

IDENTIFY SOME CENTRAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF THE SHIFT IN THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

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Globalisation and its Challenges for Christian Theology

The Context

"Societies in the world today are the products of a tremendous upheaval, not only politically, socially and economically but also technologically and epistemologically. In other words, because of rapid strides in the development of information technology, even the remote corners of the world are being connected through a grid of almost instant communication. This has generated new ways of perceiving the world and our place in it. It is breaking down traditional barriers between "local" and "regional", "national" and "international", re-arranging our pre-modern understanding of the relationship between "private" and "public" space, and as a result, bringing into focus a new sense of public scrutiny of and personal accountability for events and situations worldwide. In addition to this phenomenon, "globalisation", a surge in migrational mobility is rapidly increasing the urban mix of faiths, cultures and peoples around the world. Economies and industries are increasingly producing weapons of mass destruction on a wide scale, consumerist and environmentally unfriendly practices increasingly undermine the earth's life-sustaining structures. More than ever, the human community faces an uncertain future with a formidable challenge to human values and the means of human fulfilment appearing to balance on a knife edge. (Julius Lipner). Max Horkheimer says:

"At no time has the poverty of humanity stood in such crying contradiction to its potential wealth, at no time have all powers been so horribly fettered as in this generation where children go hungry and the hands of the fathers are busy turning out bombs".

Enter the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century witnessed an unexpected mutation in the make up of Christianity. This is the rapid growth of masses of poor Christians in regions far away from Europe and North America. Today, most of the world's Christians live in Latin America, Africa and Asia and the majority of them struggle to extrude themselves from abject and dehumanising poverty. This shift of Christianity's epicentre from Europe to the impoverished nations of the world is of seismic significance for modern theology. Too often, in contemporary Christian theology, Christianity is equated with Europe, the Church is identified with the west, and the centres of ecclesiastic power are housed in a decreasingly Christian Europe. In 1920, Hilaire Belloc declared that "The Church is Europe; and Europe is the Church". Today, his view is visible in the extreme.

The extent to which Christianity has been transformed over the last century can easily be demonstrated with a few facts:

- There are about 2,000 million Christians in the world today. They constitute roughly a third of the planet's population. Of these, 480 million live in Latin America. In Africa, there are 360 million Christians, while 313 million Asians profess Christian faith. Europe is home to 560 million Christians, while 260 million live in North America. This differs significantly from the situation in 1900 when there were only 10 million Christians in Africa. Today, the largest group of Anglicans are African, 23 million of them live in Nigeria. The abundant conglomerates of desperately poor people poses a menacing problem for Christian theology.

- Today, the vibrant centres of Christian growth are in Africa, Asia (including China), the Pacific Rim and Latin America. Indeed, some projections suggest that by 2050, China might contain the second largest population of Christians in the world. At that time, the world Christian population is expected to have reached three billion, with non-Hispanic whites constituting less than twenty per cent of this community.¹

The use here of the labels "North" and "South" does not suggest a unique or non-problematic, simple kind of geographical determination. The term "South", for example, does not simply refer to south of the Equator. It includes countries such as China and Korea which are north of the Equator, and excludes Australia, which is to the south. Rather, it is a useful shorthand to designate those countries, outside Europe and North America, which experience economic, social and political problems caused, in various degrees, by their historical colonisation by western colonial powers. The term is also inexact in that it includes countries which are desperately poor, such as Malawi and Swaziland, and those such as Korea and China for example, which compete favourably with western industrialised nations. Some countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the United States, have within them minorities which are so marginalised as to make those societies "Third World" or "Southern" communities within a developed world.

Some of the colonial legacy broadly shared by the southern states still shapes their internal dynamics. Describing the impact of the negative legacy, Worsley says: "The most serious legacy of colonisation is in the economic sphere, in the form of backwardness, mono cultural economies, foreign ownership of major resources, uneconomic "dwarf" states, poverty, and an extremely low economic base".² These factors, exacerbated by low provision for health and education, foreign debt, ecological spoliation, civil unrest and unstable governments, shape the contexts in which southern states function. The positive effects of the colonial experience, however, are not always readily acknowledged. These include new technologies, some progressive habits, ideas, education and access to developmental support through the Commonwealth of Nations, which have been useful in modernising the former colonies. The deleterious effects of poor economic policies and bad governance by some rulers of former colonies are often understated.

