. This appears to be the significance of the addition of verse [15](#): "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' " The implication is that as God has been with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so he will be with Moses and Israel. Furthermore, the reference to these three patriarchs (here and elsewhere) underscores the personal nature of God.

The personal nature of God is again emphasized in God's opening statement in [Exodus 20](#): "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (v.2). Clements has rightly drawn the following three conclusions from this statement: first, God's relationship to Israel is fundamental to knowing and understanding God; secondly, the knowledge of God in the Old Testament is tied to an event of Israel's past and thirdly, God liberates from both political and moral oppression (1978:55, 56). He adds: "Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God of freedom, the champion of the oppressed, the guardian of the poor and the avenger of those who have been unjustly treated" (Clements 1978:56). This provides us with a link for the New Testament p. 97 understanding of God.

The events which marked the beginning of the New Testament era are strikingly similar, at least in emphasis, to those of Abraham. When the angel appeared to Mary and told her, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus" ([Lk. 1:31](#)), puzzled, she replied: "How can this be?" ([Lk. 1:34](#)). Then the angel tells her: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (v.37); Mary's reaction is the same as Abraham's: she accepts and believes (v.38).

Following the angel's visit, Mary goes up to see Elizabeth. There she expresses her faith, in the *Magnificat*, in terms which recall [Exodus 20:2](#):

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;  
And holy is his name.  
And His mercy is upon generation after generation  
Toward those who fear Him.  
He has done mighty deeds with His arm;  
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones;  
And exalted those who were humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things;  
And sent away the rich empty-handed  
([Lk. 1:49-53](#)).

Again God is feared, worshipped, loved, and known for what he does in concrete historical events.

The incarnation had no other purpose than to cause people to know God in the actual person of Jesus. For "no one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" ([Jn. 1:18](#)). Even the disciples had difficulty in understanding and accepting that. This may have been the reason why Jesus' declaration in the Upper Room ([Jn. 14:1-4](#)) prompted two questions. Thomas saying: "We know neither where you are going nor the way" (v.5) and Philip adding: "Show us the father, that is enough for us" (v.8). The emphasis in Jesus' reply to both questions is on the

identity between him and God the Father (vv.6, 7, 8, 10, 11). To know God is to know the Jesus they now see; seeing Jesus is seeing God!

So the biblical record makes plain the fact that God's attributes are not merely intellectual abstractions; they rise out of a specific context, that of faith and obedience. Furthermore they are not ideas reached by societal consensus; they are discovered as God reveals himself to people in history. p. 98

## **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND AFRICAN THEOLOGY: A CASE STUDY**

So far we have emphasized the fact that our understanding of the Bible cannot be separated from our prior questions and concerns. Those prior questions, which are largely cultural and philosophical in nature, govern hermeneutics. We have shown what this means for our understanding of the doctrine of God. Now is the time to reflect on the implications for the contextualization of theology, particularly African theology.

### **THEOLOGY IN THE PRESCRIPTIVE MODE**

My understanding of theology is that it is reflection on God's self-disclosure contained in the Scriptures with the purpose of generating the knowledge of God and better obedience. In this perspective, theology is neither a luxury nor only an intellectual endeavour; it is a matter of life and death for Christian communities. I have chosen to call *prescriptive theology* the method used to achieve the above purpose. Our primary concern should not be to study the beliefs and thoughts of particular groups, Christian or otherwise. Rather the question which should constantly be before us is: how will biblical Christianity look when a specific group of people (with their cultural and religious background) reflect on God's word from their context? Prescriptive theology, then, will always have a specific target: a given Christian community in a given cultural milieu. Generalizations, if they are made at all, must come later.

Prescriptive theology is purposeful theology. Its aim is to deepen the hold of scriptural truths on the hearts and minds of people so as to transform them more and more into the likeness of Christ. Such a theology is urgently needed in Africa today and it has a strategic role in reversing what some observers have called the originality of African religions in that they have shown a remarkable ability to transform imported religions (Deschamps 1970:122). Having thus clarified our method, let us now proceed with the case study.

### **GOD IN BOBO WORLDVIEW**

We will focus our attention on the question of God's relationship with human beings as understood by the Bobo of Mali and Upper Volta. The Bobo like many other African peoples, show relatively little concern for God as God. They acknowledge his existence and they fear him. But as Creator and sustainer of the universe, God is now p. 99 absent from the daily life of the people though the Bobo think, he was once as close to them as the sky was to the earth.

We need not dwell any longer on the question of the *Deus absconditus* of African religions. Suffice it to say here that for the Bobo, God cannot be localized or known and no one can entertain direct communication with him. Nevertheless "he is never a stranger, never absent and everything belongs to him" (Sanon 1977:179). While the Bobo view God as all powerful and all knowledgeable, their attention and devotion is given to those intermediaries and mediators sent by God. Reflecting on the Bobo understanding of God, G. Le Moal writes:

The Bobo are inclined to conceptualize the very person of the supreme God ... God, in his essence, is thought unknowable; the nature of his being as well as everything which surrounds him directly are incomprehensible because they are unintelligible in principle. Placed before the problem of the knowledge of God, Bobo theology—reminding us of the position of the ancient Christian schools known as ‘apophatic’—opposes a kind of negative *a priori* (1980:91).

Le Moal does not indicate a particular thinker of the apophatic Christian schools but the unknowability of God in Bobo thought is quite similar to that of Dionysios the Areopagite. In that sense, Bobo worldview and Platonism (and some aspects of Western thought) agree.

But the apophatic method does not represent Dionysios’ entire theological method. We have seen that the two modes (the *via affirmativa* and the *via negativa*) are both part of the discursive reason. The affirmative way (or the cataphatic method) describe the most noble to the least noble of divine attributes; it multiplies words. The negative way (or the apophatic method) takes us from the most humble to the most noble of divine attributes; it leads to silence and awe before God (Roques 1958:xxvi). The difference between the Bobo and the Pseudo-Denys is that the Bobo think that “negative *a priori*” is the only proper way to deal with the question of the knowledge of God.

Nevertheless the similarity between the Dionysian writings and Bobo on such a crucial question as the knowledge of God has far reaching implications for the task of contextualizing theology. It implies, for instance, the impossibility of developing African theology on superficial similarities between African religions and either the Bible or other religions. Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* is an example of such a comparative methodology. His purpose is to show p. 100 that “African peoples are not religiously illiterate” (Preface, p.xiii). He devotes Part One and Part Two of his book to how Africans describe the nature and the active attributes of God. This is an *exposé* of the attributes of God such as omnipotence, omnipresence, etc., as well as transcendence as found in traditional theological textbooks. African ideas of God may indeed be according to Mbiti’s descriptions and Africans may be as religious as any people of earth; but that does not prove them right in the light of biblical revelation. Mbiti fails here to make a significant contribution to African Christian theology because he remains imprisoned in Western (and African?) theological modes.

An African reading or hearing the Old Testament cannot help but notice similarities between some aspects of the social structures and religious institutions of ancient Israel and those of traditional African societies. If one builds a theology on those (as many have done) one will have missed the point of biblical revelation. For God’s concern is not to teach us about social or religious institutions; rather he calls his people to transcend these and know him as the Lord Almighty. That God Almighty can be known, even though he can never be totally comprehended, is the qualitative difference between biblical faith and all paganisms, ancient or modern!

## CONCLUSION

This has been an exercise in how the Bible should be taken to lighten our path in our task of developing theologies in context. It is my conviction that this could be applied to every single area of theology. First, we should deprogramme our hermeneutics so that we don’t only see in the Bible what our hermeneutical key tells us is there. This will help us reduce the effects of our pre-understandings. Secondly, we should read the Bible with the purpose of gaining new understanding. Thirdly, we should see how this affects our total context.

I cannot end this paper without calling attention to the practical implications of what I have learned in the course of this research. First is the necessity for all of us to listen to one another. No one has the infallible method of just letting the Bible speak for itself. Secondly the resources wasted in teaching the traditional attributes of God (say) in African theological institutions could be better utilized in teaching our students to reflect on the Bible. Thirdly, I have anew understood why the Old Testament is the Word of God: it is not because it Contains interesting (and sometimes boring) stories; it is because it teaches me that the supreme heresy is to remove God p.101 from history. This moves me, more than ever before, to communicate as best as I can the historical dimension of faith in Christ!

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Rev. Tite Tienou is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. p. 102

## Biblical Foundations: An East Asian Study

# Wilson W. Chow

## FACING THE CONTEXT

Evangelicals today are facing a challenge to evaluate and to rethink the nature, the task of theology and the methodologies of theological construction in their own contexts. Much has already been said on the doing of theology, or theological reflection. Evangelicals in some parts of the world are already engaged in this endeavour, whereas in Asia various factors have discouraged the launching of theological contextualization. These include uncritical adherence to tradition, fear of syncretism, lack of creativity, etc. Many remain content in making critique of existing theologies with negative attitudes and apprehension, but make no serious effort to go one step further in offering evangelical contribution. However, an evangelical theological awakening is now in progress in Asia. We need to be more open-minded, more bold and willing to learn from others, but with no less evangelical commitment.

Evangelicals are sometimes criticized for having only the gospel, but no theology. Of course, a theology that is void of the gospel content is theologically bankrupt. But the comment points to our evangelical tendency to make theology simply a systematic formulation of doctrines, or a statement of the Christian beliefs, and thus stopping on a confessional level. It fails to take into account the dynamic, vital aspect of theology, that is, to relate the Christian faith to the present context. If the doing of theology involves “the activity of reflecting on the contemporary human life situation in the light of one’s faith”,<sup>1</sup> then we must build a much closer relationship between the biblical text and the context than most evangelicals have so far been able to establish.

Theology cannot but be indigenous or “contextualized”. What we have inherited, as a result of missionary activities and theological training in the West, are western theological traditions. In the past, Christianity has played such an important role in western civilization that “the marriage between theology and western norms of thought and life inevitably becomes the implicit assumption of doing theology in the West.”<sup>2</sup> But in the Third World, we need not be bound or frozen by western theological traditions. Rather, we have to create our own. That means we have to decontextualize much of our present p. 103 available theologies before we can actually contextualize, and avoid the temptation of contextualizing a secondhand expression of the Christian faith. That is not to deny the values of western theological traditions or to downgrade their efforts doing theology. We need to study them as part of our Christian heritage. But our study of theology does not replace the need and responsibility of our own doing of theology. It also means that the way evangelicals do theology in the Third World is equally valid compared to what theologians did or are doing in the West.

The context places a demand on us that we cannot ignore. In the West, we have heard of the “post-Christian era”. Yet in the Third World, we are still looking forward to a Christian era. In Asia, which has more than half of the world’s population, only about 3% of the people are Christians. Hence the number one item on the agenda of the church is mission and evangelization. The “Christian” West looks at this world situation with great emphasis on cross-cultural mission and a strategy on unreached people groups. But what does this have to say to the task of theology in the Third World? It has also been pointed

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos H. Abesamis, “Doing Theological Reflection in a Philippine Context”, *Asian Christian Theology*. Phila.: Westminster Press, 1980, p.89.

<sup>2</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, p.4.

out that “Christian theology, within western theological traditions, has to a large extent limited itself to the explication of the Christian faith handed down from the early church. The subject matter of theology is ‘Christian’ spirituality. It is the traditions of the church that constitute the contents of theological endeavours.”<sup>3</sup> We must not divorce missiology from theology. This should be the direction of Third World theology. The greatest theologian in the Bible, the apostle Paul, was a missionary. “Theology is essentially missiology. The task of theology is to so undergird the deep concerns in mission that the church moves forward in her task in the twentieth century. It is the theologian’s task to help the church to break out of her enslavement to the context in which she lives, so that she can be obedient to her Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

Both the doing of theology and evangelization do not occur in a vacuum, but in a concrete life situation affected by social, political, economic, cultural and religious factors. How to bring the gospel of universal relevance and application down-to-earth to the needs of a given context is the task of theology. As Dr. Athyal put it, “If the Christian gospel is the answer, one should know what are the real p. 104 questions, and this is the task of indigenous theology.”<sup>5</sup> So theology interacts with the contemporary situation, seeking to understand the problems and issues, at the same time being aware of the answers and solutions put forth by other religions or ideologies, and speaking out firmly with conviction from the Christian viewpoint. The making of theology is carried out in the fellowship of the Christian community, and at the same time with participation in the larger community of society. The theologian is not a loner, nor can he afford to be isolated from active participation in Christian fellowship and in the world.

If the doing of theology is such an urgent, challenging and exciting task, what are the guidelines for a relevant theology that is both biblically oriented and contextually related? Are there boundaries to be drawn so that evangelical commitment will not yield to compromise? How do we respond to the basic issues in theological contextualization?

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The first question is about the source or sources of Christian theology. This may sound unnecessary or routine, but we cannot take the question lightly or take the answer for granted. For example, in his ten theological proposals for new frontiers of theology in Asia, C. S. Song suggested that “the totality of life is the raw material of theology.”<sup>6</sup> If, as he puts it, it is not the business of theology to ask how human beings deal with God, but that theology should be concerned about the question of how God deals with human beings, it is important that we know the source of such understanding. In contrast, evangelicals accept only the Bible as the source of theology, because it is the written Word of God. God has revealed Himself in history and the Christ event, and this divine revelation forms the foundation of our theology. There are no other avenues today of knowing God’s will for the world, and His redemptive work for sinners except through what He has revealed in the Bible. The Christian faith is not a philosophical system, but it has an historical basis and character of which the Bible is the only written witness to God’s redemptive activities.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> Peter F. Savage, “The ‘Doing of Theology’ in a Latin American Context”, *TSF Bulletin*, March–April, 1982, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Saphir P. Athyal, “Toward an Asian Christian Theology”, *Asian Christian Theology* p.68.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Song, “New Frontiers of Theology in Asia”, *Varieties of Witness*. Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1980, p.43.

“The historical character of the Christian faith demands that the Bible, as it is the unique witness to and the **P. 105** record of this history, be the source and provide the content of any Christian theology.”<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing that the Bible is necessary and essential as our source of theology, we need to go one step further and ask: Is the Bible alone sufficient for the task of doing theology? If the answer is no, what else are needed?

Some theologians speak of “formative factors” in theology instead of sources. These factors are not on the same level or of equal importance, and they usually include: experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, and reason.<sup>8</sup> While revelation is regarded as “the primary source of theology”, this approach makes no clear commitment to the Bible as the normative source. Others point out that in doing theological reflection, the theologian needs experience, analysis and the Bible. These are called tools for doing theology.<sup>9</sup> It can readily be seen that theology as a subject matter cannot be separated from the theologian who does this task, or from the process of doing theology, of which theology is the product. In view of the lip-service rendered to the Bible in many theological circles today as a primary source of theology, yet there being no use of it in actual practice, we must stress the word of God as indispensable and essential. But besides the question of the source, there are at least three factors fundamental to the doing of theology:

- a. The illumination and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whose presence in the individual believer and in the Christian community must be experienced as a reality. The Holy Spirit is a life-giving Spirit, and the Spirit of truth.
- b. Obedience to the Word of God. It is important that theology flows out from a life filled with worship, devotion, love and obedience to God. Otherwise, theology is reduced to an academic exercise which can be done by brilliant, learned scholars even when faith, love and obedience to God may be lacking.
- c. The life situation in which we find ourselves. Problems and issues in the Christian faith are not only the results of thinking and contemplation, but often are encountered in ordinary life situations or in crisis. The debate on circumcision, whether a Gentile believer needed to be circumcized in order to be saved, taught by the Judaizers but rejected by Paul and Barnabas ([Acts 15:1–2](#)), arose as **p. 106** the Early Church engaged in missionary expansion. It was a concrete matter, not abstract philosophical argument. We cannot do theology without taking the context into consideration.

A second issue involves the whole matter of text and context. We have already given much emphasis on the importance of context. But how do we relate the text to the context? Does the context affect or even determine our understanding of the text, or should we let the text speak to our time? Where do we begin?

Evangelicals have rightly insisted that we must start with the text. Scripture forms the basis of our Christian faith, and provides the “givenness” for our theological content. It is the normative nature, the authority of Scripture that compels us to listen and obey what it has to say to us today. The Christian message remains unchanged; it was “once for all entrusted to the saints.” ([Jude 3](#)) The task of theology is first to understand the text, the meaning of God’s redemptive activities in the course of biblical history, culminated in the

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<sup>7</sup> Athyal, p.69.

<sup>8</sup> For example, John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press, rev. ed., 1977, pp.4–18.

<sup>9</sup> Abesamis, pp.92–93.

person and work of the God-man Jesus Christ. The text in its own context is the very starting point of any theological pursuit. The essence and uniqueness of the Christian faith lies in the fact that it is historically-based and yet not historically-bound. The Bible speaks to every age and every situation, directly or indirectly. It is the form or framework that must be carefully constructed to express relevantly what the Bible says to the issues of a particular situation. Only when we stand on the ground of the text can we embrace a biblical view on a certain subject. The text helps us to understand the context.

It has been argued that everybody approaches Scripture with his own presuppositions. These may be religious, cultural or ideological conceptions as well as inclination based on experiences. The question then is whether that person recognizes this fact, or to what extent he is aware of it. Hence it is difficult to speak of understanding the text as it is, rather one always understands the text from one's context. We must admit that there is a tendency for us to place the context above the text, so that relevance becomes a greater concern than truth itself. It is exactly because of this danger that we have to reaffirm the value and absolute necessity of biblical exegesis. Our freedom of theological contextualization must be set within the boundaries of sound exegesis. Our concrete life situations cause us to be more sensitive to the whole counsel of God, and our involvement in life makes us more alert to the overall teachings of the Bible. If we begin with the context, we may be able to set a theological agenda, but very often the Scripture is used, if not manipulated, to give [p.107](#) support to one's viewpoints or conclusions which are shaped by sociological, psychological, political and cultural tendencies. We do reflect on the contemporary life situation, but in the light of our Christian faith. We must ask: what does the text say on this matter? Sometimes we may ask the wrong questions from the context. We must let the Word of God ask questions and address itself to our issues. When confronted by the text in the context, we may be able to discover some forgotten, neglected or hidden themes in the Bible.

In recent years, much attention and discussion have been drawn to the issues of poverty, oppression and injustice in the world. Along with these concerns comes the theology of liberation, a call to preach the gospel to the poor and the oppressed, and a campaign to seek social justice and human rights. We cannot be blind to the present realities that surround us, especially in many parts of the Third World. But how can we be sure that our interest, our enthusiasm is not a mere passing fad? Is our activist outlook and social involvement prompted only by humanitarian concern as a response to social pressure, or is it motivated by a deep conviction that comes from an understanding of the gospel message and the biblical mandate? One way is to quote Scripture as examples to support and to justify one's viewpoints and action. The other way is first to understand what the Bible as a whole says and in particular on certain subjects, then obey and apply this to the present context. What does the Bible teach about poverty? Is God truly concerned with the poor? If so, how? How did Jesus identify Himself with the poor and the oppressed? Our theological reflection starts from here and builds on this foundation. The context plays the role of sensitizing us to the mandates of Scripture. Sometimes we are slow in obeying or even understanding God's Word. One may wonder why it took so long for the Reformers to "re-discover" the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. Why so many social reforms did not occur earlier. Why so many practices contrary to the teachings of Scripture still exist today among Christians.

The task of interpreting the text must be taken seriously. While "liberation" becomes a common, even popular word today, widely accepted in some theological circles, we must seek its basic theological meaning in Scripture. The deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, from the land of bondage, is often seen as an example of liberation, where the afflicted and the oppressed were rescued by God from the power of enslavement and

exploitation. Hence it warrants a liberation until self-identity, freedom and independence. This understanding of the exodus in the Old Testament is p. 108 conveniently adopted to advocate, support or justify certain reactionary movements in the present political and sociological scenes based on certain socio-economic, political ideology. But to start with, this biblical event is understood in a socio-political perspective; in other words, it is interpreted from the context. The student of the Bible today can reject the historicity and the meaning given of the exodus event, but he has no right to change its meaning or say what it means in the way he understands it, even to the extent of contradicting Scripture itself. The above approach fails to recognize the meaning and significance of the exodus in the light of the history of Israel's experience, or as a redemptive act of God in His plan of salvation. Yahweh called a people unto Himself and established a covenant with them. (Exodus 19:1-6) The exodus from Egypt is the Old Testament redemption. It is portrayed as a deliverance from an objective realm of sin and evil. At the same time, "the Hebrews were delivered not merely from outside foreign bondage, they were likewise rescued from inward spiritual degradation and sin."<sup>10</sup> It is more than a liberation, independence, or revolutionary movement; it is a becoming of God's covenant people, confessing Yahweh as Lord, and obeying His commands. A theology of liberation should first seek to bring out that theology described and contained in the Bible, with its content exegetically controlled. This is the basis for theological reflection.

