

Voices



FROM THE THIRD WORLD

Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians

**NEW CHALLENGES
TO
EATWOT THEOLOGY**

Asociacion Ecumenica de
Teologos del Tercer Mundo

Association Oecumenique des
Theologiens du Tiers Monde

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New Challenges to EATWOT Theology

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Editorial

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

Once again we present another issue of *Voices* containing contributions from different contexts and on various concerns. All of them, in one way or other, raise challenges to EATWOT theology and help it expand its horizon.

The distinct contribution of EATWOT theology is its methodology. Rooted in the struggles of the poor and marginalized, a new theology is evolved whose accent is on liberation. The option is option for the poor and not for any ideologies. It is true, Marxism provided a framework to understand and interpret the political and economic realities of the third world. But experience of marginalisation has many faces. Marxism is found to be inadequate to speak to all the different contexts. The experience of deprivation whether it is related to gender, racism, caste, or poverty has many things in common. But their specificity is irreducible, and therefore distinct. Moreover, today we see a decline of the larger ideologies, especially the liberal and Marxist humanism. Centred around their specific struggles, different groups have been constructing their own little utopias without a recourse to these totalising ideologies. How can EATWOT and this journal continue to provide a forum for dialogue between them? We cannot evolve a grand utopia; but our shared vision should be articulated and common action could be strategised. The WSF slogan, 'Another World is Possible', is an attempt towards it. This came as a breath of fresh air in an atmosphere filled with propaganda by the forces of

globalisation that there is no alternative. We should project a model of global solidarity based on a vision of society where economic growth and development is guided by humane and ecological values of justice and sustainability. We sincerely hope our readers will join in articulating their vision for an alternate world.

Shalom

K.C. Abraham

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IS AN OPTION FOR JUSTICE, AND NOT PREFERENTIAL

**A new theological-systematic framework
for the preferential option**

José M. Vigil

Translated: Charles T. Plock, C.M.

Status of the Question

We always said that the option for the poor was rooted in God himself, in the being of God and therefore by nature was theo-centric.¹ In a certain sense, we can say that God makes an option in favor of the poor and that God «is» the option for the poor. There was universal consensus that this option for the poor is based precisely on the Love-Justice of the biblical-Christian God.²

Nevertheless, with the recent «liberation theology crisis» some authors have softened their discourse about the option for the poor. They have abandoned the Love-Justice perspective³ and substituted the «Gratuitousness» of God as the basis for the option for the poor. In this new way of thinking, God simply «prefers» the poor or there is

a «weakness» in God's mercy or an uncontrollable «tenderness» toward the poor. Thus there would be no need to search for any other reason, because the option is «gratuitous».

From this perspective, the option for the poor becomes a «whim» of God toward the «the lowly, the weak and the insignificant». So now we speak of the «lowly» and not «the poor» with the powerful meaning⁴ found in the classical discourse that today has been suppressed. In this theology, the option for the poor has disassociated itself from the strong theme of justice and replaced it with the more acceptable theme of gratuitousness.

My thesis is that this rewording and shifting of the focus from God's Justice to God's Gratuitousness as a basis for the option for the poor weakens and ultimately misappropriates the option, (consciously or unconsciously), converting it into a simple «preference», a «preferential love», a priority in the order of charity,⁵ and thus it is no longer a true «option», no longer a selective and an exclusive taking of sides, and no longer a fundamental option rooted in the very nature of God.

I do not deny that in some sense it can be said that «God has a gratuitous preference for the lowly and the weak»; but I maintain that such a «preference» cannot be identified in a strict sense with the option for the poor (even less can it be seen as the basis for this option). To confuse the option for the poor with this «preference of God toward the lowly and the weak» or with the so called «preferential love for the poor» and then name it a preferential option is to become the victim of confusion, and submit oneself to the strategy of those who have attempted to give a new meaning to the option for the poor and strip it of its proper content. The original and classical Latin American option for the poor, that which is typical of the theological spirituality of liberation, the option for which our martyrs died, and that which we consider «firm and irrevocable» is different from and must be distinguished from any later deviations. A courageous and

enlightened fidelity ought to reject, consciously and explicitly, this false basis that roots the option for the poor in God's «gratuitousness». This is what I want to clarify; and to do so, it is best to reframe systematically the very nature of the option for the poor.

First Thesis:

In a strict sense, God loves without any preference or discrimination

To state otherwise would be anthropomorphism.

God cares for and loves all equally; God loves each individual with a very particular love, an infinite love that is impossible to quantify. No one should feel him/herself «preferred» over another or discriminated against, either positively or negatively. It is impossible to speak seriously about «preferential love» on the part of God toward certain persons. The dignity of the human person and the impartiality of God demand that we affirm anew God's infinite love toward all people. Anything else is simply an inadequate form of speech that is «too human», anthropomorphic.

God is not partial and has «no favorites». God is not motivated by race or color or gender or culture. God loves all creatures with «an incomparable and unqualified» love. In God there can be no preferences or discrimination.

Second Thesis:

God opts for Justice, not preferentially but rather in a partial and exclusive manner

There is an area, however, where God is radically and inflexibly partial, that is, the area of justice. God places himself on the side of justice and against injustice, with no compromises or «preferences», certainly not «neutral»; God is against injustice and takes the side of those «treated unjustly», that is, the victims of injustice. God does not make nor can he make «a preferential option for justice»⁶; rather God opts for justice by placing himself in a radical position against injustice and totally assuming the cause of the victims of injustice.

This option of God for justice is not rooted in his «gratuitousness», nor is it some kind of divine «whim» which could have been something else or simply never have come into existence, as if the divine approval of justice obeys a simple ethical voluntarism⁷.

God's option for justice is rooted in his very being: God cannot exist in any other way, and indeed without this option God would contradict and deny his very being. «By nature» God is the option for Justice and this option is not gratuitous (but rather axiologically inevitable), not contingent (but rather necessary), not arbitrary (but rooted in the very being of God), not preferential (but rather partial and exclusive).⁸

Third Thesis:

The option for the poor is an option for the victims of injustice

The concept «poor» as part of the expression «option for the poor», has caused certain confusion. In effect, if the option is «for the poor», then one is explicably tempted to situate the foundation of this option in «poverty», thus falsely identifying poverty with holiness (which was avoided from the beginning), or metaphorically orienting the concept of «poverty» in a different direction⁹, or aligning it with one of the groups which in the Old Testament seems to be the object of «preference» on the part of God («the weak and the lowly»), or giving it a meaning that was never intended.¹⁰

We can avoid these deviations if we bring to light the theological role that the concept «poor» concretely plays in the expression «option for the poor». Theologically speaking, «poor» refers precisely to those who are «the victims of injustice». God does not opt for the poor because they are poor, (economically or materially), but opts for the poor because they are «the victims of injustice». Economic poverty is not in itself a theological category, but injustice, often a cause of economic poverty, is a theological category. Theologically considered «the option for the poor» is in reality an «option for the victims of injustice»¹¹. If it is called «option for the poor», this is due to the fact

that the poor (economically) are the primary victims of injustice and its expression *par excellence*. Speaking with theological precision, the subjects of this option for the poor cannot be identified with the «economically poor» in themselves nor with «the poor who are good», or with those who are «poor in some other sense of the word» or who are «poor in spirit»... (because of the metaphorical word games, all of these definitions are elusive and inadequate), rather the subjects of this option are «the victims of injustice», economically poor or not.

On the contrary, the «lowly and the weak» or all those whose «poverty» cannot be measured in terms of injustice¹², cannot be identified as the first recipients of the option for the poor, except through metaphorical extension. They can be the object of God's and our «special tenderness» and graciousness, but this attitude and feeling should not be confused with the option for the poor.

Every human problem that can be called unjust (even though it may have nothing to do with «poverty» in the literal or economic sense) is the object of the option for the poor (because this is an option for justice). Even though they might not be directly linked with economic poverty, yet racial discrimination, gender discrimination, cultural discrimination... as forms of injustice (indeed very clearly so), are the object of the option for the poor — not because they are expressions of some form of poverty (which they are not) but because they are forms of injustice.

The option for the culturally despised, for those living on the fringes of society, for those oppressed because of their gender, are not different from the option for the poor, but rather concretizations of the «option for the victims of injustice», which we call the option for the poor.

Fourth Thesis:

The theological-systematic essence of the option for the poor and its foundation is God's option for Justice.

Theologically speaking, in a systematic-dogmatic sense, the true nature of the option for the poor is God's option for justice. The

«theological radiography» of the option for the poor, the foundation that sustains it, and that which in reality constitutes it, is God's option for justice.

If God's relation to justice is set aside in such a way that the option appears to be one of «gratuitous good will» on the part of God, then the option for the poor becomes lost in a way that confuses and strips it of its very nature, turning it into a simple «preferential love» or an optional option, gratuitous, arbitrary, disconnected from justice, reduced to «charity» and benevolence.

God's option for justice is greater than, and precedes, that which the theology of liberation understood and expressed as the option for the poor. The option for the poor is an expression of (indeed an important expression but not one which totally captures) the option of God for justice. The option for the poor is one way for us to understand, express and assume this option of God for justice.

«Option for the poor» is a pastoral, historical phrase, chosen to help us in our understanding. But theologically-systematically considered, that is, examining its deepest theological essence, the option for the poor «is» the option for justice, and the term that best expresses its theological nature would be «option for the victims of injustice»¹³. We are not saying that we must now change the name of this option, but rather we are simply calling attention to the fact that the name does not correspond to that which would be «an essential definition» of the option for the poor¹⁴.

Fifth Thesis:

As an option for justice, the option for the poor is not preferential, but rather selective and exclusive. On the other hand, the preferential option for the poor is simply a priority and not an «option».

The option for the poor is the adoption of a spiritual position (wholly human and therefore, also social and political) in favor of the poor in

their concrete social, historical, and conflictive situation. Therefore, it is an option that is selective and exclusive¹⁵.

The option, (not preferential), for the poor pertains to the area of justice and is rooted in God's option for justice. On the contrary, the «preferential option for the poor» pertains to the area of charity¹⁶ and can be placed in relationship with the gratuitousness of God. The option for the poor is not applicable to *natural poverties* whereas the preferential option for the poor is only applicable to these *natural poverties*.

The option for the poor sees poverty as an injustice to be eradicated by a political and transforming love, by a social praxis, as an act of justice. The preferential option for the poor, however, sees poverty as a lamentable reality but perhaps natural, that is, as a reality that has to be compensated for by acts of gratuitous generosity and benevolence.

Making the option for the poor «preferential», that is, displacing the option for the poor and substituting it with the preferential option for the poor serves to obscure the framework of justice and then views reality solely from the perspective of beneficence and material assistance. To put it another way, it reduces Christian love to private mercy and spiritual solidarity. Indeed, the opposition to the option for the poor – and in general the opposition to the theology and spirituality of liberation where this option for the poor first saw the light of day – has served as the principal objective of those who have attempted to reverse the post-conciliar renewal of Latin American spirituality as expressed in Medellin and Puebla, and of those who want to return to a Church that legitimatizes the capitalist and neo-liberal system that is also openly hostile to the Church of Latin American liberation and its many martyrs.

When applied to the option for the poor, the adjective «preferential» implies a relation of simple priority between distinct entities that are at one and the same time inclusive and mutually exclusive. Thus the option for the poor is stripped of its nature and becomes a simple

priority or a hierarchical preference and ultimately denies the possibility of a radical option for one of the entities that has been reduced to a preferential relationship. Thus, speaking precisely, the preferential option for the poor is not an option for the poor, but rather, as stated by its rhetoricians, is a simple «preferential love» in the strict sense of the word¹⁷. The addition of the word «preferential» has served in many cases as the «Trojan horse» that has introduced into the option for the poor the seed that destroys its very nature. Fortunately, there are many people who have adopted the use of this adjective (because of external pressures) without abandoning (internally) the radical understanding and lived reality that forms the genuine nature of the option for the poor, that is, not preferential, but exclusive and excluding other options.

Applications and Corollaries

Option for the poor:

a transcendental on the level of *norm of norms*

In its theological-systematic meaning (over and above its concrete application to non-theological mediations or as distinct from these mediations), the option for the poor is a transcendental that surpasses and moves beyond the theological dimensions and pertains essentially to the very image of the biblical-Christian God. Our God (at the very heart of biblical¹⁸ and Christian revelation, and *per se*) «is» an option for justice¹⁹, with absolute precedence over and totally independent of any theological school or any charism or spirituality in which we might situate ourselves. Seen in this way, the option for the poor is not susceptible to be normative in a subordinate position²⁰ (it is situated on the highest level of *norm of norms*) and therefore demands obedience as though one were obeying God, thus opening one's spirit to the test of greater love.

In this same sense, the option for the poor is not a «theory» of Latin American liberation theology, but rather a transcendental dimension of Christianity, a dimension of liberation theology (for the

benefit of all Christians) that has been rediscovered as belonging to the very essence of God. This rediscovery is indeed «the greatest event in the history of Christianity that has occurred during the past few centuries»²¹, and marks a «before» and «after», a defining moment, with no turning back for those for whom the option for the poor has been a spiritual experience of conversion to the God of the poor. The option for the poor has to be seen as «firm and irrevocable» and as a «mark of the true Church».

Poverty, wealth, and injustice

With respect to the identification of the option for the poor with the option for justice, let us put it in more precise language.

- If the poverty of an individual or a group is due to the fact that they have been the victims of injustice,²² then to that extent God is on the side of these poor persons and against their poverty and against the persons who cause this poverty-injustice. God is necessarily on the side of the poor in a way that «excludes» the injustice of the unjust, not simply on their side with a non-exclusive «preferential option».

If, however, we are dealing with some type of «poverty» that has nothing to do with justice («natural poverty» due to race, gender, culture...), then we must understand that God does not discriminate nor does God «prefer» one person to another. God neither prefers nor ignores any race or gender or culture *per se*.

- If the wealth of an individual or a group implies an injustice, then to that extent God is decisively against this wealth and against the way of life that has produced this wealth because God takes the side of those who suffer the consequences of injustice and is against those who cause this injustice. God necessarily takes on this attitude and does so in a way that excludes this injustice, and not with an option that is only «preferential toward the poor» but in a way that radically excludes «the way of life of the rich»²³ that produces this injustice.

If, however, we are dealing with wealth that has nothing to do with injustice (psychological qualities, gender, spiritual and/or natural gifts, misfortune...) then in this case God neither discriminates nor is partial toward anyone.

To put it another way:

- If in the social order we only see people as people of color or not, as short or tall, as strong or weak, as significant or insignificant ... (that is, if we see people simply in terms of their natural differences and ignore their dialectical, conflictive and political differences)²⁴ then we can only think of God as having some concrete «preference» toward the lowly, the weak, the insignificant... but not making an «option» or taking sides with one group that excludes another (because this would be unjust of God). The foundation for this «preference» is the «gratuitousness» of God and demands us to be benevolent and to act with kindness and alms giving. This is the meaning of the preferential option for the poor.

- If in the social order we are able to see people impoverished by others who are enriched²⁵, races dominated by dominant cultures, genders oppressed by oppressing genders... then we are able to grasp the fact that God is incapable of simple «preferences» without true «options», «taking the side» of the victims of injustice and «against» injustice, and that this option of God is radical, selective, and excludes the opposite. Its theological foundation is not the gratuitousness of God, but rather God's justice, and it therefore demands us to make a similar «option»: radical, selective and exclusive, with implications for an option to a «social role» and with a commitment to a praxis that transforms history. This is the meaning of the option for the poor.

The concept of justice as mediation

Logically, theological principles, as they are put into practice in the real world, are obliged to pass through the diverse filters of philosophical, sociological and even political mediation.

For example, the very concept of «justice» with all its philosophical, sociological, political and even cultural implications will be an especially influential mediation when referring to this «option for the poor». There is a socialist concept of justice as well as a capitalist, neo-liberal and imperialist concept. People are influenced by their concept of justice as well as by the «social role» they play or choose. Those who see justice as «giving to each one his/her due», may see the world of extreme inequality as just if, for example, they hold as absolute the right to private property. This was, certainly, not the case for the Fathers of the Church, nor is it so for those who embrace the concept of distributive and social justice according to the social doctrine of the Church. Indeed these people operate with a very different concept of justice.

In this sense, even though we theoretically make reference to the same God, and accept God's option for justice as evident, yet our vision of God's will for the world can differ and we may very well hold positions that are completely contradictory to the positions of others. What is the origin of this discrepancy?

The discrepancy is not rooted in our concept of God or his plan or will, but rather in the concept of justice that we use to form our moral judgments. The origin of these discrepancies can very well be found in the moral judgments (based on our concept of justice) that we make about poverty and wealth and about the social and structural mechanisms that produce them; that is, do we judge them as natural or historical, determined or flexible, accidental or caused, culpable or not, structural or circumstantial, an essential product of a perverse system or an accidental negative by-product of a system that is not necessarily negative. Therefore, for example,

* If we see the unequal distribution of wealth in the world as natural (the famous «champagne glass» of the PNUD reports), then we will also think (logically) that God has nothing to say about all of this or that God only exhorts us to give alms, to be charitable and

generous... and thus mitigate these lamentable «natural» differences.

- * On the contrary, if we see this distribution of wealth as unjust and sinful, we will think (logically) that God is angry at this situation and ardently desires its obliteration and that God also wants us to struggle against this unjust system with a radical commitment to justice.
- * Again, if we think that the struggle against this unjust system is the greatest drama of humanity, then it will seem that overcoming it expresses the best and most urgent will of God.
- * If we consider neo-liberalism as innocent and that it is the «lesser evil of the systems», then it would seem that God wants us to support it and even «better» its «accidental deficiencies».
- * On the contrary, if we believe that neo-liberalism is unjust, the greatest injustice and unjust in its very structure, then it would seem that God wants us to combat this sinful structure in the most resolute way possible.

Thus it would seem that the theological problem is orientated toward the discussion and the analysis of the mediations and that the discrepancies are not found on the theological level of principles but on the prudential level of mediations. Nevertheless, this is only half the problem, because our concept of justice forms part of our choice of God. «Tell me how you define justice and I will tell you who your God is». Tell me how you view justice and I will tell you about the God you adore.

We are accustomed to think that our concept of justice comes from the God of our belief, but the opposite is also true: we believe in a God compatible with our concept of justice. The most fundamental option of our life might very well be the one we make with regard to our concept of justice, (justice that at the same time encompasses our world vision). Our image of God is the child of the option that leads us

to choose one or another concept of justice and its corresponding world vision. The opposite is also true: many people never assume a utopian concept of justice because previously they opted for the God of selfishness and wealth.

The option for the poor then, is also an option for the God (of the poor) and an option for the utopian justice (of the Kingdom). The «option for the rich» is a rejection of the God of the poor and an option for a justice resigned to selfishness. The option for the poor or rich, utopian justice or a justice resigned to selfishness, the option for God or its rejection are mutually implicit in a hermeneutical circle. Obedience to God is not determined by a direct relationship with God, but by our choice between utopian justice and a justice resigned to selfishness.²⁶ Principles and mediations are more mutually implied than at first they might seem to be. God is just and justice is divine. The option for the poor then is an act of faith in the God of the poor and an ethical and humanizing option for justice (at one and the same time the justice of the poor and the justice of God). On the other hand, the option for selfishness is an injustice and a rejection of the God (of the poor). Thus we return to the beginning: God and the option for the poor can't be separated because the option for the poor is rooted in God himself, in God's justice. The gratuitousness of God is another theme.

Notes

- 1 Let us state clearly: the ultimate reason for this option is found in the God of our belief (...) For us as believers we are dealing with a theo-centric option, rooted in God. Gustavo Gutierrez, *El Dios de la Vida*, «Christus» 47 (1982) p.53-54, Mexico; *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, Lima, 1980, p.261-262.
- 2 Even though this may be obvious, see the doctoral thesis of Julio Lois, *Teología de la Liberación: Opción por los pobres* (IEPALA, Madrid, 1986) in which he studies the option for the poor of the leading theologians of the classical period.
- 3 A clear case would be that of Gustavo Gutiérrez. In a lecture in which he responded to Cardinal Ratzinger, he affirmed: «Speaking about poverty and marginalization invites us to speak of justice and to consider the rights of Christians with regard to all of this. While this is true, one should not lose sight of the fact of what makes this fundamental option for the poor so central. This option is rooted in the gratuitousness of God's love. This is the ultimate basis for

- this preference». From this moment on, Gutiérrez no longer uses the word «justice» in his writing and the option for the poor revolves around the notion of «gratuitousness». See: *Una teología de la liberación en el contexto del tercer milenio*, in Varios, *El futuro de la reflexión teológica en A.L.*, CELAM, Bogotá, 1996, p.111. I am not talking about an isolated text, but in my modest opinion, this reflects a softened and common perspective in the theology of the option for the poor of Gustavo which has gone on now for more than a decade; see: *Pobres y opción fundamental*, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, UCA Editores, San Salvador, 1991, 303ff, 310.
- 4 The poor are a «collective, conflictive and socially alternate» reality: C. Boff, *Quiénes son hoy los pobres y por qué?* In J. Pixley-C. Boff, *Opción por los pobres*, Paulinas, Madrid, 1986, p.17ff.
 - 5 A love that is the same for all but begins with the poor and continues with the rich. No distinction between rich and poor is made. A love that is the same for all and therefore simply with an order of priority.
 - 6 Those who opt «preferentially» for justice, also opt, even though less preferentially, for injustice. In the dilemma of justice and injustice, no simple preferences are possible: the option is between mutually exclusive alternatives.
 - 7 Let us remember the medieval theological position (the «ethical voluntarism») of those who maintained that the present moral order was not necessary but contingent, and that it obeyed the positive and gratuitous (arbitrary) will of God. This doctrine maintained that the moral order could have been something else, including something that would be contrary to what it presently is, if God had so willed it in his inscrutable and mysterious plan.
 - 8 J.M. Vigil, *Opción por los pobres, preferencial y no excluyente?* In *Sobre la opción por los pobres*, Sal terrae, Santander, 1991, p.57ff. This appeared in an edition in Nicaragua (Editorial Nicarao, 1991), Chile, (Rehue, 1992), Colombia (Paulinas, 1994), Ecuador (Abya Yala, 1998), Italia (Citadella, 1992), Brasil (Paulinas, 1992).
 - 9 At one time it was argued that the rich were the true poor (poor spiritually, while at the same time the materially poor were blessed spiritually, or truly rich)... Many word games were played and concepts were juggled to avoid facing the obvious. Casaldáliga speaks of this poetically in his work *Bienaventuranzas de la Conciliación Pastoral*.
 - 10 Poor in spirit, poor of Yahweh, virtue of poverty, *anawin*, spiritual infancy.
 - 11 «Option for the victims of injustice» is a precise expression that is above the possibility of being mystified or metaphorized.
 - 12 As is the case when speaking of «natural» poverties, non-historical, where no one is to blame for such situation.
 - 13 We do not need to make an «option» for women, for Native Americans, for people of color, etc, rather the option «for the victims of injustice» includes all these groups.
 - 14 «Essential definition» speaking in classical terminology, not only adequately defines the object but also defines it in terms of its essence (and not for example, on «its own» or as a group of clearly defined accidentals.
 - 15 Vigil, J.M., *Opción por los pobres: preferencial y no excluyente?*, in Vigil, J.M. (org), *Sobre la opción por los pobres*, Sal Terrae, Santander, 1991, 57ff.