The wider context of extreme poverty and adversity in the South needs to be clarified. Existence in some of these societies, which include inner city Lagos, Kinshasa, Soweto, Nairobi in Africa and others in Latin America and Asia, is frustrating and excruciating. In these environments, the incidence of HIV is very high, and so is malaria. It can seem like a miracle when public services function as they should, when electricity and clean water are available. The few viable businesses include violent crime and evangelical churches which promise a better life. There is a total lack of the basic amenities taken for granted by residents of the North who cannot readily imagine or envisage the sense of powerlessness and dependence created by existing in such a poor environment even though their own societies have, in the course of history, experienced adverse living conditions. For a Northern world that enjoys better health and wealth, it may be easy to fail to appreciate or even despise less well off Southern counterparts. The latter would tend to associate divine favour with full stomachs or access to the basic amenities such as healthcare, employment and education. These are societies that seek miracles in order to survive or flourish.

Christian theology that is driven by an agenda set in the North seems ill-equipped to grapple with these issues and may, consequently, be deemed inappropriate. The writers of "*The Seoul Declaration*" of 1982 dismissed much of western theology as irrelevant to western concerns:

¹ Future projections are in David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M., Johnson , *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Oxford University) 2001, p.12-15

²P. Worsley, *The Third World* (London, 1978)p.14

"Western theology is by and large rationalistic, moulded [sic] by western philosophies, preoccupied with intellectual concerns, especially those having to do with faith and reason. All too often, it has reduced the Christian faith to abstract concepts which may have answered the questions of the past, but which fail to grapple with issues of today."³ There is, however, need for in-depth theological reflection to reconcile the old and the new worlds of the North and South which are divided by a chasm that Benjamin Disraeli referred to as "Two Christianities between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets, the rich and the poor".⁴

Themes and questions arising from this "new" Christianity and the gulf with the old, pose challenges that have major implications for Christian theology. The shift in the centre of gravity from the North to South has entailed a change in the ethnic composition of Christians as well as a fundamental shift in their socio-economic background. For Christians in the South, the Bible describes currently pressing issues such as hunger, poverty, exile, diseases and wars. The resemblances may appear superficial but the accumulated weight adds greatly to the credibility of the Biblical message. Immediate and material answers are provided to adversity as are ways to cope in the hostile environment. Hope for prosperity is held out. Thus issues that make the Bible a somewhat distant historical record for Christians in the North keep it a living text in the South.

Another central implication coming in the wake of colonisation and requiring more theological reflection is that of "identity". This refers to the denigration of culture, integrity and humanness that comes in the wake of colonization. The imposition of foreign languages and the widespread demonisation of indigenous cultures such as popular Hindu "idolatry" or African "fetishism" exemplify this.⁵ Little attempt was made to understand the genre of spirituality which gave rise to these religious forms, and it was anticipated that they would soon be displaced to make way for "true faith". Deeply held religious beliefs were dismissed as superstition. Very little, if any, effort was made either to analyse the rationale behind the concepts of evil and causality, or in seeking to bring these religious traditions into dialogue with the Christian faith. In the 1960s, African Christian theologians such as Harry Sawyerr, Christian Baeta and E. Bolaji Idowu gave rise to an African theology, which began to address some of these issues. Their work was built on Placide Tempels' and Geoffrey Parrinder's work in the late 1950s.⁶ More theological reflection and analysis in this area is eagerly anticipated.

Commenting on the growth in voice and numerical weight of Christianity in the South, Carpenter says, "Christian theology eventually reflects the most compelling issues from the front lines of mission, so we can expect that Christian theology will be dominated by these issues rising from the global South."⁷ These basic issues of survival set the agenda for Christian theology. Christian theology will therefore be increasingly driven by a need to give practical responses to adversity and must make a difference. Even Pentecostal theologies, which are often a-political, focussing on recognising the signs of the times and discerning what God is doing in today's world, will

³ "The Seoul Declaration: Towards an Evangelical Theology for the Third World", 1982.