A third issue deals with the nature of the text in context. On the one hand, we indicate that every form of theological production is to some extent contextualized and culturally conditioned. We make mention of western theological traditions, and propose to do our own indigenous theology. On the other hand, we insist going back to the Bible as our source, and accept what it says as our norm. Now the question is put in this way: "Isn't the theological production in the Bible equally culture-bound?"<sup>11</sup>

There are those who feel they are forced to choose one of the culture-bound theological expressions of the Christian faith, because after all we must find the message somewhere, otherwise we would be in a dead end. The Semitic stage is chosen for a number of reasons.<sup>12</sup>

- a. The Semitic stage (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, early church) represents p. 109 the primitive years of the founding of the Christian faith. In God's providence, Christianity first took root in a Semitic culture.
- b. It depicted the history of redemption in its integrity and in its fulness. It means this stage speaks of a salvation that is at work from creation onwards to the final saving deed of Christ, finally to the full completion at the parousia, and a total salvation for humanity and the creation, for both this world and the world to come.
- c. This stage is more concerned with history and human events and divine activities, but less interested in metaphysical descriptions.
- d. It is more akin to the oriental spirit and to the Third World aspirations.<sup>13</sup>

We appreciate these insights into the nature of the "theological production" in the Semitic culture. But we cannot accept the premise that the theology or theologies in the

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<sup>10</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, p.126.

<sup>11</sup> Abesamis, p.97.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>13</sup> Note also Dr. Athyal's remark that "the context and backgrounds in which God's word came to man during the biblical times are very similar to the life situations in Asia today", p.69.

Bible belong to a group of theological expressions that is now available to us, notwithstanding that it is regarded as the best one. We must go beyond, for example, the notion of “providence”. The Bible in its own cultural context should not be taken on the same level as any theological production in a certain context in terms of meaning, value and significance.

Students of ancient civilization know that it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of the Hebrew culture as being unique. The Hebrew culture shared common elements with the neighbouring nations to the point of borrowing or adapting some cultural forms. Circumcision, which was the sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel, was commonly practised among many peoples in the ancient Near East. The covenant that Yahweh made with Israel on Sinai took a form that was patterned after the international suzerainty treaty. In the areas of poetry, art, architecture, administrative structure, there are indisputable examples of cultural affinity and borrowing in the life of the Israel nation and people. However, we must also take note of the fact that there was a conscious rejection on the part of Israel of pagan practices in Canaanite culture. So while we cannot speak of a unique, biblical culture in the Bible, the faith of the Israelites in obedience to Yahweh’s law and commandments, which He revealed to them, resulted in the rejection of abominable p. 110 elements in the culture of the land where the people lived, but also in the adoption of certain forms which even became the vehicle of divine revelation.

God’s redemptive revelation in acts and in words came in the course of history in the biblical period. This time-space dimension, expressed in concrete, real, historical life situations, gives unique meaning and significance to the Semitic culture as the medium of God’s revelation. The biblical text and the biblical context go together hand in hand. It was a chosen context in the plan and purpose of God. Incarnation necessitated God’s intervention into human history in a particular time-space cultural context. It took place in the “fullness of time”, preceded by promises and prophecies of which Christ is the fulfilment. The essence of the Christian gospel is concretized and embedded in the context of the Christ event. It was a demonstrating of the Absolute in the relative. We cannot extract supra-cultural elements from the gospel message and re-dress them in other cultural forms. For example, the centrality of the cross, the suffering and atonement form the irreducible core of the Christian faith. So even if the givenness in Scripture is regarded as something “contextualized”, there is no reason to place it on the same level as a theology in any other context because of its uniqueness in the redemptive history and of its normativeness in the purpose-plan of God.

This is not to say that we identify completely the form and the content in the Bible. It is not easy to separate the two, but we can detect cultural forms such as social customs or institutions which illustrate precept, principle or truth, in distinction from others which are divinely appointed vehicles of truth. It is the ongoing task of hermeneutics to deal with this complicated subject.

The relationship between the Bible and its own context also forms a basis for us today to engage in doing theology in our context with the givenness in Scripture, because the Bible itself provides a pattern for indigenous expression of thought. With the conviction and confidence that the Bible speaks to our time as to every time, where does the context come in? If we do not start with the context in our theological task, if the context does not determine the meaning of the text, what is the place of context in theology?

The context is not simply an objective realm of value, things, people or situation. Rather it is concretized and encountered in the life experience of a person. It is reflected in his feeling, thinking and perception. So the key lies in the theologian himself. In a way, it is not even accurate to say that the theologian stands between the text p. 111 and

context, for he himself is an in-context person, and should embody the questions and issues of his time.

The theologian does not do theology in abstraction. His theology is not built in a cognitive system dealing only with concepts of being and nature. Rather he should be a cultural man, a frontier man. What he sees, how he feels, and the way he thinks are all integrated in his theologization which is a whole-person involvement. As a result, the theologian inevitably finds a tension within himself which is latent yet very real. It calls for caution. The text speaks to him, and he must listen. But the context draws his vision, and he cannot be blind. Yet he knows he must begin with the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit speaks to him.

The theology (or theologies) in the Bible is not topically arranged or systematically organized. The familiar structure in systematic theology, with divisions on the doctrines of God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, church and last things, follows a certain logical sequence of presentation. Even biblical theology (theologies) makes use of dominant biblical themes or categories as organizing principles. The theologian's cultural background and contextual concerns function like a lighthouse as he is confronted by the text. Seeking to understand the biblical text in its own context, he also exercises his perceptive power to choose certain biblical themes or categories as the focus for his theological expression. For example, he may choose the theme of the covenant, not necessarily as a centre to explain all other materials in the Bible, but because of its emphasis on the relational aspect, the solidarity of the community, and in view of the present-day tendency toward individualism, alienation and the breakdown of relationship, this biblical theme can be chosen among others as a relevant one for a contextualized biblical theology. Preaching the gospel to the poor is not an idea that comes from our present social context, but is a dominant theme throughout the Bible. Yet it is only in a context of poverty that this theme stands out prominently, and the theologian must be sensitive and creative enough to bring out such a theology. Other central themes in the Bible may receive special attention in different contexts, and there is a wealth of theological raw material in the Bible that the Asian mind finds particularly attractive and relevant. A theology of wisdom would be very appealing to the Chinese, for example. Theologies of the Kingdom of God, the love of God, the new creation, etc., can be constructed based on these categories.

The context drives the theologian to the text constantly. The beam of the lighthouse shines through him to the text. What about issues [p. 112](#) that may not be self-evident in the Bible but have become vitally important today? The theologian must search the Scripture, find out what it does say about, for example, money, power, suffering, cultures, modernization, totalitarian government, and then give theological expressions on such matters. Theologies in these areas must also be biblical in the sense that they bring out biblical teachings in these areas, and deal with the contemporary situation from a biblical perspective.

## CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to deal with some basic issues concerning the relationship between the Bible, theology and the context. It breaks no new ground, but it presents an evangelical position for the foundation of the evangelical theological task. It formulates no rules or guidelines, but it points out the objective, unchangeable nature and priority of the Bible, at the same time allowing freedom to the theologian in his theological reflection.

# Biblical Foundations: A South Asian Study

Ken R. Gnanakan

Facing increasing pressures within an atmosphere of religious pluralism on the one hand, and forced subtly into a stand for social relevance on the other, the evangelical church in India stands urgently in need of critically evaluating its position. Current trends are steering theology either towards compromise solutions within all the religious and cultural demands of the country or towards arguable approaches where social action becomes the stress. Our task is to write a theology that will not only counteract such tendencies, but one that will stand on its own ground. And this theology will have to be one that faithfully holds together the two elements suggested in our title—Biblical theology and the Indian context.

However, it is imperative that we define our terms. First, what is theology? I must be honest and confess that I approach the term not as an academic but as one concerned for very down-to-earth practical outworkings of our faith. Theology thus to me refers to all of God's dealings with man in the widest sense. Yet, we need to be specific and state that we are talking about the *Biblical God*. To be clear, "theology" does not confine itself to the biblical God, as there can be Hindu or Islamic theologies. There could, however, not be an atheistic theology as that would be a contradiction! For this reason, we need to specify that we are talking about Biblical theology.

Further, this Biblical theology must be written in the Indian context. But what do we mean by the word "context"? I must hasten to point out my own discomfort over questionable attempts at "contextualization". Sincere as the purposes may have been, the results have not been very adequate. Hence, I use the word "context" advisedly in the widest sense to refer to not only the particular setting of the particular people, but also in reference to the peculiar way God may choose to confront that people. Our theology, then, needs to be written with a sensitivity to the context of each country, but also from the perspective of God's unique mission for that country.

But then, the question arises, can one really rewrite theology? The answer is in the affirmative, as long as we are clear that theology and the Bible are not synonymous. Theology depends upon the Bible, but the Bible does not depend upon theology. Thus while there may be a Korean theology, there cannot be a peculiarly Korean Bible, except in terms of a different language. However, despite varying theologies, the fact that we stress a Biblical theology ensures that there must be biblical truths universally valid, except that their outworkings may [p. 114](#) vary. The Christ exalted in America must be the same Christ exalted in Asia. The one sin—rebellion against God—is the same sin that separates all men from God.

It has become fashionable these days to talk separately of the Christology of Paul, the Christology of John etc. The varying elements are stressed rather than their unity. Simultaneously, there is a plea to go back to the teaching of Jesus rather than to get hung up on the teaching of Paul!

These no doubt make good academic pursuits but encourage the tendency to portray varying Christs for varying contexts. This is dangerous and must be avoided. All of the Christ who is relevant to Birmingham must be relevant to Bombay, or else we are formulating a chameleon-like Christ who changes colours according to the context. It has got to be the same Christ, making the same claims over all men wherever they are located.

By this we do not mean that the outworkings are also the same. The West may get convicted about its sin of materialism, the East about its religiosity.

But then, we are talking of context in terms far more than reference to geographical and cultural settings. We must also take in account God's dealings with that country and see how God wants to confront that particular people. So to contextualize the message we not only take into account the peculiarities of that particular people but sensitize ourselves to see how God wants to confront that people with his righteous demands. Perhaps another word needs to be used. I myself prefer to speak of "actualization", where the whole message becomes flesh in the messenger, making him communicate relevantly to his own situation. Nevertheless, theology must always be motivated from the condition of man on the one side, and from the concern of God on the other. Otherwise, we end up with a lifeless humanistic sociology, or else an irrelevant academic theology. The theology that Asia needs, and for that matter Africa or even America, is one that will burn with the passion of men involved with men, and not speculations of scholars surrounded by tomes and theoretical treatises.

One can hardly expect to even begin to write such a theology in this paper. And I will not even pretend to do so. But what we will be able to do is to call upon the kind of ingredients that will flavour such an undertaking. In other words, we ask ourselves what are the accents necessary to orchestrate a more relevant Indian Biblical theology. There are several, but four such accents are discussed below: [p. 115](#)

## **AN EMPHASIS ON GOD'S REVELATION**

India is a country where millions are in a sincere search for God and his blessings. They are misled by the fallacy that this sincere search will ultimately lead them to the true God no matter by what name or in what form this God is now worshipped. Within this atmosphere the Christian is asked to be more accommodating, and with this desire, theories of the "hidden Christ in Hinduism" or that of the "anonymous Christian" have been encouraged.

Amid this pressure of religious permissiveness it is imperative that Indian Biblical theology accentuate the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and confront India with the uncompromising claims of Christ. Bishop Stephen Neill in a discussion of this whole problem<sup>1</sup> offers two suggestions amongst others. First, he suggests that "we must recognize afresh the immense originality of Jesus Christ. Under the influence of 'comparative religion' and similar tendencies we have been too much inclined to find parallels to the words of Jesus here, there and everywhere, and to suppose that he can be fitted into the category of prophet, or genius, or religious leader, or whatever we prefer. But this is simply wrong. Jesus cannot be understood in any other dimension other than his own. He has called into being a new world of reality, in which only those are at home who call him Lord. When Christians use the word 'God', they mean the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and nothing else. This is a truth that we forget at our peril."<sup>2</sup>

Neill goes on to strengthen this claim by stressing secondly that "we must not evade the inexorableness of Christ. We have tended to present to the world a tamed and amiable Christ, perhaps hoping thus to make him more attractive, but overlooking his own word that he came to bring not peace but a sword. His command 'Follow me' is unconditional, and its very indefiniteness makes it formidable. Neither path nor goal is indicated. But the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow* (Lutterworth Press 1976)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.148.

world that crucified Jesus Christ has not so much changed that it is likely ever to be a comfortable home for the disciple.”<sup>3</sup>

The point is quite strongly stated, but Indian Biblical theology must be just as strong in order to be able to effectively confront other Indian theologies with the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and the inexorable claims of Christ upon the country. A useful ingredient for such a confrontation has been brought to our notice through p. 116 recent missiological discussions over the role of elenctics. The word “elenctics” finds its root in the Greek verb *elengchein*, which means to rebuke, to convict, to refute, to expose sin.<sup>4</sup> The word occurs some eighteen times in the New Testament, and putting together all the varying shades of meanings, an elenctic confrontation can be summed up to be—“a confrontation with error in which error is exposed for what it is, the one guilty of error feels rebuked and compelled to admit his error and, one hopes, is led to repentance.”<sup>5</sup>

Men need to be confronted, error needs to be exposed and God’s concern to bring man into repentance must be passionately made known. And this we can and will do only when we ourselves are convinced about the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s final word to man, and as Wolfhart Pannenberg points out this is so even in relation to all earlier manifestations of God—“The God of Israel is revealed in the full sense only in Jesus. All earlier self demonstrations by his action are by comparison purely provisional; they are not a definitive self disclosure, and therefore cannot be called in a strict sense God’s self-revelation. What happened in and through Jesus cannot, however, be superseded by any future events, because in him precisely the end of all things has occurred.”<sup>6</sup>

Is it not this kind of confidence in the finality of God’s revelation in Jesus that the early Christians daringly demonstrated in the face of all prevailing philosophies and ideologies? There is therefore no need for us to relax the claims of Christ on man in any way today. Theology must be bold, forthright and able to confront man in whatever situation he may be.

## **AN ASSURANCE OF AUTHORITY BACKED BY THE SPIRIT OF SERVANTHOOD**

Having just spoken about the uniqueness of the Christian revelation it is easy to misconstrue the accent to refer to authority in the sense that the Christian is in command. This is not what we mean. As those confronted by and committed to this revelation of God in Christ, the question will have arisen—on whose authority do we as theologians in India confront our countrymen with the claims of Christ.

I have drawn inspiration from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s answer to the question “What right do you have to preach to us?”<sup>7</sup> In a p. 117 challenging chapter entitled “The question of Authority” he concludes that “the only possible answer is ‘In the name of Jesus’

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.149.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. Philadelphia 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment*, IVP 1981 p.16.

<sup>6</sup> *Faith and Reality*, Search Press 1977. pp.59f.

<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, Eerdmans 1978. pp.13f.

([Acts 4:7-10](#)). They can only refer to the name of Jesus and by that name they refer to an ultimate authority and to their own final commitment to that authority.”<sup>8</sup>

Newbigin goes on to elaborate his answer by first pointing to the matter of personal commitment. “I am—in Pascal’s famous phrase—wagering my life on the faith that Jesus is the ultimate authority.”<sup>9</sup> Second, he affirms that “the confession I am making is that Jesus is the supreme authority, or, using the language of the New Testament, that “Jesus is Lord”. This confession implies a claim regarding the entire public life of mankind and the whole created world.”<sup>10</sup> And third, he qualified himself saying “I would be distorting the truth if I simply spoke of this confession as being mine alone. I make this confession only because I have been laid hold of by another and commissioned to do so.”<sup>11</sup>

It is this kind of authority that needs to be demonstrated by the writer of theology. There is no room for watering down the claims of Christ just because such and such a situation demands it. In fact, the demand is from the side of revelation, which of itself has an authority that needs to be laid hold of. There have been tendencies even amongst evangelicals to get on the defensive by making subtle compromises or resorting to dangerous disguises for the sake of social relevance. One needs to be convinced that any theology written with the authority of Jesus behind it will need to be bold and uncompromising so that the reader of this theology will be challenged, equipped and motivated to submit himself to this authority and want further to bring others too into this submission.

But authority is only one side. Servanthood is the other. The authority of Jesus does not make us proud, pompous primates pronouncing judgment on the lost. We must recognize that we are what we are only because of the grace of God. And so, in humility we set out as servants. It is this spirit of servanthood that must season our service.

India has had far too many “lords” and “masters”, who despite any genuine desire to serve the masses have failed. It is only a few who chose servanthood as their role who won the hearts of the masses. This kind of servanthood is not at all alien to the Bible. For [p. 118](#) “even the Son of man came not to be served but to serve.” ([Mt. 20:28](#))

Perhaps one can say that this is more the responsibility of the *writer* and *doer* of theology than of theology itself. True. But can one really separate the writer from his writing? This is the “actualization” I referred to earlier. When God wrote to man it was himself that he revealed. So also theology must embody what we are in ourselves. This kind of combination of authority and servanthood comes through so clearly when Paul reminds the Corinthian Church—“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as *Lord*, with ourselves as your *servants*.” ([2 Cor. 4:5](#))

## THE INTEGRATION OF WORK AND WORSHIP

Indian theology must consciously strive to remove the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. To us Christians this dichotomy comes not only from the predominant Hindu background but also through the hangover of the outdated Thomistic teaching. One needs to be reminded that the Reformation brought about a newer outlook. Although Luther and Calvin did not deliberately intend to achieve this, their efforts brought about a healthy

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<sup>8</sup> p.16.

<sup>9</sup> p.17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> p.18f.

understanding of God's calling as applying to man in all of his involvement. The radical reformers in Europe went on to set up exclusive working, worshipping communities, but through that, laid the ground for a positive evaluation of work, employment and labour in the light of one's commitment to Christ. This kind of an integration of work and worship is crucial to Christian witness in India today. The dangerous disparity between our work attitude and our worship attitude has weakened our impact on the country. On a positive note it must be said that in India worship is highly respected. But the sad thing is that no connection between work and worship is recognized.

Biblical theology that is written in India today must take this much-needed integration of work and worship far more seriously. The starting point must be to deal with the unhealthy way in which some forms of work are shunned. There are so many elements starting from the doctrine of Creation itself that will lend themselves to upgrading the value of work in all its forms. This accent needs to be woven into the fabric of all our theology. The important factor to note is that in weaving this accent into theology we should not be giving the impression that all our involvement in the country's physical needs is only a disguise to ultimately channel man into the Church. It is an involvement in people's needs because we too are people amongst [p. 119](#) those people. Aren't we all created in the image of God? Should there not then be a commonality that binds me with my fellow man which arouses my concern for him just as a fellow man and not as a potential catch for the Kingdom?

The answer to India's economic problems is not in economic aid. What can do far more is a theology of work that will motivate Christians themselves to the stirring up of all of God's gifts to utilize our minimum resources for maximum output. Such a theology that will recapture the dignity of labour will be creatively dynamic rather than coldly doctrinal. If man can be challenged to be productively involved in God's material creation, worship can become more meaningful.

However, one must be careful not to equate work with worship. All we need to show is that work is not in opposition to worship, but rather an extension of it. While there is a distinction between work and worship we need to note that there is no separation. In a sense, work begins where worship ends and vice versa. For, if our worship is true, our work becomes a continuing expression of love for God the Creator and for his creation.

The Greek word *latreuo*, particularly in [Rom. 12:1](#), is rendered both 'worship' and 'service'. Although this refers primarily to religious service it should be possible for the Christian, who has submitted himself entirely to the Lordship of Christ, to be able to see all of his involvement in the world as an act of adoration for his Master.

However, one must be careful not to destroy the distinctiveness of worship. The commonly used word in the New Testament is *proskuneo*, which refers to a singular reverence for God, honouring him as Lord. Indian Biblical Theology must motivate more meaningful and reverent worship or else it may become a stumbling block to a nation given so sincerely to worship. But we need to know that we would only be transforming true worship if we are encouraged to come to our Master as those who have faithfully fulfilled the tasks that he has called us to perform in his world.