- 16 Classically called «the works of mercy». For this reason the preferential option for the poor can be properly called «a preferential love for the poor» — indeed, this is what is it. The option for the poor is quite different.
- 17 The act by which one makes an option for the poor or selects his/her social role flows from the essential anthropological character that is called «fundamental option».
- 18 There is no partiality with God (Romans 2:11). The Lord of all shows no partiality, not does he fear greatness (Wisdom 6:7). Judgment is stern for the exalted — the lowly may be pardoned out of mercy but the mighty shall be mightily put to the test. Because God made the great as well as the small and provides for all alike; but for those in power a rigorous scrutiny impends (Wisdom 6:5, 6,8). Teacher we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status (Matthew 22:16). Man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).
- 19 «The struggle for justice is another name for the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus»: Rufino Velasco, *La Iglesia de Jesús*, Verbo Divino, Estella, 1992, p.33.
- 20 For example, ecclesiastical or disciplinary.
- 21 «I personally believe that the preferential option for the poor has produced an extraordinary yet necessary Copernican revolution in the heart of the Church, whose significance goes beyond the ecclesial context of Latin America and concerns the whole universal church. I truly believe that this option signifies the most important theological-pastoral transformation since the time of the Protestant Revolution in the XVI Century». L. Boff cited by Julio Lois in *Theologia de la Liberación: Opción por los pobres*, IEPALA, Madrid, 1986, 193.
- 22 This is implied by our preference for the dynamic adjective «impoverished» rather than the static noun «poor» (the same could also be said for the concept «victims of injustice»).
- 23 When speaking of «the way of life of the rich» we refer to all that is implied in the word «rich» — except his/her person. Thus we refer to their life style, their social status, the Cause that they objectively serve, their luxury, their exploitation of the poor, their participation in the system that exploits them...
- 24 Either because this is how they are or because this is the way we want to see things.
- 25 Note the dynamic, active, process character of the adjectives.
- 26 Casaldáliga expressed the conflict between the two Gods and the two justices in his poem *Equivocos*: «Where you say law/I say God./Where you say justice, peace, love,/I say God!/Where you say God,/I say liberty,/justice,/love!».

THEOPATHOS: A POST-PATRIARCHAL APPROACH TO THEODICY IN BLACK, DALIT, AND JEWISH HOLOCAUSTS

Sarah Anderson Rajarigam

Introduction: A story from a modern Jewish experience continues to be an enigma to me since I first read about it in Moltmann's *The Crucified God* almost a decade ago. In his memoirs, *Night*, Elie Wiesel recounts an incident in the concentration camp at Buna during the Holocaust.

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows...'¹

In the face of incomprehensible suffering humanity has become one in asking such questions as these; How can a good God allow such evil? Why does God not intervene and put a stop to human misery? Why should innocent people suffer? How can the suffering of the Blacks or the Dalits go on for so many centuries together? Where is God? Where is God in the face of human suffering and evil? How can our faith in God be reconciled with suffering on the scale for which these holocausts have become the symbols in our times?

The effort to answer questions of this sort is commonly referred to as *theodicy*. Although it is a theoretical question, yet it is practically addressed by all humans. It demands the highest intellectual integrity and deepest commitment to faith in God. However, when either of these crucial aspects is neglected, or sacrificed at the cost of the other, then theodicy needs to be declared dead and indeed, it must be. Has theodicy been successful in integrating the philosophical and the practical aspects of the problem of evil? Has theodicy been used to challenge the use of power or to maintain the status quo of the perpetrators of radical evil? These and related questions that can be answered only in the negative challenge us to rethink our theological assumptions with regard to theodicy and reformulate new options that are biblically sound and theologically appropriate.

The underlying hypothesis in this essay is that a liberated and critical consciousness prevails over radical evil and oppression, and enables some individuals and groups to experience the presence of God in their resistance against, and survival in spite of, the power of evil. As hinted at earlier, I wish to focus on historical communities whose destruction has been planned and implemented (the Jews), or warned and executed (the Blacks), or simply implied and sanctioned (the Dalits) by the political, socio-cultural, and the religious systems respectively. I do not deny the presence and significance of the continuing struggles of other groups such as the aborigines of Australia, the indigenous Indians of America. My reasons for choosing these three are due to

their unavoidable presence in the shaping of my own theological growth as well as their significance in the history of Christian theology in general, and very particularly because of the deepest challenges they pose to Christian theodicy.

My focus question in this paper is this; what is the impact of the “suffering God” in traditional theodicy? In other words, do the concept of the suffering God and the practice of theodicy go together? Have we been complacent about the theodicy question in contemporary theology or has it become irrelevant to our contexts and in our times? In the light of these questions, I wish to analyze the relevance of theodicy in each of the three holocausts. I will then argue that the articulation of the ‘presence of God’, which I call “Theopathos”, has already become flesh and blood of our theologies. In the light of such developments in our understanding of God, it will be shown how the practice of theodicy does not resonate with our current understanding of God and is therefore outmoded for use in contemporary theology.

I. Theodicy:

Theodicy is defined as the “vindication of the divine attributes, particularly holiness and justice, in establishing or allowing the existence of physical and moral evil”². It is an interpretative framework to defend God’s justice and power in the face of evil. In other words, “theodicy is the attempt to reconcile belief in the goodness and power of God with the fact of evil in the world”³. Traditionally, theodicy has been used to justify simultaneously the presence of evil and the absolute power of God, using such tenets of Christian faith as Creation, Fall and Sin. This has resulted in the classical formulation of the Free-Will defense, which serves as the functional basis for the other themes within theodicy such as Eschatological theodicy and Educative or ‘punitive’ theodicy. These themes are used for the following two reasons: Firstly, to explain away evil as the consequence of the sinful nature and activity of human beings by which we keep God uninvolved in the face of evil. Secondly, to superimpose the human image and

nature on the very Being of God as an attempt to show that God is also in the process of change towards perfection.

This is mainly due to the origin of the practice of constructing theodicies, which became possible in the context of enlightenment.⁴ Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) who apparently coined the term theodicy derived its meaning from a compound of the Greek words for God (Theos) and justice (dike). It gained currency when Leibniz used the term “theodicy” as a title in 1710, and particularly in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755.⁵

Furthermore, as Terence Tilley has clearly argued, “The profound shifts in the intellectual and social worlds of Europe created the conditions in which Theodicy can become a discourse practice.”⁶ After tracing ‘evil’ as a theoretical term and abstracted from specific instances of sin, suffering, and violence, Tilley goes on to show that it is only in the enlightenment context that the abstract problem of evil becomes a central issue which later surfaces in two major forms. Firstly, since the discussions of evil presumed the reality of an all-good, all-benevolent God, the theodical issues was to understand how it is possible that there is evil in the world God created. Secondly, the problem of evil demanded a plausibility of belief in God in the midst of sin and suffering.

Both these problems figure in the work of a pre-eminent contemporary theodicist, John Hick, in his book *Evil and the God of Love*. For Hick,

The aim of a Christian theodicy must thus be the relatively modest and defensive one of showing that the mystery of evil, largely incomprehensible though it remains, does not render irrational a faith that has arisen, not from the inferences of natural theology but from participation in a stream of religious experience which is continuous with that recorded in the Bible.⁷

Here, in explaining his starting point for theodicy, Hick dwells upon both the mystery of evil and the plausibility of believing in God in the

midst of evil. He then outlines two major responses to the problem of evil. One of these responses he shows is traceable to Augustine and institutes the historically dominant line of thinking in Christian theology. It begins by explaining evil in creation “not as a substantial reality in itself (as the Manicheans had contended) but as an aspect of non-being”.⁸ Thus, he claimed that God is not a source of evil but represents the unavoidable, unexplainable absence of goodness. This is the doctrine of evil as the way human beings turned away from God toward non-being. Thomas Aquinas and many other Catholic theologians also take up this view.

In contrast with this view is the second response to the problem of theodicy that Hick associates with Irenaeus (c.a. 130-202). Placing the whole discussion of theodicy in the realm of eschatology, Irenaeus also traces suffering to the abuse of freedom. Generous “Universalistic” eschatology, here, sees all who have lived as eventually becoming “children” of God.⁹ Hick himself expresses a strong preference for this view. He says, “instead of looking to the past for its clue to the mystery of evil (referring to Augustine’s Original Sin) it (theodicy) looks to the future, and indeed to that ultimate future to which only faith can look”¹⁰.

However, not many contemporary theologians share this view because theodicy at this point is seen as flirting with the theoretical aspects of theodicy. This is clear from Hick’s own words where an adequate answer for the suffering of the innocent is postponed until “a kingdom which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence”.¹¹ Theologians like James Cone, Dorothee Söelle, Johannas P.Metz, Wendy Farley, William C.Placher, James Newton Poling, John Douglas Hall, Emil Fackenheim, Delores Williams and others would rather concur with Moltmann’s judgment that the theodicy issue in our time is political rather than naturalistic. That is, their focus within the range of theodicy is on ‘moral evil’ rather than ‘natural evil’. They all are critical of the rationalistic way in which classical Christian (White)

theologians have dealt with the theodicy issue. It is with much caution that they would accept Hick’s starting point for theodicy, which he thinks, “must find meaning of evil in the past that is made to play in the eventual out working of the purpose; and must find the justification of the whole process in the magnitude of the good to which it leads”¹².

The theological assumptions and the developments traced thus far clearly depict a shift of emphasis in theodicy from natural evil to moral evil. This shift has given rise to some issues in theodicy, particularly when we try to relate God to the moral evils of our time. Given the long history just sketched, it is a fairly remarkable phenomenon that so many theologians of our own century have avoided such pitfalls in theodicy by emphasizing divine suffering.

Initially divine suffering as an option in theodicy might seem entirely out of place because it does not even conform to the limits and boundaries prescribed by theodicy. But this essay is an attempt to demonstrate divine suffering – Theopathos, not only as an option within theodicy but to establish it as an alternative to theodicy, the spoilt child of enlightenment that self-destructively craves for theoretical and philosophical remedies for radical human suffering. However, before reaching this we need to grasp the contemporary issues involved in traditional theodicy.

II. Contemporary Issues in Traditional Theodicy:

Theological formulations throughout the history of the church have tended to maintain the view of God as a self-protecting monarch, unmoving, unchanging, and not capable of suffering. Nevertheless, the theological situation today has changed greatly. A growing reaction to the concept of impassibility of God coupled with the challenges posed to the discourse of theodicy within theological circles has emerged. These responses from communities of resistance emerge both from the way their life is entangled with the present hostile reality and with the way they view traditional theodicies functioning in order to maintain status-quo.

James Cone aptly sums up the issues embedded in traditional theodicy and says, theodicy in both the alternatives of the classical theological tradition generally, and the Euro-American theology in particular, “negates the praxis of freedom against the structures of injustice and oppression”¹³. The main reason for this, he argues, is due to the resolution of the problem of suffering being relegated a place in the logical structure of the rational mind. It is not clear whether the following two problems are the cause or the effect of such a treatment given to the problem of suffering. Nevertheless, the two serious problems are as follows: Firstly, the omnipotence of God maintained uncritically, hosted several other related problems. Secondly, evil is mindlessly abstracted from reality and pathetically reduced to mere formulations in the equation.

Philip Hefner makes a similar case in his analysis of David Griffin’s theodicy and points to the concept of omnipotence and what Griffin calls ‘genuine evil’ as two central issues of the problem of evil as Griffin views it. The determining characteristic of traditional theodicies, then, is that they define God as omnipotent in the sense that God can unilaterally determine all beings and thus they are driven to deny that evil is genuine.¹⁴ It is arguable that both these problems stem from the most common theological doctrine of the Free-Will defense, which also serves as the basis for some of the common themes in theodicy.¹⁵

A. Is Theodicy a Modern Gender Issue?

Male-biased theodicy could hardly have been avoided in a sexist culture. Noddings reminds us that recognizing the truth of such a claim does not grant us the permission to condemn every male philosopher and theologian who has written on the problem of evil. But the gender issue is just one of the multi-evidential layers that conceal the true problem at hand. Hence, the male bias will be uncovered as the first step to point to the obsolete status of theodicy in our times.

At a time when we are increasingly aware of the contextual nature of all theological problems, says Inboddy, it is necessary to ask whether theodicy is a distinctively modern male theological conundrum. This especially becomes a pressing question in lieu of the enlightenment context as it provided basis for its origin and development. Nel Noddings, in her book, *Women and Evil* has argued that theodicy is “thoroughly suffused with male interests and conditioned by masculine experience”¹⁶.

B. Is Theodicy a Question of Power?

Implied in this question is a two-layered power. ‘Power’ has been an intrinsic part of theodicy right from its inception both in the way it seeks to describe God as well as in the way theodicy as a practice has evolved into a theoretical discourse in the shadow of the enlightenment project. Within this essay, both these aspects will be treated in full length and repeated (unavoidably so).

C. The Methodological Issue:

This issue will invariably come up eventually in our discussion of theodicy. The purpose of this essay being to point to the failure of theodicy we will certainly be left with the following two methodological questions: Can or does theodicy retain its structure and function when practiced within the feminist/post-patriarchal parameters? In addition, how can the resultant theopathos alternative help us to overcome the pitfalls (such as neglecting human agency in radical evil, and maintaining status quo in the face of evil, caused and sustained by systems of power) that were avoided in traditional theodicy? How progressive is our changing views about God and how do they resonate with the way in which we seek to understand the meaning of radical suffering? Can the Theopathos alternative to theodicy accommodate the social and political aspects of humanity within the divine realm and serve to integrate the divine reality in our social and political lives?

III Analysis of Theodicy in Jewish, Black and Dalit Holocausts:

While theodicy constitutes a relatively recent term in the history of Western philosophy and Christian theology, the problem it touches upon are perennial.¹⁷ With the exponential increase in radical evil committed against humanity, however, theodicy seems to fade into obscurity rather than fortify the struggles of the people in the context of their faith. Unfortunately, its worth is proved only insofar as it enables its users to identify, articulate, and schematize conceptual dilemmas and the varying extents to which people address them. Interestingly enough, its problematic nature is betrayed even by theologies where such a theodical practice is absent.

In this section, we will analyze Jewish, Black, and Dalit holocausts to demonstrate the rational unfeasibility of theodicy. We will try to uncover the contradictions that lie beneath the surface of theodicy. Although the route to this does not eliminate a consideration of the problem of evil as such, nevertheless, the main issue we will address is the problem of theodicy, within Christian theism, of reconciling world's evil with the belief in an omni-benevolent and all-powerful God. The assessment of the rational unfeasibility of the so-called theodicy vis-à-vis the conception of God and our contemporary worldview is quite explicit in the contexts of the Jewish, Black and Dalit Holocausts. The graphic representation of the problem of evil in these situations, as mind boggling and spirit-wrenching as they might be, are but useful windows to see the havoc such practices as theodicy have created in maintaining the status-quo of the power structure that mindlessly dehumanizes people, based on religion, race and caste.

In my study on the various theodicies employed within these holocausts, and in considering some of the responses to and the critiques of these theodicies, the following observation was made. Whereas theodicy has a fully developed form in post-holocaust theology, within Black theology theodicy is present but not actively, and in Dalit theology, the practice of theodicy seems to be totally absent.

While in the Jewish response to the holocaust following the Second World War, several trends that range from theodicy, to antitheodicy and even negative theodicy are developed. Although there have been a few debates regarding the apparent theodicies present in Cone's theology, yet final analysis clarifies for us that it is unbecoming of theologians (who critique Cone) to expect similar questions that are raised by traditional theodicy to be answered here. However, in Dalit theology, even the seeming absence of theodicy actually points to the superfluous character of theodicy for our times.

A. Theodicy in Jewish Holocaust:

In this section, we will analyze the Jewish holocaust to demonstrate the rational unfeasibility of theodicy. We will try to uncover the contradictions that lie beneath the surface of theodicy. Although the route to this does not eliminate a consideration of the problem of evil as such, nevertheless, the main issue we will address is the problem of theodicy, within Christian theism, of reconciling world's evil with belief in an omni-benevolent and all-powerful God.

The Jews have been repeatedly subjected to torture and genocide. Words cannot fully describe, nor the mind completely grasp, what went on in the death camps. The magnitude and degree of brutality, suffering, and sorrow are beyond human understanding. Raul Hilberg depicts the utter pain and anguish of the victims. He writes,

“The horror of the camps extended far down the rail road tracks that carried Jews to death. Jammed onto car trains, Jewish deportees faced long journeys in conditions so unbearable that many persons were dead on arrival. Those living were still routed from the cars as the destination. Thereafter the routine varied from place to place. In some camps- Treblinka, for example—entire transports were sent directly to the gas chambers. At Auschwitz, which was both a labor and a killing installation, a more elaborate procedure was followed”.¹⁸

This depiction is used here to force our minds to see the evil that humans have committed. To forget it would be sin because everyone who lives after Auschwitz is affected by the holocaust. In the face of Jewish holocaust, all norms of speech are to be cautioned, an appropriate category – in philosophy, radical-evil-in-general, and in theology, the demonic-in-general – seems insufficient to meet the case. That is why even the traditional theodicy question becomes a total absurdity. It has made it impossible for Jews to speak of God as good, loving and merciful or powerful. They are forced to reexamine their most fundamental beliefs especially because their faith regards history as the domain in which the divine expresses its plan for humanity and all creation.

It is not surprising then that their theodical questions yield such diverse and complex views on faith in God after the holocaust. Some of the radically differing responses to theodical questions can barely be recognized as theodicy. Eli Wiesel who simply cannot accept that God is God after what has happened articulates a “Negative” theodicy. Jerry K. Robbins explains this position with “The Trial of God” as the background. In telling us that evil wins in the end, says Robbins, “Wiesel not only gives up on any attempt at a theodicy but goes one step further and blames God for the suffering that plagues the world”¹⁹ It is indeed true because Eli’s protests raise some thorny issues for anyone who wrestles with the problem of evil.

Another trend speaks of God’s presence in history. It affirms this presence in full awareness of the fact that the affirmation is strange, extraordinary, and even paradoxical and makes it an intellectual justification for the ideology of survival. This stance has as its premise in what Fackenheim calls the 614th commandment- “Jews are forbidden to grant Hitler posthumous victories,”²⁰ by giving up their faith in the God of covenant.

Analysis: Wiesel’s negative theodicy seems to be a logical outcome of the parameters in which he struggles with the problem. For him,

there are no other feasible answers to the problem of evil. He rules out all other possibilities as justificatory maneuvers and sees no viable alternative solutions²¹.

Theodicy can show its demonic face even in the disguise of so-called passion for justice as in the case of a German pastor who testified against Adolf Eichman in Jerusalem, but without any trace of embarrassment asserted that Auschwitz was the will of God. Finding meaning in the death of the Jews (obviously supported by his “Christian” faith) he said, “For some reason, it was part of God’s plan that the Jews died. God demands our death daily. He is the Lord...,”²² This sentiment, says Richard Rubenstein, along with the pastor’s sacred views that Hitler was simply another ‘rod of God’s anger’, “...reiterated his belief that God was ultimately responsible for the death of the Jews”²³. This is a case in point, not simply for anti-Semitism but for a justification of God in the light of what happened to the Jews.

Berkovitz raises another important issue in traditional Jewish theodicy. He writes in *Faith After the Holocaust* that “Man can only exist because God renounces the use of power on him...History is the arena of human responsibility and its product”²⁴. Thus for Berkovitz the theodical question becomes an anthropological question. It is not ‘Where was God?’ but ‘what does it mean to be human?’ How can we believe in human goodness after Auschwitz? Human beings – not God – must bear chief responsibility for the event. Thus, we see that in the wide range of theodical responses to the Jewish Holocaust, even the rejection of God is only an act out of deep faith. The vital point that emerges here is that it is one thing to say that the presence of evil cannot be a factor against belief in God and quite another to reject God as being present in the midst evil.

B. Theodicy in Dalit Holocaust:

Dalits are the indigenous people of India who are socially ostracized, economically pauperized, politically subjugated, and religiously considered polluted and therefore, treated as untouchables. Centuries

after centuries of oppression at the hands of the upper caste Hindus have made the Dalits subservient to the dominant Brahmanic forces. Living in the most inhuman conditions of social and cultural discrimination, the Dalits experience death each day in their lives. The ghettos of social and cultural ostracization are still a part of their life.

The genocide of the Dalits that has been going on for the past three thousand years is like a slow-motion version of what befell the six million Jews during the Second World War. I do not claim to deeper parallels, especially in the ingenuity in the use of science and technology. Nevertheless, what is crucial to note in both instances of history is the brutal ripping of human dignity. If this was not enough, the victims (Jews, Dalits and Blacks) were forced to accept this reality as if their own.

The holocaust of the Dalits began as a casual invasion of the Aryans. Although scholars differ on the question of the origin of caste and untouchables, Dr. Srivastava's summary is acknowledged by many as historically tenable. He writes,

“Therefore defeated aboriginals were made ‘slaves’ in the social order...criminal tribes.”