⁴ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (New York: World Classics Edition, Oxford University Press), 1999, adapted by P. Jenkins, Op.Cit., p.14

⁵ It should, however, be noted that English, for example, was eagerly espoused, often too eagerly for missionary tastes. See Richard Gray, *Black Christians and White Missionaries* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1990) p.84

⁶ Christian G. Baeta, (Ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (Oxford University Press, 1968)

E Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (Oxford University Press, 1968)

Godfrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (, SPCK ,also, Seraph Series, 1954)

Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism*, (P. Lutterworth, 1968)

Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, (Paris, 1959)

⁷ J. Carpenter, Op.Cit., p.70

increasingly be shaped by this agenda. For many Latin American theologians, this meant involvement in the cause of social and political liberation as defined by a Marxist analysis of history and of social reality.⁸

Issues of how one deals with the impact of Christian faith upon other religious cultures, replacement/ fulfilment theories, underline the fact that in the South, the context for Christian theology is also a multi-religious one. Even though some traditional religiosities have been "overwhelmed" by Christianity, particularly in South America, sub-Saharan Africa, they have not been eradicated. This underlying traditional worldview remains as a sub-stratum which has to be taken seriously. A main quest for Christian theology today has become one of attempting to give meaning to these old traditions within this new context.

The theme of religious plurality assumes a different dimension in most parts of Asia: how does one exist as a Christian in a setting which is determined by other religious or ideological values such as Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim teaching? The concern is how to relate Christian theology meaningfully to cultures which have either little or no Christian heritage or very different traditions, such as the East Syrian and Ethiopian churches. Christian theologians in the South, unlike their counterparts in the North, do not have a long historical tradition to draw upon in their own contexts. In the African context, Christians commonly adopt the seemingly disparate worlds of Christianity and African culture. In a thought-provoking book, Bediako discusses the crisis suffered by those seeking an African Christian identity, or how to be simultaneously truly Christian yet authentically African, which lies at the very heart of African theology.⁹

The theme of comparative Christologies (how Christ is re-imaged and re-conceived) has major implications for Christian theology as Christianity takes root in the South. At the heart of traditional, western Christian faith found in the North, is the person of Jesus Christ. Basic to biblical orthodoxy is a "correct" understanding of Jesus' person and ministry, hence, if any contextual theology expresses itself in a way that is significantly different, will it still be Christian and biblical? Is the Western tradition of Christology a universal standard of biblical Christology against which all local Christologies should be measured?

In countries such as Ethiopia, where the Oriental Orthodox church is the dominant Christian faith, questions about Chalcedonian Christology present a living, dynamic study in comparative Christologies. Questions arise as to how Christians in Ethiopia should express their Christology. By explicitly embracing Chalcedonian Christology, for instance, are they preserving an important biblical truth, or are they erecting unnecessary barriers between themselves and the Ethiopian Orthodox churches? The apparent captivity of Christ in Christianity and the churches is a serious problem for Asians in particular. As Stanley J. Samartha has argued, God is at work in all religions, cultures and histories. A 'helicopter Christology', in its attempts to land on the religiously plural terrain of Asia, makes such a lot of missiological noise and kicks up so much dust that people around it are prevented from hearing the voice and seeing the vision of the descending divinity. A 'bullock cart Christology', on the other hand, always has its wheels touching the unpaved roads of Asia, for without continual friction with the ground, the cart cannot move forward at all. Moreover, a 'bullock-cart Christology' has the advantage of having its bullocks move on with a steady pace, even when the driver sometimes falls asleep.¹⁰ Furthermore, there are perspectives that view Christ as an Ancestor and Source of life. Bediako, for example, refers to Christ as Ancestor and Source of life as a

⁸ G Gutierrez,, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll,1975)

⁹ K. Bediako, Op.Cit.