This kind of an intermingling of our work attitudes and our worship attitudes will add immensely to constituting a more powerful witness in India. Injustices, perversions, laziness and superstitions can only be tackled by the participation of a working-worshipping Indian Christian community in the problems of a struggling country. Theology must seek to arouse this concern not from deficient and questionable theologies of liberation and development but by motivating men into more Christlike involvement in the country. And [p. 120](#) this must be achieved from within the very texture of theological concerns.

## AN ACCENT ON A DYNAMIC CHURCH WITH REFERENCE TO ITS MISSION

There is no doubt that Theology must be Church centred, as, ultimately it is the Church's responsibility to endorse theology. If this is true, we must recover a more biblical understanding of the church that will liberate it from its being restricted to static denominational structures. Although I am not antidenominational, I affirm that any understanding that confines the church to only the existing institutional framework is unbiblical. In a country where one anticipates the growth of the church to be far more than the present institutional structures can handle, one has got to be willing to recapture the understanding of the church as the people of God on a mission, called out to declare his wonderful deeds. Ecclesiology in this sense must not remain an optional section within the scope of theology. The nature and role of the church should permeate the whole gamut of theological concerns.

I am beginning to see that the model of the Church is perhaps the best model for a dynamic theology. The Church on the one hand has a being of itself which it has to stabilize and strengthen. The people of God gather to worship the head of the Church, God in Christ. This is the basic essential of the Church. It has to confirm its relationship with its creator. Similarly, theology too has a being of itself that it *must* confirm. It must act as an aid to the stability and strength of the worshipping Church.

Yet, on the other hand the Church is called to witness. It is a body in motion, a worshipping community on a witnessing commission. Worship is not the end. It has got to go out in response to the command of Christ. Similarly theology must motivate mission. Just as the Church that ends with worship will be an incomplete church, so a theology that ends with the edification of the reader by increasing his knowledge of God and Christ will be an incomplete theology. Theology has to be actualized in the work and witness of this worshipping community.

To be clear, I am offering the model of the Church to guard against the danger of theology becoming a static academic pursuit on the one hand, yet on the other, to prevent it from being forced into a missiological mould. Mission is not an end in itself.

Once we are able to hold the being and the function of the Church together, some other problems may be resolved too. For instance, [p. 121](#) we in India are struggling to reconcile the relationship of the church to the "para-church" phenomenon. The rather distasteful distinction between these two has become part of the Christian jargon and its continued stress will probably result in a growing distance between the pastoral and the evangelistic ministries. Theology has got to grapple with the task of restating the biblical understanding of the church in its truest sense so that the local church can be seen to envelope all of God's peoples' efforts to confront man with the claims of Christ.

This does not demand an antidenominational or an anti-establishmentarian attitude in any way. Neither does it demand a moratorium on "para-church" agencies! The mission is God's, not man's. God works through his people—the Church, and every individual he chooses to work through is part of this body. A dynamic rather than a static understanding will have to be recovered, so that on the one hand the role of the Church is seen in its truest form, yet on the other, the existence of the so called "mission" or "para-church" agencies will be seen as part of the Church's total activities. And while mission agencies and organizations outside the church should seek to link more strongly with local churches, the local church ought to look more positively at those outside of its four walls as an extension of its own being and function.

## CONCLUSION

One will probably argue that this paper restricts itself to missiological issues rather than seeking to discuss wider theological concerns. I will readily concede this. But in doing so I want to emphasize that what India needs is not a cold callous restatement of doctrine and dogma but a potent and productive affirmation of its biblical beliefs. The urgency of the mission and the staggering needs of the country grow before us in greater and greater magnitude. Theology must produce men for this mission.

However, the synthesis of the worship and the witness of the Church which has been used above as a model will demonstrate my real concern for theology. The accent should be on the holding together of the content of theology so that it will both equip and edify as well as motivate for mission. Neither function should be allowed precedence over the other.

The treatment above is far from exhaustive. There are far more accents that one may be able to discuss. For instance, one could go on to develop the need for an accent on community which is so [p. 122](#) much part of the peoples of Asia, and historicity which runs counter to the anti-historical nature of our major religions. But the whole stress ought to be on the fact that theology must be faithful to God and His revelation in the Bible and not relax its terms in any context. This kind of faithful biblical theology within the Indian context will challenge, equip and raise up many more servants of God to set out on the task of confronting their countrymen with the claims of Christ.

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**Dr. Ken R. Gnanakan is Director of ACTS (Agriculture, Crafts, Trade and Studies), Bangalore, India. [p. 123](#)**

# **Towards an Evangelical Latin American Theology**

**Emilio Antonio Núñez C.**

*This article is abridged.*  
(Editor)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Now that we have heard a criticism of our theology and an exposition of the Biblical basis for theological reflection, we need to ask ourselves where we are going in our efforts to produce an evangelical Latin American theology. In answer to this question we will refer first to all the need for that theology. Then we will have a general description of what we understand by “*evangelical* theology;” and finally we will present what the term “*Latin American*” means to us in a theological context. In this way we hope to cover all the elements included in the title of this paper: *Towards an Evangelical Latin American Theology*.

## **TOWARDS A THEOLOGY**

The word “towards” in our topic suggests immediately that after more than one hundred years of evangelical presence in Latin America we still do not have a theology which can be called evangelical and Latin American. That is, an evangelical theology produced by Latin Americans for Latin Americans.

The tragedy is that many have not been aware of the lack of such a theology, and others claim that it is unnecessary, saying that theology is universal and that to give it a regional or cultural tone would disfigure or corrupt it. It is rather strange that the same people who react with horror to the possibility of formulating a Latin American theology feel comfortable speaking of German theology, continental European theology, or North American theology. The question is raised as to whether the opposition to a possible Latin American evangelical theology is not an indication of the paternalistic attitude which some leaders have assumed toward the Latin American Evangelical Church. That is to say, the idea that the evangelicals in these countries are still children unable to think for themselves and to express the Christian faith within the context of their own culture.

The phenomenon of dependence is seen also in the area of theology. We suffer from a theological underdevelopment which is largely a product of our theological dependence. Many of us have been satisfied to receive an imported theology, sometimes without evaluating it in the light of Scripture and of our cultural and social imperatives. p. 124

This does not mean in any way that we look down on the doctrinal treasure accumulated by the Universal Church through the centuries, or that we pretend to begin something which has already begun, believing foolishly that the Holy Spirit will start speaking through us, after nearly twenty centuries of absolute silence. We already have an evangelical theology which is universal in its nature. We are Christians as a result of the teaching ministry of the Church. We are a product of the great missionary movement which by the grace of God reached our lands with the message of the Gospel. We welcome, therefore, the theology produced in other latitudes by thinkers who are also members of the Body of Christ. However, we should not be simply an echo of what others say, without trying to express the immutable truth of the Gospel in response to the reality of Latin America.

In regard to theologies of Latin American origin, it is our responsibility also to examine them on the basis of God’s written revelation. The fact that a theology may have had its origin in our continent does not automatically give it a place in the Latin American evangelical church. A case in point is the theology currently articulated by Latin Americans under the influence of a certain European ideology. In answer to this theology the evangelical Christian affirms that the Word of God stands high above all ideologies, no matter what their emphasis is.

In our midst are found, then, a traditional evangelical theology, forged on other continents, and theologies which in spite of being called “Christian” are rejected by the great majority of evangelicals. What we are lacking is an *evangelical* theology which is systematized and authentically *Latin American*. But there is a group of evangelical thinkers in pursuit of that theology. With great effort they have begun to make progress in the theological field and are on the road of serious reflections, with the intense desire to hear the Word of God and pronounce that Word for the people of Latin America. The word “towards,” which is part of our topic, has a dynamic meaning; it suggests direction and movement, and indicates a goal which should be reached. The theological journey has begun, and there are better days ahead for evangelical thought in this part of the world.

## **TOWARDS AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY**

It is important to always put the evangelical emphasis before the Latin American. Our culture is human, and as such imperfect; but it is also regional and changing. The Gospel, which has its origin in the mind **p. 125** and heart of God, is universal and unchanging. It is fitting, then, to give pre-eminence to the evangelical aspect in the theological process. Our goal is an *evangelical* Latin American theology. But, what do we mean by “evangelical theology”? How can this theology be distinguished from other systems of thought in the contemporary mosaic which also uses the term “evangelical”?

### **Evangelical Theology is Theocentric**

The word theology (theos, logos) speaks of God, his person and his works. This means that theology is not first of all cosmology, nor anthropology, nor sociology, but rather the study of God and his creative, revelatory and redeeming acts. That is to say, God as the initial and final point of theological thought, and between both extremes the fulness of his person and his works.

Biblical theology is theocentric, not anthropocentric. God is at the centre and man at the circumference, to which divine grace radiates. There is interaction between God and man on the basis of grace, but God does not abandon the place which corresponds to Him as Sovereign over all creation. God does not stop being God, even when He is made flesh ([John 1:14](#)) to save man who was made in his own image.

To truly be theology, our discourse must give God the preeminence and see all things, beings, and life itself from God’s point of view. In this way our worldview is transformed into a *God view*, something which becomes possible as we grow in the knowledge of God. John Calvin was not out of line when he stated that to know ourselves we must first of all attain the knowledge of God. We understand man better when we know the One who created him. From there stems also the theocentricity of Biblical theology. The first requirement in the study of theology is to grow personally in the knowledge of God.

### **Evangelical Theology is Bibliocentric**

Theology is, certainly, a *logos* (word, discourse), regarding God and his works. But this discourse should consist not so much of what we say about God, as of what God says about himself. The most important thing is not our word but his, his logos, his self-revealing discourse. Someone has defined divine revelation as the communication of which God makes of himself. He exists and has made himself known. The *logos* of God is now the Word incarnate—the Lord Jesus Christ—and the written Word: the Bible. We know the incarnate Word through the written Word which the Holy Spirit inspired. Consequently **p. 126** God’s self-revelation is also Christology and Pneumatology. We find ourselves here facing an eminently trinitarian theology.

There is no authentic Christian theology apart from this self-revelation of God in the Scriptures. Much more important than the discourse of theologians about God is the revelation He has made of his person and his works in the Bible.

It seems that from the beginnings of Christianity there has been an inevitable relationship between theology and philosophy, to the extent that in different periods of church history human reflection has usurped the place of divine revelation and theology has become the handmaid of philosophy. While it could have become a great ally of theology, philosophy has come to be in certain cases an obstacle to the free expression of God’s thoughts. It is easy to detect, for example, the powerful influence of Greek philosophy in the doctrine of the church fathers. That influence can be seen even today in the theological world. But, what can we say about rationalistic theology, or the existential theology of more recent times?

It is not always easy to discern between Biblical revelation and the philosophic robes in which it is clothed. Moved by the desire to communicate effectively the Christian message of their contemporaries, some theologians have used certain philosophic terms; but at times Christian theology has come out disfigured from this effort to communicate, as the above mentioned theologies show.

In Latin America today, theological thought is often constructed of a sociological foundation. As with philosophy, sociology can be a valuable tool for the contemporary theologian, as long as it remains in subjection to God's revelation. It is well known that today serious efforts have been made to force an ideology on the Biblical content, to manipulate theology whether in favour of capitalism, or socialism. The ideological battle which is being waged around the world has entered the field of theology. At the present time, theology stands in grave danger of becoming the handmaid of sociology or of specific political interests. To say that in the past theology became subject to philosophy in no way justifies its becoming enslaved to sociology.

If we believe that God has spoken through the Scriptures, we need to make an effort to hear in them his voice, apart from our ecclesiastical, social or political prejudices. To become open in this way to God's revelation is certainly difficult, but not impossible. Otherwise, the Bible would lack its intrinsic power to communicate its message, and the Holy Spirit would be impotent to carry out his ministry of illumination. The Bible itself would then be the hiding and not the [p. 127](#) revelation of God. But we know that by the grace of God it is not so.

### **Evangelical Theology is Christocentric**

It is impossible, of course, to offer even a synthesis of Biblical Christology in this paper. We will limit ourselves to some of the Christological themes which are of great importance in the contemporary theological scene. For example:

*The deity of Christ.* He is pre-existent. He comes from eternity and goes to eternity ([Mic. 5:2](#); [Is. 9:6](#); [John 1:1](#)). Since he himself is God, He has always been face to face with God. There is no beginning or end in Him. He is the Omega point of history, and the Alpha point in creation. Because He is the originator of all that exists, "without him nothing was made that has been made" ([John 1:3](#); [Col. 1:15-20](#), etc.). We can fall prostrate before Him and say, "My Lord and my God" ([John 20:28](#)), because He is worthy to receive glory and honour and power for ever and ever. Amen ([Rev. 4:11](#); [5:13](#)). His deity is a touchstone of our faith.

*The humanity of Christ.* He is the true God-Man. When the fulness of time established in the council of Deity arrived ([Gal. 4:4](#)), the eternal Logos was made flesh ([John 1:14](#)) and humbly limited himself to the plane of human history.

Recently the Incarnation has become a subject of great interest in the Latin American scene; but there has been a tendency to emphasize only the humanitarian or philanthropic implications of this Christological portent, that is to say the full identification of the Son of God with human misery, with the poor of the earth. This is a very important aspect of the Incarnation, an aspect which had not been emphasized enough, particularly in our underdeveloped countries. But there are other aspects of this doctrine which should not be passed over. For example, the fact that the Incarnation presupposes the pre-existence, and therefore the deity of the Son of God. It is also necessary to take into consideration the other purposes of his coming into the world, "made in human likeness" ([Phil. 2:7](#)).

One of those great purposes was to reveal the Father: "No man has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" ([John 1:18](#)). In response to the request of the apostle Philip, who desired to see the Father, Jesus says: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone

who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ([John 14:8-9](#)). He is "the image of the invisible [p. 128](#) God" ([Col. 1:15](#)), Immanuel, "God with us" ([Matt. 1:23](#)) and among us, manifesting his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth ([John 1:14](#)).

Of great importance also is the soteriological purpose of the Incarnation. Christ himself reveals to us the saving purpose of his first coming to the world. He claims to have come to preach his message of the kingdom ([Mark 1:38](#)), and to give witness to the Truth ([John 18:37](#)). His desire is that those who believe in Him should not remain in darkness ([John 12:46](#)). He clearly affirms that He has come not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many ([Mark 10:45](#)); that He has not come to condemn the world ([John 12:47](#)), but to seek and save what was lost ([Luke 19:10](#)), and to give abundant life to his followers ([John 10:10](#)).

Today as never before it is necessary to emphasize the fact that the Gospel includes all those who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation and excludes all those who refuse to believe in Him. The Gospel is not universalist. Any theology that overlooks the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, or that tends to dilute that uniqueness in dialogue with other religions, runs the serious risk of being left without the Gospel.

Evangelical theology is "the word of the cross," a word of scandal and stumbling to those who are lost, but the power of God for those who are saved by believing in the Lord Jesus. The cross of Christ is a sign of union and division for the human race. In it are united all who humbly receive the Gospel, and it marks the abysmal difference between those who believe and those who do not believe in the Son of God.

Furthermore, the cross is the symbol of the radical nature of Christian discipleship. Christ called people to follow Him taking up their cross, in the presence of a society which in general admired beauty and strength, riches and fame, earthly power and wisdom, but not those who carried on their back the instrument of their own death. The situation can be the same today for those who choose to follow Christ to the ultimate consequences, carrying their cross.

*The resurrected Christ.* The resurrection of the Son of God is another great distinctive of evangelical theology. No commentary can equal, much less surpass, that of the apostle Paul's in his First Exposition Letter to the Corinthians, chapter [15](#).

The resurrection of Christ guarantees the forgiveness of our sins (past tense) and the resurrection, or the transformation, of our body (future tense). But there are also great consequences of Jesus Christ's [p. 129](#) triumph over death for the present. For example, the authority for our ministry is based on the resurrection of the Lord ([I Cor. 15:15](#)). We have a new quality of life communicated to us by the One who arose the third day from the dead. He gives us power to walk in this newness of life ([Rom. 6](#)). The new ([II Cor. 5:17](#)) has been made possible by the victory of the resurrection. A new era was inaugurated for mankind the moment God's Son broke the bonds of death and stepped triumphantly from the grave. The Church, the Body of Christ, emerged as a fruit of the resurrection of her Lord and Saviour ([Eph. 1:20-23](#)). The Holy Spirit came as a result of the resurrection and ascension of the Son of God ([John 16:7-15](#)).

We do not serve a dead Christ, nailed to the cross, but the Christ who lives for ever. Jesus of Nazareth has been made Lord and Christ and is exalted at the right hand of God, interceding for us, waiting for his enemies to be made his footstool ([Acts 2:32-36](#)). He has the absolute right to reign in our lives, here and now, for his glory. He also has the right to exercise his lordship over all creation. He is King and Lord, and we should proclaim his lordship to our contemporaries. The message of the Gospel is not only an offer; it is also a mandate which comes from the throne of God, and must be obeyed for salvation.

*The returning Christ.* He reigns and He will reign. His promise is that He will come again ([John 14:3](#)). Prophets and apostles, and even the angels, announce in the Scriptures that He will return to consummate his purpose on the Earth. Only Christ will be able to fulfill the most golden dreams of mankind in regard to a better world, a world of justice and peace. On the other hand, the return of the Son of God is the hope of the Church, a blessed hope ([Titus 2:14](#)) that will not fail ([Rom. 5:5](#)), because it rests on God and not on man. Its fulfilment does not depend on the changing circumstances of this world, but rather on the immutable purpose of God.

### **Evangelical Theology is Pneumatological**

We have already referred to the trinitarian character of evangelical thought. We also mentioned that the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures and enlightens man's mind so that he may understand the written revelation of God. But there are other ministries of the third person of the Trinity in the fulfilment of God's purposes in this world.

The Holy Spirit participates in creation and in the many-faceted works of providence. He also has an important function, along with the Father and the Son, in the history of salvation. For example, He is p. 130 in the world to make effective the work of redemption in the lives of men ([John 16:7-11](#); [I Cor. 2:6-16](#); [Titus 3:5](#)). And in a very special way He comes to the believers in the Gospel, imparting to them his wisdom and power, giving to them the spiritual gifts which are necessary for the building up of the church ([John 14:16](#); [Acts 1:8](#); [I Cor. 12:14](#)). The fruit which pleases God in the lives of his children is also produced by the Spirit ([Gal. 5:22-23](#)).

It is in the fulness of the Spirit that Christians can faithfully fulfill their responsibilities in the local church, in the home, and in society ([Eph. 5:18-6:20](#)), and carry out the task of evangelization ([Acts 2:4](#); [4:21](#); [6:3](#) with [8:5-8](#); [9:17](#), [20](#)). The Church must go in the dynamic of the Holy Spirit to make disciples of all nations. The best proof that a person is filled with the Spirit is his obedience to the Word that He himself inspired.

The Holy Spirit should not be grieved in the personal life of the believer ([Eph. 4:30](#)), nor quenched, nor hindered, as regards spiritual gifts in the local congregation ([I Thess. 5:19](#)). But it should be remembered that He will never lead his people in contradiction to what He himself has revealed in the Scriptures. The internal testimony of the Spirit and the external testimony of the written Word (the Bible) work together to guide the sons of God. There is perfect harmony between the revelation of God the Holy Father, the revelation of God the Son, and the revelation of God the Holy Spirit.

Christian theology is not static, but dynamic, in the sense that the revelation of God himself is a living word ([Heb. 4:12](#)) which exhorts us continually to grow in the knowledge of Him ([II Pet. 3:18](#)). Furthermore, the nature of our ecclesiastical and social context obligates us to examine the Scriptures anew in the search of an orientating word for our generation, and it impells us to communicate the Biblical content in such a way that we respond adequately to the question of our time.

It is precisely this challenge which comes from our own culture that makes us feel the urgent need to formulate an evangelical theology of Latin Americans for Latin Americans.

### **TOWARDS A LATIN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY**

There can be a Latin American theology which is at the same time evangelical, just as there exists an evangelical theology produced in other parts of the world; but it should not be merely a reproduction made by Latin Americans of evangelical thought imported from other latitudes. This takes us inescapably to the field of hermeneutics. For P. 131 traditional evangelical hermeneutics, the Biblical text is primary, while today the social

context is becoming so preponderant that in some cases it is arrogantly imposed on the text of Scripture.

If in existential hermeneutics the personal feelings of the interpreter prevail, so to speak, in the hermeneutics of certain liberationist theologies in Latin America can be seen the preponderance of an economic, social and political thesis. The Latin American evangelical theologians necessarily desire to avoid such extremes, but at the same time they feel the responsibility to “make theology” in response to their own ecclesiastical and social context. We are not able to discuss here in any depth the hermeneutical problem. But at the risk of being too simplistic we need to say something about the task of interpreting the Scriptures in relation to a Latin American *evangelical* theology.