The Aryans made slaves of the indigenous people, who refused to adopt their ritual hierarchical system, and set up the socio-cultural discrimination and economic exploitations as ghettos. Any sign of protest or rebel was promptly met with brutal killings. For example, as Devashayam records, an attempt to learn Sanskrit, believed to be the language of the gods, would be dealt with by pouring molten lead down the throat. Even until today, the Upper caste expects the Dalits to remove their footwear as a mark of respect when they cross the streets where they dwell. A violation of this was taken to imply their rebellious challenge of the upper caste ego. Again, if a Dalit man were to fall in love with an upper caste woman, it was regarded as demeaning to the Upper caste for which either burning that man's

house or killing him would be some of the first few options. If the Jews were left to live in their own urine and excreta to make sure they lose their morale to fight back or rebel, the Dalits have for generations been given that occupation to clean the public latrines with their hands. This gross humiliation was thrust upon them as their lot for which they are expected to be grateful. These and other countless stories of the way human dignity was and is stripped, and burnt, whose identity is crushed in the pages of history, as in reality, is what prompts me to refer to their condition as holocaust. I certainly value the Jewish claim for the uniqueness of holocaust but when such unimaginable evil is wreaked on humans, it qualifies as a holocaust, no matter how earlier in time or how distant from the epicenter of Auschwitz, that evil which lavishes on human dignity will be condemned as holocaust.

Analysis: Poling has rightly noted, “Evil cannot be studied directly because its reality is mystified by illusions of necessity and legitimate power...” This is no truer than in the case of Dalit holocaust, which presents a strange case to theodicy. It is a by-product of the Hindu tradition where suffering is derived from the operation of the automatic law of moral retribution known as karma which works in conjunction with the process of reincarnation. This makes it even more problematic because this kind of reasoning denies any involvement in or control over the process, by the gods. All suffering therefore is understood as deserved, thus implying that the gods may be neither blamed nor appealed to when suffering. Thus in a context where the suffering is completely attributed to the misdeeds of the individual, even the gods become powerless before the operation of this moral law of cause and effect.

This feeling of absolute powerlessness is a typical characteristic of most Dalit writings both in the secular as well as in the theological field. For example, even A.P.Nirmal, who is considered the pioneer of Dalit theology, seeking a parallel in John 9:30 (where we read, about the blind man who was healed by Jesus. “It was not that this man

sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him”) says, “We have suffered in the past and we continue to suffer in the present. This is not because of our sins or the sins of our ancestors”. We see that the unchallenged view of karma is combined with the fatalistic Christian idea of redemptive suffering. This is evident when he says, “our sufferings and dalitness have their place in the economy of salvation foreordained by God. It is in and through us that God will manifest and display his glorious salvation.” It is also interesting to note that, so far, this theological stance has claimed the full dais and there has not been another point of view to challenge this yet.

This brief analysis is used to show how the Vedas create an environment of absolute powerlessness. Is it not surprising to know that Christian theologians and scholars are expending much of their energy in trying to emphasize the kind of atrocities committed on them rather than seeking ways to demystify the power of the supreme principle of “moral law” that allows for such inhuman treatment of the Dalits? Thus, we see that there is no place for any such nonsense as theodicy in a situation, which leaves the humans to figure out how to find their way out of this maze created by ancient Vedas. Where is the need for justifying God or the gods for all the suffering the Dalits have to endure?

Now it is our task to explain the apparent absence of theodicy in Dalit theology. Can we attribute this silence to the religious ideologies bequeathed by Hinduism where the tentacles of the supreme moral law tighten their grips on the socio-religious ordering of life in the Indian society? Alternatively, is it an effect of the sedative served by traditional Western theology (where suffering is an essential part of salvation)? Should we accept the absence of theodicy as mere absence? Is not the seeming absence of theodicy obviated by the elaborate recalling and narration of the Dalit reality that constitutes the heart of every piece of writing by Dalits?

The vital point that needs to be stressed now is that theodicy in such contexts become superfluous. It is obsolete not merely because of the absolute powerlessness of the people involved but because it assumes that God is to be held responsible for suffering whereas the humans have held the reigns of caste-system and use that power to sustain illusions of necessity and legitimate power. So justifying God becomes so ridiculous and amounts to yielding to the misdirection of the dominant power that seeks to get away with the evil they perpetrate on the Dalits.

C. Theodicy in Black Holocaust:

The holocaust has become the paradigm for radical evil in our century. The most ironical aspect of radical evil is that it is caused but ignored by modern liberal optimism about progress. The definitive form of the problem of evil in its contemporary post-modern form is history, the relation of evil to modern politics such as the concentration camp at Auschwitz or racism in North America or dehumanization of the Dalits in India²⁵. Racism, remains the unresolved dilemma of life in the U.S., the deepest, the most widespread and most resistant of the macro evils. Some of the initial studies tracing European and North American participation in the four hundred-year African slave trade generally accepted that about 15 million Africans landed alive. However, more recent studies like that of Basil Davidson and Philip Curtin estimates a total of 21 million as having landed alive the Americas, 2 million were lost on the ocean crossing and 7 million died before embarkation.

This actual history of Blacks and Whites in America, four hundred years of unforgettable suffering for an entire group certainly introduces a new dimension to the problem of evil. It becomes highly ridiculous to apply any of the traditional theodical themes to such a massive inhuman destruction of the African slaves on the soil of America in the name of White power. These descriptions of radical evil clearly show that they are beyond justice. Although she has chosen to reverse

the cry to God, we must wait to do that especially in racism etc. where it is clearly a manifestation of moral evil – brought about by human agency.

Within Black Theology, William Jones sets out to interpret the meaning of black suffering as a religious problem. He questions God's equal love and concern for all people, and concludes that the theistic concept of God leads to a God who is a white racist. Jones is not alone in elaborating the problem of distribution of evil in black suffering. James Cone would readily agree with Jones on the point that the distribution of suffering among people is extremely out of balance. However, Cone expressly states his oppositions to the other traditional function of theodicy in Black suffering. He focuses on moral evil rather than natural evil and rejects theodicies based on concepts like vicarious suffering of black, deserved punishment, inscrutable mystery, eschatological compensation, and divine racism.²⁶ McWilliams does splendidly in pointing to how Cone deals with the traditional types of theodicy. However, she fails miserably in her final analysis of Cone's theodicy because she rightly observes that Cone is critical of speculation about the origin of evil, but is hasty to hold Cone accountable for that. This is what needs to concern us. What McWilliams goes through is but understandable because if at all some basic elements of theodical argument were to be changed then how can one expect theodicy to retain its forms. She may be quite right in noting that Cone needs to develop more systematically the consequences of his understanding of God's relationship to the world. However, her insistence that "any thoughtful Christian, however, will still inquire about the source of that suffering"²⁷ is what leaves a bad taste in our mouths, after an exquisite serving of Cone's theodicy in Black suffering.

A similar vagueness can be seen in A. Pinn's book *Why Lord?* Not being able to pinpoint to the absolute madness and its obsolescence in Black theology, Pinn introduces them with an asterisk explaining, "The term theodicy is used with question marks. This is to show from

the beginning of this book the uncertain nature of this term as a proper category of investigation."

Although Pinn has clearly chosen his path of theodicy strewn with typical black suffering where he used Spirituals, nineteenth century Black though, Blues, Rap, and nitty-gritty hermeneutics, yet his loyalty to the traditional theodicy discourse directs him to the orthodox, conventional humanist position in the footsteps of William Jones, the prominent Black humanist of our time.

Williams Jones' contention that "Black thinkers must not be so wed to their theological assumptions and structures that they are unwilling to raise hard questions and oppression and God's relationship to it" is rightly said but clearly misdirected. It can be argued that Jones fails to attribute Black suffering to humans – the whites. His assumptions regarding hierarchy of human value reveals that Jones has bought into maintaining the status quo and this is clear from the way he views hierarchy as sanctioned by God²⁸. A failure to analyze hierarchy and to see it as instituted by God is evidence enough that he does not recognize human component both in hierarchy and in maintaining it with such claims as though ordained by God.

The tension between Jones and Cone is heightened with the evidence that Jones seeks to suggest that Blacks are God's "suffering servants." Cone's argument is pivoted in the Christ event as an ultimate proof of God's history siding with the oppressed.

"The coming of God in Jesus breaks open history and thereby creates an experience truth-encounter that makes us talk in ways often not understandable to those who have not had the experience... [I]n the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ..."²⁹

The above set of arguments and counterarguments reveal a struggle within Black Theology to wrestle with this unsuitable discourse of

theodicy. Truly, this old wine cannot be used in new wineskins. Having considered the irrelevance of theodicy in all the three holocausts, whether in its fully developed form as in the case of Jewish theodicy, or whether in the partial presence of theodicy in Black theology or even in the total absence of theodicy in the Dalit situation, that theodicy is obsolete in contemporary theology is clear. That it operates on three levels of theoretical abstraction³⁰ has overplayed the issue of God's power and that it is divorced from the concrete realities needs no further clarification.

Hence, we see that within the enlightenment project of theodicy, evil was mainly understood as natural evil where evil or suffering is not traceable to acts or volitions of free beings, including such things as earthquakes, floods, pestilences. However, metaphysical evil or moral evil is traceable to the agency of free beings such as war, genocide, or racism. The litany of human crimes and anguish is without end. Thus, we cannot but join Farley who in trying to grasp the evil as more than tragedy and indeed as a rupture in creation, declares, "The world cannot be made whole again, the surd of suffering shatters every attempt to restore harmony. Radical suffering is outside the bounds of justice and cannot be returned to the harmony of justice by consolation, vindication, or retribution. It cannot be justified."³¹

IV. The Post-Patriarchal Approach:

The Post-patriarchal approach that will be adopted in this study refers to a collective of liberation perspectives that are inclusive, and opposed to patriarchal tendencies. It is not a feminist approach because it is neither my intention to develop a woman's perspective (or even Asian for that matter) by analyzing women's place in the traditional view as evil and countering it, nor to incorporate "women's experience" into the whole discussion of evil and tragedy.

The question of power has no doubt given women an entry point to dialogue and debate but it has not been any more merciful to the weak and oppressed in the society. By saying this perhaps, I do not

deny the condition of women but refer to that intersection where men and women within a community are brutally attacked and stripped of their human dignity. I do commend the womanist in their particular effort to carve out a voice for their particular suffering based on gender and racism. However, I also wish to submit that I am not yet prepared to make such a transition yet. If there were sufficient time and space I would choose to layout the psychological and philosophical arguments for the way gender dissolves in the face of suffering, evil, and death. It will not be an understatement to say that gender debate is a matter of luxury and can abound only where the life sources are available. Within the community, yes indeed, the gender issues are clear and certainly need to be ironed out. So whether our particular emphasis is on the enhancement of the condition of women or of the community (or simultaneously) will determine to what extent we may need to prioritize our concerns.

I am mindful both of the hegemonic deception that seeps through an oppressor's gentle reminder not to give in easily to "elitist" modes but to be loyal to the community's priorities as well as to the male chauvinist's advice to critically adopt the "western" modes of discourse. More than seeing this as an entrapment between the two 'liberal' views I consider this a strange opportunity zone to emphasize that while the reality of evil is extremely conscious of both gender and race the same cannot be said of suffering; for in the loss of human dignity both our race and gender disappear and we stand as helpless beings. For example, in Schindler's List, shame and cruelty are perceivable only by the onlookers, if we truly penetrate the being of those tortured, human life can be perceived beyond gender. In fact the most vulnerable aspects of suffering become unbearable when we lose our identity to our self and others and our 'being' remains and we dwell in the nameless, genderless, raceless body as the dehumanized ones. For to talk about gender in suffering is to see suffering as less than dehumanizing and we will enter the same pitfall that many of the philosophers do in minimizing the reality or the intensity of radical evil.

From this vantage point it is easier to direct our attention to human suffering and to make sure we are addressing the question of radical evil brought about by human agency.

The assumption that God means, first, power runs throughout much of history³² and particularly so in the discipline. Whether or not people believe in God, whether or not they find God an attractive notion, they do have an idea of God, an idea that tends to center on power. The feminist theologians seriously challenge the classic idea that God is all-powerful, omnipotent. Contemporary Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson addresses the question of divine power. She notes that the reshaping of the notion of omnipotence is a primary task that befalls all who “seek an understanding (of God) that does not divide power and compassionate love in a dualistic framework that identifies love with a resignation of power and the exercise of power with a denial of love”³³. She is right and echoes many other theologians’ criticism against the discourse of theodicy when she says, “Anyone who works out a rational way to integrate evil and radical suffering in an ordered fashion into a total intellectual system of which God is a part thereby justifies it”³⁴.

In the face of incomprehensible human suffering as in the Black, Dalit, and Jewish Holocausts, there can indeed be no theodicy, no theoretical solution to the mystery of suffering and evil, but there is the compelling field responsive action towards what destroys human dignity. This action succeeds, though not always, grants fragmentary experiences of salvation and the anticipation of the human condition where suffering and evil are overcome.³⁵ The only route available for responsive action in the midst of radical suffering is the comprehensive post-patriarchal approach.

By Post-patriarchal approach, what I mean is the positive confluence of ideational thinking that moves beyond such limitations as set up by patriarchal culture and solidified in the dominant Christian tradition. It is more than a feminist approach in the sense that it also

brings together the Womanist, Asian and even some of the male theologians’ voices, all of which have dared to challenge the status quo and move beyond traditional understanding of God as raw power. The aim of this approach is to “seek a resymbolization of divine power not as dominative or controlling power, nor as dialectical power in weakness, nor simply as persuasive power but as the liberating power that is effective in compassionate love”³⁶.

V. Theopathos:

The concept of a suffering God has been a problem to mainline Christianity from early on. This is partly due to the influence of the Stoic who “believed that because no one could be greater than God, no one could influence God, and therefore God must be incapable of undergoing the experiences of the world.”³⁷ For some early theologians, passibility was simply unthinkable and even the council of Chalcedon dismissed the view that God could suffer as “vain babblings” and condemned those who held it. As many contemporary theologians would agree this absolute power of God has been the most difficult to let go in the many changes that have come about in the past. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has shown how power triggers the image of God and vice versa and critiques its acceptability in our times. Carter Heyward also criticizes this human obsession with divine power as model dominance and says, “To possess power is to be on top-of someone else... It is to be above the common folk, to flex the muscles of our brains, bodies, or ideologies- and to win.”³⁸

Now many theologians agree that the suffering God as a central concept has emerged as a distinctively Christian understanding of and response to suffering and evil. It has become a major theme particularly after the Second World War. Its prominence in contemporary theology has prompted people to refer to it as “New Orthodoxy” and as a “structural shift in the Christian mind”. Trinitarian theologians like Marjorie Suchocki and Catherine M. LaCugna have argued that the development of the concept of a suffering God originated in the formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. A flood of literature reflecting

this new scholarly appraisal of the biblical view has still not receded. Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, Rahner's *The Trinity*, Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, Soelle's *Suffering*, Elizabeth Johnson's *Who She Is* are but a few of the significant among them. The reverberations of this can also be heard in the theologies of Kitamori, Koyama, Andrew Sung Park, and C.S. Song in their Asian adaptation of this theology of divine pathos.

A common resource invariably used by most of these is the theology of the divine pathos of Abraham Joshua Heschel. As a survivor of Jewish holocaust, his writings, after overcoming an initial period of shock and silence, later introduced himself to the modern world as a prolific writer and independent thinker. The significance of his writings is that he approached the Hebrew Bible with a particular lens, his experiences at the holocaust. He is of particular importance to this study because of his revolutionary doctrine of divine pathos in the midst of a rush of antitheodicies. He refuses to blame God, the God of history when immediate response for evil lay with human beings.

Heschel's idea of divine pathos is "the central idea of prophetic theology which to him is also the summary of Jewish theology. He understands Pathos as a transitive concern that is directed to others. In distinguishing transitive from reflexive concerns, as concerns about oneself, Heschel writes, "To the prophets... God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world".³⁹

His basis for such an understanding comes from the prophecy of Isaiah (63:9) where we read God is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands. But even within this given Heschel did not negate the freedom of God but rather emphasized that pathos implied "no inner bondage, no enslavement to impulse, no subjugation by passion..."⁴⁰ since Heschel focuses on the relationality that he views as embedded in the divine pathos, he constantly sought to avoid describing pathos in terms of God's essence. John Jaeger, rightly notes

this in his article by saying that, Heschel "wanted to avoid linking God's passion to God's ultimate Being, for such a connection would limit divine sovereignty and freedom; God would have to act in certain ways based on his pathic character. The purpose of God's pathos, as Heschel understands, is "to bring about the restitution of the unity of God and world"⁴¹.

The above analysis also points to one of the basic issues in our changed understanding of God, from an isolated, immutable, all-powerful God to God as a relational, mutable and also powerful being. Some of the theologians who have vehemently opposed the idea of theodicy have also simultaneously articulated the active presence of God in history as a liberating God. In this section, I would like to highlight briefly some of the contemporary contributions. The significance of theopathos is that it liberates the oppressed to fight against suffering while not being determined by it⁴². This concept is presented here, not so much to certify the idea of people who seek a cosmic Caesar of Pathos who could eliminate their suffering by a couple of degrees. The most vital point, of this section and this paper is that the responsibility for history lies with humanity and therefore in and through the power of the presence of the God who suffers alongside, to be able to challenge the evils perpetrated by humans, in the social systems of their times.

Conclusion:

The tradition of theodicy to justify God's power and goodness as compatible with the fact of evil, as a logical problem has invaded the privacy of theology for too long. It has misdirected the victims, to hold God responsible by not taking seriously enough the human agency in moral evil. Many contemporary theologians concur that the theodicy issue in our time is political rather than naturalistic, i.e. the focus is on 'moral evil' rather than 'natural evil'. Beliefs in the power and goodness of God have been severely questioned in the face of incomprehensible human suffering in our century. Racism, Casteism and genocide have

become crucial lenses in our theology to scrutinize the dominant view of God as Omnipotent. The experience of radical suffering by the Dalits, the Blacks, and the Jews raises several questions related to our understanding of God and creating social changes based on such theological premises.

Along with our understanding of God as liberator come certain changes that we must accommodate in theology. One such change is in the area of our response to radical suffering, from theodicy to anthropodicy, and hence theodicy must give way to theopathos. I have argued that in the context of radical suffering,⁴³ theodicy is a patriarchal enterprise and that theopathos has already emerged as an important alternative to theodicy in liberation theologies.

We have considered “theopathos” as a current post-patriarchal approach to theodicy in Black, Dalit and Jewish holocausts. The concept of divine presence in human history – (Theopathos), as developed by Heschel, a Jewish philosopher of religion, is rooted in the biblical understanding of God and resonates with the experience of the communities of specific oppression rather than theodicy (or even negative theodicy).

It has been shown how Moltmann has quietly carried on this tradition of Theopathos and is very similar to what Cone achieves in his *The God of the Oppressed* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Through Kitamori’s *The Theology of the Pain of God* it has been sustained in the Asian theologies as well and has found some persistent voices in A.P. Nirmal, the pioneer of Dalit theology in India. There are numerous other theologians who have logged on to this concept and are using it to sustain their faith in the face of radical suffering and guarding it from giving in to a potential danger of redemptive suffering. Drawing from the analysis of the three holocausts, we have come to know the thickness of this problem of theodicy in general and more particularly in the light of the horrendous evils of our times.

Thus, even the most distinguished theologian among us must contend with the theodical implications of these holocausts. Any attempt to frame an interpretation of radical evil such as these becomes, as Eli would have us say, a work of the devil. In response to the way theodicy conducts itself in the presence of horrendous evil we must ask whether any theodicy is possible or can be authentic in the aftermath of Auschwitz, in the continuing racially conscious America or in the dehumanizing of the Dalits that still goes on.

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Notes

1. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, Second Edition, 1973), p.273-274
2. Albert W.J. Harper, *The Theodicy of Suffering* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1990), P. iv
3. Rem Edwards, *Reason and Religion: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Joranson, 1972), P.30 Quoted in Tyron L. Inbobby, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), P.27
4. Terence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), p.221.
5. Leibniz in his epoch making essay "*Essais de theodicee sur la bonte de Dieu...*" claimed that this is the best world possible that God had created where order and regularity in nature were the strong bases. This view was contested by many on account of the event of Lisbon earthquake in which thousands died on All Saints Day in 1756.
6. Terence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p.221.
7. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p.245.
8. Ronald Green, "Theodicy" in Mircea Eliade Ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987)
9. Ronald Green, *Ibid.*, P. 437
10. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, *Ibid.*, P.261
11. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, *Ibid.*, P. 261
12. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, *Ibid.*, P.261

13. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, P.164
14. Philip Hefner, "Is Theodicy a Question of Power?" in *The Journal of Religion*, P. 87
15. The malfunctioning of these themes in some of the current theodicies will be shown a little later in the analysis of theodicy in the three holocausts.
16. Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil*, P. 11
17. Braiterman, (God) *After Auschwitz* P.19
18. Raul Hilberg, ed., *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, p.xxvi
19. Jerry K. Robbins, "The Negative Theodicy of Elie Wiesel" in *Dialog 26* (Spring 1987) p. 131
20. Raul Hilberg, *Holocaust: Theological and Philosophical Implications*,
21. Jerry K. Robbins, *Ibid.*, P.131
22. Raul Hilberg, *Ibid.*, P.263
23. *Ibid.*, p.262
24. *Ibid.*, P.296
25. Tyron I. Inboddy, *The Transforming God*, P. 93
26. Refer to Warren McWilliams article on "Theodicy According to James Cone" in *The Journal of Religious Thought* pp.45-55 for a detailed explanation of Cone's rejection of these types of theodicies.
27. Warren McWilliams, "Theodicy According to James Cone" in *The Journal of Religious Thought*, p. 54
28. Anthony B.Pinn, *Why Lord?* P.93
29. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.191-192
30. Braiterman, (God) *After Auschwitz* p.21 Here Braiterman outlines the three levels of abstraction as a) justifying divine providence and the concrete historical and tragedy, b) an explanation of how attributes of divine goodness and power jibe with the existence of genuine evil, and c) affirming these attributes in the form of omni benevolence and omnipotence.
31. Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, p. 64
32. William C. Placher, *Narrative of a Vulnerable God*, P. xiii
33. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, P. 269
34. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ibid.*, P.271
35. E. Johnson, *Ibid.*, P.272
36. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ibid.*, P. 270
37. Inbody, *The Transforming God*, P.165
38. Carter Heyward, *Our Passion For justice* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 117
39. Heschel, *The Prophets* p.223-224
40. Heschel, *The Prophets* P.258
41. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p.112
42. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.175
43. As experienced by individuals in large communities both in "moments of extremity" in the Jewish holocaust or long periods of despondency such as four hundred years of African-American slavery and oppression of the Dalits that have dehumanized people for several centuries.