¹⁰ S.J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, 1991)

way of translating biblical and patristic understandings of Christ into African languages.¹¹ These varying approaches highlight the differences between those who accept the western views of Christology and those who wish to relate Christology to African, Asian or other indigenous religious categories. Christian theology will have to face the possibility of further diverse Christologies, possibly "paralleling the longstanding differences between the West and Oriental Orthodox, and indeed Nestorian Christology in East Asia".¹²

New ways of reading the bible and fresh scriptural interpretation, ranging from African embracing of the Old Testament to Hinduized appropriations of Johannine theology and the Confucian style literalism common in Korean conservative churches, present a dimension which has far reaching implications for Christian theology. The debates in the Anglican Church over the ordination of women and homosexuality highlight the fundamentally different approaches adopted in the North and South and within the South.¹³ Literalist approaches can lead to selective reading of the scripture, somewhat irrational emphases on passages that confirm ideas or prejudices, and disregard of context. Commenting on this theme, Jenkins says: "The issue is about the difference between flexibility in accepting biblical text and flouting explicit biblical injunctions."¹⁴

Christian theology driven from agendas set in the context of the South has sought to define itself in contradistinction to the theology arising from the missions of the mainstream Western churches. Perhaps a tad cynical, yet just, is the assertion by the Congolese theologian, B. Bujo, that African theology is a reaction to not being taken seriously by the Western Church.¹⁵ There is a dynamic search for self identity which considers carefully the traditions and cultures in which it is located, but simultaneously seeks to address the social world in which most Christians now live. This implies a shift from the theological agendas which were developed in the different historical, political, socio-economic and religious context of the North. Consequently, the kind of questions that theology driven by a Southern agenda will generate will therefore be substantially different from those in the North.

Remarking on this phenomenon, Desmond Tutu says, "Western theology has some splendid answers, but they are answers to questions that no one elsewhere is asking!"¹⁶ The focus of the South-based theology is liberation from adversity on a number of fronts, be it economic, political, gender etc. While any theology is, broadly speaking, necessarily contextual, nevertheless, it has to be noted that North-based theologies have not explicitly placed contextual issues at their centre. The southern approach therefore represents a departure from the traditional northern mainstream. Another point of departure is the preferred method of applying the social sciences, as opposed to philosophy, to evaluate the context. In the evaluation, southern based theologies have favoured context as the starting point, analysed with the help of sociological and anthropological tools rather than the western academic tradition of starting with traditional sources – the Bible, church tradition and so on.

A possible objection to contextual theologies is that the discipline could become a "chameleon theology", changing its colour according to its situation. In a rebuttal to this objection, Coe, while agreeing with the basic sentiment, argues that it is precisely by taking the actual situation seriously that contextual theology becomes "truly catholic". True catholicity, rather than being "colourless

¹¹ K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 1995

¹² J. Parratt, *Op. Cit.*, p.48

¹³ Southern Christians, notably Kenyans and Nigerians, have adopted different stances on issues of women's ordination in the Anglican Church. The Nigerians and Southern African Anglicans differ on views regarding homosexuality.

¹⁴ P. Jenkins, *Op.Cit.*, p.23

¹⁵ B. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll,, 1992)

¹⁶ J. Parratt, *Op.Cit.*, p.8

uniformity", therefore, becomes "a manifold and diverse theology which responds to a different context, just as the Incarnate Word did on our behalf, once and for all". The theological ground for contextuality then is to be found in the fact that Jesus Christ was incarnated within a specific human history and culture, and, through that, Grace has become available to all.¹⁷

The shift in the centre of gravity from North to South also has deep implications for pneumatology, the language and theology of the Spirit. In Asia and Africa, the recent and continuing influence of traditional and "animist" beliefs is responsible for the ready attribution of evil to powerful spiritual forces. For Africa as a whole, the religious shift in the twentieth century means that around one third of the continental population transferred its allegiance away from indigenous, traditional religions to different shades of Christianity. A high level of belief in the reality of the spirit world is still very much in evidence.