### **Primacy of the Biblical Text**

Before anything else we must reaffirm our confidence in the Scriptures as the written Word of God, and as the supreme authority for our Christian faith. We cannot abandon the principle of *Sola Scriptura* and continue being evangelicals, in the sense that we have always used the term. We know that should we put aside the authority of the Bible, what awaits us is theological relativism.

On the other hand, we recognize that we inevitably come to the Biblical text with certain presuppositions. We are children of our culture, we find ourselves within a specific social context, and we have an ecclesiastical, denominational formation, besides our own interests or personal preferences. We also find it easy to let ourselves become obsessed with a doctrinal peculiarity, or with some religious practice which is of tremendous importance to us. It is natural that we should tend to impose on the Biblical text all of this cultural society, social, psychological and religious burden.

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Dr. Emilio Antonio Núñez C. teaches at the Central American Theological Seminary, Guatemala. **p. 132**

## **Towards an Evangelical Caribbean Theology**

David Ho Sang and Roger Ringenberg

*In the second half of this abridged article the authors outline the thinking of ecumenical Caribbean theologians in the relation of context and praxis under the categories of The Bible, God, Christ, Man, Sin and Salvation, The Church, Eschatology. They suggest in general terms possible lines of an evangelical alternative but without reference to the writing of contemporary evangelical Caribbean theologians. They appeal for a theology that is faithful to Scripture and relevant to the needs of the Caribbean.*

(Editor)

### **THE CONTEXT OF CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY**

## Locale

The geographical designation “Caribbean” generally refers to the area composed of islands situated around the perimeter of the Caribbean Sea, with the possible inclusion of the mainland territories of Guyana, Surinam, and French Guyana. The physical barriers of water and the relatively long distances between countries, coupled with their diverse historical backgrounds have served to make the Caribbean a very non-homogenous region, aptly described as “a microcosm in its representation of the nations, races and political systems of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, there exists significant political, social, economic, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, class, and religious differences between (as well as within) some of these countries. However, in spite of this plurality, there also exists an identity that reaches out in “ever-widening circles of kinship.”<sup>2</sup> The nature of this common identity will become evident during the course of this historical survey.

It may be noted at this point that although certain historical similarities p. 133 exist between the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, they seem to be far outweighed by their significant differences. For example, the religious political dominance of the Roman Catholic church in Latin America from the sixteenth century onward is unparalleled in the majority of Caribbean countries (especially the English, French, and Dutch speaking ones). The mere fact that certain Caribbean theologians have adopted a Marxist analysis of the history of their region does not automatically make Caribbean Theology an identical twin or genuine blood brother of Latin American Liberation Theology. Thus, it would seem to be a poor error of judgment to group the Caribbean countries with the Latin American ones, when considering indigenous theologies; for there seems to be more than adequate justification for placing the Caribbean region into a different category.

## Historical Periods

For the purposes of analysis, the history of the Caribbean may be conveniently divided into the two following periods: (1) Colonialism and Slavery, and (2) Emancipation and Independence.

*Colonialism and Slavery.* All the countries in the Caribbean Sea share the common heritage of having been “discovered” by Christopher Columbus on one of his four voyages in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The Spanish colonizers were followed by the French, Dutch, English, and Danish colonizers, who established rival colonies throughout the course of the seventeenth century. The Spanish, in order to supplement the indigenous Amerindian Indian labour force which was being rapidly depleted by the cruelty of the Spanish themselves, imported Africans (primarily from the West Coast of Africa) as slaves. This practice was continued by the other colonizers over the following

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<sup>1</sup> Carmen McFarlane, “Economic Development and the Caribbean Woman,” in *The Role of Women in Caribbean Development*, ed. Marlene Cuthbert (Bridgetown, Barbados: CADEC, 1971), p.11.

<sup>2</sup> S. S. Ramphal, “The Search for Caribbean Identity,” in *Called to Be*, Report of the Caribbean Ecumenical Consultation for Development, 2nd ed. (Bridgetown, Barbados: CADEC, 1973), p.25. Ramphal sees in separate innermost circles the Dutch, French, and British, or former British, territories. Wider than these is the circle which includes all three. “Wider still, is the circle that includes beside them the islands of the older Caribbean—islands that had shared the early experience of colonization but had wrested freedom from the colonial power at a much earlier stage in their history the larger island States of Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.... Within this wider circle let us for completeness, and without putting too fine an edge on our concept of colonialism, include also the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.” (Ramphal, “Caribbean Identity,” p.25).

three centuries. Thus, the virtual elimination of the indigenous population, and the massive importation of West Africans during the slavery years radically altered the face of the Caribbean which, for the greater part, became artificially created societies created by Europeans to satisfy Europe's economic appetite.

During this period, the European colonizers viewed themselves as members of a superior race and even used the Bible to support the theory of divine sanction for the enslavement of the people of colour.<sup>3</sup> The African slaves were considered less than human, so that even when they came to outnumber the Europeans overwhelmingly, a "West Indian" was still considered as someone who was obviously p. 134 European. During this period, every effort was made to eradicate the social structures and culture of the slaves.

The Church's attitude towards slavery was somewhat ambivalent. Clergymen, sent by the colonizing countries, viewed their ministry primarily or exclusively in terms of their responsibility to the colonists. Some regarded the preaching of the gospel to the slaves as a means of preserving the colonial status quo, while others viewed it as opening the door to further rebellion. On the other hand, the missionaries who came of their own accord, demonstrated genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of the slaves, but this did not lead them to speak out against the institution of slavery itself<sup>4</sup> In general, it may be said that: "Christianity, as it reached the Caribbean, was itself part of colonial dominance ... Far from questioning the assumptions of colonial dominance or the justice of the system, missionary policies, preaching and practices were themselves shaped by the system."<sup>5</sup>

In addition, it may be said that for all their laurels, missionary opinion of black people was never very high.<sup>6</sup>

*Emancipation and Independence.* It was not until 1770 that the institution of slavery began to be seriously called into question and condemned by such men as John Wesley and Adam Smith. Using publicity regarding the cruelty of the slave trade and the declining economic benefit derived from it, Englishmen such as Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson, most of whom were devout Christians, were instrumental in moving Britain towards the abolition of the slave trade (1807),<sup>7</sup> and the emancipation of the slaves (1833) in her colonies. The other colonial powers followed suit during the course of the nineteenth century.

Although slavery was abolished and slaves were legally emancipated, the islands and territories were retained as colonies by the Dutch, French and British. In order to ensure continued economic p. 135 productivity for the colonial powers, indentured labourers from Asia (primarily from India) were imported. Although legally emancipated, the ex-slaves continued to be indoctrinated (explicitly or implicitly) in the myth of their

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. [Gen. 9:20-28](#); [Joshua 9](#); [Acts 17:24-26](#).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see the address of Count Zinzendorf given to converted slaves in St. Thomas, Jamaica in Francis Osborne and Geoffrey Johnston, *Coastlands and Islands: First Thoughts on Caribbean Church History* (Kingston, Jamaica: UTCWI, 1972), p.67.

<sup>5</sup> William Watty, "The De-Colonization of Theology," in *Troubling of the Waters*, ed. by Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: St. Andrew's Theological College, 1977), pp.62-63.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Father Ignatius Scoles and Rev. J. Pearson's comments in Geoffrey B. Williams, "Classicism and the Caribbean Church," in *Out of the Depths*, ed. by Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: St. Andrew's Theological College, 1977), pp.57, 53 respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, Denmark holds the distinction of being the first European power to abolish the slave trade—a royal order being issued on 16 May 1792 to prohibit slave traffic from the end of 1802.

inferiority. It is of interest to note that during the slavery period, membership in the church of the missionary was considered an advantage as it afforded a means and measure of social recognition which was jealously guarded by the slaves. However, in the aftermath of emancipation, many left the orthodox churches for various types of folk religion.<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of independent states in the Caribbean began with the success of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, and continued after an interval with the independence of the Dominican Republic (1844), and of Cuba (1898). More recently, the Commonwealth countries of Jamaica (1962), Trinidad and Tobago (1962), Guyana (1966), Barbados (1966), Grenada (1974), the Bahamas (1974), Belize (1981), and Antigua (1981) have gained their independence. The other Commonwealth units have moved either towards independent statehood or associated statehood with Britain.

Without offering any reasons at this point, it is of significance to note that the general response of the Caribbean churches to the movement for political independence in the sixties, tended to be more negative than positive.<sup>9</sup> This overall negative response may be compared with the response of the Evangelical Caribbean churches to the movement for ecclesiastical and theological independence.

Despite their official independence, the Caribbean countries are still characterized by a strong political, economic, social and cultural dependence on one or more of the major world powers. It is therefore not surprising that the churches within these independent countries, are characterized by a similar dependence on outside ecclesiastical powers whose geographical power base generally coincides with the power base of the secular benefactor(s). This dependence generally implies theological dependence, especially among Evangelical churches.

### Challenge

From an historical perspective, it is abundantly clear that “the Caribbean reality can no more be explained if we leave Europe out of the p. 136 account, than if we leave out Africa.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, in developing an authentic Caribbean Theology, both Europe and Africa need to be taken into account. In addition, this process must studiously avoid the danger of wholesale adoption of other theologies such as Latin American Liberation Theology or North American Evangelical Theology. On the issue of colonialism, its past evils and present adverse effects must be identified with a view towards decolonization and indigenization of theology, which means both the affirmation and rejection of things Caribbean as well as European. At the same time it must be borne in mind that colonialism in the past (or capitalism in the present) is not the sole villain of all evils present in the Caribbean society, and that the church’s adoption of contemporary analyses, methods, and jargon in the name of anti-colonialization and the search for national identity could compromise the Church’s faithfulness to God and His revealed Word.

Similarly, the dehumanizing and stunting effects of slavery must be acknowledged, while the freedom, equality, and oneness of God’s new humanity in Christ must be vigorously proclaimed and demonstrated to society by the Church. The Church’s

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<sup>8</sup> These varieties exist today under such names as Pocomania, Kumina (Jamaica), Vodum or Voodoo (Haiti), Santeria (Cuba), Shango (Trinidad), and Jordinites (Guyana).

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Gomes, “Religion and Social Change,” in *Out of the Depths*, pp.153–57 points out that an area of greatest conflict concerned the control of the schools and educational system.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford F. Payne, “What Will a Caribbean Christ Look Like? A Preface to Caribbean Christology,” in *Out of the Depths*, p.3.

proclamation and practice of spiritual emancipation and independence from sin, to a legally emancipated and independent people must also be accompanied by a secondary (but important), proclamation and practice of other types of emancipation and independence from other former oppressors (e.g. social, cultural, intellectual, psychological).

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY

Before tracing its historical development and giving an overall critique of Caribbean Theology, a few introductory comments are in order. At present, the theology being espoused is in its early stages of growth. It is still being expressed more in oral than written form, which explains the relative dearth of literature on this subject. Furthermore, the theology being presently propounded does not seem to reflect the majority view of the church in the Caribbean as it is being articulated by a small, vocal, educated cadre of theologians belonging primarily to the Caribbean Conference of Churches. The majority of these theologians would not fall into the category of “Evangelical” either on the exclusive single issue model (e.g. inerrancy) or even on broader **P. 137** inclusive models<sup>11</sup> suggested by some Evangelicals. Furthermore, they would probably not identify themselves as “Evangelicals”.

Thus, the number of people who have begun to address themselves to the issue of Caribbean Theology, and who would identify themselves as Evangelical Caribbean theologians is extremely small. In fact, the mere number of “Evangelical Caribbean theologians” is quite small. This quantitative as well as qualitative deficiency, together with sheer ignorance regarding the concept, has contributed much to such responses as opposition, suspicion, or apathy to Caribbean Theology from the Evangelical Church in the Caribbean. In addition, some theological factors which militate against the Evangelical Caribbean church addressing itself intelligently to this issue include the following: (1) Its emphasis on the unity of Scripture (2) Its emphasis on the universality of theology (3) Its sometimes simplistic understanding of the Christian Faith (4) The predominantly North American Evangelical orientation of its theologians (5) Its heavy dependence on North American Evangelical theology and (6) Its characteristic conservatism. Furthermore, pragmatic factors such as the comfort and security of the status quo, and the overworking of the few theologians, also conspire against any meaningful reflection on theology.

The emerging Caribbean Theology ought not to be ignored by Evangelical Caribbean theologians for at least three reasons. Firstly, it presents an overall challenge to re-examine their own theology in order to determine what elements are to be retained or jettisoned. Secondly, it highlights certain neglected aspects of Evangelical Theology which ought to be not merely added to it, but proclaimed and practised if the Caribbean church is to be faithful to God and His revealed Word. Thirdly, it may either be making certain declarations which are clearly inconsistent with God’s revealed Word and thus ought to be condemned, or failing to make certain declarations which are vital to the Christian Faith, and thus ought to be affirmed.

The Caribbean Ecumenical Consultation for Development held in Chaguaramas, Trinidad, in November of 1971, may be seen as the beginning of the formal emergence of

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Editorials, “Which Magnet Draws Evangelicals Together?” *Christianity Today*, 16 July 1982, pp.12–13 suggests the model of “a confederation of independent nations” bound together by a “common commitment to Jesus Christ and the instructions he has given to his church in the written Word of inspired Scripture.”

what is termed “Caribbean Theology”.<sup>12</sup> In a pre-consultation publication entitled *In Search of New Perspectives*, Idris Hamid described the theology of the church in the Caribbean as “the last bastion of colonialism.”<sup>13</sup> He contended that even with its local archbishops, bishops and calypso hymns, the theology of the church remains “a colonializing, enslaving theology,” which does not bear the marks of the history or destiny of Caribbean man, and distorts “the true Biblical or Christian tradition.”<sup>14</sup> Later, he described the churches in the Caribbean as being by and large, extensions of the churches from overseas, having theologies which reflect the experiences of Europe and North America, and whose “governance, organizations, liturgies, and theologies yield little to the ecology of the faith of the Caribbean people.”<sup>15</sup> He concludes that:

The real offence of all this is not simply that these things are foreign, but it is far more serious. It means that our understanding of the faith, the expression of it in creeds, beliefs, and particularly worship suffer from the terrifying unreality to the every-day-ness of our life. The formal God of the major religious groups, is not one whom we have come to see as related to our every-day-ness. That God is not seen as one who enters our everyday experiences. What it boils down to, is that we were trained to worship God through somebody else’s experience.<sup>16</sup>

In support of this, William Watty describes Caribbean man, oriented to Western values, as a caricature, having a copy-cat mentality which is nowhere “so depressingly evident than among the Christians of the Caribbean.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, there is an appeal to “de-colonize” as well as create Caribbean Theology.

In evaluating the above claims, it is undeniable that in some aspects, the theology of the church in the Caribbean has been and still is, “colonial”. Consciously or unconsciously, well-meaning missionaries and nationals have tended, and still tend, to equate Western culture with Christianity. Thus, the Christian way of life became/becomes synonymous with the European or North American way of life. The problem is magnified in the Caribbean by the fact that there were and are colour in addition to cultural differences between the missionaries and the “natives”. Black was/is associated with bad and white with good, thus creating/perpetuating subtle inferiority and superiority complexes. p. 139

Thus, while it may be argued that some Caribbean theologians have tended to overstate their case, it is undeniable that the “foreign” nature of the Church in the Caribbean is not only present, but desired by those within the church in such areas as personnel, evangelistic methodology, homiletical styles, ecclesiastical models, codes of conduct, church architecture, liturgical forms, music, and dress, not to mention theological education models. Mirroring the society as a whole, the Caribbean copy-cat mentality has led the Evangelical churches in the Caribbean to quick adoptions of Evangelical, theological trends and fashions in the North American Evangelical churches. This is not to imply that everything “made in North America” is harmful for Caribbean consumption, but to highlight the dependence of the Caribbean churches on foreign

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<sup>12</sup> Burchell K. Taylor, “Caribbean Theology,” *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (September 1980):13.

<sup>13</sup> Idris Hamid, *In Search of New Perspectives* (Bridgetown, Barbados: CADEC, 1971), p.12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hamid, “Introduction,” in *Troubling of the Waters*, p.7. He cites the timing of Harvest Thanksgiving as a “scandalous example.”

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pp.7–8

<sup>17</sup> Watty, “De-Colonization,” p.68.

imports and to warn against the grave danger of the wholesale adoption of North American Evangelicalism say, without giving a careful consideration to both the North American and Caribbean contexts.

Thus, the challenge of “de-colonizing” or “de-imperializing” theology in the Caribbean is a real and valid one. However, this task is not synonymous with a complete jettison of the theology of the colonizers (imperialists), for although certain elements are merely cultural, and in fact, contrary to God’s revealed Word, other elements are supra-cultural and therefore in harmony with it. On the other hand, the task of constructing a Caribbean theology consists not only in the affirmation of “things Caribbean” which are consistent with God’s revealed Word, but also the condemnation of “things Caribbean” which are inconsistent with it. The de-colonizing process must therefore not only include a de-colonizing of the colonial gospel which has been distorted by accommodation to Western culture, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and capitalist ideology, but also a “de-colonization” of what has been distorted by accommodation to humanistic enlightenment influences, existential and process philosophy, and Marxist ideology. It must include not only the removal of Western accretions, but also a prophetic denunciation of indigenous concepts which are contrary to the Word of God.

The task of creating a Caribbean Theology is not an optional luxury, but a theological and practical necessity.<sup>18</sup> Theologically, as Gomes has argued, there is a need to express the tenets of *the* faith in a creative way that will be meaningful in the Caribbean context. Practically, the antipathy towards authority today calls for a clear distinction between a theology which is merely American or European, and p. 140 one which has Divine authority behind it. A rejection of human, colonial authority by the Church in the Caribbean ought to lead, not to a rejection but, to a re-affirmation of God—the sole and ultimate source of authority.

Robert Moore’s call for a “theology of exploration” that arises out of a creative and dynamic interplay between the “eternal verity” of Christianity and the collective consciousness of Caribbean peoples<sup>19</sup> is valid to the degree that the former takes precedence over the latter; for if both are made autonomous, the latter will attempt to subjugate the former, especially when disagreement arises between the two. If God’s eternal verities, contained in the Biblical revelation, are not used as the ultimate frame of reference in this “creative and dynamic interplay”, the end result will invariably be in a very relevant but relative theology. This, however, is not to deny or ignore the importance of the collective consciousness of Caribbean peoples; for as Taylor argues, “The historical experience, the socio-political realities, the Caribbean context must become the point of departure for our theological reflection.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Caribbean Theology “will be a theology arising out of the Caribbean experience, done in the Caribbean for the Caribbean ... dealing with the issues that are directly related to the people’s life and experience in the light of the Word of God.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the designation “Caribbean Theology” implies that it will be overtly, self-consciously, and unashamedly contextual. However, for the Evangelical theologian, it must be borne in mind that thought emanating from particular people to particular people

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick I. Gomes, “Religion and Social Change: Problems of Prophetic Radicalism and the Institutional Churches,” in *Out of the Depths*, p.158.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Moore, “The Historical Basis of Theological Reflection,” in *Troubling of the Waters*, p.42 and Everard Johnson, “Response,” p.46.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, “*Caribbean Theology*” p.18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp.17–18.

in a particular place at a particular time under particular circumstances for particular reasons and purposes, the basic message contained in Scripture, God's unique revelation, takes precedence over oral or written contemporary reflection on life experiences when they come into conflict with each other. That is, Scripture determines the Evangelicals' perception of their experiences in life rather than the latter determining the former, or even both determining each other. Admittedly, one's particular historical experiences and cultural perspectives influence one's understanding of the Scripture message. However, taking into account such things as the laws of grammar, etymology of words, facts of history, conclusions of Biblical Introduction, insights of p. 141 sociology, and dogmas of Biblical Theology helps to keep one's biased pre-understanding to a minimum.