REREADING THE BIBLE: A DIALOGUE WITH WOMEN THEOLOGIANs FROM LATIN AMERICA, AFRICA AND ASIA

Dorothea Erbele-Kuster

To read the Bible as Motswana African woman is to read a Western book and to relive painful equation of Christianity with Civilization.

Is the Bible a western or a universal book? Is it a patriarchal book or does it also have a liberating message for women? The Bible is still a unifying source of Christian theology across cultural borders, not in the last place, thanks to its presupposed authority. But its very concept of authority gets questioned in multicultural and multireligious contexts with a plurality of holy scriptures. At the same time the biblical canon is vigorously under discussion because of its androcentric character.

These issues bearing in mind, I will portray in this article women theologians from three different continents.² Elsa Tamez, a Mexican (born 1950), is Professor of Biblical Studies at the Universidad Biblico Latinoamericano in San Jose, Costa Rica. Mercy Amba Oduyoye,

born in Ghana in 1934 has worked for the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva and the African Conference of Churches (ACC). She was on several occasions a visiting scholar in Europe and the USA.³ Kwok Pui-lan, Hong Kong Chinese by birth (1952), currently teaches in Cambridge, Massachusetts. First, I shall give a short introduction to the particular ways each of them reads the Bible, especially how they understand the authority of the Bible. I shall then discuss commonalities, divergences and cross-fertilizations among their hermeneutical concepts. In this dialogue the western listener will be raised in the last section.

Whereas Elsa Tamez rereads stories of both parts of the Christian Bible as a biblical scholar, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is using biblical phrases to express her anthropological and ecclesiological interests, while Kwok Pui-lan's focus lies on hermeneutics.

Elsa Tamez: Women Rereading the Bible

The Mexican theologian Elsa Tamez⁴ deliberately gives attention to often neglected and unnoticed biblical women such as Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sara. In a worship service at the first general assembly of the fifth conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Women Theologians (EATWOT) in New Delhi in 1981, she compared Hagar to women in the Third World.⁵ Hagar, who is in the margin of the salvation history, suffers like many women in the Third World from a threefold oppression. She is discriminated because of her sex (as a woman), because of her class (as a slave), and because of her race (as an Egyptian) and thus she is the 'oppressed of the oppressed'. Yet, Tamez points out that a great future was promised to her and her son.

The first-predominantly male-generation of liberation theologians primarily used sociological tools in referring to and selecting a certain canon of biblical texts. Thus, they took the story of the Exodus, the Prophets, and the historical Jesus. Tamez, however, interprets texts that within the context of liberation theology are considered rather unpopular such as the letters of Paul, the letter of James or Qohelet.

In her doctoral dissertation she challenges the doctrine of justification. As a Protestant theologian she asks whether this Protestant formula that was inherited from American and European missionaries, could be of any interest for Latin America, a continent suffering under economic debt. It is difficult to understand the message of justification of the sinner in a setting where people suffer deadly from the consequences of sin and injustice.⁶ In a context like Latin America this would seem as if God were a God of injustice. Paul himself had been imprisoned unjustly by the Romans. When he suffered with his own body under the destructive logic of the Roman Empire, the forensic vocabulary of the Apostle turned into political language. Paul who was humiliated from bodily tortures called for liberty (Gal. 5:1). God's justice stands up against the injustice of the world (Rom. 1:18). In a Third World context, the Mexican theologian writes that justification must be interpreted as "God's solidarity with the excluded."⁷ In this way it becomes a liberating message with social and cultural impacts. In her analysis Tamez shows that in the ongoing social and political struggle against oppressive structures in times of neo-liberalism and globalisation, it is necessary to read the Bible anew.

Elsa Tamez' early investigation in the semantic field of 'oppression' in the Bible can be regarded as a classical exegetical work of liberation theology. In the 1980s and 1990s she called herself a feminist liberation theologian,⁸ underlining her twofold hermeneutical presupposition. Together with her male colleagues and teachers she asserted to be stressing God's option for a context of 'machismo'. In her view the Bible is liberating for the poor in general, yet women have to struggle with texts which are exclusive in character and interpretation. Hermeneutics of suspicion affects both interpretation and text itself. Mainstream interpretation of biblical texts often enforces the segregation of women in church and society, but certain biblical texts themselves are already exclusive for women. Hence Tamez encourages women to reread the Bible in the light of their experiences of oppression.⁹ This process of gaining distance and reading anew may be controversial to ways men have read the Bible throughout

history. The hermeneutics of suspicion affect the Biblical texts as well. Misogynist texts, which legitimate the subordination of women as 1Cor. 14:34, can no longer be regarded as authoritative: "Women are called, therefore, to deny the authority of those readings that harm them".¹⁰ Yet, does this not imply a general rejection of the Bible because the text itself incorporates a critical principle, as shown for example with the Pauline letters?¹¹

Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Constructing an African Theology with the help of Biblical mots and Akan proverbs

For several decades Mercy Amba Oduyoye has promoted the role of women in liberation movements, in church and in Theology.¹² Her paper read at the International Conference of EATWOT in Delhi in 1981 under the general theme 'Irruption of the Third World' was programmatic. As an African Woman Theologian she proclaimed the "irruption within the irruption".¹³ The title of Oduyoye's collection of essays *Hearing and Knowing* is an abbreviated form of the words of the Samaritan woman in John 4:42: "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world!". She reads this in the sense that God has revealed himself directly to the African people and that the African History and the early history of the Bible are closely connected. In order to demonstrate the closeness and indeed familiarly of both, the biblical and the African traditions, Oduyoye tells a story of her school days when she was pupil at a mission school. There, Proverbs proved to be their favourite biblical book, since it gave rise to a funny game in which they converted an Akan saying into King James language and even invented and assigned chapter and verse numbers.¹⁴ This clearly shows, she claims, that African proverbs may reflect Christian ways of thinking¹⁵ and vice versa; biblical sayings may converge with African ones.

Jesus' call in Luke 8 *Thalita qumi!* addressed to the daughter of Jairus, is translated by Oduyoye and her Nigerian colleague Musimbi

R.A. Kanyoro, as "Women of Africa arise!".¹⁶ This biblical quote has become the slogan of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989. The Logo of the Circle depicts a kneeling woman who is about to respond to the call of Jesus to arise.¹⁷ Accordingly, a selection of essays for the first Biennial African Institute was edited under the title: *The Will to Arise*.¹⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye's Bible quotes are short and often her questions or exclamations stress the dynamic power. They symbolize her visionary elements for an African Theology.

Kwok Pui-lan: Reading the Biblical Canon in the midst of an Inter-Religious Plurality of Scriptures in Asia

The title of Kwok Pui-lan's book on hermeneutics: '*Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*,'¹⁹ indicates the way she understands the Bible. 'Non-biblical world' refers to the multi-religious context in Asia where Christians are in an absolute minority situation. In China they count for less than 5% of the population. With regard to the plurality of Holy Scriptures and to the long tradition of hermeneutics in Asia, Kwok insists that Christians are asked to question their western conception of truth and hermeneutics. In an early statement she underlines the ecumenical importance of the Bible:

Those post-Christian feminists who try to move away from the biblical religion... tend to alienate themselves from global sisterhood because the Bible is an important part of our common 'heritage' and 'language' cutting across cultural and socio-political diversities.²⁰

The Bible is a common tradition which women from different contexts share with each other and which makes, consequently, dialogue or community possible. At the same time she claims the Bible as of Asian heritage. Nevertheless, the aim of Kwok's postcolonial reading is to discover the Bible with Asian eyes beyond the western perspective. In her interpretation of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Math. 15:2-28 and Mark. 7:24-30 she unmasks the abuse of this text.

According to an anti-Jewish model of the history of salvation, the text often served in mission history as a paradigm for submissive conversion. For Kwok, as an Asian, the way the gentile woman addresses Jesus and vice versa is of utmost interest.²¹ In the story the pagan woman begs Jesus to drive out the demon of her daughter. The narrative consists of a web of differences: Jewish homeland/ foreign land, inside/outside, Jewish/Gentiles, woman/disciples. Otherness is stressed in multiple ways: the other as woman, as pagan etc. Instead of assuming, as most commentators do, that the Syro-Phoenician woman became a Christian, Kwok states that nothing is said about her conversion. In the way the story is told, the cultural and religious identity of the woman is respected.

As an Asian Christian theologian she tries to bring into dialogue two different stories: the biblical story and the Asian story.²² Hence two acts of imagination have to be performed. First, it has to be established how the ancient biblical world was alike, and second, how the Bible might address the questions of contemporary Asia. Thus Kwok questions the biblical stories as whether they, for example, shed light on occasions such as the massacre of the Chinese students on the 5th of June 1989, where thousands of them lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy. Yet for her not only the Bible interprets the Asian history, it is as well the other way round. The courage of the young people in the resistance movement reveals the reality of resurrection.

In the process of re-writing and re-telling the biblical salvation history, the Asian myths and stories and the biblical stories gets intertwined. Kwok's aim is not to maintain a hierarchical distinction between text and context, or between the biblical text and other texts. Consequently scripture is not a silent book but a "talking book," underlining the revelatory power.²³ In the process of dialogical imagination she also wants the oral tradition to be taken seriously. Hence she tries to proclaim a new model of scripture that also includes non-written forms.

Other Ways of Reading the Bible: An Intercultural Dialogue

After having portrayed the three women I shall illuminate the 'otherness' of the ways these women understand the Bible in order to develop tools for an intercultural hermeneutics.

1. Other Ways of Womanhood- The Woman's Commission of EATWOT, founded in 1983, worked as an intercultural forum from its early beginnings. Not the assumption of a universal female sex was the impulse for the Women's Commission but the different experiences of being a woman, of being excluded from certain positions in church and society, suffering from poverty, and of being segregated and violated. The identities of the women portrayed above are multi-faceted. Marcy Amba Oduyoye states: "I am first and foremost an Akan, a member of a matrilineal society speaking the language of Akan... In fact it is as an African that I am Christian."²⁴

The role models (gender) depend on the specific cultural, religious and political background. Motherhood and family play an important role in Africa. Oduyoye depicts mothering as a positive strategy for community life that should be practiced by women and men.²⁵ African women normally feel quite uneasy with the label 'feminist'²⁶ as they regard it as western term depicting only first world women situations, nevertheless, Oduyoye uses it. The women do not opt for a universal concept of womanhood or an essentialist conception of the female sex. It is not the experience of sameness which unites women doing theology, but the experience of being regarded as the other/of otherness.

2. From a Hermeneutics of Suspicion to a Deconstruction of the Authority of the Text—Even though Tamez and Kwok concede that some biblical texts are oppressive, they do not abandon or reject the Bible as a whole, due to its patriarchal character.²⁷ Tamez struggling with the authority of misogynist texts states, "that those biblical texts that reflect patriarchal culture and proclaim women's inferiority and their submission to men are not normative."²⁸ However, she sees as well the need to "reformulate the principle of biblical authority."²⁹ As a liberationist feminist the central message of the Bible is liberating

for her. The Asian theologian questions the sacredness and authority of the canon generally. Kwok demands to demythologise and to deconstruct the Bible as canon.³⁰ She claims that the authority is rooted in the liberation process:

The critical principle lies not in the Bible itself, but in the community of women and men who read the Bible and, through their dialogical imagination, appropriate it for their own liberation.³¹

Thus the concept of text shifts from a scriptural text to a living texture.

3. 'We are the text' - In the late 1990s Elsa Tamez', criticism concerning the text becomes sharper and more outspoken: 'If women's experience is a major resource for the hermeneutical process of doing theology and reading the Bible, it is a logical next step to state that women's lives contain divine revelation'.³² This statement might sound provocative to Protestant scholars who are trained in the Western tradition of self-sufficiency of the Bible. But Tamez is still obligated to the Protestant appraisal of scripture.³³ Relating the sacred text to women's lives as sacred text is a mutual fulfilment: when women gain back their dignity, their lives are fulfilled and the sacred text is shown to be divine in this revelation.³⁴ Within the hermeneutical circle of relating text and context, the biblical text remains superior for her. In Kwok's dialogical model, however, no qualitative difference between the text and the context seems to exist.³⁵ The text is no longer a static concept. Or, as the Korean woman theologian Chun Hyun Kyung puts it: "we are the text".³⁶ Those stories that promulgate the struggle for liberation are called revelatory or canonical.³⁷

Kwok wants to "re-write the script and re-cast the biblical drama, giving women more active roles."³⁸ Although Oduyoye does not discuss bible hermeneutics at length, she has always been treating biblical stories alike. Her struggle is to re-enact biblical stories. She took the question of the women going to Jesus' grave "Who will roll the stone away?" as slogan for the *Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, addressing the difficulties which

have to be overcome. Oduyoye's answer is: 'We will roll the stone away!'³⁹, inviting men and women to take part in the human responsibility of caring for all life. This dialogical model and method of interpretation presupposes that the Bible is endowed with a plurality of meanings and voices.

4. From Indigenisation to an Intercultural or Multifaith Hermeneutics – Oduyoye describes the problem as follows: 'we can say that Christianity has converted the African people to a new religion without converting their culture.'⁴⁰ But theologians promoting indigenisation or inculturation⁴¹ get in trouble by questions such as: in which culture – high or low, male or female – the gospel should be inculturated? This model takes a universal kernel or truth for granted, which could be wrapped in different cultural fashions, whereas in a contextual model text and context have to be continuously related to each other.⁴² The process is even complicated by the rise of a global western culture in postcolonial times. Christendom has been rooted in Third World contexts for such a long time, bringing forth the effect that many people are alienated from the culture of their ancestors. Thus it is important to develop, as Kwok claims, a "critical hermeneutic to demystify the claims of a homogenous national culture, debunk the romanticizing of a patriarchal past, and expose violence done to women."⁴³ Kwok and Oduyoye unmask the myth that Christianity has brought liberation to African/ Asian women or humanity to wo/men alike.⁴⁴

Many Third World women theologians criticize the inculturation model. Indigenisation, also for Kwok, seems to be obsolete, since it was often abused in mission history.⁴⁵ But all the above sketched theologians are looking for liberating roots of their own culture and religion. Although the interpretation process of the Asian myths was often dominated by males (just as in the case of the Bible), Kwok takes the stories told by women to interpret the Bible.⁴⁶ Her intercultural reading of the Bible finally leads her to multi-faith hermeneutics:

The Bible must also be read from the perspective of other faith traditions. Multi-faith hermeneutics looks at ourselves as others see us, so that we may be able to see ourselves more clearly.⁴⁷

Learning from other ways of Reading the Bible

In Euro-American wo/men circles the reception of Third World Women theologians is still at its beginnings.⁴⁸ There has been a certain cross-cultural exchange, for instance, between the works of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a European, teaching in North-America and the ideas especially of African-American/Womanist Theologians. Schussler Fiorenza's strive to reconstruct the female impact in the early origins of Christianity have had a great influence on Kwok and Tamez. Vice versa, Schussler Fiorenza gets more and more aware of the impact of race and class for her/our doing the theology.⁴⁹ Otherness seems to be the intriguing point of departure for all our investigations. Having executed this intercultural comparison between Third World women, my own hermeneutical position becomes marked off and questioned. Last but not least, the fictitious dialogue opens new possibilities to reconceptualize the biblical canon in at least three considerations.

1. Otherness- Trying to describe otherness is tricky. To begin with, my point of view is marked by the western exegetical and feminist discourse. Who differs from whom, in which respect and from which point of view? Yet, is it at all possible to describe the other? Thus the otherness of reading does not only refer to the otherness between First and the Third World women or that between women and men, but also to the otherness among Third World women theologians. First wave feminism in western theology tended to universalise their feminist perspective and to mark boundaries between men and women, thus taking the risk of again promoting gender cliches. Looking at the otherness in women's experiences and ways of reading the Bible we have to realize diversity within feminism.⁵⁰

Interreligious and intercultural aspects are found within one's own identity. Otherness has thus to be taken as starting point. A multireligious

and multicultural context changes the reading of the Bible. Differences are not annihilated and tensions are taken as challenge. Probably one of the most difficult challenges for multifaith hermeneutics is to see the Bible through the lens of other religions and cultures, thus to be interpreted by the other.

2 Realizing our western point of view – Reading the text with the eyes and the body of wo/men who are the “Other” makes things more complicated. The authority of the text becomes questioned twice: externally by wo/men and internally by the text itself, as the critical principle lies inside and outside the Bible. This new model of reading is not just a new version of the western search for a canon within the canon. It criticizes the authority of the Bible and goes beyond the understanding of the canon as a singular self-sufficient text. Women's struggles for life are seen not just as the criteria for relevance of biblical texts they are regarding as texts. Hence the claim for the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding the Bible which is central to reader response criticism and receptionist aesthetics gets a different accentuation.⁵¹

In the western tradition we often have taken the Bible as a western book not asking the question whether it is addressed to us. Kwok for example struggles whether the Bible is or can ever be an Asian book⁵² as it was used as oppressive tool in Asia and secondly how this book may be related to other scriptures. At least reading Bible interpretations from wo/men theologians stemming from the so called Third World, we are confronted with the western colonial interpretation history of these texts.⁵³

2. Other Ways of Reading question the Bible as Canon – We have first of all to realize that the biblical canon reflects a historical process in a certain androcentric religious community.⁵⁴ It is however not adequate to respond to the historically male shaped canon with a female counterpart which would raise the old and new problems. The question raised at the beginning: whether the Bible is still a shared ecumenical point of reference, may be answered with ‘yes’; however,

its authority is highly disputed and it is no longer the only exclusive point of reference.⁵⁵ Maybe Kwok Pui-lan's most critical post-colonial way of dealing with this question may show us liberating ways to proceed. She deconstructs the authority of the canon which is just an integral part of her endeavour to discover the Bible in the non-biblical World. As the critical principle does not manifest in the Bible alone, it seems necessary to re-read out texts and contexts, in order to discover liberating and oppressive in both of them.⁵⁶

Notes

1. Musa W. Dube, *Towards a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000, 11, 13
2. For more biographical information: Virginia Fabella, M.M., *Beyond Bonding. A Third World Women's Theological Journey*, Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, 1993.
3. Mercy Arfiba Oduyoye has received an honorary doctoral degree in theology from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 1991.
4. Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History', in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.
5. Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History'; in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.
6. Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by faith from a Latin American Perspective*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.
7. Elsa Tamez, Art. Justification, in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. by Virginia Fabella, and R.S. Sugirtharajah, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000, 116-118.
8. Elsa Tamez, *Und die Frauen? Befreiungstheologen stehen Rede und Antwort. Mit einem Vorwort von Luise Schottroff*, Munster: Liberacion, 1990, 185 and idem, 'Die feministische Hermeneutik der Befreiung', in: idem, *Visionen in Zeiten messianischer Durre. Texte aus Lateinamerika*, Munster: CIR, 1997, 19-34, 19.
9. Elsa Tamez, 'Women's Rereading of the Bible', in: *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, edited by Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye Maryknoll: Orbis 1988, 173-180
10. Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 176.
11. Cf. Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 176 and id., *Women's lives*, 59.
12. Dorothea Erbele, 'Der Aufbruch im Aufbruch. Die ghanaische Theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye', in: *Evangelische Kommentare* 30 (8/1997) 453-455.
13. Oduyoye, 'Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies', in: *Irruption of the Third World*, 246-255, 247.

14. Oduyoye, 'Calling the Church to Account. African Women and Liberation', in: *Ecumenical Review* 47 (1995) 479-489, 480.
15. Resurrection, which is a central Christian topic is revealed in an Akan proverb: 'Should God die I would die' (Cf. Oduyoye, *Spirituality of Resistance*, 162).
16. Cf. (the title of) the article from Martha Frederiks, 'Miss Jarius Speaks. Developments in African Feminist Theology', in: *Exchange* 32, 1 (2003) 66-82, the article gives an introduction to some themes and persons in African feminist theology.
17. *Thalita, qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians*, 1989. Story told by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, Ibadan 1990.
18. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise. Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992 (1995).
19. Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995. Dorothea Erbele-Kuster, 'Eine interreligiöse Dekonstruktion des biblischen kanons. Die Theologin Kwok Pui-lan liest die Bibel im Kontext der Religionen Asiens', in: *DaB Gott eine große Barmherzigkeit habe*, (Festschrift for Gunda Schneider-Flume), ed. by Doris Hiller and Christine Kress, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001, 281-288 and Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, *Feminist Theologies for a Postmodern Church. Diversity, Community, and Scripture* (American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion Vol. 219) New York: Lang, 2002, 77-106.
20. Kwok Pui-lan, 'The Feminist Hermeneutics of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza: An Asian Feminist Response,' *East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol 3 (1985) 147-153, 148.
21. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 71-83.
22. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 12.
23. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 40.
24. Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit', in: *Lift Every Voice. Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. by Susan Brooks Thisethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990, 245-258, 245.
25. Oduyoye, 'The African Family as Symbol of Ecumenism', in: *Evangelische Revue* 43 (1991) 465-478; id., 'Feminist Theology in an African Perspective', in: *Paths of African Theology*, ed. by Rosino Gibellini, Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1994, 166-181; esp. 176; id., *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995 and id., 'Transforming Power: Paradigms from the Novels of Buchi Emechets', in: *Talitha qum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. by Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001, 222-244.
26. Oduyoye, 'Feminist Theology', 167-170.
27. Oduyoye does not discuss the issue of the canon; for a critical introduction on the African Feminist positions in general cf. Frederiks, 'Miss Jarius Speaks', 77-80.
28. Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 176. Cf. E. Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon, 1984, X: "A feminist hermeneutics cannot trust or accept Bible and tradition simply as divine revelation. Rather it must critically evaluate them as patriarchal articulations..."

29. Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 177.
30. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 30. 85.
31. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 19.
32. Tamez, 'Women's Lives as Sacred Text', *Concilium*, 1998, 57-63, 57.
33. Cf. Tamez, 'Women's Lives as Sacred Text', 62: The written sacred text stands above the woman text.
34. Cf. Tamez, 'Women's Lives as Sacred Text', 61.63. Or as Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, xiii puts it negatively: "if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization".
35. Kwok Pui-lan's position is in sharp contrast to a hierarchical model like that of Karl Barth. He warns of annihilation between tradition (context) and text (id. KD 1/2, 607). In his concept the authority of scripture supersedes the authority of the church (cf. Antje Fetzter, *Tradition im Pluralismus. Alasdair McIntyre und Karl als Inspiration fur christliches Selbstverstandnis in der pluralen Gesellschaft* (NTDH 32) Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002).
36. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, New York: Orbis, 1990, 111: "The text of God's revelation was, is, and will be written in our bodies and our peoples everyday struggle for survival and liberation... Our life is the text, and the Bible and church tradition are the context which sometimes becomes the reference for our own ongoing search for God."
37. Cf. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New Yoek: Crossroad, 1983, 32 and id., *Bread not Stone*, 14.
38. Kwok, 'Reflection on Women's Sacred Scriptures', in: *Concilium* (1998/3) 105-112, 109.
39. Oduyoye, *Who will roll the Stone away? The Ecumenical decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Geneva: WCC 1990, 14.
40. Oduyoye, *Calling the Church to Account*, 481.
41. Kwok does not differentiate between indigenization and inculturation. Inculturation, however, consider neither the Gospel nor the text as fixed, but operates with a dynamic concept of culture (cf. Volker Kuster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Theology*, London: SCM, 2001, 20-24, esp. 23f).
42. Volker Kuster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch uber die Minjung-Theologie*, (SIMSVD 62) Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1995, 39-52, esp. 48-52.
43. Kwok, Art, 'Bible, Third World Women', in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, 27-29, 28.
44. Oduyoye, *Calling the Church to Account*, 479 and id., *Knowing and Hearing*, 73.
45. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 57f.65. Likewise the contributions of Gomang Seratwa Ntlododibe- Kuswani and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, in: *Other Ways of Reading, african Woman and the Bible*, ed. by Musa Dube, Geneva/Atlanta 2001 are critical towards inculturation (cf. The review of the author in: *Exchange* 32 [2003] 278-280).
46. Cf. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, IX: "When women study the Bible, we do not read from a written text. Instead, we share our stories, songs, and dreams".

47. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 92 (thesis 8) in bold letters.
48. Cf. For example the early overview articles in *Exchange* 47 (1987) on 'Asian women doing theology'; in *Exchange* 48 (1987) on 'Latin American women and South African women doing theology' (cf. Especially the one by Leny Lagerwerf) and Doris Strahm, *Vom Rand in die Mitte. Christologie aus der Sicht von Fraduen in Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, Lozern: Exodus, 1997.
49. Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, XIV.
50. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 'Reading the Bible as Equals', in: Musimbi R.A.: Kanyoro (ed.), *In Search of a Round Table. Gender, Theology & Church Leadership.*, Geneva: WCC, 1997, 57-70, esp. 58-63.
51. Dorothea Erbele-Kuster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens. Eine Rezeptionsathetik der Psalmen* (WMANT 87) Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001.
52. Cf. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 11: "If other people can only define truth according to the western perspective, then christianization really means westernization."
53. Schussler Fiorenza, *Reading the Bible as Equals*, 67, for instance unmasks in dialogue with Kwok Pui-lan's interpretation of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman her own Euro-American and apologetic point of view.
54. Cf. Phyllis A Bird, Art. 'The Authority of the Bible', in: *NIB* Vol.1 (1994) 33-64, 44: "the canons of both Judaism and Christianity reflect the views of the dominant parties and the survivors."
55. Cf. Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, 14: "In the process of feminist critical evaluation and assessment, the Bible no longer functions as authoritative source but as a resource for women's struggle for liberation."
56. Parts of this article have been presented at the IIMO conference on Intercultural Reading of the Bible in Utrecht/ The Netherlands on 20th of November 2002 and at the ESWTR conference on Holy Texts: Authority and Language in Soesterberg The Netherlands on 19th of August 2003.

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KOREAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY FOR REUNIFICATION

Meehyun Chung

I. Introduction

*Mow down the enemy
How many they are
On the way the South Korean man goes
They are obstacles as enemy
Come forward
For the victory
Come forward*

This was a popular song which I used to sing when I was young to play a jumping game with elastic strings. Songs of this kind illustrate the strong anti-communist sentiments prevalent in South Korea. Indeed we are domesticated in this trend of anti-communism. Hostility against North Koreans dominated people's emotions in South Korea. All kinds of democratic movements were suppressed in the name of National security which promoted suspicion against North Korea.

Korea was often called the "Land of Morning Calm". But as a historical reality, Korea was never a "Land of Morning Calm." If we look at the atlas, we can understand the geographical location which influenced Korea. Big powers like China, Russia and Japan surround Korea. Therefore, this small country was frequently the victim of power struggles among these countries. On the other hand, Korea was also a kind of bridge through which the culture of China went to Japan.

After the colonial period under the Japanese (1910-1945) another tragedy was waiting for the Korean people. Korea was forced to get divided to suit the interests of the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union. The U.S. military government dominated South Korea, while North Korea was under the dominance of the Soviet Union.

It was a great tragedy for many Korean families and it was caused by the so-called Korean War (1950-1953). This war was the result of a power game among the big countries of the world, particularly the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, in the cold war era. The war was a disaster, not only for individuals, but also for the communal life of the whole society.

The purpose of this article is to explain the development of Korean Feminist Theology in terms of reunification. In order to articulate the sadness of separation, I would like to introduce, at first, a Korean folk tale, which implies the bitterness of division.¹

II. The Weaver and the Herdsman

Once upon a time there was a princess, who was the daughter of a heavenly King. She could weave very well and worked diligently. This Princess, called Weaver, met a young man, who was a Herdsman. They fell in love and got married. After the marriage both of them became lazy due to love.

Since they loved each other so much, they neglected their duty. Because of this laziness the king got angry and punished them. The

Herdsmen must live in the Eastern sky and the Weaver must live in the Western sky. Even though they pleaded with the King to let them be together, the King would not agree.

“The Herdsman and the Weaver were forced to part. He went east and she went west. They were so sad that eventually the king began to feel sorry for them. Finally he decided to let them meet once a year on the banks of the Milky Way River.

All year long, the two lovers counted the days and nights while thinking of each other. Both now knew that they had been disobedient to their father and king. The day finally came when they were allowed to have their yearly meeting. With high hopes, each headed for their meeting place by Milky Way River. But when they reached it, the river had become so wide and the night so dark that they could not see each other.

The Weaver and the Herdsman stood on the banks of the Milky Way River and cried. Tears rolled down their cheeks and into the river. The water from their tears flowed down the river and then became rain. The rain then fell to the earth until the ground was all wet and soggy. The sea rose higher and higher. The fields and gardens of the kingdom were flooded. Not only that, the homes of the king’s subjects were swept away by the waves.

The animals of the kingdom became very alarmed indeed. They all met to decide what to do. Each animal took turns telling everyone at the meeting what they thought would be a good way to stop the flood of tears. Some made low grunts and some made high squeaks. Some of them whistled when they talked. Finally one animal came up with a suggestion. ‘We must help The Weaver and the Herdsman get together again. Otherwise this rain will never stop.’ ‘Yes’, said another, ‘let’s build a bridge for them!’ ‘That’s it!’ exclaimed another animal. ‘We must build a great bridge!’ All of the animals agreed.

But none of them knew how to go about building a bridge. Animals don’t usually know how to build bridges. They all lay around looking

at one another, twisting their tails in silence. Finally some crows and magpies chirped up to the group. ‘Let us birds do it’, said one. ‘We can fly to the Milky Way River’, said another. ‘And make ourselves into a bridge.’ So all of the crows in the world got together and made a big flock with their cousins, the magpies, and flew up to the Milky Way River. They flew tightly together holding on to each other with their talons. Soon they stretched from one bank of the river to the other. The Weaver and the Herdsman were very surprised to see a bridge of birds. ‘What is this?’ they exclaimed. ‘Now we can cross the Milky Way River and be together again!’ The Weaver and the Herdsman ran across the backs of the birds.

In the middle of the bridge of birds they met holding each other in tight embrace. Right around this time the heavy rains slowed to a drizzle. But then the two lovers had to return to their homes in the East and West for yet another lonely year. After that, on the seventh day of the seventh moon of every year, all of the crows and magpies would fly to the Milky Way River to form a bridge. The Weaver and the Herdsman would meet on that special day of every year by crossing the river on the backs of the flock of birds.”²

This story is based on an ancient Chinese myth. This story has continued with very many variations. It also influenced Korean folk tales. Traditionally, the meeting day of the Weaver and the Herdsman is on July 7th of the Lunar calendar. There are some customs for this day of celebration, especially many kinds of ceremonies related to praying for stars have developed. This story reflects the sorrow of the separation of Koreans and also hopes for reunion beyond tragedy.

III. Korean Feminist Theology for reunification

I would like to explain briefly the development of Korean Christianity as follows:

During the history of Korea, connection was made over and over again between socio-political crises and an interest in religion. Koreans

became more intensely occupied with the gospel when secularization began in the west. By that time Koreans had lost interest in the old established religions of their country, but there was a great interest in western culture and the Christian faith which was newly introduced then. In that period of socio-political uncertainty, Christianity found easy access to the population; in a hopeless situation, the message of the gospel provided new hope through the vision of God's kingdom. That was the beginning of Korean Christianity. During this early period, the Korean Church grew rapidly.

One thing must be acknowledged: both male and female missionaries came to Korea mainly from the U.S. However, the missionaries were not separated from the drive for expansion of this colonial capitalistic superpower. Their colonial interest had much influence in Korea in numerous ways, in churches and in society.

Between 1910 and 1945, when Korea was occupied by Japan, national consciousness was also awakened. Particularly in the 1920s there was a kind of national awareness, which was combined with socialistic ideas for an egalitarian society. But these kinds of ideas and activism were very much suppressed under Japanese colonialism. The American missionaries, who had a great influence on Korean Christianity, showed conservative attitudes and they supported the oppressor, as if Christians are supposed to obey uncritically the ruler of the state. Between 1945 and 1960 the church was closely connected with Americanism. Korean Christianity relied too much on Americanism, after Japanese colonialism and the Korean War. Between 1961 and 1990, the Korean Church was oriented to a capitalistic model of development. The idea of economic growth of the country influenced the growth of the church as well. Since 1990, the Korean Church has stabilized and is not growing as rapidly as in the past.

During the second half of last century, when secularization of the West proceeded rapidly, Koreans were suffering terribly from the

Korean War. Many kinds of social problems were caused by this war and by the consequent division of the country into the South and the North. During those difficult times Christians seriously searched for support and they searched for God. Because of this serious journey of search, through their living faith, it was possible for Christians of the Korean church to have vitality.

Even though the National Council of Churches in Korea(NCCK) encouraged different movements for social justice and reunification, the Korean Church generally is oriented toward capitalism and is reinforced by anti-communism. The significant characteristics of Korea's reunification movement consists of three Mins: Minju=Democracy, Minjung=People, Minjok=Korean nation. In other words, the process and the movements for reunification include these dimensions, which is different from anti-communism.

Korean Feminist Theology was associated, from the beginning, with these kinds of movements. Korean Feminist Theology developed under the influence of Western Feminist Theology in the eighty's of the last century.³ In 1980, the Korean Association of Women Theologians(KAWT)⁴ was formed. In retrospect, we do not see, in the course of the last twenty years, that Feminist Theology and Feminist activities have gained an interest and respect in the churches; many activities were considered just women's business and therefore were seen with little regard. In terms of women's ordination, there was significant development in last two decades. It is the conspicuous result of many women's struggles. Nevertheless, the practice of woman's ministry in reality is still very difficult, even though some church laws and statements allow it.

In the Korean Feminist Theology democratic awareness, feministic awareness and national awareness come together in a specific way; that ties in with their own situation in Korea where suffering of the people results from already 50 years of political division of their country. This division is the result of the power struggle between America and

Soviet Union, during the so-called cold war. This division caused many social and political problems as mentioned earlier.

After the end of the Second World War South Korea was systematically subservient to the U.S. domination. Korean dictators and military governments were tied up with the U.S. complex of military-industrial systems. This kind of national political system and anti-communism-oriented Christianity have combined and fortified the division.

The Korean feminist theology is, in many ways, occupied with problems stemming from the division of Korea. The theological subject regarding reunification is the most important task for the Korean Feminist Theology. Soonkyung Park, the foremost pioneer among the first Feminist Theologians in Korea and one of the founders of the Korean Association of Women Theologians(KAWT), is focusing especially on this issue.

Park declared that feminist theology is not only concerned with women, but also should occupy itself with the problems of the people, even though she is well aware that women as Minjok(the nation) and Minjung(the people) are the most conspicuously oppressed.

She became well-known for her action against the anti-communist stance of the Korean theology and the Korean churches⁵. She attempted to formulate social criticism of the capitalistic military power and its connection with globalization that is promoted by America. She also tried to see women and “Minjung” in the light of what is meaningful for the people “Minjok”.⁶ She has been thematizing Minjok or Hanminjok⁷ as the subject matter of Korean theology and Korean feminist theology for the following reasons: “Minjung is the suffering subject of Korean and world iniquities. Whoever speaks of or represents the unification discussion must face the problem of Korea and the world from the Minjung perspective. In this sense, Minjung is the sign of a new unified Korean society. Minjung is itself Minjok, bearing the entire yoke of Hanminjok in the world. However, Minjok

is a more comprehensive concept than Minjung, if the latter is defined as referring to be part of the Minjok.”⁸

In 1988, the NCKK affirmed the “1995 Jubilee-Reunification of Korea.” It is based on the biblical jubilee concept and focused on reconciliation between two Koreas. Even though it was a prophetic movement, there was a lack of feminist aspects of women’s liberation.

Therefore KAWT made their own “Declaration of Korean Women Theologians on the Peace and Reunification of Korean People.”

It began with repentance of a-political consciousness, easygoing attitude and family egoism. “We find the ultimate cause of our national division in the patriarchal culture of domination... When women farmers, women laborers and women in poverty, who are the victims of economic growth, struggle for their own survival against the unjust economic structures, they are accused of being leftist procommunists. ‘The anticommunist law’ or ‘the National Security Law’ also blocks the industrial mission, the student movement, the youth movement, the women’s movement and the democratization movement. The anticommunist ideology has dried up the conscience and human love of the people and is breeding hostility and hatred in the minds of the younger generation, forming distorted personalities that are anti-peace...”⁹ After this declaration, KAWT lead regular seminars and workshops for reunification and to see Korean Christianity from a Korean Feminist Perspective. Park criticized the South Korean and Christian concept of free democracy in general since it is rooted in Western capitalist bourgeois individualism or liberalism. And she insists to include North Korean socialism in the discourse of reunification.

The characteristics of Park’s theology for reunification¹⁰, I would like to summarize as follows:

First of all, She is trying to make a connection with the socialist oriented nationalism of the 1920s. This movement disappeared in Korean history because of Japanese oppression and the Korean War. Park declares that people realized the necessity of combining liberation

and social revolution. National and social movements merged, and people cooperated in and outside of Korea; but after the U.S. military government domination, a Korean socialist notion of national liberation is systematically suppressed.

Nationalism and the issue of “Minjok” in Korea in that sense do not imply imperialist domination, even though nationalism generally, in world history, has a bad connotation.¹¹ She articulates Minjok as Mother and develops feminist values from the national tradition. Her prophetic vision implies consolation for the people in Korea who live under the yoke of division, as Isaiah did for his people (Isaiah 40:1-4).

Secondly, Park is doing theology for reunification with the legacy of European Christian and Marxist dialogue. As an expert of Barthian theology she introduced the left-wing interpretation of Barth’s theology¹² into Korea. This theological heritage developed a methodology of theology against capital expansion, which came to be related to Christianity. Moreover she is trying to develop “the third way” as a model of reunification, which is different from German reunification. This is a message which is relevant not only for Korean people, but also for world peace (Micah 4: 3).

Thirdly, the third way of unification implied in the July 4 declaration in 1972¹³ is unification by transcending the divergent thoughts and systems of South and North. Her third way means “a way of overcoming parts of the South-North socio-economic political form of state, a republic of South-North Confederation.”¹⁴

Last and not least, Park is doing Korean feminist theology for reunification from an eschatological perspective. Her theological main point is how can we sustain our faith in eschatological resurrection and proclaim the eschatological coming Kingdom of God. Christianity is not able to proclaim this message unless we are practically engaged in the liberation of the poor of the world from the powers of global capitalization.

In that sense she emphasized the practical and ethical dimension of inter-religious dialogue. This kind of dialogue and cooperation should help us to take responsibility for human liberation. Religious dialogue without connections to concrete world political and economic reality might be too abstract.

Indeed, she articulates an eschatological vision toward the new earth and new heaven (Isaiah 65: 17-25). “Christianity, that has become part of the capitalist world, has lost the meaning of divine salvation through Jesus Christ, and made it impossible to proclaim the actual coming of the Kingdom of God. The human liberation movement towards transformation of world order is a preparatory correlative to the proclamation of the salvation and coming Kingdom. Inter-religious spiritualities must be explored and built up in terms of their responsibility for human liberation. The final word on the meaning of their spiritualities may belong to the freedom of the Holy Spirit of God and Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

Jesus Christ broke the barrier and opened the door for all of us (Ephesians 2: 14-18) for unity. But we human beings tend to do the reverse. The Korean Church and Christianity is still very much affected by anti-communism. Animosity against North Koreans still dominates. Christianity needs self-criticism regarding social justice. The Church in a post-Marxist society should be a place where social justice in the light of “Good News” proclaims and encourages people to do so rather than condemning, blaming and calling down a curse on communism.¹⁶

The issue on the ecumenical agenda of the National Council of Churches in Korea has strongly remained the unification of the two Koreas. Therefore, some Korean Feminist Theologians complained that women’s issues are not taken seriously enough due to the priority of the reunification issue in Korea. Women’s struggles to improve their status in the family or society are pushed aside as if they were some luxuries which only Western society could afford.¹⁷ In my opinion, even gender issues in Korea shouldn’t be separated from the issue of the whole Korean nation.

Each theology is dependent on the context. For instance, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural problems are not urgent issues for Korea compared to other regions in Asia because Korea is so far a rather homogeneous society. But this issue for reunification due to American-centered militarism occupies Korean Feminist Theology.

To promote inclusive language and to struggle against sexism in Church and Society is still a very important task of Korean Feminist Theology, but this effort shouldn't be separated from the issue of reunification. The division of Korea is not only a family tragedy on the Korean peninsula.¹⁸ It is also a barrier to world peace. It is beyond the individual and family tragedy in Korea.

IV. Closing remarks

Like the Weaver and the Herdsman, Korean people are forced to live separately in two Koreas by superpowers. The 38th parallel dividing Korean people is the Milky Way River. Just like the couple who got this punishment due to neglecting their duties, Korean people are primarily responsible for the separation, but the colonization by Japan and the following division between South and North by the U.S. and the Soviet Union caused this tragedy.

Korean Feminist Theology has to help to break the legacy of hatred and hostility between the two Koreas. The historical truth in terms of the Korean War should be reinterpreted and reevaluated.¹⁹

It is not easy to restore the bridge for the two Koreas. Like crows and magpies which encouraged birds to make themselves into a bridge for the Weaver and the Herdsman, Korean Feminist Theology must take the role of building a bridge between the Koreas.

North Korea is a target for the nuclear weapons and mass destruction issue.²⁰ The process of demonisation of North Korean leaders as one of the axis of evil threatens the peace in the Korean peninsula and disturbs the effort of the peace-making process between the two Koreas. The Korean nation should determine our own destiny and not be manipulated by the U.S. regime.

Indeed a permanent peace settlement with a treaty between the U.S. and North Korea should replace the armistice treaty (a cease-fire agreement) of 1953. Also the National Security Law and Status Of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and South Korea should be basically changed.²¹

The problem of market capitalism and global control of economy, media and militarism etc. should be consequently analyzed in Korean Feminist theological discourse. Needless to say, peace which is based on gender, economic and social justice is so important for the household of earth and planet. The original idea of communism is not evil. It is rather an idea which christianity originally shared (Acts 4: 32-37). Only the realized communist system was problematic, just like capitalism has its own weaknesses. After the collapse of east bloc countries there is only one-sided capitalism. To slander communism and to feel the victory of capitalism is not what Korean Feminist Theology is looking for. To break the unjust system of this globalized world and to construct economic, ecological, and ecumenical justice in a capitalized world is one of the core tasks of Korean Feminist Theology. Korean Feminist Theology should be a theology as facilitator between the two Koreas. Korean Feminist Theologians should raise the awareness of ordinary church women, who are rather oriented toward individual salvation. In order to develop the process of reunification, we need to reconcile with North Korea.²² Since Korean women are the most oppressed of the oppressed and are victimized under male domination and division of the country, Korean women have a right to speak about reconciliation. Korean Feminist theology is invited to build a bridge based on the light of Jesus Christ.