Among Korean and Chinese Christians, memories of folk religions also remain strong. In these nations, Christianity established itself in societies deeply imbued with Buddhist and Shamanistic elements in which enormous significance was already attached to visions and divination. In Latin America, the surging Pentecostal Churches of Brazil commonly draw on believers from nominal Catholic ranks including converts from African-rooted faiths such as Umbanda. This inheritance, deep-rooted in Christian communities in the South, has a complex and far reaching impact on contemporary Christian thought, reflection and practice. Some Christian theologies have sought to hold highly inclusive views, recognising the presence of God in the new faiths.¹⁸ However, some theological viewpoints may be less radical. The mere presence of alternative religions, some reminiscent of those condemned in the bible allows certain Christians to frame these practices in terms of devil worship, giving credibility to the objective existence of spiritual, satanic evil. More theological reflection is greatly needed in this subject area.

Ecclesiology, as in the informed reflection on the nature and the governing paradigms of the Church's self-understanding, is also experiencing the full force and impact of the southward shift in the centre of gravity, which has meant removal from a Christendom to a plural context. Historically, this has happened in times of conflict or renewal in the Christian Church. This gave rise to the Faith and Order component of the twentieth-century Ecumenical movement and subsequently, the World Council of Churches. Through new mission encounters, all denominations of the church have been compelled to reassess their self-understanding and their evaluation of other churches. The encounter with Southern driven agendas has generated a quest for defining the essence of Anglican identity in the Anglican Communion. Protestant Churches of non-episcopal tradition have begun to reassess their view of episcopacy.¹⁹ The Orthodox, longstanding participants in the ecumenical process, are conducting an internal debate on the validity of their traditionally exclusive ecclesiology. In the Roman Catholic Church, this missiological renewal of ecclesiology culminated in the Vatican II decrees on the church and ecumenism. Traditional ecclesiological issues look different in this new context. Issues surrounding the baptism of believers, the Eucharist in certain kinds of evangelical Protestantism, the admission of indigenous peoples to the ministry, lay ministry, women in ministry have also come to the fore. Intense theological ferment in the traditional Churches, their ministry and ecumenism looks set to rage on due to the shift in the centre of gravity.

¹⁷ Coe, S. , 'Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform' in Elwood, J. (ed.) *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*. (Maryknoll, 1980) p.48ff.

¹⁸ E.g. S.J. Samartha

¹⁹ Brian Stanley, *The Reshaping of Christian Tradition : Western Denominational Identity in a Non-Western Context*, in R.N. Swanson (ed.) *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, (Studies in Church History, Volume 32, Blackwell, 1996) p.399

The unity which is the aim of Ecumenism will continue to be expressed in even more diverse terms as patterns of Church which do not correspond to Western categories emerge in the South. Terms such as "visible unity", "organic unity", "full communion", "intercommunion of faith and sacramental life", which are a product of northern ecumenical debates, may become more widespread, modified and adopted as part of Christian theology as the debate includes the southern agendas. Those who insist that a united Church can and should admit of pluriformity of doctrinal formulation as well as liturgy, spirituality and common law sometimes speak of "reconciled diversity" as a compromise. The southward shift in the centre of gravity has central implications for the Roman Catholic Church's belief, for example, in the need for a universal primacy endowed with ultimate teaching and jurisdictional authority. It is unlikely that others, even though they may accept that unity may require a petrine ministry to serve the unity of the universal church, will believe it needs to be located in the North, let alone be vested in one person.²⁰

In conclusion, the southward shift in the centre of gravity has made context quite explicit as a ground for theologising and in setting the theological agenda. Christian theology will have to find ways to communicate effectively with the new, dominating, constituency of the South. It will have to address plurality and the different socio-economic differences within the South and between the North and South and accommodate the various expectations as it seeks to renew issues of ecumenism, ecclesiology and pneumatology. The concerns of world society, rather than the Church alone will have to play a more central role in theological reflection. The new Christianity will push theologians to address the faith to the most pressing issues in its new heartlands: poverty and social injustice; HIV/AIDS pandemic and inadequate healthcare; political oppression, violence and the breakdown of the rule of law. Issues of identity and the need for Christians to make sense of God's self-revelation to their pre-Christian ancestors will have to be reflected upon. Theologians will have to ponder Christianity's answer to the spiritual hunger and searching in global mass culture.

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²⁰ G.H. Tvard, *Two Centuries of Ecumenism*, 1960, p.2

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