Since the majority of Caribbean theologians advocating Caribbean Theology are non-Evangelical, it is not surprising that they have essentially adopted the "dynamic interplay" model which leads them to emphasize the varieties of theology,<sup>22</sup> and to deny the possibility of a Universal Theology.<sup>23</sup> A mere reflection on the New Testament books will reveal differences in content, emphases and perspective, due to such things as the background and temperament of the author and addressees, the time and place of writing, the situation addressed, and the reason and purpose of the work. Thus, there is considerable diversity within Scripture. However, the Evangelical theologian sees this diversity in terms of complementation rather than contradiction. On the other hand, an impressive case may be presented for the essential unity (as well as continuity and development) of Scripture. For example, "despite all the rich diversity of theological formulation in the New Testament, there was only one basic apostolic tradition of the gospel."<sup>24</sup>

If, by the term "Universal Theology", one means that there exists either the reality or possibility of a unique, comprehensive, perfect, and final theology whose content, emphases, perspectives, methodology, and praxis will manifest themselves to all peoples for/of all times in all places, in identical or similar ways if they are obedient to God, the Caribbean theologians are right in claiming that this is humanly impossible<sup>25</sup> and unnecessary. (This claim to a Universal Theology is made invariably by Western theologians who have Western theology in mind, despite its own differences.) However, this is not to deny the existence of universal truths and principles in Scripture which may be expressed either in very similar or radically different ways and forms in different contexts. In brief response to Watty,<sup>26</sup> it may be noted that universal availability does not guarantee a "natural" universal appropriation, and that there is a difference between God's general p. 142 revelation which is universal in the sense that it has been revealed to all men, and God's special revelation which is "universal" only in the sense that it is applicable to all men.

It should be noted that the content, emphases, and perspectives of Caribbean Theology will not necessarily be the same as those of traditional theology. For example, the main

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. Idris Hamid, "Theology and Caribbean Development," in *With Eyes Wide Open*, ed. David I. Mitchell (Bridgetown, Barbados: CADEC, 1973), p.121; and S. E. Carter, Foreword to *Troubling of the Waters*, p.4.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. William Watty, *From Shore to Shore: Soundings in Caribbean Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Golding Printing Service, 1981); p.2; Wally "De-Colonization," p.52; Moore, "Historical Basis," p.37; and Horace Russell, cited in Ian Boyne, Seaga's No Threat to Blacks," *Sunday Sun*, 2 August 1981, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p.41.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, "Historical Basis," p.37; Watty, *Shore to Shore*, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Watty, "De-Colonization," p.52.

point of discussion on the incident of the feeding of the five thousand recorded in the Gospels will probably not be the parallel Synoptic accounts, the relationship to the feeding of the four thousand, the law of the indestructibility of matter, the possibility of miracles, or rationalistic explanations, but the loving care and compassion which Jesus showed for the vital, human needs of the people. Hence, the emphasis may be on orthopraxy, with orthodoxy assumed or unquestioned—an emphasis, incidentally, which is heavily supported in both the Old and New Testaments.

## **THE QUEST FOR EVANGELICAL CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY**

It is in this context of the Caribbean and early Caribbean Theology that we turn to our present quest.

### **The Task**

As already mentioned, the theological task of creating a Caribbean Theology is that of expressing the Christian Faith in a creative way that will be meaningful in the contemporary, Caribbean context.<sup>27</sup> This will involve the two-fold process of decolonizing and constructing. This task is a theological as well as practical necessity. It is of interest to note that while there is probably essential agreement on the stated task, there is probably considerable disagreement between many Evangelical and non-Evangelical theologians regarding their understanding of its meaning and implications, based on some radically different presuppositions which invariably, will lead to radically different results.

### **The Personnel**

Though fairly obvious, Evangelical Caribbean theologians who are actively involved in the life of the Caribbean Church ought to be spearheading **p. 143** this effort, although the degree and extent of its success depends largely on the degree and extent of involvement of the Caribbean Church. While the role of North American (and European) missionaries, missiologists, and theologians ought not to be entirely excluded, it ought to be studiously kept to an absolute minimum, being relegated to such things as objective third-party critic.

### **The Methodology**

The reaction of some Caribbean theologians to the dominant European methodology which is described as being characterized by “scholastic isolation” rather than “vital communication and intensive participation in the life of people”<sup>28</sup> has some validity. Caribbean Theology will undoubtedly tend to be more practical and less theoretical than European theology.

However, to view theology merely as “reflection on praxis”<sup>29</sup> is a most inadequate view of theology which has both subjective and objective aspects. Despite its shortcomings, Western methodology does have its place. For example, Western theology produced the

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<sup>27</sup> Edmund Davis, *Roots and Blossoms* (Bridgetown, Barbados: The CEDAR Press, 1977), p.116, sees this as the primary theological task in the Caribbean today. W. E. Thompson, “In ‘Doing Theology’ in the Caribbean,” in *Moving into Freedom*, ed. Kortright Davis (Bridgetown, Barbados: The CEDAR Press, 1977), p.59, sees the goal of theological reconstruction as discovering and refining “the best means by which the Good News, that ‘God-in-Christ’ is ‘self-giving love,’ may be proclaimed in word and deed in the contemporary situation.”

<sup>28</sup> Watty, *From Shore to Shore* p.9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

basic tools and methodology necessary for the important task of Biblical exegesis. Thus, apart from the fact that Caribbean Theology will continue to have a strong Western European flavour because of the strong historical links,<sup>30</sup> it will continue to employ some Western methodologies because of their intrinsic value, and therefore provide a needed corrective to over-zealous, decolonization efforts. In graphic terms, Payne aptly describes the task of evaluating European theological methods as more resembling “the tedious occupation of sifting the wheat from the chaff than the heady pastime of putting a match to the whole pile.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Sources

For the Evangelical Caribbean theologian, the primary and paramount source in the construction of Caribbean Theology is the Biblical Witness which serves as the frame of reference against which all other sources are measured. This “canon” is a safeguard against the dangers of the Christian Faith “losing itself in the concrete situation or emerging out of it amalgamated with other non-Christian ideas.”<sup>32</sup> A helpful source in giving the theologian a greater familiarity p. 144 and appreciation of the rich heritage and continuity of the church as well as insights into its various theologies and approaches to theology, is the tradition of the Church. On the other hand, a mere fleeting, retrospective glance into the pages of Church history will reveal the human fallibility of the theologies of the Church throughout the ages. Similarly, models, analyses, and explanations of sociology may help in giving a better understanding and perspective of both the Biblical as well as contemporary context. However, it must be borne in mind that the sociological method per se, poses several fundamental problems for the Christian Faith. For example, it gives little or no consideration of the possibility of Divine involvement in human affairs, and tends to study the Christian Faith on the same level as any other Faith.

The shared colonial and slave experience, the call to do theology and not merely discuss it, the serious consideration given to man’s concrete situation, the condemnation of unjust oppressive power structures, the call to accept “blackness” and to condemn racism are some factors or emphases of liberation and/or Black Theology which are of relevance to the construction of Caribbean Theology. The “sifting task” of the Caribbean theologian in this exercise is that of recognizing the points at which liberating and/or Black Theology do or do not address themselves to the Caribbean context, with a view to (1) a vigorous affirmation (after appropriate modification) of certain emphases of these theologies where similarities exist and emphases are Biblical (2) a prophetic denouncement of certain emphases of these theologies where, though similarities exist the emphases are unbiblical and (3) an appropriate silence where differences between the Caribbean context and these other contexts are radically different. In addition, the Caribbean theologian is also obligated to affirm certain vital emphases (especially ones which are complementary to (1) above) which these theologies have minimized or failed to make. For example, emphasis must be given to the Divine as well as human nature of Scripture, the transcendence as well as immanence of God, the divinity as well as humanity of Christ, the depravity as well as dignity of man, the personal as well as corporate nature of sin, the vertical as well as horizontal dimensions of salvation, the

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<sup>30</sup> Payne, “*Caribbean Christ*,” pp.4–5; Johnson, “Response,” p.47.

<sup>31</sup> Payne, “*Caribbean Christ*,” p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1974), p.252.

spiritual as well as the social concerns of the Church, and the future as well as present hope of the Church.

Undoubtedly, the Marxist analysis of history as a class struggle does have some relevance to the Caribbean context where the gap between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed is tragically evident. In addition, some of its theoretical principles on such things p. 145 as the equality of man, the stewardship of resources, the work ethic, and the concept of community are sometimes in basic agreement with Christian principles which have oftentimes been neglected by the Caribbean Church, both in theory as well as in practice. However, the Marxist analysis is only a partial and inadequate one. For example, apart from failing to deal adequately with such things as racism, its concept of religion as merely “an opiate of the people” fails to take into consideration the transforming power of authentic Christianity. Its goal of a new man fails to take into account the perversity of man apart from Divine transformation, and thus it has no place for God and His power to change human nature. Its optimistic vision of the establishment of a classless society on earth during this age is not shared by Christians who, although diligently working for a more humane and just society, do not anticipate this utopia until Jesus returns to establish His kingdom.

Having said all this, it should be noted that the Marxist criticisms of the Caribbean Church is not without justification; for even Evangelicals have realized that

... the church has too often shared individualistic bourgeoisie attitudes and life styles. It has tacitly supported the vested interests of the rich, instead of being an influential force on the side of the oppressed.<sup>33</sup>

Although ultimately, Rastafarianism<sup>34</sup> stands judged as “another gospel”, its distinction in the Caribbean as “the earliest precursor of a radical break with Western theological patterns as well as a theology which has grown out of the living experience of an oppressed but defiant people”<sup>35</sup> merits it some consideration. Its widespread appeal in the Caribbean (especially to the young) as well as the mere fact that widely accepted heresies contain an element of truth in them, adds to the justification for considering this movement when possible sources of Caribbean theology are being discussed. Although having a radically different theology, Rastafarianism stresses at least the four following aspects of the Christian message that have often been neglected by the Church: (1) the humanity of God (i.e. the identification p. 146 of God with the suffering and oppression of man) (2) the dignity of man (particularly the black man) (3) the present aspect of eternal life and (4) the resident-alien status of the believer in this world. On the other hand, the alternative theology, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology proposed by Rastafarianism must be repudiated, and are *not* “objectively ... as about as convincing and as weak as that which has cherished and taught by orthodox Christianity.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, like Marxism, Rastafarianism presents a challenge to the Caribbean Church to emphasize, in word and deed, neglected aspects of the Christian Faith. The Evangelical Caribbean theologians’ concern is that the theology which emerges in the Caribbean is faithful to the

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<sup>33</sup> “Evangelization of Materialistic Atheists Report,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p.869.

<sup>34</sup> Rastafarianism is an indigenous Jamaican cult which stresses the dignity of the black man and his African culture, and the divinity of Heile Selassie, former emperor of Ethiopia. The Bible is used as the source of their authority and is interpreted using unorthodox hermeneutical principles.

<sup>35</sup> William Watty, Editorial in *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (September 1980):iv.

<sup>36</sup> Watty, “De-Colonization,” p.69.

Biblical revelation to the contemporary situation. If this takes place, then Caribbean Theology will be “both an evangelical and ethical theology, a proclamatory and practical theology, a theology expressed in both the indicative and imperative moods and a theology that would be both authentic and relevant.”<sup>37</sup>

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David Ho Sang from Jamaica is presently engaged in doctoral studies at Oxford, England. Roger Ringenberg is an ex-patriate missionary in the Caribbean. p. 147

# Towards an Evangelical African Theology

Tokunboh Adeyemo

*In this essay our attention is focused not so much on the questions of how, where, what and who should do theology for the Church in Africa as on the discipline itself. Because of this, we have given more space to part two of the paper than to its first part. Nevertheless part one is necessary since it serves as compass in the task before us.*

(Editor)

## PART ONE: PROLEGOMENA

As evangelicals we define ourselves as Bible-believing Christians and identify ourselves with those who have come to a personal dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Doing theology for us therefore is not a matter of cold academic speculation nor of unprofitable sterile debate nor of curious tourist adventure. Rather, it is an obedient spirit-led reflection upon God’s revelatory words and acts, culminating in Jesus Christ, an honest application of the same to our lives, and consequent sincere communication of it for perfecting the saints for the work of the ministry (see [Ezra 7:10](#); [Eph. 4:12](#)).

Equally, as Africans, we share the historical past of our people, cherish our cultural heritage, identify with our present struggles and aspirations and, under God, are determined to bring God’s righteousness and justice to bear on all forms of life as our future is shaped. In this discipline we are, without any apology, strongly committed to the following:

### The Holy Scriptures

That the Scriptures are given by God’s inspiration and are therefore not only profitable but basic for theologising is assumed. God’s eternal and unchanging message is both relevant and true to our ever-changing situations. It cannot be over-emphasized that as God is absolute, so is His message. This God’s self-disclosure of Himself—the Scriptures—forms our primary source for theology.

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<sup>37</sup> Taylor, “Caribbean Theology,” p.19.

Of course, Biblical revelation did not take place in a vacuum. Like all revelations, it was a divine-human drama embodied in history and open for empirical verification. Our commitment takes the historical and cultural contexts under which the Scriptures were given seriously. Our investigation reveals that African history and cultural complexity have a lot in common with the Bible world, a fact which makes theological bridges easier for us to construct. p. 148

### **The Lordship of Christ**

The centre of Biblical revelation is the historical and living Christ, who manifested the fullness of the Godhead bodily. God got himself involved in human history, thus destroying Grecian classical dualism and metaphysical chasm characteristic of African myths. People heard him, saw him, gazed at him and touched him—Emmanuel, the climax of God's revelation! By the Christ-event (Incarnation, life and ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation), it is demonstrated that God is not absent from human history and struggles. Christ-centred theology cannot help but be functional, dynamic and relevant.

Our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as our Mediator par excellence can only be as the one who has absolute authority and power over all flesh. His example—became flesh and dwelt among us—has become our model in doing theology. And as He came not to do his own will but his Father's, so also our theology must be one of obedience whatever the cost.

### **The Supremacy of the Holy Spirit**

"The Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit ... shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance" ([John 14:26](#)). We err if we ever think that we can develop a theology for the Church which will glorify God and perfect the saints all by our own education and training. As the Christian community of the New Testament lived in the dimension of the Spirit's immediate operations, so must we. We must constantly seek his fresh anointing; his in-filling; his leading; his insights; his enablement, even as our Lord did throughout his life and ministry.

The dynamic operation of the Holy Spirit, bestowing gifts freely as He pleases, takes theology away from the monopoly of the "specialists" and makes it the business of the whole Church. Paradoxically, since gifts differ (see [1 Cor. 12:28–30](#)), there is plenty of room in the community for gifted theologians to exercise their gifts for the edifying of the body of Christ. Our commitment to the supremacy of the Holy Spirit in doing theology reminds us of our utter inadequacy and of our need for total dependence on Him.

### **Personal Spiritual Discipline**

Karl Barth recognised prayer as the first and basic act of theological work. We cannot but agree with him. Prayer is more than asking and receiving. It is a vehicle for fellowship and communion with God. Who knows the mind of God, and who can speak with authority for p. 149 Him? Only those who practise God's presence, who wait upon Him in solitude, away from the noise and busyness of everyday life. Study the prayer life of Jesus in the Gospels and of the Apostles in Acts and you will see that prayer is hard work. It is a discipline.

Together with prayer, evangelical theologising calls for serious meditation upon God's Word and work. There is no other key to knowing God, enriching faith and deepening commitment than habitual meditation in God's word. It opens up doors of understanding into Biblical mysteries and the deep spiritual realities of life.

Commitment to spiritual discipline shall be incomplete if it stops with prayer and meditation. Vital to it is involvement and identification with people in their struggles and

affliction. True spirituality does not isolate us from people. On the contrary, it brings us in touch with the fatherless and widows in their affliction; takes us to the prisons, hospitals and refugee camps to minister Christ's compassion and power to the needy; and compels us to do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with God and proclaim the good news to the poor. Jesus was a man for the other. And in the words of Bonhoeffer, His Church must be the Church for others.

### **The Christian Community**

"Till we all come in the unity of the faith ... unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" ([Eph. 4:13](#)) expresses our commitment to healthy Christian community in our theological efforts. This argues strongly against individualism and its corollary, namely theological imperialism. Theology that will thrive on African soil will be that which evolves as a result of believers' interaction and dialogue among themselves about the meaning of their faith as tested out in their daily lives in all kinds of relationships. This may account for the fact that pastoral and political theologies are more popular in Africa today than any other branch of theology.

It is imperative for us in the African context to involve the Christian community as much as possible in the theological process, test our theological findings in the community, channel our theological results through the community and employ the community to police our theological explorations. Also, theology for Africa cannot be done in disregard of theologies elsewhere in Christendom. Otherwise we open ourselves to sectarianism at best and heresy at worst.

### **Total World Evangelization**

The ultimate goal of our doing theology is aptly expressed by the Apostle Paul's words: "we take captive every thought to make it **p. 150** obedient to Christ" ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). This echoes our Lord's commission of world-wide discipleship, teaching all believers to obey everything He has commanded—love of God and love of our neighbour. Andrew Kirk receives our support by stating that: "encouraging and enabling God's special people to carry out Christ's commission in and for the world seems to be theology's fundamental *raison d'être*." If knowing God doesn't bring us closer to Him and communicating His grace through our evangelical writings doesn't attract people to Him, then something is amiss. Paul would become all things to all men for Christ's sake that he might by all means save some. Our theologising must therefore have this invitation-to-Christ dimension. We cannot do this faithfully without confronting the power structures of our day—the rich, the privileged and the powerful. A call to justice and righteousness is an integral part of the Gospel.

Having underscored our commitments in doing theology in the African context, let us proceed to part two of the essay.

## **PART TWO: A MODEL OF EVANGELICAL AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

Our sources in this awesome discipline include: The Bible; African worldview and religions; Arts and crafts; African history and tradition; Church History; Contemporary theologies and events. Of all the methodological approaches being advocated—extrinsic, intrinsic, comparative and systematic—each has its own value. It is a common practice for theologians to use certain themes as polar axis upon which their entire theological structure spins. Take, for example, the concept of "time". One of our own African theologians has used it as key to his theological construct. Though it could be restrictive

and limiting unless the theme is large enough it has the untold advantage of theological data synchronization. Because of this advantage we have employed it in this essay.

### **Thesis: “Cosmological Balance as key to developing Evangelical African Theology.”**

Two terms commonly used in connection with the study of any man’s or any culture’s *weltanschauung* are cosmogony and cosmology. Compounded from κόσμος, the world, and γενεά, generation, cosmogony is strictly the science of the origin of the earth. It is applied also to the various theories of the formation of the material universe. In any epistemological consideration in which the doctrine of direct or special revelation as traditionally held p. 151 cannot be attested, what a man thinks of the world around him becomes crucial if not determinant to his faith.

“Our worldview is like the umpire at a ball game,” declares an Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke. “He seems unimportant and you are hardly aware of him, but in reality he decides the ball game.” Naturally, the ancient civilizations of the Sumerians, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians were built on mythical cosmogies which presupposed that out of nothing, nothing could be made. This resulted in the belief in many gods. In like manner the naturalistic, theistic speculations of the Greek philosophers evolved from their organistic worldview which was rooted in the belief that the world was eternal in form as well as in substance. This model of the world as an organism was later replaced by that of the world as a mechanism which eventually gave birth to the modern evolutionary theory. Down through the ages cosmology has served not only as an explanatory device and a guide to conduct, but also as an action system or pattern. It is a profound statement that “as a man thinks, so he is” (Prov. 23:7). Francis Schaeffer has rightly asserted: “People have presuppositions. By presuppositions we mean the basic worldview, the grid through which they see the world.”

To understand an African’s perception of God and reality, even for an African Christian for that matter, it is extremely important to know his worldview. Writing of the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria, for example, Uchendu said: “The Igbo world, in all its aspects—is made intelligible to Igbo by their cosmology which explains how everything came into being.” Another Igbo scholar, Emefie I. Metuh, has defined worldview as “the complex of a people’s beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature, structure of the universe and the interaction of its beings—with particular reference to man.” After identifying and illustrating four main characteristics of the traditional African world view—the multiplicity of spiritual beings; the unity of reality without dichotomy between the spiritual and the material; the hierarchical order of beings; and the essential connection and interaction between beings—Metuh concludes that “it is against this background that major problems of man are conceived, assessed, and their solutions sought.”

The world as a natural order which inexorably goes on its ordained way according to a master plan or a natural law as found in a mechanistic worldview, is foreign to the African mind. His world is a dynamic one. It is a moving equilibrium that is constantly threatened and sometimes actually disturbed by natural and social calamities. The events which upset it include natural disasters such as long continual p. 152 droughts, long periods of famine, epidemic diseases, as well as sorcery and other antisocial forces of oppression and injustice. The Africans believe that these cosmic forces and social evils which disturb their world are controllable and should be manipulated by them for their own purpose. The warding off of these cosmic and social evils becomes the central focus of religious activities among the various African people.