References

1. "Long Long Time Ago". Korean Folk Tales Illustrated by Dong-sung Kim, (Hollym: Seoul), 1997, p. 28.
2. The Weaver and the Herdsman
<http://psh2289.com.ne.kr/jin-9-1.htm>(beginning of 4th century, Dokhungli –ancient tomb in Pyongyang)

Notes

- 1 Asian resources might not be a substitute or alternative for the Bible, but a complementary resource for doing Asian Feminist Theology.
- 2 *Long Long Time Ago*. Korean Folk Tales Illustrated by Dong-sung Kim, (Hollym: Seoul), 1997, pp. 25-29.
- 3 For a general information about Korean Feminist Theology, see. *Feminist Theology and Korean Church*, ed. By the Korean Association of Feminist Theology, Seoul, 1997.
- 4 Cf. www.feminist-theo.or.kr
Reunification movement in relation with KAWT see Chunja Yoo, "Feminist Liberation Spirituality through the Experience of Korean Association of Women Theologians: A Spirituality of Communal Transformation", San Francisco Theological Seminary, Dissertation for D.Min 1999, p. 86ff.
- 5 Soohkyung Park was imprisoned in 1991 for 106 days due to her lecture on "Perspective of Korean Church and Reunification", which she held in Tokyo in July 1991. Cf. Chunja Yoo, *ibid*, p. 96 f.
- 6 Sex slavery issues under Japanese occupation are also considered in this issue of militarism.
Others who are active in this area are: Oochung Lee, Aeyoung Kim, Yoonok Kim and Choonja Yoo etc.
I am trying to do theology from this perspective. But I am focusing also on the Reformed Tradition which was socially critical and included social re-formation as well as church re-formation. In this Protestant context I am trying to develop a Korean Feminist Theology from a reformed traditional perspective. Therefore, I think, the connection, the continuity and critical solidarity with European theology, which has this heritage, is still important for me.
- 7 Han in this term means etymologically universality, greatness, oneness and primordial light etc.
- 8 Soonkyung Park, "The Unification of Korea and the Task of Feminist Theology", in: *In God's Image* 1988, June, p. 18.
- 9 KAWT, "Declaration of Korean Women Theologians on the Peace and Reunification of the Korean People", in: *Reunification of Korea and Feminist Theology*, 1989, pp.241-254. quoted from Chunja Yoo, *ibid*, p. 94
- 10 Park focused her theological works on the issue of reunification. Her major books are:
Soonkyung Park, *Korean People and the Task of Feminist Theology*, (KCLS: Seoul), 1983
Idem, *Kingdom of God and the Future of Korean People*, (KCLS: Seoul), 1985
Idem, *Reunification of Korea and Christianity*, (Hangilsa: Seoul), 1986
Idem, *Suffering and Victory of Reunification Theology of Korea*, (Hangilsa: Seoul), 1992
Idem, *A Journey of Reunification Theology of Korea*, (Hangilsa: Seoul), 1993
Idem, *The Future of Korea's Unification Theology*, (Sakyechul: Seoul), 1997.
- 11 While western modern nationalism has a negative connotation due to colonial capitalist expansionism, Korean nationalism includes social revolutionary components in a good sense.

- 12 Theologians like H. Gollwitzer, F.W. Marquardt, J. M. Lochman etc. belong to this group.
The real cause of the Korean War is still very controversial. When the war broke out in 1950, the World Council of Churches made a kind of resolution in Toronto, Canada. This document shows North Korea caused the war. Karl Barth was one of the most prophetic theologians, who criticized this document as unbalanced and one-sided. Cf. K. Barth, *Offene Briefe 1945-1968*, Karl Barth GA, V. hrsg. von D. Koch, Zuerich 1984, S. 284
Even though Barth was concerned about the enthusiastic tendency of some East European theologians with Communist ideas, he showed most solidarity with them. Since he evaluated positively the idea of socialism, he seems to have solidarity with these theologians.
Cf. Meehyun Chung, Karl Barth, Josef. L. Hromadka, Korea, (Alektor Verlag: Berlin), 1995, S. 119f.
- 13 The July 4 declaration was made by South and North Korea jointly in 1972. The three formal principles of this declaration are 1) unification by the Hanminjok as subject, independent of foreign powers
2) unification by a peaceful method
3) unification by the unanimous will of the Minjok, transcending the two divergent thoughts and systems of South and North.
- 14 Soonkyung Park, "The Unification of Korea and the Task of Feminist Theology", in: *In God's Image* 1988, June, p. 21.
- 15 Soonkyung Park, "Theological Significance of Korean People's Unification Liberation Movements Under the Yoke of National Division and Global Capitalization", in: *Sustaining Spiritualities with Living Faiths in Asia in the Context of Globalization*, ed. by Sookja Chung and Marlene Perera, EATWOT 2002, p. 29.
- 16 Cf. Charles C. West, "The Church in a Post-Marxist Society", in: *Theology between East and West. A Radical Heritage*. Essays in Honor of Jan Milic Lochman, ed. By Frank D. Macchia and Paul S. Chung, (Wipf and Stock Publishers: Oregon), 2002, pp. 297-315.
- 17 Cf. Wai-Ching Angela Wong, "The Poor Woman", A Critical Analysis of Asian Theology and Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Women, (Peter Lang: NY), 2002, p. 59.
- 18 When my mother was two years old, my maternal grandmother took her from North Korea to South Korea. At that time people were still allowed to go back and forth. After the Korean War it was impossible to meet the family again. So my mother couldn't see her father again. She never experienced calling her father. Although she had a very good relationship with her mother, she missed very much to have a father. Therefore she likes to call God as father because then she feels that God is very close and intimate. That is a reason why I am not able to insist on my mother calling God as mother, although I am aware of the problem of God as male in Church history. Cf. Meehyun Chung, "How Can I understand Karl Barth's Theology as a Korean Feminist Theologian?", in: *Theology between East and West. A Radical Heritage*. Essays in Honor of Jan Milic Lochman, ed. By Frank D. Macchia and Paul S. Chung, (Wipf and Stock Publishers: Oregon), 2002, pp. 145-146.

- 19 South Korean President Moohyun Roh 2003 October 31st officially apologized at a meeting in Cheju island for the misusing of power by the South Korean Government during the Cheju 4.3 Uprising from 1947 to 1954, which was a national incident under the name of anti-communism. It was one of the signs that the South Korean government reevaluates modern Korean history and apologized to the victims of this Cheju 4.3 incident officially.
- 20 The Issue of denuclearization of North Korea should accompany a call for the denuclearization of all nations including the U.S.
- 21 Under this unjust military system many Koreans and the environment of nature suffered. Particularly prostitute women on U.S. military base were frequently victim. There are many prostitute women, who were killed by U.S. soldiers. Due to SOFA they weren't punished by Korean law even though all murder cases were so brutal.
After two middle school students were killed by U.S. tanks in 2002, ordinary people became more aware of the problem of the U.S. military system in Korea including the environmental issue because of military drills. It was a pivotal incident.
- 22 Cf. John L. McCullough, "Compassion and Ethics: Korea and the Paradigm for Reconciliation", Lowell Lecture at Boston University Dec. 3. 2003.

**A GENDER ANALYSIS
OF THE DYNAMIC OF AN
AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCH:
NOMIYA LUO CHURCH IN KENYA
(C. 1907 to 1963)**

Mildred A. J. Ndeda

Abstract

This paper explores the connections between gender and the independency Christian ideology in the formation of new social relations as well as affirmation of traditional relations of domination between men and women. To aid in the analysis of these issues a case study is used, that of the Nomiya Luo Church in Kenya, whose history and tenets are discussed. This church developed within a semi patriarchal set up hence we analyse male dominance and its persistence in church. Some of the religious doctrines, beliefs and value systems and their impact on the roles and values concerning women are considered. Roles of women in independent churches, the opportunities for leadership, their roles as healers and patients and in relation to their background and concerns of

daily life are discussed. Moreover, as the rank and file members of such movements, women also possess their own hidden sub-cultures and practices, which definitely influence the groups. The intention is to establish the gender roles and attitudes in this church.

Introduction

The study of independent African churches is a growing field. Publications have increased during the last three decades (Turner 1977). They appear in fascinating variety. The term independent church is generic. It has been applied to churches which were identified in older studies as syncretistic, nativistic, separatist, sectarian, messianic, Zionist, prophetic and cultic. In Africa the increase of such religious groups has been immense (Barrett 1968; Lanternari 1963).

These churches were first seen as a reaction to colonialism; but when they continued to mushroom new explanations were sought. Today there are about 9,000 African Independent Churches (AICs) with millions of followers, estimated at 15 per cent of Africa's total Christian population. According to some sources these estimates are too conservative since the movements are growing faster than scholars are studying them. As Hoehler-Fatton (1995:98) says:

The actual number of Africans involved in various kinds of indigenous Christianity may be much higher still, for the figures published in large surveys frequently exclude small, local Christian groups that stand distinct from established religious denominations but are not officially listed or recognized by their respective governments.

Independent African Churches emerged remarkable early in Kenya and before the First World War there was articulate independency. They emerged in response to colonial presence and became a vital part of the political history of Kenya. They were important at a time when there were few other popular expressions of African antipathy to the colonial presence. They rejected paternalism and the monopolistic attitude of the mainline churches. Their aim was to create

a fraternal spiritual understanding as a means of arousing a sense of identity amongst the followers and fulfilling immediate needs of the communities (Baeta 1962:6). By 1966, there were 166 independent churches in Kenya and by 1978 they had become a matter of concern to the post-independent state (Barrett 1968: 30).

Studies on independency ascertain that women make up at least two thirds of the non-missionary church members and note the greater attraction of religious faith and religious participation of women than men. Nearly every major study has commented that women comprised a majority of the adherents of the churches they studied (Barrett 1968:148; Jules-Rosette 1979: 127; Sundkler 1961; Sundkler 1976: 79). These studies do not however, analyse their participation and role in the process of social transformation. Women have played significant roles, either directly or indirectly, in the troubled life of the church in recent years, especially in the independent churches. Because independency involved direct break from mission control one might expect that they too would emphasise influential roles for women in reaction to the limited roles held by lay African women in mission organisations.

The predominance of women in these churches is significant and yet, with the exception of research done on women's participation in the Legio Maria and Ruwe Roho churches, there is little information about the way which gender shapes religious ideology in these studies.

Independence, Gender and Women's Roles

Kretzshmar (1991:106-119) asks why issues of gender is to be taken seriously by the churches and missiologists. She argues that while in the academic circles gender debate proceeds apace, in the church it is not taken seriously. She concludes, "Can we afford to ignore the vital issues of gender?" We need to ask how those who are proclaiming the good news, respond to the oppression or subordination of women. Further, can the church preach liberation if it oppresses women within its own ranks? What is the reason for the subdued

silence of women in church and other areas? What does this convey of the church and its perception of women? Ramodibe (1996: 413-416 cited in Ramodibe 2000: 255) carries this comment further:

There can be no argument that the church is one of the most oppressive structures in society today, especially in regard to the oppression of women. About three quarters of the people in the church are women, but men make decisions affecting them alone (with very few exceptions). Once women are acknowledge as pastors, as the body of Christ, we can build a new church (in Africa). I say a new church because the church as we have it today is a creation of male persons. As women, we have always felt like strangers in this male church.

Gender simply refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women and men in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life of women and men. It therefore constitutes an aspect of the wider social division of labour and this, in turn, is rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction, and reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in society

These socially constituted relations between genders may be of opposition and conflicts, which take very different forms under very different circumstances. They often take the form of male dominance and female subordination (Whitehead 1978). The subject matter of analysis is then the various forms that subordination takes, for example women's exclusion from positions of responsibility. This means sharing in status because a great deal of decision-making and authority goes to men. A gender approach means analysing the forms and the links that gender relations take, and the links between them and other wider relations in society. Religious relations are gendered, making it significant in religion. It organises material and ideal religious life. Throughout time it has functioned as a unique and critical symbol that in itself qualified (or disqualified) a person for participation. Sexual dominance prevailed and men were privileged over women. Males

retained exclusive access to key authoritative posts such as the pastoral office and eldership board membership.

Ethnographic and historical studies of women and religion have thoroughly documented patterns of women's exclusion from positions of significant religious leadership. In many societies women have active religious lives, yet ecclesiastical hierarchies rarely include women and official or great tradition or religious concepts generally reflect men's and not women's priorities and life experiences. But however, scattered throughout the world and centuries, there are instances of religious domination by women in which women have been the leaders, the majority of participants and in which women's concerns have been central (Sered 1994:3).

In the available literature, the most puzzling issue is the immense power and influence which female leaders often wield in these churches contrary to male dominance in the mainstream churches. In some of these churches prophetesses have left indelible marks on the African continent, for example, Alice Lakwena of Uganda, Mother Jane Bloomer of Freetown. In Ivory Coast, Marie Lalou was inspired by a dream to start a cult so that women have ceremonial leadership and a clear sense of gender roles is maintained. In the movement of William Harries Wade, women become leaders and gender roles are well balanced, but polygamy is not renounced. Such independent churches believe that it is the Holy Spirit that raises people to positions of authority, irrespective of gender. Locally, there is Mary Akatsa of Kawangare and Maria Aoko of Legio Maria who carved niches for themselves in Kenya's religious history.

Bengt Sundkler (1976:79) says that from early times the church was like a women's liberation movement and functioned as one, long before that term was invented. Indeed, he points out numerous examples of churches in South Africa where women excelled as leaders but he also gives instances of women's efforts that failed to receive recognition and appreciation because of gender. An example

is that of Grace Tshabala who brought great revival in her church but was described as “after all she was merely a woman”. Her husband and other Zionst leaders admitted, “yes they can pray all night but of course man’s prayer is stronger, for he is the head and leads in everything.” Perhaps in South Africa, the fact that women lead as presidents of churches, while others are involved in both the financial burdens and evangelistic outreach is Zionist’s great contribution to African society.

Zion gave women a central and honoured position, in healing activities, in worship and social life of the church. New emotional contacts of care and concern were found where women and men could meet on equal terms. These terms were regarded as those of the ultimate authority of the Holy Spirit. But perhaps this was also determined by other parallel occurrences, for example, in 1955 women led in the bus strike in the Rand. There was also an upsurge in women’s involvement in business, and women’s organisations were even stronger in the churches. And as Barrett (1968) claims, it is in the independent church movements of Africa that women had chance to recover some of their traditional status and position which had been undermined by the teaching of the mission churches.

Some charistmic independent churches are more of a man’s world than a woman’s. Many women scholars have criticised African Christian traditions for being sexist. Despite the church being populated by women, they still play a marginal role in power structures of the church. The African churches are like “inverted pyramids” where *the few male adherents lead the many women*. One Kenyan Independent Church leader once rendered ordination of female priests as a deviation from Christian teachings whose consequence was confusion and called for its immediate end. This was after the ordination of female priests in two of the mainline churches.¹

Leadership is an important feature of any church. Despite their numerical dominance, women rarely occupy top positions in their

church’s administrative hierarchies. Instead they command, what Benetta Jules-Rosette (1979: 127) has termed “ceremonial leadership”, a leadership entailing the use of mystical talents during specified and limited occasions by men.

What we are saying is that women’s roles in their religions vary tremendously between and within religions. Some religious organisations are founded on fundamentalist principles which promote a traditional or even regressive social position of women, while others are welfare oriented and the churches are seen as allowing outlets for expression of leadership qualities and for solving disputes (West 1975: 49; 74-75). The importance of leadership cannot be overstressed. Those who do not find immediate scope of advancement within the church are potential seceders unless new positions are created for them with new responsibilities. The Nomiya Luo Church (NLC) falls within the category of those churches that failed at the crucial point to solve the issue of the subordination of women in both the society and religion.

The Context of the Emergence of The Nomiya Luo Church (NLC)

The NLC developed among an ethnic group of Nilotic origin, the Luo of Kenya. The Luo society on the eve of colonial rule was patrilineal, exogamous, virilocal and organised into territorial segmentary lineages. Within this system people acquired land primarily through patrilineal inheritance. Under Luo customary law women did not have independent rights in the land but were assigned plots by their husbands. Women had no jurial autonomy and no independent legal rights over their children (Hay 1982: 110-123; Pala 1980; Potash 1978:380-396). Betty Potash’s recent argument that, despite informal methods of getting what they want, most women, given the structure of Luo society, are subordinate to men. This is applicable to the society in colonial times. She states (Potash 1978:384):

Luo men... have considerable formal control over the behaviour of their wives. While women have means of evading such control and regularly do so, if a wife wishes to keep her children and to maintain a good reputation, she must maintain her marriage. To this extent she must conform, at least superficially to her husbands requirements, and must avoid antagonising her mate to the point of separation.

In Luo society a woman's primary role was as a wife and mother and to instruct girls in the importance of obedience to husbands, in mothering and diligent work both in the home and in the garden. Women gained respect in the community largely through bearing many children and raising them well (Ominde 1977: 34-36). The division of labour within a typical homestead was based on sex and age. Women and men had different roles (though overlapping occurred in certain instances). The males were heads of homesteads and sometimes household, depending on the number of wives and family size. In decision making some exerted control over many aspects of household operations while others delegated authority to wives and sons. No matter how involved the men were in household operations, women were in control of the domestic economy (Oswald 1915: 27-28).

The Luo culture valued age and the wisdom it brought. In the past male elders formed territorial councils in which certain wealthy elderly women were able to participate in and even occasionally chair. In addition people always sought the wise words of grandmothers and older women on numerous issues of significance. The *Pim*, an ageing widow, was frequently the one who lived with and trained the girls (Hoehler-Fatton 1995:112). In all matters of protocol, the senior wife (*mikayi*) was also very important. Often she participated in the settlement of homestead land disputes. While women were not expected to express their views publicly, on important matters they were consulted privately.

Before a man took a decision with repercussion on the family he might say "*We apenj orindi mondi* (Let me consult the head rest

before making the decision) (Odaga 1980:22). Men consulted particularly with *mikayi* because of her prominence in performance of all crucial rituals and as the co-owner and participant in decision-making of the homestead. Despite these obvious allowances to women, the Luo system was patriarchal and theoretically the men were expected to dominate. This was a system that could be easily manipulated by a more dominant system.

The period 1895-1902 was that of recovery for the Luo and marked the establishment of colonial rule. Nyanza had experienced a rinderpest epidemic (*Apamo*) in 1890 which killed many cattle leading to both immediate and long-term adjustments in the balance between pastoralism and agriculture. Homes renowned for wealth in cattle had but a few heads or none at all.² That was followed immediately (1891-1892) by a famine. It is likely that the crucial work of recovery from famine lay in the production and reproduction labour of women (Lonsdale 1977: 23). In some places dowries were either reduced or suspended due to lack of livestock and marriage was perhaps made easier for all men including the poor. Some married men abandoned their wives and left them to fend for themselves. Some young men, on the other hand, might have worked for their fathers' in-law instead of paying the dowries.

The colonial system itself was patriarchal, male institution in all its aspects. It regarded women, even within its own service, as shallow, self centred and the cause of trouble. They had to be dependent on their husbands if married, and as professionals, hold subordinate positions. So for the colonial government Kenya was a man's country. Colonialism generated the alienation of women through practices like the monetisation of several of Luo practices. Several colonial economic, social and political policies were to have adverse effects on the Luo family life and specifically on the women. The CMS and MHF were also patriarchal in the sense that certain males had authority and they practised the patriarchal hierarchy both in the household and

the church. Both the colonial men and the missionaries viewed women as hysterical, irrational and obedient to nature's impulses more than men and this was even more exaggerated in the case of African women (Hoehler-Fatton 1995: 10). Possibly this is why the British missionaries encouraged their wives to teach African women in domesticity, but again, they could only do this without interfering with the mission's work, that of converting African men.

Basically this was a period in which enormous changes were beginning to take place in the gender order of society since religion and church generate significant gender templates by which people run their lives and build gender order of society. The colonial system, the missionaries and even later the independent churches disrupted the established patriarchal precolonial gender order in multiple ways. This created spaces for African men like Yohana Owalo to open up new spaces and to set out new gender templates for the Luo follow. Some men and some women then moved into these new spaces and built new gender regimes. It was within the situation where existing uncertainties and new forces were beginning to impinge on each other that the NLC arose.

The Founding of the Nomiya Luo Church

Yohana Owalo, the founder of the Nomiya Luo Church (henceforth NLC), was born in Asembo Location, Bondo Districts, Nyanza Province. (Asembo was previously under districts variously named as Central Kavorondo, Central Nyanza, and Kisumu district and after independence Siaya district). Yohana Owalo was the third son born to Abor, son of Otonde, and his second wife, Odimo. He hailed from the Kochieng clan specifically of the lineage of the Kocholla. Owalo's poor background earned him spite and occasional scornful remarks from his own followers. Abor was also polygamous and had five sons and a number of daughters out of this polygamous arrangement. Owalo's own mother had three sons and three daughters whom we were unable to trace during research.³ It is possible that by the time

Owalo started his religious movement he was already orphaned since none of the respondents seemed to recall his parents.⁴

Yohana Owalo, the founder of the NLC, was a man with great experience within the colonial world-view. He got involved with the colonial government, possibly as a porter, when the railway construction was approaching Kisumu before 1900. Probably it was during such visits that he met graduates from Kaimosi who made an impression on him and he decided to remain in Kisumu and study at the Catholic Mission at Kibuye. According to J.J. Willis (n.d.), one such person who impressed him was Daudi Kweto, a Kaimosi old boy, who worked in Kisumu, but who frequently decried the Europeans inadequate understanding of Africans. By October 1905, Owalo was a student in the day school at the Roman Catholic Station, Kibuye. He spent four months at the school and then decided to serve as a "Mission's boy" which he did in the subsequent four months. In June 1906 he was baptised as Johannes. Shortly after this, he left Kisumu to work as a "house boy" for a court judge, one Alexander Morrison, in Monbasa (Willis n.d.). while in Mombasa, he had several visions and revelations that convinced him of God's call upon his life. The most spectacular one that completely transformed him came on 1 March 1907 when he was taken to the first, second and third heaven by the spirit. He saw various revelations in these heavens.

After his heavenly experienced, Morrison deterred Owalo from starting his movement until he had acquired adequate education. Consequently he joined the Catholic Ojola mission until it became apparent that his beliefs were inimical to the Catholic faith and he was sent away in 1907. He had a brief spat with the Muslims in Kisumu and was probably circumcised before he joined the CMS School in Nairobi in 1908. By 1909, he had joined the Church of Scotland in Kikuyu (Opwapo 1981).⁵ In October 1910 he joined Maseno as a teacher but again his controversial beliefs became known and he was expelled in 1912, because of his avowed belief that Jesus was not of

the same substance as God and his rejection of monogamy as basically a European idea and not a biblical one. He left Maseno to start his Mission to the Luo. Later (1914) it was renamed Nomiya Luo Mission. This was the first African Independent Church in Kenya.

This religious movement was attractive to both men and women and spread with such marked rapidity that by 1920 when the founder died, it had spread all over Luoland and into some of the white settled areas. When the expansion of a movement is so rapid, several questions arise, for instance, why were people joining? What features did it display that made it attractive?

First, when Owalo appeared in Asembo, it is possible that he recognised the situation of the Luo Community in the face of colonialism. He capitalised on this and then articulated it. Owalo built a community out of the breaking pieces of then old and the ill adopted offerings of the new. He introduced a movement attuned to the traditional fears, needs and aspirations. In a society that was undergoing rapid change, with Christianity providing the framework, certain important factors were overlooked. Second, the spiritual, emotional, moral and religious needs of the Luo were ignored. Visions, dreams, spirits and even their notions of God were considered futile. Religion played a very significant part in the day-to-day life of the Luo and was generally practical at the family level. Both sexes performed rituals, which reinforced the existing social order and participated in cults, marked by spirit possession. Men dominated in the arena of lineage-strengthening rites and in making frequent offerings to the ancestors in small shrines located within the *dala*. Women too participated in some of the lineage based religion like the naming of infants and the installation of a married son (Potash 1978:390).