(Just in passing, we may note that the fastest numerically growing churches in Africa are the Pentecostal and the Independent churches where prayer-healing and exorcism—warding off evils—are practised.) Keeping a proper and undiluted ritual distance from all

forms of evil or, stated positively, maintaining a cosmological balance through divination, sacrifice and appeal to the invisible powers has been the centre-piece of African religiosity. It is no wonder then that when many an African Christian is struck with calamity he seeks succour and help from native herbalists.

A theology of cosmological balance springs from a knowledge of cosmic struggle as described above and proclaims Jesus Christ as Victor and Liberator par excellence, the God-man who has blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against humanity; and, having spoiled principalities and powers, death and the grave, he has set man free! Of necessity, arrangement of theological categories in this system will be different from that common to traditional textbooks. In developing our theological system against the foregoing background, we shall propose the following tentative outline for exploration.

## **TENTATIVE OUTLINE**

### **Revelation and Redemption**

If Theology is the science concerning God, it is only fitting that we begin with and base our theological construct on His revelation. Though there can be revelation without redemption, it is crystal clear that God's divine intention in disclosing Himself to man is to redeem him. Genesis, chapter three, records the first divine interrogation and detailed cross-examination with man. In the midst of judgment we have the gracious protoeuangelion of verse 4 and a demonstration of God's mercy in verse 21. Likewise, Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. Redemption is the sense of Revelation.

The question is then asked: since Jesus is the true Light which lights every man that comes into the world (including our African great p.153 grandparents who never heard the Gospel as such), how did our great grandparents perceive and respond to God? To answer this, we have to examine the various forms of revelation offered to them including dreams, visions, worldview, and nature and test the validity of any claim their tradition leaves behind by the light of Scripture. For example, in the Yoruba pantheon, there is *Ela* who bears attributes similar to those of Jesus Christ. A corpus (i.e. oracles of Yoruba religion) addresses *Ela* as light, saviour and deliverer. To reinforce *Ela*'s position, a story is told of a mythical only son of a woman (*Olu-orogbo* and *Moremi* respectively) who was offered in sacrifice a while back in order to deliver his people from their enemies, the Igbo invaders. Whenever *Ela* is worshipped today, constant mention is made of *Olu-orogbo*. Has pre-incarnate Christ ever revealed Himself in any form and to any other people and at any time outside the Biblical record? Probably stories like this can be cited in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism ad infinitum. This opens up theological issues such as pluralism and universalism.

Rather than propositional statements about God and sin and atonement, the cosmological approach creates a lively interaction between the *given* revelation—the Scriptures—and the *perceived* revelation. When doctrinal statements follow rather than precede lively interaction as suggested here, faith, when generated, is firmly anchored.

Time does not permit us to treat other relevant categories as we would wish. However, for the purpose of discussion expected to follow our presentation, they are listed herewith:

1. Incarnation and Identity: How does the Incarnation of Christ fulfill man's quest for identity, particularly African Christians with a sad history of colonial exploitation?
2. Blood of Animals and Blood of God's Son: an exposition of Leviticus sacrifices and the Book of Hebrews in light of African sacrificial systems. The cross of Christ and power!

3. Mediator and Intermediaries: the knotty problem of ancestors worship or veneration and the cult of saints; Is Christ sufficient?
4. Messianic Community and Vital Participation: are all believers priests, even in African thinking?
5. Spiritual life and spiritual fruit: African religiosity defined and described.
6. Spiritual warfare and spiritual resources: the reality of spiritcharged entities and beings; the benevolent forces versus malevolent forces; exorcism etc. Have sign gifts ceased?
7. Prophets, Priests and mediums: do they exist and function today? [p. 154](#)
8. Sacraments and Rites: discussion in African psychology; points of convergence and divergence.
9. Law and Grace: issues of social ethics and morality in African Church; the family.
10. Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world: missions and politics; Church and State; where do they meet and where do they part lines?
11. Messianic Hope and Development: issues of evangelization and social responsibility in the African context.
12. Creation and Consummation: myths of lost paradise; of exist and return; eschatological imageries—real or metaphorical?
13. Continuity and Discontinuity: where do we draw the line?
14. Oppression and Liberation: what approach to solution?
15. Permanence and change: the Gospel and Ideologies.

This list is by no means exhaustive and the approach suggested is by no means normative. Probably the best result that could come out of this consultation is to create cells of theological communities all around the world among the Evangelicals for regular habitual interactions and dialogues where various models could be tested. If this essay has contributed in some way to that stimulus, our trip to Korea has been greatly rewarded.

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**Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo is General Secretary, Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) Nairobi, Kenya. [p. 155](#)**

# Toward an Evangelical Asian Theology

Rodrigo D. Tano

*This article is abridged.*  
(Editor)

## INTRODUCTION

This is by no means the first effort to sketch some lines along which Asian theology may be developed. Preman Niles,<sup>1</sup> has suggested a framework for doing theology in Asia using

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<sup>1</sup> See his "Toward a Framework for 'Doing' Theology in Asia," in E. Nacpil and D. Elwood, eds., *The Human and The Holy* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1978), pp.267–90.

creation (as opposed to redemption) as motif to support the idea that “in Asia God is realizing in a new way the promise of salvation given in Jesus Christ for all mankind.” He dismisses the “salvation history” concept as exclusivistic (limited to the church and Israel) and ineffective in Asia. He sees the task of the Asian church as that of discerning the “new thing” which God is doing in general (Asian) history apart from the “new humanity”, the Church. Kosuke Koyama’s,<sup>2</sup> effort in “theological rerooting” is exhibited in his *Waterbuffalo Theology*. The country of Thailand and his own observations of Thai culture serve as the backdrop of his theologizing. Koyama sees the following as key issues facing Asian theologians: communicating the Bible to the Asian mind; men of other faiths and ideologies; the nation of China; spirituality. Though Choan-seng Song<sup>3</sup> follows a slightly different route (the Exodus as redemption theme), his concern, like that of Niles, is to show the significance of the new realities in Asia in the light of God’s salvific acts in history. He also claims that God can deal in a saving way directly with Asian cultures apart from the Church and Gospel proclamation; Saphir Athyal<sup>4</sup> urges that Asian Christian theology be systematized “around contextual issues in Asia.” He delineates the lines along which theologizing in Asia may be done but does not elaborate, and Bong Rin Ro,<sup>5</sup> suggests a method of doing theology and characterizes Asian theology according to its content, whether syncretistic, accommodational, situational or **P. 156** biblically oriented. He opts for a biblically based theology dealing with Asian realities but does not demonstrate how this may be done.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THEOLOGY

Contextualization is the process by which Christian truth is embodied and translated in a concrete historical situation. The concept calls attention to the significance of the present moment of faith for the Church’s mission. In this sense, contextualization involves: (1) dynamic interaction of the text (Bible) and the context (historical situation); (2) interpreting, challenging and transforming a particular situation; (3) appropriate adaptation of the Gospel within a given culture.

The Church’s historical task involves a proper grasp of the meaning of God’s revelation in history and its relation to the present moment. Understanding what the text means then requires the proper use of hermeneutical tools (historico-grammatical). Here the labours of the biblical exegete and theologian are indispensable in assisting the Church to unravel the meaning of the text. To understand the meaning of the present it is necessary to have a knowledge of the past (which somehow shapes the present) and a thorough grasp of the significance of a set of historical, cultural, social and economic forces at work.

Theological activity then is mainly theological reflection, seeking the meaning of the present in the light of the history of God’s redemptive acts and purposes. This produces a life-situation or pilgrim theology which arises from the necessity of confessing the faith in a changing socio-political milieu in which the Church is placed. Translating biblical

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<sup>2</sup> See his “From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap,” in G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends* No. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp.211–222.

<sup>3</sup> See his essay “Towards an Asian Christian Theology” in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.68–84.

<sup>4</sup> See his “Contextualization: Asian Theology,” in D. Elwood, *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.47–58.

<sup>5</sup> James Curtness, “Innovation as the Search for Probabilities: to Recontextualize the Text,” in *Learning in Context* (Bromley, Kent: TEF, 1973), p.13.

truth within the Asian situation involves what Filipino theologian Carlos Abesamis calls “bracketing off” the western (Greek) tradition of theology. Western theology is basically abstract and almost a-historical. Meaningful theologizing in the Third World is therefore not a matter of slanting or adapting western theology (Koyama calls this “salt and pepper” theologizing). This does not mean the setting aside of a long tradition of useful theological activity in the west. It means rather that the Christian communities in the Third World can come to the text directly with their questions, needs and aspirations, and allow the text to speak to them.

Given diversities of cultural and conceptual filters and contextual issues peculiar to given regions, it should not be supposed that there is a uniform way of doing theology. To characterize a certain type of p. 157 theology as western or Asian is to recognize its specific features—methodology, emphases, themes and concerns.

## **SITUATIONAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY**

The principle of contextualization indicates the situational character of theology as it relates the text to the context. The situational character of theology in turn points to some marks of theological reflection. First, theological reflection serves a critical or prophetic function. The theologian or reflecting Christian community should not only understand the biblical text in its original setting; it should also relate it to the burning issues of the day. Through theological reflection a community of believers analyzes, judges and seeks to transform a given situation in the light of the biblical message.

Second, since contextualization seeks to relate the text to the context, theological reflection is inevitably shaped or conditioned by a set of historical and cultural forces. Theological formulations therefore utilize the thought forms and symbols of the surrounding culture. The situational character of theology further indicates that no theological formulations should be transported into another period or culture without creative reinterpretation and recontextualizing.

A third implication of the situational character of theological reflection is that of theological self-determination. Since theology is shaped by a given situation, it is not necessary that the younger churches in developing countries engage in theological reflection following the same path taken by churches in the west whose theological agenda are drawn under different circumstances. Third World churches may therefore develop, for instance, a theology of change, of development, of culture and world religions.

## **CONTEXTUALIZATION AND HERMENEUTICS**

Inherent in contextualizing is the approach to the biblical text which gives serious attention not only to the life situation of the biblical writers and their original readers but also to the faith-and-life situation of the church around the world today. The biblical interpreter needs to be “inside that context as well as this context” to render the text meaningful today. The contextualizing of the biblical text and theology is the “cry for the recognition of the significance of this time and this place (wherever and when ever that may be, but particularly in the Third World) without which the Word is a dead word and the Christ is a non-living lord.”<sup>6</sup> P. 158

## **PROCESS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION**

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Lutzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (South Pasadena, Ca.: William Carey Library, 1976), p.6.

The Church's relation to its surrounding culture is always one of tension, for as long as the Church is in the world but not of it, it will sustain a relation of continuity with culture. Contextualization then will take on several forms. It could take the form of *accommodation*—"the respectful, prudent, scientifically and theologically sound adjustment of the church to the native culture in attitude, outward behaviour, and practical apostolic approach."<sup>7</sup> Paul's use of two lines from pagan poets to describe the Christian God is an example of accommodation (See [Acts 17:28](#)).

*Adaptation* as a process of contextualization differs from accommodation in that it does not seek merely to assimilate but to express the Gospel through the cultural forms and ideas. John's use of Logos to express truth about Christ is a case of adaptation. Others have suggested the idea of *possessio* as a way of relating the Gospel to culture. Possession (taking possession) is achieved through selection, rejection, and reinterpretation. Biblical faith was expressed in the symbols, ideas, and practice of human religions in general; however, only those which were compatible with biblical religion were retained. Once purged of their pagan components, the elements of a culture are to be given new meaning and usage.

The position of the World Council of Churches is frequently represented by the process of *dialectic*. Dialectic refers to the dynamic interaction between text and context. The concept assumes the process of change in the contemporary situation. It therefore rejects the idea of the static stability and unchanging nature of culture. Dialectic includes the prophetic role of the Church as it analyzes, interprets and judges a given situation. Some proponents of the process go so far as to say that contextualization as a dialectical process must allow ideology (Marxist ideology and categories, for instance, as in liberation theology) and the context to determine the content of theology. Nikos Nissiotis who initiated the 1971 consultation on "Dogmatic or Contextual Theology?" stated that "contextual or experiential" theology is to be preferred to systematic or dogmatic theology since the former takes as its point of departure "the contemporary scene over against the biblical tradition and confessional statement ..."

The first three approaches to the context more properly fall under the process of inculturating or indigenizing the biblical message and [p. 159](#) the Church in terms of a receiving culture. To a lesser or great extent, each of these approaches utilizes the components of a culture to express the Gospel and the life of the Church. More than any other approach, the dialectic takes serious account of the social, economic and political dimensions of a situation which it seeks to challenge and transform. There is the tendency to be selective in the use of Scripture to bolster partisan and nationalistic interests. Thus, in liberation theology, for example, the political meaning of the Exodus event in the Old Testament is stressed but its spiritual meaning in the New Testament is neglected, and *shalom* (this-worldly peace and well-being) is emphasized but *eirene* (peace with God through Christ) is often overlooked.

It should be noted that in dealing with a culture and a given situation, some degree of adjustment, adaptation, selection, rejection, reinterpretation and transformation is inevitable. It is therefore essential to employ the insights from each of these approaches provided great care is exercised so that biblical truth and the Church's life and mission are safeguarded.

## PROBLEMS AND LIMITS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

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<sup>7</sup> "The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism Report," in J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publication, 1975) p.1227.

The divine-human encounter never takes place in a cultural vacuum. To be received intelligently, the supracultural message of the Gospel has to take on the forms of a receiving culture. The basic problem therefore would be how the supracultural but transcultural Gospel may be communicated in culturally suitable and meaningful terms without at the same time being distorted or diluted by non-Christian elements of a culture. Determining the proper relationship between the supracultural and the cultural is not a simple matter. Form and meaning are inseparable.

One basic problem involved is that of distortion or dilution known as syncretism. Syncretism occurs “when critical and basic elements of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture.”<sup>8</sup> Assimilative syncretism incorporates elements of non-Christian religions based on the claim that there is no qualitative difference between the Christian and other religions. Syncretism by accommodation reduces or rephrases the Gospel’s content by applying unbiblical viewpoints to determine the meaning or interpretation of the Christian faith. The claim that Christian theology has nothing new to offer to the Hindu or that the knowledge of Christ may be transposed into *Brahmavidya* (knowledge of the Supreme and union with the Absolute) is an example of assimilative syncretism.

The dangers described above point to the problems and limits of adapting and contextualizing the Christian message within a given situation. What then are the legitimate boundaries in which indigenization/contextualization may be undertaken?

First, a valid indigenous or contextual theology must uphold the supremacy of the biblical revelation as normative for faith and conduct. Such a theology then must be biblically based. What one derives from the biblical text depends on the questions he brings to it. There should therefore be flexibility in interpretation as application of Scripture.

Second, it is equally essential that any type of theology maintain in proper balance the doctrines of the personality, transcendence and immanence of God. In the Christian religion one has to do with a personal God who makes himself known to man and with whom man may have a meaningful personal relationship. As transcendent Creator, the Christian God is not part of the created order nor is the created order part of him; however, his power pervades the universe which He sustains, guides and rules. The incarnation of Jesus Christ demonstrates that although there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and man, God is interested in, and has made himself accessible to, man. This concept of the Christian God rules out any form of pantheism, idolatry, deism and absolute idealism.

Third, to be valid, any type of contextual theology must uphold the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, his teachings, person and work. His humanity, divinity and resurrection set Him apart as the world’s only Saviour and Lord, and his atoning death provides the sole basis for man’s reconciliation with God.

Fourth, any indigenous or contextual theology that claims to be Christian at all must affirm human sin and lostness, and repentance/faith as appropriate response to God’s offer of grace. The affirmation of man’s lostness should not minimize his moral sense, rationality, and creativity as reflections of the image of God in him.

Fifth, a valid theology includes as an essential element the call to the fellowship of the Christian church. As a community of love the Church is commissioned to make known God’s words and deeds and to promote the worth and integrity of the human person.

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from W. A. Visser’t Hooft’s guidelines for “canonical accommodation.” See “Accommodation: True or False,” *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 15 (January 1967), p.14.

Sixth, it is essential that in adapting the Christian message to any culture, the message fill the local and national cultural religious p. 161 concepts with biblical substance. Traditional cultural concepts should not be employed in theological formulation without critical evaluation and reinterpretation.<sup>9</sup>

## ISSUES AND THEMES

The realities in Asia require that theology—if it is of any value at all—must be pastoral and prophetic. It must enable the Church to be God’s people where it is situated. Hence, theological reflection in Asia, as suggested by Koyama, “must not begin by studying Augustine, Barth and Rahner with an English-Indonesian (or English-Chinese, or English-Thai) dictionary nearby. It must begin with an interest in people.”<sup>10</sup> In view of the pressing issues and challenges in Asia today, theology in the region need not concern itself with system building as such but with decisions that need to be made now.

Following is a suggested listing of issues and themes which evangelical Asian theologians have to wrestle with in their effort to bring the biblical message to bear upon the Asian situation. The list is not intended to be exhaustive nor is the treatment of issues comprehensive.

## CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

What is the relation between Christianity and other religions? Should we dismiss other religions as utterly false? Is Christ present only within the Christian religion? One group of Christians sees the relation as one of radical or absolute discontinuity. Karl Barth contended that in the face of God’s self-disclosure, judgment falls upon all religions, including Christianity. Emil Brunner claimed that based on its message of atonement, Christianity alone “knows God who is Himself Redeemer.”<sup>11</sup> To Hendrik Kraemer the “world of religion and religions (of culture as a whole) with all its marvellous achievements and satanic deviations” is under judgment.<sup>12</sup>

On the opposite side are those who see religions as continuous with Christianity, sharing its truth and saving power. Karl Rahner has p. 162 advanced the idea that the sincere non-Christian should be considered an “anonymous Christian” since Christ already resided in his “grace-endowed” being. Raimundo Panikkar affirms that there is “no genuine human relation from which Christ is absent.” The whole created order is itself a “christophany” moving toward the new heaven and new earth. Hence, the Christian duty is not to bring Christ to other religions but to discover Him there.<sup>13</sup>

Is there a middle ground between these two views? Is there not some interpenetration between Christianity and other religions? In the New Testament, Peter recognized that

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<sup>9</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Reflection on Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia,” *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 15 (1974) p.22.

<sup>10</sup> Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p.236.

<sup>11</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p.257.

<sup>12</sup> See “Christians and So-called Non-Christians,” in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.338–376.

<sup>13</sup> Choan-seng Song urges that Christians not speak of Christ as absolute or unique but as “decisive.” The latter term, he claims, is less exclusive as it allows for the recognition of truth and virtue in other cultures. At the same time it places non-Christians cultures and religions under Christ’s judgment.

God does not show partiality; in every nation, the man who fears Him and does right is accepted by Him ([Acts 13:34–35](#)). Paul taught that though God allowed the nations to walk blindly in their own ways, He did not leave Himself without witness since He did good to all ([Acts 14:16–17](#)). Here it is implied from prehistorical times that God's self-witness is obvious to all men. Speaking to the Athenians, Paul also declared that all men, regardless of culture and belief, live and exist in God who placed them within their own geographical boundaries so that they may seek Him, since He is not far from each person ([Acts 17:24f.](#)).

In the early church, Justin and Clement employed the Stoic doctrine of the *logos spermatikos* to interpret the relation between Christ and the best of pagan culture. They taught that the logos which was incarnate in Jesus had implanted the seed of divine truth in the Greek mind so that whatever is true and virtuous, wherever found, should be accepted as the work of the universal Christ. We can therefore think of other religions as containing both positive and negative elements.

Religion is man's quest for and response to the transcendent. All beauty, truth and virtue in other religions derive from the Light which enlightens every one that comes into the world ([Jn. 1:9](#)). Christianity therefore has no monopoly of truth or beauty or virtue. We hasten to add, however, that whatever amount of truth and virtue is found in them is partial and will not lead to salvation.

Religion as experience of the holy and transcendent may be a point of entry for the Gospel. In India the concern for holy living, the quest for release from bondage, the search for a worthy *guru* could be favourable entry points for the Gospel. Moreover, there are aspects p. 163 of some Asian religions which could illuminate and enrich our understanding of some dimensions of Christianity. It is suggested that the *advaita* concept of transcendence in Hindu thought (comprehensive vision of reality) may provide a clue to viewing reality as a whole. The concept of *Tilakkhana* (anicca, dukkha and anatta) in Buddhism could assist the Christian in the analysis of the human predicament which is marked by change and decay.