It was however, in the realm of the ecstatic religion that women predominated for they were easily possessed by the various clusters of spirits which only needed to be tamed and harnessed to become useful in society. The Luo recognised the ancestral spirits and the

supreme God; they also contended that each individual had his or her God (*Nyasache ni kode*- when one escaped from danger) who in collaboration with the ancestors was responsible for his or her well-being (Odaga 1980:23). The Luo believed in spirits of non-human origin, magic and witchcraft. The society had a need for solutions to existential problems such as fears of the forces of evil, the need for emotional outlet and religious healing. Owalo understood the importance of witchcraft, the tradition of spirit possession; mediumship and ancestral spirits among the Luo and viewed them as issues to be dealt with through the ministry of the church. Consequently, he promised both mental and physical healing of illnesses. Adherents cite several cases of healing and exorcism, the majority of whom involved women. Exorcism remains a common practice in the NLC.

Several cultural practices of the Luo disgusted the Europeans, especially missionaries, who militated against them. Indeed their attitude to the indigenous culture and religion was generally disastrous. Owalo's movement contributed significantly to the process of deculturation. He curtailed missionary campaigns against certain religious practices, customs and institutions for example, polygamy and ceremonies accompanying death. To the missionaries, the Luo practice of polygamy was offensive to Christian morals, therefore, the baptism of polygamous men and of women and children of such marriages, was not allowed. Owalo accepted these as practical arrangements within his movement.

The controversial issue of polygamy was touchy because it was such an integral part of the local culture that people were bewildered with the idea that there should be anything wrong with it. Polygamy was resorted to in instances of childlessness, which was not merely an unfavorable incident, but a calamity. In this case, it served both the man and the woman. The woman could bring in a close relative to be her co-wife to avert the calamity. Second, when a legitimate partner to cohabit with; similarly in instances of ill health another wife was advantage to the ailing woman. In marriages that had shortcomings,

the second marriage saved the first wife from embarrassment and ridicule and gave her the opportunity to correct herself. It was also a moral obligation that in case a girl became pregnant before marriage she could be married off to an elderly man. Polygamy was also a sign of acquisition of wealth, status and power for men and it also contributed to economic independence and social status for women.

The levirate⁶ was also a part of this polygamous arrangement and the nobility and integrity of a homestead depended on how ready its owners were to take up responsibility as when crises arose. A woman who had lost her husband needed a helper/replacement and also the psychological help and care for the well-being of her children. To keep this wife and children in the home a male member of the family of upright standing had to step in as caretaker. This was the best tribute to the dead. This was the best tribute to the dead. This was clearly understood and empathised with by the caretaker's wife because tomorrow it could be her turn. It contributed to the widow's own security in the home and to the promotion of the integrity of the homestead. The levirate was like the social security for widows (Maliu n.d.). By this practice wives were regarded as still formally married to the dead men and referred to as *chi liel* (wife of the grave). The leviratic union was not regarded as marriage, although some of the elements are common. This was like the Luo version of the life insurance policy and women had a choice in who would be their levir.

The crusade against polygamy by Christianity affected the entire society but particularly women. Harun Nyakito reported that in instances where a man had a church wedding, his wife took him before the church council if she discovered his intention to marry a second wife. The church council handed him over to the District Commissioner and the man was imprisoned for breaking a law. Owalo himself tried to take a second wife but the first made it impossible for her to stay.⁷

Wives of polygamists suffered if their husbands became Christians because the man was only permitted to keep one wife and the others

were often sent away suffering the stigma of rejection and disgrace. Robins (1979: 185-202) suggests that women joined independent movements seeking religious legitimisation for the rejected polygamous unions. Europeans attacked it as originating from sinful lust but failed to recognise it as an economic and social institution. Thus, the campaign against it was conducted with colonial criteria, methods and aims, which took little account of the real and immediate exigencies of women.

For women, this constant conflict between mission and polygamous institutions was leading to an assault on the family. Luo women had managed to cooperate with co-wives, polygamy worked for them, in that it guaranteed them some autonomy, personal freedom and greater mobility than would be possible in a monogamous nuclear family. They could also use their position as a means of maximising their own interests. Several wives in a homestead meant that women had more time to themselves and could develop strong bonds with other women.⁸

Owalo authorised men to keep a maximum of four wives if they had interest in leadership positions, but gave no limitation to those who did not harbour such interest. But he advocated for equality and fairness for all wives. He maintained that polygamy was not immoral but scriptural since patriarchs like David, Abraham, and Solomon practised it with no godly retribution and it was more acceptable than adultery (Opwapo 1981:159). Thus entry into the church became easy; polygamists did not need to discard extra wives and the polygamous women and children were relieved of the stigma, they acquired recognition and, acceptance, which they had been denied in the mainline churches.

The NLC was an African movement, not only in its leadership and the growing membership, but also especially in its attempt to come to terms with the African existential situation. This Africanness was at first a definite asset. Through it God's word was made to belong to the Luo, thus the Luo regained their self-respect. This movement

attracted all and sundry. Men who had nasty martial experiences with the colonial system joined with whole families. Many of those attracted to the movement were women. Owalo had an agenda for both men and women. Lois Otinda, one of the earliest female adherents recalled that Owalo gathered both men and women and taught them the catechism, reading and writing every afternoon in his early days in Orengo. She was baptised after attending these classes and was given a new name, a mark of a new identity. Owalo's attitude towards women could also have stemmed from his martial experiences. His wife Alila failed to recognise his mission, was rebellious, rude and he regarded her as insane. Since he lacked this female support, he failed to problematise the place of women, instead he was rarely in their company and ordered his leaders to avoid frequent interaction with women.

Membership of the Independent Churches provided certain benefits. Male migrant labour left women with much physical and agricultural labour. Tasks classified as men's work were taken over by women. Hence the life of the Luo woman was defined and dominated by *tich* (work). The concept of work was integral to the way Luo culture depicted and shaped women. Loitering, even as relaxation, was stigmatised hence the church gave innumerable opportunities for women's legitimated socialisation and friendship (Ndeda 1991). Women in particular gained a caring support network outside the formal structures (e.g. fellowship groups with shared experience) of society and the opportunities for personal advancement. These churches also formed a legitimate space within which women freely participated outside the home without question or need for justification. On the other hand, they provided that spiritual solace and community in a world in which hard work, social, economic, physical and emotional violence were the order of the day. Nervous breakdowns or mental disturbances were not rare among women with such stresses. In the small local communities there was relief. Shoe found a relaxing escape from the arduous daily tasks and an opportunity of entering

into a sympathetic relationship with women under similar strains. When the woman was prayed for, or when she prayed alone, she underwent a psychological treatment that gave her emotional relief. Increasing drift of women into independent movements was also due to barrenness, delay in conception, and domestic difficulties. The churches responded to these problems through deliberate and open prayer and healing sessions. In spite of the relief that women obtained they were not allowed to hold any positions of spiritual leadership. However, women as members of the NLC continued to attain prestige, status and respect (Opwapo 1981:206). This means that the NLC ministered to its members in a personal and meaningful way at the crisis points of life; therefore it obtained results where the mission churches had failed.

Apart from the tensions and anxieties of the family, the women in colonial times were also the victims of the policies of the mission churches. Missionaries had often criticised and undermined the African forms of religious expression in which women had a part to play. Lehmann (1963) suggests that many women were attracted to the independent churches because they replaced the functions of customary institutions that were weakened by cultural change. Barrett (1968:147) remarks:

The missionary assault on the family complex caused women to act, for they felt the issues at stake more keenly than the men. With more to lose, they vehemently defended their traditional institutions and way of life.

Conclusively, the church's interpretation of Christianity gave women the opportunity to be involved in the churches' activities not as silent observers, but as participating subordinate actors.

Independence and the Subordination of the Luo Women

The NLC developed its form of leadership with time. Owalo established what seems as a paramount chief type of leadership, in that the leadership went beyond clan boundaries. He mingled with Luo leadership pattern and the Christian one. He church was is ethic

group and he insisted that only true Luo could be his followers. Owalo was the first leader of the group. He also instituted circumcision as a central feature in leadership. Circumcision was a heavenly mark of distinction but it alienated women from the positions of leadership. In the call of heavenly experience he was to circumcise men alone and this was essential for full membership, which means that women joined as appendages of men. In the early phases of his ministry his adherents could not baptise and when they acquired in 1917 his response was that they were not yet circumcised. He was able to circumcise the first three, and later six. After his death more people were circumcised the first of its significance for leadership. The adherents were proud because this was a mark of uniqueness and set them apart. In 1933, they introduced the circumcision of small boys eight days after birth, which automatically placed a mark of the leadership on the boys from a tender age. The little girl was baptised on the 14th day as a mark of identity with the church (Opwapo 1918:166). However, at his death in 1920, he failed to appoint his successor. He had no son to inherit leadership. Hence after his death wrangles over leadership ensued but later Petro Ouma was recognised as leader.

In 1930 Petro introduced new positions in the leadership structure which included secretary, treasurer, and archdeacon. He held the position of Bishop in spite of the recurrent wrangles until his death in 1954. G.C. Owalo, born to Alila wife of Yohana Owalo, through levitic union, took over as Bishop. Writing the first constitution of the Church, G.C. Owalo included the following on leadership. "The direct descendant (male) of the spiritual leadership will normally succeed to the spiritual leadership of the church at the majority age of thirty or more years." During his leadership, the area of jurisdiction was divided into two pastorates managed by two male pastors. Hence the leadership had two pastors, location teachers, preachers and lay readers. Lay posts like the general secretary and treasurer were also introduced. All holders of these positions were men. A significant, humble office plagued by persistent problems was that of the *sharriff* (the

circumciser). Those who claimed knowledge of this skill abounded and several decrees had to be promulgated to stop them from practising but to no avail.

The Bishop was the overall head and was assisted by the archdeacon. The chief pastor, who was the direct representative of the bishop, had under him location priests and lay readers who were directly responsible for small communities. The secretary general was responsible for all church correspondence and the administration of the church. The treasurer was in charge of all churches finances. This was the pattern of leadership until 1972 when the whole hierarchy was revised and made even more elaborate.

In the NLC titles, martial status and age assumed significance in conferring status. The ideal leader in addition to being male had to be at least middle aged and married. In leadership, literacy was a requirement but not necessarily a high level of education. Before assuming the position of spiritual leadership ordination and proper consecration was done in the presence of many adherents. During the ordination the leader's responsibilities were clearly delineated to avoid conflicts.

The domination of leadership roles by men shows evidence that in the NLC, women were subordinated. This subordination simply means to put a person, or group, in a less important position (Caufield 1981; Collins, 1971). The subordination of women refers to relations between men and women within the social process as a whole and the way those relationships work to the detriment of women. Collins argues from the Freudian perspective that women's subordination is fundamentally as a result of men's sexual lust and men have used their size and strength to coerce women (Collins, 1971). Tiger on the other hand asserts that male dominance arises from their social bonding.

The argument here is that their subordination was not solely the result of the policies imposed by foreign capital and other forces of colonialism. Rather, patriarchal value systems borrowed patriarchal

control and reinforced and transformed one another evolving into new structures and forms of domination. The contention here is that both Owalo and later church leaders did not seriously challenge the basic structure of gender relations. Hence inequality between men and women remained rooted and perpetuated. Conclusively, independence, which becomes institutionalised, has largely lost its liberating function for women as it reinstates, determines and distorts traditional values. The NLC mainly affirmed traditional relations of domination between men and women. Thus women continued to be victims of male dominance. Patriarchal value systems, borrowed from both the Luo patterns and colonial system. Were supported by religious beliefs of the NLC and exerted social belief in male superiority and female inferiority. Hence the subordination of women was rubber stamped by the NLC.

Despite the attractions of this movement, it should be noted that the society within which it emerged was guided by strong patriarchal tendencies, which were real and quite durable. This system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women was clearly replicated in the Nomiya Luo Church. The tendencies caused the subordination of women in the movement. The NLC developed fundamental organisational principles based on the traditional social structure with gender as the major determinant of the division of labour. As in the rest of the society, the major decision makers and functionaries were men. The main figures in the church were the bishops, elders, and administrators. This religious movement was viewed as everyone's concern but with the specific responsibility and privilege of men. Women were extremely important, absolutely essential and highly regarded but primarily as facilitators of the men's religious activities. Most of the women were not aware of their own giftedness, dignity, and potential and self-worth because they were unconsciously victims of male dominance, social prejudices and discrimination. Their valuable contribution to the church was either insignificantly appreciated, or not at all.

In the church, men regarded themselves as superior to women and as their roles increased in number and importance so women were denied equal opportunities in church. Women were not appointed into the critical areas of decision-making and participation like the NLC gatherings of leaders. They were also excluded from the leadership role in all public rituals, for example, no women officiated as elders during ordination and baptismal ceremonies or as *sharrif* (the circumciser). But it should be noted that during circumcision an elderly woman was present with the ritual cleansing before the operation. At the official level of church organisation women were seemingly excluded from positions of authority, for at the death of Owalo his close adherents and the bearers of his mantle and vision were men. However, women played the same domestic roles they filled in other areas of life such as cleaning the church, cooking and serving during their ceremonial functions, and organising prayers for the sick but were never assigned priestly functions (Opwapo 1981:185). They also led in the solos and directed the church singing on Sundays and other occasion because music as a form of presentation and expression was greatly appreciated by women.

When Owalo began to teach in any locale, prayers were held both at dawn and dusk. A bell was rang to alert the neighbouring adherents to gather in the leader's home for prayers. Such gatherings soon fell under the leadership of women and occurred extensively in the 1920s and 1930s as labour migrancy rapidly become the lifestyle of the Luo males. Wives of the leaders sustained such prayers in their homes long after their husbands died, for example, Saphira Okanja kept this practice for thirty years after the death of her husband in 1954. This is responsibility which women undertook without due recognition, yet it served as a discipleship programme, sustained the *dala* concept, made the church unique, and was the lifeline of the church (Opwapo 1981:148)

The female religious participation, religious metaphors and beliefs concerning female sexuality are all evidences of the existing subordination. Female religious metaphors for example, derived from the sexual and reproductive status such as *Nyasach dhako* meaning the uterus. The uterus was considered the point where life began and God did his moulding work. Reference to the uterus only in her ability to give birth. There was also the age held belief that female sexuality was polluting and contaminating to all things. Hence a woman was rendered incapable of leading worship service or the singing if she should be menstruating.

Her sexuality was also seen as needing periodic purification, for example, after birth of a child the woman was confined for a period of either 33 days or 66 days depending on the sex of the child. This period ended with a covenant feast (*sawo*) in which chicken and or other animals were sacrificed to mark the end of the period of confinement, the woman was under the care of an elderly woman, ate special dishes, was confined to specified sections of her house, was to remain indoors, was not to touch the husbands or her church clothes, bible and prayer book, and had no sexual relations with the husband during this period. In other words she was in a state of sexual taboo.

Even those independent churches which involve women in ministry still evoke inauspiciousness of the energy which emanates from females sexuality and use it to curtail women's involvement e.g., menstruating woman, or one who has just delivered, or unwashed after sexual intercourse, or women with uncovered hair (Oduyoye 1992:20). Women are keen observers of these taboos against pollution particularly in the case of menses, which is believed to defile a woman and all that she touches.

Most ritual obligations for adult women were related to their roles as mothers and took place in the private family setting or private domain of the household. For example, during the *sawo* (covenant celebrations

after period of confinement) it was women who directly helped their colleagues throughout the period of confinement. But at the end of the period the church male leaders officiated in the purification ceremony and were served the delicious sections of the meal as specified by the religious movement for instance, the chicken roast and the kidneys and livers of the animal. Males on the other hand, performed rituals that were beneficial to the whole group and in the public domain, for example, baptism and circumcision. While men officiated in the funeral services, it is the women who participated in the funerary dirges. The dirges involved the *sigweya*- poetic praises recalling the heroic performances of the deceased. Saphira Okanja did this woeful lamentation while recounting the exploits of Owalo the day he died.⁹

Why were women subordinate? Paradoxically women attended church in greater numbers than men and this largely agrees with the commonly held view that women are intuitive, receptive to religious experience and by nature more devout than men. Yet women were confined to the domestic sphere often in some form of seclusion or, even if they were allowed to move in public spaces, there were numerous social conventions. Second, they were excluded from formal religion and from participating in important public rituals. They might have been important in possession cults and healing rites but these were extensions of the traditional female roles. On the other hand, the few men who attended the church held prominent roles, performed religious rituals, formulated dogma, provided those divinely inspired ideas and controlled the powers of female reproductivity and dictated social and cultural roles of women.

In the history of the NLC women have been exploited by male adherents but not given equivalent status. In 1930, Elisha Adet a recalcitrant member of NLC took about 12 married women to Chula Ndere against the mandate of the colonial government (and the advice of NLC leadership) because he had a fresh vision, which required him

to receive commandments, instructions and structures from God. But it seems the women were only used for sex for when they returned six months later the majority were not only pregnant, but also sick. Similarly in 1961 when James Owigo Pesa emerged among these NLC's adherents with new powers of preaching, healing and exorcism, he took a group of women (married and unmarried) as helpers and doctors with him when he travelled from Oboch to South Nyanza. The end result was mass pregnancy.

Whereas women were freed from their political responsibilities they had expressive powers that operated chiefly in ceremonies and settings managed by female elders. Because they lacked legitimate authority women based their leadership upon two forms of power: the mystical power based upon spiritual gifts, which operated like *Muya* (Holy Spirit). And since the 1960s, the direct control of situated interaction. As already mentioned, most of the NLC ritual activities were distinguished by gender marked expectations and differences in participation.

The concept of Christianity equality, with the expectation that men and women enter heaven side by side, is basic to the NLC doctrine. However, the expression of equality in political leadership was denied women whenever men were present at a ritual of events, Luo women show respect and express their control through their informal leadership. Through this interaction, women controlled and directed the sense of ceremonies and other ritualised behaviour without formally acknowledged leadership roles. This was evident in the participation in song (Opwapo 1981). The women would be reprimanded when their participation transgressed the boundaries of sin, healing and mediumship. However, during ritual the routine exercise of power occurred through song intervention. Intervention with song allowed the woman to redirect sermon topics to present moral lessons that criticise the types of wrong doings they associate with men.

Women also derived power from the sub realm detached from public authority namely, the all female enclaves. Women developed social networks, or enclaves, that became their control bedrocks where their power and authority developed. These enclaves allowed them to discuss issues that concerned them and place pressure on the leadership- overt pressure that could cause certain decision to be made. Women could also attain positions of authority within the congregation based on relationship to authoritative men. Perhaps they also exercised considerable informal authority through their husbands or their fathers. This kind of authority was ascribed to and could be similar to the authority and influence of *mikayi* among the Luo. Women also held congregational power. A crisis affecting the morale of the congregation could lift what might be described as a delicate dance between male authority and female power in church life. When trouble hit the NLC the women revealed that they had bargained with rather than surrendered to patriarchy. They remained tangible factors in the social control mechanism of the group. They used overt and ambiguous ways to address women's concerns. The NLC and its splinters have somehow managed to control the churches affairs in spite of the women who claim to have received the Holy Spirit. However, it should be noted that in moments of crisis and division in the church the support and participation of women became quite significant because of their vocal participation and the ability to tread where men feared. Often they saved the church from very serious splits as in 1962/63 and in the early 1930s and 1950s.

For men, preaching was a routine aspect of ritual leadership. The sermons were performed in concert with a reader who presented a passage, which was elaborated upon by a speaker in antiphonal fashion. Women remained seated and initiated song from this position. The women's interruption was a controlled contribution from this restrained position. This ritual participation could be viewed from the large Luo concept of *wich kuot* or shame. In the Sunday ceremony, the women's

song participation was complementary to that of men. In the curing ceremony, women played an active and instrumental role. Healing would be like an extension of normal routine domestic activity. Midwifery (*nyamrerwa*) was confined to the older women.

In the area of religious values, gender was not a decisive symbol: equality of gender prevailed. The salvific relationship was shaped, not by sexual dominion or sexual polarity, but sexual unity. So soteriologically women and men are equal. The other sifting values gave men authority but the personal relationship with a living deity was available equally to men and women. As far as this was concerned the significance of gender was a moot point. To date one of the articles of faith is that the NLC will provide eternal life for all its adherents. The words of E. Sullerot (1971:233) aptly conclude this paper:

A visitor from another planet would find it paradoxical that while the majority of the Churchgoers are women, religious doctrines certainly do not value the female sex very highly, or at least have been misinterpreted over the centuries to give women a subordinate role in religious practices. They have been debarred from conducting religious services and administering sacraments. In the main line churches currently a number of women are now rejecting the self-effacement involved in this definition of their religious roles.

The NLC has survived in a world that has experienced several changes. It is a world where both in the secular world and the church, women are speaking with a new voice and a new urgency. In conferences, seminars and discussion groups of various kinds the issue of women's roles is being addressed. It is amazing that in spite of political independence, the Women's Decade (1975-1985), post-Nairobi and now Beijing, this church that has emerged out of changed circumstances has not considered ordaining women as priests to date or changing the rules concerning women's participation. Women may be vocal in situations of disagreement and infighting, in the music and even dance and participate actively as preachers in *mony* (night vigils) and in the ceremonies neatness parades but to date they will be

reminded that they are mere women when it comes to issues of significance

As life transmitters, effective agents of communication and fervent religious adherents, women in the NLC should be empowered to advance to all positions of church leadership. Empowerment would mean provision of education since the majority of the women folks are either illiterate or semiliterate. Thus they are incapable of participating in certain deliberations and discourses requiring literacy. This is part of the church population that has distinguished itself for its love of the church and willingness to commit itself to work in the church. These women were and are actually the pillars of the church, always active, strong and ready to carry forth the mission of the church. With this in mind it is necessary for the church to authenticate the ministry of women.