These positive factors notwithstanding, natural religions contain negative elements. Since men are alienated from God, their response to Him is often marred by disobedience. Their search for the transcendent often ends up with an entity less than the true God—an idol. Devotees of other religions often claim to find salvation apart from the grace of God. They suppress the truth and reject the Son of God. It could not be claimed therefore that the Allah of Islam is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus.

It will not suffice therefore for evangelical Christians merely to dialogue with adherents of other religions with no intention to persuade them to own Christ as Lord. It is the task of the Asian theologian to explicate the meaning of "no other name" and "there is no salvation in any other" ([Acts 4:12](#)) and to describe the conditions under which the Christian can appropriately approach the non-Christian and witness to the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

## MODERNIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The impact of the West in the form of technology and progress has caused a profound shaking of the foundations of Asian life. The far-reaching social ferment that obtains in Asia may be explained by the process of modernization. Modernization has a total thrust. Not only does it involve economic and technological change; it also involves a quest for a

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<sup>14</sup> See "Toward Christian Ethnology," in A. Tippet, ed., *God, Men and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p.110.

new social order and new conception of man. Its direction is from tradition to modernity, involving a series of changes accompanying the growth of knowledge and its effects on doing things.

Modernization has brought noteworthy benefits. It has brought release from a cyclical view of time, from a fatalistic understanding of the world, and from inhibiting social structures. This has enabled Asian people to break out of the past and participate in shaping their social and political destinies. Modernization and the resulting economic progress have brought a great measure of economic, social and physical well-being. p. 164

On the negative side, modernization has disrupted Asian traditional values of harmony which preserve human dignity and solidarity. It has created a'n acquisitive attitude and a secular outlook which eliminates the category of the transcendent. In the wake of the longing for a better life in Asia, developed countries have also taken advantage of the situation. Through the economic activities of multinational corporations which pursue protectionist and exploitative policies, the local economies are being drained.

How may the Christian understanding of history interpret modernization within God's purposes for man? What is the mission of the church in relation to modernization and social change?

God is the Lord of history and history is the locus in which God and man are engaged. The biblical material describes man as a responsible, creative being mandated to subdue the earth, to shape and utilize it for the common good. Thus man as steward is in partnership with God as designer, decision-maker and creative agent in the world.

## **GOD AND CAESAR**

The political situation in many Asian countries is unstable and unpredictable. Revolutions, coup d'états, authoritarian rule and armed conflicts have marred the scene. How may we determine if a particular regime or government ceases to serve its purpose? When does Caesar cease to be just? When should a particular regime be replaced? And what is the role of the church in regard to the exercise of political power? How do we develop a theology of power?

From the biblical data, the following propositions may be formulated as guidelines in dealing with these issues.

First, power belongs to God. Government or the state as an institution reflects the lordship of God in a fallen world.

Second, the basic functions of Government are: (1) preserving order and stability (preservative): (2) punishment of evil (punitive): (3) rewarding the good (remunerative): (4) promotion of social justice and the welfare of the citizens (supportive). The exercise of power and coercive authority to maintain order is necessary to the normal processes and functions of societal life.

Third, when a particular regime or administration fails to accomplish these functions it should be replaced through those legitimate avenues and instruments available to the citizens. p. 165

Fourth, government is to function within its legitimate boundaries under God. Caesar is just Caesar and not God. When a ruler or regime becomes corrupt, cruel and unjust, or if it takes the place of God, it ought to be resisted or changed. For the Christian, God rather than men must be obeyed under these circumstances. The change sought may be radical but need not be violent.

Fifth, revolution as radical and violent change in the political order may or may not promote justice. It may in fact bring in a new form of bondage and tyranny. The best

course of action at a given time and place is that which promotes the greatest good under the circumstances. A thorough grasp and evaluation of the situation is required before a course of action is taken.

Christians are called upon to actively participate in government to bring about a just and stable order. The form of government which a Christian should or should not espouse depends upon tradition or custom. At all times he should support that regime which best accomplishes the purposes of God and promotes human well-being.

In many Asian countries the governing elite and the affluent class are unwilling to share the means of economic and social advancement with the majority of citizens. Often they entrench themselves in power and seek to maintain the status quo to protect vested interests—their own, those of their proteges or of multinational corporations which help maintain their positions of power.

Christians must join all men of goodwill in exposing the mechanisms of power and exploitation, in lobbying for positive and egalitarian legislation that will enhance the condition of the weak and powerless, and in opposing ideologies and techniques that abet the wrong use of power.

## **THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION IN ASIA**

The Church's mission is indicated by some metaphors and titles in Scripture which point to its nature and role in the world. The following are appropriate in defining the mission of the Asian church today.

*Salt and Light.* Under these metaphors, the church serves as moral preservative and conscience in society. As salt, believers are to penetrate society and through their influence the process of moral decay that obtains in society. As light they are to bring God's truth to bear on every dimension of human life and to make known the saving truth in Christ.

Christian service in Asia should no longer be limited to the activities p. 166 of the institutional church as though the sphere of Christian influence is to be confined to ecclesiastical life. Believers as salt should be out of the salt shaker in order to exert their influence in every area of social life and activity. This means that believers in Asia should fulfill their Christian vocation as they live and work among their fellowmen. Through their good works they are to bring glory to their Father in heaven.

*Servant in the midst of Suffering.* Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that He was sent to preach good news to the poor, to bring freedom to prisoners and to release the oppressed. He is described as anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, doing good, healing all who were under the devil's grip ([Acts 10:38](#)).

There is considerable suffering in many parts of Asia due to poverty, sickness, exploitation, political and armed conflicts and natural calamities. Like her Lord, the Church should not seek to be served but to serve the needy. In doing so, it will manifest its solidarity with men in their predicament. Sharing in the suffering of our people and meeting their needs could well be a point of entry for the Gospel. Through his servant Church Christ can bring hope to the millions of Asia in the midst of suffering and pain. The Asian church must identify with those who struggle for a better life. Asian Christians can authenticate the truth of the Gospel by identifying with the predicament of those who suffer.

*People of God.* As the people of God, the Church in Asia is a pilgrim Church situated in a world which is unfriendly to God's grace. As a pilgrim people, the Church is dependent on God, in need of continual reform. It is therefore subject to judgment, correction and cleansing. Called in history from among the nations, Asian Christians are to constantly

discern what God is doing in the world and to respond to his call at this or that time and place. In the vicissitudes of history, Yahweh is the God who acts—judging, creating, renewing, redeeming, reordering, saving, healing and reconciling. In the welter of historical forces, the Church in Asia is to affirm the divine Yes to all processes that enhance justice and righteousness, that approximate the values of the kingdom, that promote human dignity and well-being. On the other hand, it is to say No to all forms of human perversity and corruption that defeat the purpose of God.

As God's people, Asian Christians are a kingdom of priests. They are to offer spiritual sacrifices, represent God to the nations and the nations to God, and mediate God's blessings to them ([Gen. 12:1, 2](#); [Exod. 19:5, 6](#)). God will continue to take a *laos* from the myriads of the ethnic groups in Asia as the churches in the region rehearse p. 167 God's mighty acts of deliverance through Gospel proclamation.

*Instrument of the Kingdom.* The kingdom of God was central in the teaching and mission of Jesus. His acts of healing and exorcism were signs of God's rule over nature and demons. The coming of God's rule in Jesus fulfilled the idea of the kingdom as bringing deliverance and wholeness. Hence, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose in creation and redemption.

The Church is not to be equated with the kingdom but it is part of the kingdom, the sphere of God's rule. The kingdom therefore is present in the Church. Though not the kingdom, the Church is the instrument through which its boundaries are extended. Through word and deed, the Church presents the claims of the King and exemplifies the values of his kingdom. While awaiting the full manifestation of God's rule in the world, the Church witnesses to its power and presence. The life and fellowship of Christians are to be a foretaste of life in the consummated kingdom; they are to reflect in the world something of what the future reality is to be.

The Asian Church is a minority in the vast Asian complex. All the more it is mandated by the King to extend the boundaries of his rule by Gospel proclamation, because only those who give their allegiance to the King will enjoy kingdom blessings. Through its fellowship and service the Asian Church should embody God's mercy, justice and righteousness in society. Though the Church cannot duplicate the works of Jesus, any act or word that lifts and restores human dignity and worth, that delivers from bondage and displays God's mercy and righteousness can draw men's attention to the presence of God and reflect his rule.

## CHRISTIAN ETHNOTHEOLOGY

One activity in which Christian communities in Asia should engage is doing theology in terms of specific cultural systems. Charles Kraft employs the term "Christian ethnotheology" to describe the effort which combines insights from Christian theology and anthropology and maintains "an interpretive approach to the study of God, man, and divine-human interaction."<sup>15</sup> Buswell proposes the term "inculturation" to point to the process of communicating Christian P. 168 truth in the linguistic idioms and forms of a culture.<sup>16</sup> Here the culture provides analogies, illustration, framework, forms and principles of communication.

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<sup>15</sup> J. O. Buswell, III, "Contextualization," *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 14 (January 1978), p.16

<sup>16</sup> See "The problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity," in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Saying* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.105–118; "Sri Lanka: Theological Construction in a Buddhist Society," in G. Anderson, ed., *Asian Voices in Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 19), pp.37–52.

The particular forms of a cultural system refer to the philosophical presuppositions or world-view of a culture which functions as the framework against which the members of the culture understand the nature of the universe. This framework constitutes the context and provides the vehicle in which Christian truth is understood and communicated.

Lynn de Silva's attempt to construct theology in a Buddhist context<sup>17</sup> is a clear example of how the thought forms and world-view of a people may serve as meeting points between Buddhist and biblical thought. De Silva, for example, sees parallels between the *Tilikhana* or the Three Signata in Buddhism (*anicca*—possibility of non-being; *dukkha*—finitude; *anatta*—non-self) and the biblical ideas in [Romans 8:18-25](#) (expressed by *mataiotes*, *pathemata* and *pthora*) which describe the human predicament. Paul teaches that the whole creation is subject to decay (*anicca*); is groaning in travail (*dukkha*); and subject to dissolution (*anatta*). De Silva discerningly observes that the three Greek terms have close approximations with the Pali terms *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

The Buddhist solution to the human predicament lies in the complete extinction of the self by the eradication of *tanha* (craving, thirst for existence). While Buddhism holds that this idea does not amount to self-annihilation, at the same time it rejects eternalistic notions of the self. Noting an inconsistency in Buddhist thought at this point, de Silva inserts the Christian solution found in the concept of authentic self-hood signified by *pneuma*. In Christian faith it is possible to deny the self without lapsing into nihilism and to affirm it without eternalizing it in the process. In explaining this truth, de Silva employs both the notion of *anatta* (not self) and the Christian concept of "spirit" (*pneuma*). God's love in Christ is the basis of the intermingling of the "I" and the "Thou" where the self is both negated (through suffering) and affirmed (through resurrection).

In the Philippines, the Christian theologian can construct an ethnotheology by analyzing, interpreting and evaluating some elements of [p. 169](#) the Filipino world-view and value system. In an essay on some traditional Filipino beliefs about man, Elwood isolates two major components of the Filipino traditional world-view which relate to the understanding of man.<sup>18</sup> These are the *swerte* belief ("fate") and the *hiya* value ("shame").

To the average Filipino, *swerte* is not just "luck"; it is "one's predetermined lot in life." Based on this belief, one cannot do much to change his situation or improve it and therefore can easily rationalize a do-nothing or do-little economic philosophy. *Swerte* in turn is based on a cyclic view of life illustrated by the "wheel of fortune". This outlook leads to the *bahala na* mentality which could mean "come what may," or "it's up to God." Elwood observes that *bahala na* and *swerte* are reinforced by an unorthodox understanding of the role of divine providence in human affairs. This distorted view of divine providence encourages a fatalistic and careless attitude ("God wills everything; there's nothing I can do to change my lot").

A related value orientation is *hiya* which could mean a sense of shame, embarrassment, inferiority or timidity. The average Filipino usually feels inhibited to speak out or to act for fear he may fail or lose "face." The belief in fate supports the unwillingness to disturb the status quo as implied in the *hiya* concept. *Hiya* in turn supports the feeling that there is nothing we can do about our "assigned status."

Theological reflection in the Philippines must address these two components of the Filipino world-view and value system through proper explication of divine providence as not eliminating the exercise of human freedom and initiative based on the teaching that man, created in God's image, is a responsible being.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Elwood, "A Theological Approach to Some Traditional Filipino Beliefs About Man," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1970), pp.37-53.

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*Man and Nature.* Theological construction in Asia must include the question of man's relation to nature.

*Man and Nature in Asian Thought.* Generally speaking, in Asia, man and nature are understood as having a sense of kinship and affinity. Man is understood as part of the cosmic whole, as in the Hindu concept of *advaita*. There is therefore the absence of an analytic or detached view of nature. Based on the principle of Tao (the organizing principle), nature is viewed as self-contained and self-operative. In animistic cultures, nature is considered as sacred, an object to be hallowed or feared.

*The Scientific View of Nature.* The effects of science and technology have disturbed the traditional Asian views of man and nature. The establishment of factories and industries have produced harmful wastes that pollute air and water, bringing an ecological imbalance. The scientific view of nature has disrupted an essentially relational p. 170 understanding of man and nature. This has alienated man from nature and man from man.

*Biblical Teaching.* There are several strands of biblical teaching on the relation of man and nature that should be considered.

First, nature is created; hence, it is not self-existent or self-ordered. It is upheld and borne along by the immanent sustaining power and providence of an ordering Creator. As a created entity, nature has no inherent sacredness, nor does it have magical powers.

Second, nature was prepared like a home, with all its furnishing, for man's dwelling and use. God created everything in it to sustain life and to meet man's need. It is in this sense a manifestation of God's faithfulness and steadfastness.

Third, the creation accounts ([Genesis 1](#) and [2](#)) depict man as the crown of God's creation. The creation of man is indicated as the highest point in God's creative activity. Man is at the centre of things, and his dignity, worth, and exalted position are clearly indicated.

Fourth, man is part of nature, though transcending it. Sustained by nature, he is dependent upon it. Man shares some features of animal life. He has a mortal body and basic biological needs.

Fifth, the biblical tradition describes man as having the prerogative of exercising dominion over creation ([Genesis 1:26-28](#); [Psalm 8](#)). As God's representative, man is to subdue the earth and to utilize it for his purpose.

Sixth, nature is to be the object of man's contemplation and reflection. As such, it is to be the source of man's enjoyment and human curiosity is to be excited by the intricacies, beauty, order and variety in nature.

Seventh, nature is the expression of God's glory, the reflection of his power and wisdom. General or natural revelation points to some of the perfections of the invisible God ([Romans 1:18-21](#); [Psalm 19](#)).

Eighth, man and nature are to rejoice in God together, to glorify the Creator. In the creation Psalms, in the book of Job and in Isaiah, man and nature are depicted as reflecting the Creator's glory.

It is to be noted, however, that in the exercise of his rule over nature, man is to be a faithful steward as God's covenant partner. Man is to care for nature, seeing to it that it is not polluted or destroyed.

The reciprocal relation between man and nature is to be recovered in view of the negative effects of modernization and technology in Asia. Asian man's sense of community based on the relational understanding of nature is to be preserved to offset the p. 171 dehumanizing and depersonalizing effect of science and materialistic ideologies.

## CONCLUSION

Theological reflection is the search for the meaning of the present in the light of God's unchanging Word. That which distinguishes a particular type of theology is its method, themes and emphasis. It is in this sense that evangelicals in Asia can engage in theological reflection. The product of such an enterprise is a theology that must be biblically oriented and responsive to the issues and challenges posed by each situation in Asia. As a pilgrim and prophetic community, God's people in Asia must continually pursue the hermeneutical task of relating God's Word to the total context, discerning where the Spirit is leading and being alert to the burning issues of the day.

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Dr. Rodrigo D. Tano is Principal, Ebenezer Bible College, Zamboanga City, Philippines. p. 172

# **Towards an Evangelical Theology in India**

by Sunand Sumithra & Bruce Nicholls

## **INTRODUCTION**

A clear grasp of and a genuine commitment to evangelical theology which seeks without reservation to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God is our first priority in attempting to develop "an evangelical theology in the context of India and Hindu cultures". A second priority is a sympathetic understanding of Hindu cultures and of the historical moment in contemporary India. Thirdly, we take the Church as the people of God seriously in our theological task. Therefore we want to reflect carefully on the strength and weaknesses of earlier and current attempts at formulating theologies and evaluate them both from the normative standard of Scripture and the response of the churches as they have sought to implement such a theology in the fulfilling of the church's mission in the world.

We affirm that good theology faithful to the Scripture and relevant to a particular cultural situation cannot be done from a distance. The task of formulating theology must be done in the context of worship and a right relationship to God on one hand and in the context of a commitment as Christ's disciples in his mission in that particular situation. God himself did not consider solving the problems of the human predicament from a distance. He became incarnate, identified with us, lived as a servant, was crucified on a cross and rose again from the dead for our salvation. In the spirit of worship and personal involvement as God's fellow-workers we take seriously and sympathetically the effort of other theologians in India to bring the Good News to those without the knowledge of Christ. We bring their insights and achievements along with our own to the foot of Christ and the judgement of his inscripturated Word. Therefore, in this paper we seek to describe some of the vital cultural issues which we in India face and analyze our own part in them. We then reflect on the questions that these issues ask of biblical theology. We then seek to evaluate some of the methods and answers that Indian theologians have given in this dialogue between context and text. Finally, we want to suggest some

guidelines faithful to Scripture which will help us in developing an evangelical theology relevant to Hindu cultures.

## **SOME VITAL QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

### **Sensitivity to the Realm of the Spirit**

In contrast to the materialistic world view and secular ideologies that **p. 173** are engulfing the world the Hindu approach is still predominantly spiritual. For Hindus reality belongs to the realm of the spirit. A spirit-conscious Hindu is ready to renounce his earthly life and relationships and sacrifice all worldly ambitions in the search for spiritual realization. The appeal of sadhus and sanyasis (the wandering gurus and ascetics) continues as a great ideal. This is why Hindus are attracted towards the person of Jesus as the great ascetic, the great guru, the yogi. His cross is interpreted as a supreme act of self-sacrifice.

This spiritual sensitivity is a challenge to much of our theological thinking and values as they have developed not only in the west but also in India. Those elements of spirituality which are affirmed in biblical revelation need to be preserved by Indian Christian theologians. They are not only an antidote to the materialistic and secular ideologies of our time but challenge us to theologize in spirit and in truth. The Christian caught in a spirit of consumerism becomes a major stumbling block to Hindus coming to Christ. They say yes to Jesus but no to the Christian church. Where the spirit of self-sacrifice and willing acceptance of suffering is seen in the life-style of the Christian community they become bridges to the Hindu mind and heart. However, this search for spirituality can become a stumbling block unless the biblical understanding is made abundantly clear in word and deed. Mahatma Gandhi wept at the sight of the cross, for to him it was a supreme principle of self-sacrifice. Many young Hindu men today wear a cross for similar reasons.

### **QUESTIONS RAISED BY INDIAN PATRIOTISM**

In 1947 when India became freed from British colonial power, India became one nation as never before in all her ancient history and she became *independent* as never before in modern colonial history. Though the early Christian patriots, like Kali Charan Banerjee and K. T. Paul wisely avoided forming communal Christian political parties as the Hindus and Muslims have done, this has sometimes being interpreted by our Hindu neighbours to mean a lack of patriotism. This has led to the saying that every new Christian is a loss to the nation as a citizen. This is confirmed in cases when new converts who formerly were active in public life now withdraw and devote themselves primarily to spiritual ministries. At the same time Christians have a good record of being mediators in situations of bloody Hindu-Muslim riots and their efforts to preserve national unity have often been recognized. With conversion to Jesus Christ as Saviour **P. 174** and Lord, nationalism ceases to be our god. We do not cease to be Indian citizens. As was true of the early Church we will seek to be loyal to our rulers and motivated by love and compassion for the welfare and progress of our poor and especially the down-trodden.

### **THE QUESTION OF INDIVIDUALISM IN SOCIETY**

The basic unit of most Indian cultures is the extended family. Important decisions such as marriage and education are decided within the circle of the family or the local community. Decision-making is rarely a private act. The extended family of several generations gives

a sense of identity and belongingness both to children and to the elderly and is in accord with the biblical understanding of family. Paul Sudhakar, a well-known Christian evangelist in India, testifies that he was converted through reading in Matthew's Gospel the genealogies of Jesus Christ back through David to Abraham. This impressed on him the importance of Jesus Christ. Understanding this pattern of society became an important factor in developing a theology of conversion and of disciple-making. On the other hand, the denial of the rights of the individual, particularly of women, reinforced by ideas of *karma* and *Sansara* can lead to intolerable suffering and fatalism. It is the Gospel which focuses on the worth of the individual in the sight of God. The shepherd spares no effort to find the one lost sheep in a hundred.

## **THE QUESTION OF CASTEISM AND COMMUNALISM**

We feel that casteism is the great curse of our nation next only to idolatry. We are painfully aware that legislation fails to alleviate caste distinctions and the intolerable burden of dowry which is only one of its consequences. We confess that as Christians we have failed in the struggle against the stranglehold of casteism which functions inside the Church as well as outside of it. In our caste-conscious churches there is a lack of inter-caste marriage. Caste discrimination affects church elections and the training for the ministry. However, we thankfully acknowledge that in some areas this is fast changing.

Communalism which is often seen as a necessity of survival is also a major cause of national disintegration. The Christian community had not always succeeded in its fight against communalism. It has made the Church hesitant to welcome converts from other communities, and unwilling to share the benefits accrued by the Christian community from the foreign missionary movement or from their own resources. The recent Harijan conversions not to Christianity but to [p. 175](#) Buddhism and to Islam have opened the eyes of the Hindu leaders to the evils of the caste system and stand as an indictment against casteism in the Christian community.

In order to defend Christian conversion against charges of proselytism it must be shown that becoming a disciple of Christ is not the same as changing one's allegiance from one religious community to another. While recognising that motivation for Christian conversion is never purely spiritual, every effort must be made to ensure that it is primarily so. Christian discipleship is the change of allegiance from all forms of idolatry to commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour, apart from material and communal benefits.

## **QUESTIONS OF POVERTY AND OPPRESSION**

The all-pervading social issues in India today are abject poverty and religious, social, economic and political oppressions. It is estimated that 60% of the population live below the poverty line and the number increases year by year. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. In Bombay, which is our richest commercial city, it is estimated the 40% of the population live in approximately 1,600 slum colonies. Dehumanization, the loss of human dignity, hopelessness and despair, fatalism and hate are to be seen to be believed. One of the major causes of this widespread suffering is unemployment. But we agree with the economist E. F. Shumaker that India's economic problems are ultimately moral problems. Poverty and oppression stem from human greed, bribery and corruption among politicians, merchants, social workers, police and even the courts. We confess with shame that the Church has been largely silent. But we also believe that the only hope for India is in a renewed and growing Church, insofar as it is the sign and agent of the Kingdom of God, God's reign on earth.

Where the Church is true to its nature and calling, it becomes the conscience of the community, restraining evil and bringing hope to the poor and oppressed. Its ministry is a moral force rebuking evil rather than a political agent conscientizing people towards revolution. The human heart is individually and collectively sinful. To the Church is given the Good News that Christ can change human nature and the moral behaviour of families and communities. The fact that poverty and oppression are increasing in our contemporary society makes it immoral for the Church to keep silent or to withdraw from its social responsibility. p. 176

## **THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS RAISED BY CULTURAL ISSUES**

As evangelicals we believe it is legitimate to begin our theological process by studying our own society, listening to the questions that our cultures raise and then going to the Bible for guidelines and answers. In this dialogical process we quickly discover that the Bible has its own agenda and that it not only gives guidance in the issues which our cultures raise but it also raises its own set of questions. The Bible as the revealed Word of God has an inherent balance between the divine and the human as expressed in the two great commandments “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “love your neighbour as yourself”. ([Matthew 22:37, 39](#)). Because of the limitations of our humanity, theologians have the tendency to focus primarily on either our vertical relationship to God or our horizontal relationship to our fellow man. When we hold to one and neglect the other we distort the Gospel. This is the history of theology both in the West and in the Third World. It is true of both evangelicals and liberals.

In the context of our search to develop an evangelical theology in the context of Hindu cultures we limit ourselves to reflection on three theological questions which the Scripture asks the cultural context.

## **PERSON VERSUS PRINCIPLE IN CHRISTOLOGY**

“Is Jesus Christ God incarnate, or a prophet or a deluded mystic or a cosmic ideal?” is a question countless people have asked in every culture. Hindus have always been fascinated with the figure of Christ. Is he a person or is he a principle? For Keshab Chandra Sen, one of the early leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, Jesus Christ was a “divine humanity.” In his lecture “India asks: Who is Christ?” (1979) Sen portrays Christ as “the prince of idealists.” He exhorted his hearers to “be Christ”. His aim was “to make every man Christ.” Mahatma Gandhi, whose admiration for Christ is well-known, said he did not care if there lived a man called Jesus or not. The sermon on the mount would still be valid for him. For Vivekananda, Christ was the greatest teacher of the world for he both taught and practised Godrealization which is the universal gospel of mankind. He is pure soul and his suffering a *prasad* offered to God. It is clear for both orthodox and reforming Hindus that Jesus the man is but a symbol for a cosmic ideal, a symbol for the divine principle of self-sacrifice. Hindus do not deny that Jesus is a historical person, but they deny the significance P. 177 of such historicity for the principle of Christhood. Only the ideal is real, all else is *maya* or illusion.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, on behalf of them all replied, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God,” ([Matthew 16:16](#)). Christian orthodoxy affirms Peter’s confession that Jesus Christ is none other than God incarnate in history.

## THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN CONTEXTUALIZATION AND SYNCRETISM

Hinduism challenges the Christian claim to uniqueness by using analogies drawn from human observation to show that all religions are equally true and all ultimately lead their devotees to God and to bliss. All appearances of diversity are only relative manifestations of the Universal. In the thought of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the late philosopher President of India, the mystical experience is the universal religious experience.

The biblical response to this challenge is a call to faithfulness to God's self-revelation in scripture and to relevance in the diversity of our cultural contexts. The attempts of Indian theologians to take the Gospel out of its Hebrew cultural framework and pour it into the cup of one or more Hindu religious philosophies and lifestyle is fraught with dangers unless the relationship between content and form, text and context, is itself controlled by the parameters of biblical revelation. This two-way dialogue between the Bible and the cultural context must be contained in a one-way movement of communicating the Word of God to man. Symbolically, it may be spiral rather than linear, but at heart its message is always eschatological. Too often Indian theologians have made the Hindu religious cultural framework primary and the biblical content secondary. The boundary between true contextualization and false syncretism depends on exercising the prophetic rebuke of the Christian faith, judging what is contrary to revelation, purifying and transforming what reflects God's work as creator and bringing to all men what is new in salvation history.

## RELATING NEW LIFE IN CHRIST TO JUSTICE IN SOCIETY

The enormity of human suffering and social injustice in India challenges the Christian to face the issue of the relationship of proclamation and evangelism to social service and justice. To proclaim a Gospel of a loving God without compassion and love for one's neighbour and vice-versa is a truncated gospel that falsifies God's **P. 178** Good News. The Bible recognizes that mission is reconciling men both to God and to one another. If we close our eyes to the suffering of the poor and the oppressed they will block their ears to our Gospel of salvation in Christ. Biblical salvation is for life now as well as for life after death. Evangelical theology must show the relationship between the two.

## EVANGELICAL REFLECTIONS ON SOME INDIAN THEOLOGIAN

In this section we confine ourselves to some broadly representative theologians who have pioneered new frontiers in Indian theology.

### A. J. APPASAMY (1891–1957)

Bishop Appasamy is well-known for his attempt to interpret John's Gospel in terms of *bhakti marga*, or the way of devotion and surrender to God. His early writings *Christianity as Bhakti Marga* (1928) and *What is Moksha?* (1931) largely reflected his liberal theological education in the west, while his later writings and ministry as a Bishop of the Church of South India reflect the heart of an evangelical pastor. The ground of his earlier work was that just as the New Testament in its Hebrew cultural form assimilated Greek culture, so the Bible can assimilate the best of Hindu culture. Appasamy maintains that God was preparing to reveal Himself to India through the long spiritual heritage of India. Thus, he seeks to show how John's Gospel corrects the abuses of *Bhakti*. He makes frequent use of Ramanuja's use of the analogy of body and soul to show that the universe

is the body of God. Body is that which is totally dependent and subordinate to soul. Using this analogy, Appasamy seeks to show that the logos is God filling all and again that Christ's relationship to the father is one of dependence and subordination. The sacraments are the body of Christ and so likewise is the Church. His attempt to interpret biblical salvation in terms of release from *karma* is equally limiting and unsatisfactory. *Bhakti* has no real place for grace and the forgiveness of sin, while *karma* rejects the possibility of substitutionary atonement. Thus Appasamy's emphasis on the immanence of God without a corresponding emphasis on the transcendence of God in revelation leads to reductionism. The context shapes the content of the text itself.

Appasamy acknowledges his indebtedness to Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889–1929), the faith mystic of Indian Christian spirituality. His unusual spiritual power, his obedience to the call of Christ, his joy in suffering and his christocentric faith were an inspiration to p. 179 Appasamy, as they have been to countless other Christians. While aspects of his trance experiences and visions of the spiritual world and his sadhu lifestyle may be questioned, his devotion to Christ, his desire to submit to the authority of Scripture, kept him on a more even keel. He used parables and symbols to express his faith but not as its ground. However, because of the limitations of his hermeneutical method, his understanding of biblical doctrine may be questioned.

### **BRAHMABANDHAH UPADHYAYA (1861–1907 AND RAYMOND PANIKKAR 1918– ).**

These well-known representatives of Catholic scholarship were attracted to the task of reconciling Thomistic theology with the Vedantic monism of Hinduism. Brahmabandhah (a friend of Brahman) sought to find the meeting point of pure Christianity and pure Hinduism in the Trinity as Saccidananda (Being, Consciousness and Bliss). However, such natural theology has little Good News for those bound by sin and guilt or suffering from poverty and oppression. Raymond Panikkar in his famous book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (1964) looks for the same synthesis but in a modern existential framework. History as subjected to the symbolic and the grammatical-historical exegesis of Scripture is subject to the principle of analogy. The cosmic Christ is the fulfilment of the Hindu mystical search for reality. His dialogue with Hinduism is on Hinduism's terms.

### **P. CHENCHIAH (1886–1959)**

Chenchiah as a leader of the "Rethinking Christianity Group" known for its radicality is undoubtedly one of the most original thinkers in contextualizing the Gospel message in the Indian context. He sought to synthesize the biblical message with insights gained from the gnosticism of Aurobindo and with the emergent evolution of naturalistic science. His starting point is what he calls "the raw fact of Christ", whose humanity is permanent and who is a bridge between God and man. Christ is the beginning of a new order of creation and salvation or union with Christ is "reproducing Christ" or "becoming Christ." This somewhat mystical experience is achieved by the yoga of the Spirit. Thus, according to Chenchiah we are saved not by the act of Christ, but by the FACT of Christ, not by the Cross but by the Incarnation. In the process of evolution Christ brings a new creation order for man. Chenchiah had little sympathy with the P. 180 organized Church believing that it usurped the kingdom of God. He writes that on the day of Pentecost, the Church gained three thousand souls but the kingdom of God lost them. While Chenchiah's theology is creative and responsive to many Hindu concepts, its biblical rootlessness leaves it powerless to bring India to Christ.

## M. M. THOMAS

Perhaps the most important Indian theologian is M. M. Thomas. The approach of M. M. (as he is affectionately known) is we believe an excellent example of the ideologization of the gospel. Having come out of the struggle for independence and nation building he tailored his theology to be relevant to these struggles. However, M. M.'s uniqueness lies in the fact that he was also involved in the struggle to evolve a relevant theology of mission both at national and international levels. In broad terms his approach may be summarized in four steps:

- (i) His starting point is *man's quest*. He analyzes what man is searching for and discovers that the primary search is for human dignity, freedom, creativity and meaning in history.
- (ii) he then asks: what is *Christ's offer* to these quests? He responds that Christ is offering exactly those things for which man is searching. Christ is the new man, the new humanity. Humanization is the most relevant point of entry for dialogue between Christianity and other religions.
- (iii) then what is the *mission of the Church*? It is to participate along with Christ in the liberation movements of our time, so that man may receive what he is searching for. The confession of participation is the essence of the mission of the Church.
- (iv) finally what is the *goal of humanity*? It is the humanity of mankind leading ultimately to a just world society. This utopian world society is at best the preparation for the coming kingdom of God, for the kingdom of men is necessary raw material for the kingdom of God.

M. M.'s "living theology" is always situational "born out the meeting of the living church and its world". Such a theology is always in the direction of synthesis. And so starting with the analysis of the human situation for which a vision of the world society is set as the ultimate goal, M. M. uses Christ and the Church as a means in a programme of action to achieve this goal. This is clearly an ideologization. p. 181

## SOME GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

From this discussion of text and context it becomes clear that the starting point of our theology must be the biblical doctrine of God as Creator. The Hindu denial of creation, of history and the portrayal of the earthly life as *maya* or illusion is one of the root causes for a lack of social ethics. Even Hindu leaders such as Dr. Radhakrishnan have felt the need to reinterpret *maya* to give history reality and validity. This worldly life is not an illusion but a second reality in order to receive *monksha* or salvation. The biblical doctrine of creation is the best antidote to *maya*. The world, mankind and history have reality and moral purpose because they are the creation or outworking of a holy creator God. Men and women are of the utmost importance because they are created in the image of God for fellowship with God. The fact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the clearest evidence that history is the arena of God's actions. Promise and fulfillment in the coming of Christ is the strongest evidence that history has divine meaning. The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory full of grace and truth. The God of the Bible is, as Martin Luther repeatedly emphasized, the God of action, a God of history.

This has already led us to our second major concern of God as Saviour. He is the Creator-Saviour God, for salvation is all of grace from first to last. The failure to recognize

the work of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator and Redeemer lies at the root of much of our theological failure. The fact of the universal fall of mankind from righteousness into seeking to claim equality with God, in rebelling against his law, brings us under the just wrath of God. It points to the need of a covenant-making God to restore man not only to his original image but to the new fullness in Christ to which the resurrection points. This eschatological hope of the coming reign of God, of the perfection of his body the Church, and the ultimate new earth and new heaven wherein dwells righteousness, is the Good News which God offers to all.

One way of developing this God-centred and God controlled theology is to think of it as Word of God theology, not in the circumscribed limits that Barth gave to that term but, in the fullness of Scripture in which the Word of God is revealed through written propositional truths, in the living Word of Jesus Christ, God's final Word to mankind and in his acts in history preparing and creating a new people of God unto his praise and glory.

It is therefore the Word of God that maintains the harmony of [p. 182](#) proclamation, of life style, of action and reflection. It is a theology of reconciliation and liberation now and in the world to come.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, revelation is a process of interiorization while in Islam it is flat impersonal propositionalism. In Christianity, revelation is verbal and prophetic, historical and eschatological. It is supremely personal because Jesus Christ is the living personal Word of God.

In the dialogue between the Christian faith and other faiths the distinction between God's general and universal revelation as Creator and Law-giver and his special and saving revelation as Redeemer is both valid and necessary in discussing religious truth and the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ. The loss of this distinction in revelation opens the door to universalism.

The theology of the Word of God is one of judgment and fulfillment. Christ through the cross brought judgment on all forms of idolatry and sin and in his resurrection points to fulfillment and the new creation. The hope of the resurrection is indeed good news to those who despair of the body and are imprisoned in endless rebirths. The early Church was excited by the good news of the resurrection and it is equally exciting for today's hearers. But to talk of the resurrection without the cross is to reduce the gospel to the determinism of Allah who destines men and women to heaven or to hell. Apart from the cross we cannot understand the meaning of grace. It is found in other religions but apart from the cross it can never be more than an aid to the keeping of the law. A theology of the Word of God is a theology of grace and forgiveness, faith and hope, love and compassion.

Such a theology is not the possession of a few individuals but is manifest in the Church, wherever it is truly the sign of the kingdom of Christ and a model before the watching world. The Church as the body of Christ is his agent in the world as salt and light, as the conscience of society restraining evil. It is the place where the Word of God is actualized, where culture is judged and transformed, ever looking forward to the perfect culture when Christ returns to usher in the kingdom. Only a mission-theology flowing from the Church as God's people will be adequate to meet the spiritual and social need of India and of the whole world. Our theology must be a confessing theology of the Word of God. [p. 183](#)

# National Evangelical Fellowships

- Angola:** Association of Evangelicals, C.P. 29, Caluquembe.
- Austria:** Evangelische Allianz, Franz-Josef Str. 23, 5020 Salzburg.
- Botswana:** Evangelical Fellowship, PO Box 213, Gaborone.
- Central African Republic:** Association Des Eglises, B.P. 1127, Bangui.
- Denmark:** Evangelisk Alliance, Aron Jenson, Klinvej 20, DK 9220, Alborg Ost.
- France:** Alliance Evangelique, 47 Rue De Clichy, 750009 Paris.
- Germany, East:** Evangelische Allianz, 99 Planen, Dobenastrasse 12.
- Germany, West:** Evangelische Allianz, D-1000 Berlin 41, Albestrasse 4.
- Ghana:** National Association of Evangelicals of Ghana, PO Box 30, Achimota.
- Guatemala:** Alianza Evangelica, Apartado Postal 123.
- Guyana:** Guyana Evangelical Fellowship, c/o Elim Church, Lot 147, Albert Street, Bourda, Georgetown.
- Haiti:** Concile Des Eglises Evangeliques D'Haiti, BP 2475, Port-au-Prince.
- India:** World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, 105 Savitri Building, Greater Kailash II, New Delhi 110048.
- Indonesia:** Evangelical Fellowship, Flat Wisma Segara E, Jalan Purnawarman 858, Kebayoran Baru, Jakarta, Selatan.
- Italy:** Evangelical Alliance, Casella Postale 680, 50100, Florence.
- Ivory Coast:** Federation Evangelique, BP 411, Cote D'ivoire.
- Jamaica:** Jamaica Association of Evangelical Churches, PO Box 121, Kingston 8.
- Japan:** Japan Evangelistic Association, 2-1 Kanda, Surugadai, Chiyoda-Ku, Tokyo 101.
- Kenya:** The General Secretary, A.E.A.M., PO Box 49332, Nairobi.
- Liberia:** Liberia Evangelical Fellowship, PO Box 480, Monrovia.
- Malawi:** Evangelical Association, PO Box 5436, Limbe.
- Malaysia:** National Evangelical Fellowship, 5 Jalan Othman, Petaling Jaya, Selangor.
- Mali:** Association Des Eglises Evangeliques, Markala.
- New Zealand:** Evangelical Alliance, Attn. Mr. J. E. Davies, 34A Glamorgan Drive, Torbaya, Auckland.
- Nigeria:** Nigeria Evangelical Fellowship, PO Box 634, Ilorin, Kwara State
- Norway:** Evangelical Alliance, Toppen 4, 1430 Aas/AS. [p. 184](#)
- Pakistan:** Evangelical Fellowship of Pakistan, Jinnah Colony, Chaklala Road, Rawalpindi.
- Papua New Guinea:** The General Secretary, Evangelical Alliance Baptist Bible College, Kwinkya, Baiyer Riba.
- Philippines:** Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, 111 West Avenue, Quezon City.
- Portugal:** Alianca Evangelica Portugal, Avenida Conselheiro Barjona, De Freitas 16-B, 1500 Lisbon.
- Senegal:** Fraternité Evangelique, BP 2778, Dakar.
- Sierra Leone:** Evangelical Fellowship, PO Box 218, Freetown.
- South Africa:** Association of Evangelicals of S.A., Box 50, 3245 Hilton.
- Spain:** Alianza Evangelica, Trafalgar 32 20B, Madrid 10.
- Sri Lanka:** Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, The General Secretary, PO Box 66, Colombo.
- Swaziland:** Association of Evangelicals, PO Box 73, Manzini.
- Sweden:** Evangelical Alliance, Stavgardsgatan 19, 161 37 Bromma.
- Sudan:** Association of Evangelical Christians, PO Box 220, Khartoum.
- Switzerland:** Evangelische Allianz, Pfarrweg 3, CH 8200-Schaffhausen.

**Thailand:** Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, GPO Box 1200, Bangkok.

**Upper Volta:** Association Des Eglises Evangeliques, Boite Postale 108, Ouagadougou.

**Zambia:** Evangelical Fellowship, PO Box 115, Choma.

**Zimbabwe:** Evangelical Fellowship, PMB M-5218, Bulawayo.

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**Dr. Sunand Sumithra** teaches at Union Biblical Seminary, Yavatmal, India and **Dr. Bruce Nicholls**, formerly of Yavatmal, is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of WEF. He resides in New Delhi.