Conclusion

Within these independency religious movements equality of the sexes in relationship to God will continue to co-exist with complete male monopolisation of leadership roles, religious laws and authority in community affairs, for even in religious framework that exclude women from authority, women may be active participants. Women's religious lives are often closely linked to their interpersonal concerns: the network of relationships that seems most relevant to the understanding of women's religiosity is the family. An intense concern with the well-being of their extended family characterises the religious life of many women. Even within the male dominated religious contexts, women domesticate religion by emphasising ritual and symbols that give spiritual meaning to their everyday lives (e.g., observing food taboos, sacramental foods).

For its own survival and future effectiveness, the NLC needs to address the issue of the liberation of women. Women must be given roles in decision making and this will help towards equity. It should also come to grips with its own concept of vocation and perhaps develop

a consciousness of gender related issues. Both long-term and historical effects and presents day realities need to be understood and evaluated, as far as this is possible. Finally, there is need for increased education for women. Men also need to be liberated from the attitudes and structures that bind them. This implies that male and female liberation are two sides of the same coin; both are necessary for liberation and wholeness in the church.

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Notes

1. Kenya News Agency, 18th January, 1983.
2. Data of this epidemic is confused; some out it at 1883, or mid 1880s or 1890.
3. Oyungu, interview; James Ojuok, interview, Ougo Asembo, February 19, 1980.
4. The followers who were interviewed were: Okech, Oyungu, Okanada, Meshack Onyango, Otinda, Okanja, Oundo, Adhing'a, Ojuok, N.A. Onyango, Mathia Owade and Mariko Ouko
5. For details on the life of Owalo see also files Judicial 1/297 and Judicial 1/474, KNA Nairobi.
6. The practice whereby on a man's death, his brother inherited his widow and through her he was to raise children to carry on the line.
7. Oral interview, with Harun Nyakito, on 12th January 1980, at Oboch.
8. Not all homes were necessarily polygamous but polygamy is one institution that literally impacted on each and every member of the community. In colonial times *dala* (homestead) remained the basic unit of society politically, socially, and economically.
9. Oral interview with Saphira Okanja, Kapetro, 15th December 1979.

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RE-DISCOVERING CARIBBEAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: BIOGRAPHY AND MISSIOLOGY AT THE SHORE (BETWEEN THE DRY LAND AND THE SEA)¹

Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi

When Andrew Walls invited me to participate in the World Christianity Seminars sponsored by the Pew Charitable Funds and Princeton Theological Seminary, I proposed the following title: “Re-discovering Caribbean Christian Identity: Biography and Missiology at the *Borders*.” A few days before the presentation, I shared with Justo González, one of my mentors and a close friend, the title and a brief synthesis of my presentation. He immediately remarked, “Why ‘missiology at the borders’? Why not ‘missiology at the shore’? It is about the Caribbean after all.”

Thoughts overwhelmed my mind and ideas rushed into my brain. I was “seduced” by the metaphor. So close to my biography, so close to my Caribbean identity, so close to my being. I changed the title of my presentation and exchanged the term “borders” for “shore.”

I knew I had to rework some pieces of my presentation, but never expected to be lead where the metaphor has taken me. I am excited about this perspective. I took the challenge of my Caribbean friend and began to reflect on the metaphor as a source for Caribbean Christian identity.

I am aware that the phrase *biography and missiology at the shore* triggers other images beside the one I would like to propose. Actually, the phrase could powerfully appeal—for those living in cold weather conditions—to imagine doing missiology at the shore of Montego Bay in Jamaica, Luquillo Beach in Puerto Rico, or Varadero Beach in Cuba. I am sure the reader can imagine such a delight, and maybe suggest that a future conference on Currents in World Christianity be convened in “Paradise” while we listen to the Beach Boys singing the “Kokomo” tune, a musical group and popular song, respectively, that reinforces the common stereotype of the Caribbean. No doubt that this is a pleasant and troubling image. But that is neither my objective nor my intention. I want to exchange the “Paradise” for a “Paradox.”

“Only a paradox,” in the words of K. Klostermaier, “prepares the mind for a new experience.”² The Caribbean, as a region, is a context of extreme paradoxes where life is configured by a complex history, an ambivalent and fragile present, and an uncertain future. Yet, life is colorful and tuneful, hospitality is offered in good will, hope overwhelms our people, and faith—many faiths—sustains our hopes. We embody the despair of a marginalized and exploited region and the joy characterized by a people of hope. We live between the assurance of the dry land and the mystery of the sea. We are a paradox!

Rubem Alves, one of our most distinguished Latin American theologians, uses the metaphors of the dry land and the sea to describe the human condition of living between anomie and certainty. He describes his struggle as a Brazilian child moving from the rural area to the city in the following way:

I did not possess the human resources needed to sustain myself in that abysmal solitude [referring to the change from the rural to the city context]. Sociologists call that situation anomie. How much suffering is buried in that little word! *Primitive cosmologies always talk about a primordial conflict between the dry land and the sea. Dry land is the place where human beings can walk with security. The waters of the sea symbolize the horrendous possibilities that menace human beings unceasingly. Chaos and the void ever threaten to engulf the world of human beings.*³

Alves' explanation of the metaphors is, in my opinion, strongly influenced by his studies in psychology, particularly his Freudian focus, and probably his own Reformed background. I believe, however, that the primordial conflict between the dry land and the sea is much more complex and ambiguous, capturing the paradox of Caribbean life and identity. Without reducing the "primordial conflict" in the metaphor, when you live in the Caribbean and your family depends on the ocean as a means of survival—as my parents' family did—the primordial conflict is re-configured, negotiated, and nuanced. It becomes an ambivalent relationship of conflict and dependency. For instance, my uncle, who was a fisherman in Boquerón, one of Puerto Rico's fishing and touristic towns, referred to his relation to the sea as one of "mutual respect." He used to say: "Always respect the sea. Never take for granted her fury and her provisions. Never take for granted her mysterious awe and beauty. She will be your companion. She can be your assassin."

My family has always used the feminine pronoun to refer to the sea. I have noticed that older fishermen refer to the sea in the feminine gender. It is like a love affair, a special kinship. Even the women in my family refer to the sea in this way. I never raised a question about the language to refer to the sea. As I revised the presentation (in Jamaica, while I taught a course on missiology!) I remembered Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway—an

American in love with the Caribbean—explains the old man's use of *la mar* in the following way,

He [the old man] always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. Sometimes those who love her say bad things of her but they are always said as though she were a woman. Some of the younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motor-boats, bought when the shark livers had brought much money, spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or a place or even an enemy. But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild and wicked things it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought.⁴

Hemingway also captures this re-configured and nuanced primordial conflict between the dry land and the sea in the Caribbean. In the novel, the sea becomes the source of life and a criterion to judge the "state of being" of the old fisherman. The old man "had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish"⁵ which meant that he was "now definitely *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky,"⁶ one who has lost it, one who needs to be kept at a distance. Yet, time after time, despite the old man's condition as a *salao*, he needs to go to the sea, for the sea is not only the provider of food and sustenance, but the context where the old man's fate and dignity is decided.

The term "borders," which I originally intended to use in my presentation at the seminar, is powerful. I am indebted to friends and theologians such as Virgilio Elizondo, Justo González, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Daisy Machado, and other Hispanic/Latino theologians who introduced me to the depth and intricacies of this theological metaphor.⁷ I have used the metaphor in other writings trying to convey the task of reflecting on mission from a Hispanic/Latino perspective in the United States.⁸ Without their contribution and insights, and without dwelling in and struggling with the metaphor—a task to be continued—I would

have never begun to explore the shore as a new metaphor for my Caribbean Christian identity.

The “border” was a starting point. Ironic as it may be, I started with a metaphor that has informed my identity as a Hispanic/Latino person in the United States. My identity as a Hispanic/Latino comes around as North American ethnic naming removes my Caribbean identity and re-names me Hispanic/Latino. But it is not until I began to struggle and settle with this new identity that I can re-visit my Caribbean identity with a new perspective. The actual meeting of two cultures raised the suppressed one at critical points.

The term “borders” evokes a space between lands. In the United States, the borders are politically constructed and legally enforced and protected. The “borders” mark the difference between prosperity and poverty, the land of dreams and the land of survival, the new global configuration and the old foul establishment. Yet, at times the borders are suspended, illusive, especially when the land of the free needs the “cultural others” from the other side to help contribute to its well being. The borders see the movement of people, watching the legal and illegal crossings, witnessing the expectation of a family’s vacation and the despair of family’s survival, keeping a disturbing secret of the injustice between two lands. And yet, the borders are between lands, between dry lands, minimizing the inherent primordial conflict between the certainty of the land and the mystery of the sea.

The primordial relationship—negotiated, nuanced, ambivalent, and dependent—between the dry land and the sea is a metaphor that helps re-discover my evangelical Christian identity⁹ and the multicultural and hybrid character of my Caribbean cultures. I will refer to and develop the use of this metaphor as I continue my presentation. In the meantime, let us consider other categories for this task.

Biography, History, Theology, and Missiology

Alves describes the relationship between history, biography and human interconnectedness in the following way,

Biography and history go together... [t]he fact remains that our personal destiny is rooted deeply in the destiny of civilizations. In one way or another, our biography is always a symptom of the conditions prevailing in the world. That is the reason behind the discovery we all frequently make. Despite the fact that we live in different places, posts, and political contexts, our biographies st[r]ongly [sic] resemble slight variations of one and the same script. They have the same structures. They go through the same sequence of hopes and frustrations.¹⁰

In theatre there is one script for the performance, but many dramas in the performance. The script is the story of life, the rollercoaster of life and the struggle to keep yourself seated, focused, and safe in the ride. The dramas are the multiple ways in which human beings respond to the lows and highs, the changes in speed and angle. Some of us respond with fascination and excitement to the ride. Others (in my case, just by watching others ride) become sick to their stomachs. The sequence of hopes and frustrations, of certainties and ambiguities, of faith and doubt are responses that characterize human existence and creation. They illustrate the complex, but common human dilemma of life.

For Alves, as stated above, this common human dilemma defines the connecting link between biography and history. But he goes further and proposes that the task of facing this common human dilemma with courage, sense of direction and meaning is, however, the link between biography and theology. He states,

[t]heology and biography go together... Religion is the proclamation of the axiological priority of the heart over the raw facts of reality. It is a refusal to be gobbled up and digested by the surrounding world, an appeal to a vision, a passion, a love.¹¹

It is this “appeal to a vision, a passion, a love” in the midst of despair what provides grounding to engage through my biography in the task of re-discovering my Caribbean Christian identity.

Biography and theology find a medium of transmission in *testimony*. In testimony a community theologizes its biography and “bio-graphs” its theology, ultimately shaping its missiology. In the Pentecostal tradition of my grandparents, testimony has a crucial role in defining the character of the faith of a believer and a community. Testimony is the speech/act activity which integrates the Gospel story with the believer’s and the community’s story. Moreover, testimony has levels of maturity. The speech/act activity achieves higher levels of maturity as (1) the Gospel story moves from an individual story to a communal story and (2) the speech/act activity shifts or emphasizes the “act” dimension of testimony. It is this last principle which makes the connection with mission. Ultimately, mission is not only about telling the story of the Gospel or my story of the Gospel, but rather communicating, in a speech/act activity, the story of the Gospel *in* the broader community *to* the broader community. It is a communal journaling of God’s activity in the community! Therefore, mission is the sharing of our testimony, of our biography, of our struggle to see, hear, smell, touch,¹² and taste God’s performance in the drama of our lives, in creation’s common script.

“Re-discovering”... What does it mean?

For many Christians in the Caribbean the task of “re-discovering” Christian identity could be considered irrelevant. Many Christians and congregations assume that they have a comfortable, though challenging space in the Caribbean societies. When I take North American students to churches in Jamaica, Cuba, and other islands in the region, they always find themselves asking, “What was Caribbean about the worship services?” (I must acknowledge that this does not happen when they visit the Pentecostal churches. Many of the students find overwhelming, among other elements of worship, the “freedom of time” in the worship experience).

The reader must take into account that although Caribbean Christianity has become critical of its own role in the Caribbean

societies, its history carries a strong legacy of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and Christendom. For instance, while it is common to see the outrage of Christians and Christian communities regarding the complex merge between slavery and oppression, and the transmission of the Gospel and the transplantation of Christendom, it is not uncommon to find resistance and blunt dismissal of the cultural and religious sources that contributed significantly to the liberation of our people.¹³ Consequently, we become selective in our historical memory and in our personal and communal introspection. We also maintain an artificial division between Christian practices and “culture” and the multi-layered religious cultures that shape our daily life.

The ecumenical movement in the Caribbean, particularly the Caribbean Conference of Churches, *began* to raise the issue of Caribbean Christian identity in the 1960s as a result of the people’s own appropriation of congregations under the banner of the Black Power Movement.¹⁴ We have just begun to explore in theological circles and congregational life this critical part of our history. Therefore, Caribbean Christian communities are beginning to re-discover our identity in our region.

I struggled between using “Discovering Caribbean Christian Identity” or “Re-discovering Caribbean Christian Identity.” The term “discovering” is problematic to the history of the transmission and reception of the Gospel in the Caribbean. It assumes that such an activity has never been done, that it is new or that what has been done is not really Caribbean, or Christian, or a search for identity, or all of the above. It may also play into the hands of those who assume that “real” Christianity arrived with Protestantism, contributing to the false premise that anything “Christian” before Protestantism falls short of the fullness of the true Gospel.

“Re-discovering,” on the other hand, recognizes that the task of discovering is an ongoing one. That our present task, that of re-discovering, is expected for it is congruent with searching, providing

depth and perspective to what we know. It points to the critical engagement and reflection of what others have done. But it is also the task by which our faith is renewed, the grounding of our theological thoughts and practices with the new contextual contours in the life of our people.

Darrell Guder, my colleague and Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary, provides some theological grounding—from a western perspective—to engage in the task of “re-discovering” any Christian identity. In his studies of Karl Barth’s missiology, Guder proposes that Barth’s critique of Christendom is an invitation for the Christian churches to “risk believing in the possibility of genuine beginnings.” Guder states his interpretation of Barth in the following way:

Whether in its ministry to its own, or in its missionary witness to the unbeliever, the church’s proclamation is a risk, a dare. Barth states that the missionary sermon is the prototype of the sermon in general. The church in mission risks believing in the possibility of genuine beginnings.¹⁵

Guder’s missiological proposal for the North American churches is simple, but radical: “The challenge for the western church after Christendom is, I would like to suggest, one of risking beginnings.”¹⁶

In spite of all the above arguments, suggestions and theological underpinning, I find that it is the people’s faith, the people’s testimony of God’s performance in their drama that best embodies and justifies the task of “re-discovering” our Caribbean Christian identity.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico was the first mainline church to declare itself autonomous from its “mother” church in the United States. This action was taken in the early 1930s after the island had experienced one of the most devastating hurricanes in its history and suffered as a colony of the United States major economic consequences during the Great Depression. The Disciples in Puerto Rico, finding themselves in a situation of anomie, experienced

a revival which disturbed the missionaries’ church and worship order in most of the congregations in the island. Missionaries confused by the effervescence, decided to close the churches. The nationals appealed to the U.S. courts in Puerto Rico and found themselves protected. The churches had to be opened!¹⁷ A clear example of how colonial powers contributed to the erosion of Christendom models and the emergence of a contextualized Christian faith.¹⁸

During the next decade lay leaders began to create unique worship resources, particularly hymns. One of those lay persons was Ramona Alamo, a poor peasant from the coastal town of Dorado. Alamo, author of many hymns, wrote «A Empezar de Nuevo» (To Begin Anew), which has become one of the most important and popular hymns of the Puerto Rican Disciples.¹⁹

I have been unable to date the hymn. Local church historians and pastors in the Disciples in Puerto Rico suggest the early 1940s, during the latter part of this period of theological and ecclesial emancipation.²⁰ Musically, the hymn does not follow any of the popular modalities of the time, though its tempo and rhythm clearly fit Puerto Rican popular musical patterns. Nor does it follow the pattern of the traditional hymnody that was used and transmitted by the missionaries, though its lyrics and character keeps the dignity and solemnity of traditional hymns. The hymn is a combination of a march with what is called a «paso doble» “double step,” with a simple combination of tunes that allowed the hymn to be accompanied by a guitar and other Puerto Rican instruments. The lyrics are:

To begin, to begin, to begin anew again
Brethren in Christ, to begin anew again

To begin anew our journey in Christ
Oh merciful Christ, guide us with your light
Give us new strength to follow you
Let your grace overwhelm us

God calls the church to begin anew
 Our minds to heaven should always be
 Always trusting and in fellowship
 We will receive greater blessing

Let us begin by searching in our souls
 The great sacrifice of Christ in the cross
 His blessed blood, shed it was
 Let us all seek to be faithful to Him.²¹

The lyrics are simple. An invitation to the church to begin anew, focusing on glorifying God in Jesus Christ. The call is to be faithful and live out the Gospel. The hope is that God's presence and grace will be experienced by the community. The hymn is simple, evangelical, unique, visionary and in affinity with the Protestant theological framework of the time. A theological piece, however, with the same insight of Karl Barth's work, but from a woman of a poor *barrio* (shanty town) in Puerto Rico, who invites the faith community to "re-discover" its faith with «sabor boricua», "Puerto Rican flavor."

Caribbean Christian identity: resources, coherence/incoherence, and pulled at the shore by the dry land and the sea

World Christianity studies have been significantly shaped by Andrew Walls and others.²² Their focus on the "translability" of the Gospel has been critical in helping mission scholars understand the demographic transformations of Christianity. The theoretical/theological framework—the translability of the story of Christ—gives credibility and openness to the theological and missiological endeavors in Africa and in Asia. Their contribution has made my teaching more accessible to students in the United States and the Caribbean.

As I try, however, to work with their contributions in the Caribbean context, I find myself with some obstacles. First, Christians, and particularly Protestants in the Caribbean, received the Scriptures in the language of the colonial powers. The cultural genocide suffered

by the original inhabitants of most of the Caribbean islands took the language of our oldest ancestors. In order to control uprisings and possible revolts from the slave and indentured communities, the colonial powers imposed strict policies regarding languages and maintained the colonial language as the official language. Scriptures were already accessible in these languages. Though in many places in the Caribbean the spoken languages are a beautiful harmony of the legacies of the different mother tongues encountered throughout our history, the translation of Scripture to our mother tongue never had nor it will have the impact and cultural revitalization that these scholars ascribe to the African and Asian context.

In the Latin Caribbean, we inherited the Reina-Valera version, one that continues to be upheld as "sacred" in many of our congregations. Therefore, we find ourselves with some limitations as we identify "the vernacular" in our regions. Recognizing that, in the words of Andrew Walls, "language is the skin of culture,"²³ our "vernacular" in the Caribbean has been associated, if not stamped as paganism, heathenism, and backward culture. As I mentioned earlier, the legacy of Christendom and missionary work, with all its contributions to the Caribbean, created a distinction between Christian cultural resources and other Caribbean cultural resources. We have been asked to find a Caribbean Christian identity through a process of denial of our own identity. Early ecumenical efforts in the Caribbean (which are as late as 1967) stated the dilemma in the following way:

The South Caribbean Ecumenical Consultations on Mission (1963 and 1967) made it clear that we cannot but persevere in trying to translate the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ for all the peoples of our area in their very different religious and cultural background. It is a true mark of the Spirit's work when people of every creed and race ask "How is it that all of us hear them speaking in our own language the great things that God has done?" The Church [in the Caribbean] cannot be satisfied to be identified with just one section of the population [or of its culture].²⁴

The resources for Caribbean Christian identity are also resources for Caribbean identity; there is no re-discovery of Caribbean Christian identity without interphasing with the other religious and cultural sources of the Caribbean. Charles Ryerson, one of my mentors at Princeton Seminary, provides a critical insight to this task when he states,

Groups which have been marginal to society often enter into history especially explosively, whatever the ages of the individuals involved, although youth may be the most explosive. These groups and individuals, long invisible to history, have a special problem. They need an useable past—a sense of continuity—if they are to “enter into history” and have an effective psychological base for cultural and political action.²⁵

While Guder’s interpretation of Barth’s, discussed above, requires the Christian communities of the West to return to the New Testament,²⁶ Ryerson’s proposal—broader, comprehensive, particular, and contextual—challenges, the Caribbean Christian communities to “enter into history” with “a sense of continuity” by (1) risking its beginnings as we re-interpret and search for a history in the complex crossings and clashes of Caribbean religious and cultural interactions and (2) by “risking” Christ in this asymmetric encounter of religious and cultural histories in the region..²⁷ It is an invitation to find our “sense of continuity” in the depth of the sea.

The resources for Caribbean identity are varied and at times in confrontation with each other. In my personal life, born in what I was told was an Evangelical household, I was kept at a distance from “other religious sources” and cultural practices considered as threatening to my Evangelical identity. I was kept in the dry land, secure and protected. The sea was abysmal, the symbol of perdition. I learned to stay at the shore and speak to the sea: “Come, be dry land and you will be saved.” I was conditioned to see the sea—that abundant source of cultural identity and mystery—as my enemy. I was conditioned to call it *el mar*.

Ironically, it is not until I begin my education at Princeton and I am imposed an ethnic identity—Hispanic/Latino—that I began to “re-discover” who I am as a Christian and a Caribbean. I must confess, however, that I still struggle with some of my findings. At times, I still see the sea as *el mar*, something to be contested, an enemy. But, though my spirit carries this apprehension for the sea, my body was taught to enjoy the sea, because the sea is *la mar*: erotic, mysterious, unpredictable and yet our source of life and well being. Consequently, I am thrown to the shore as my spirit and body pull each other in opposite directions. Body and spirit struggle and I find myself tempted not to jump in the ocean of mystery and keep myself in the dry land. And yet, the ocean calls, it is part of who I am, part of who I will be.

Testimony: Facing the deep sea in my life

During my Christian life I have faced the deep sea many times. Actually, I have not only faced her, I have been thrown in her with no caution. As I reflect on my biography as a Caribbean Christian I remember the scenarios that characterize my Caribbean culture. Nevertheless, I would simply put these experiences aside, keep them marginalized, as if they had no meaning or importance in my ministry. But as I find myself at the shore, I have no other choice but to reflect on them carefully and intentionally, for they are a crucial piece of my own identity.

Protestant, and yet, Roman Catholic?

As I mentioned above, I was raised in an Evangelical household. My mother’s family can trace its Methodist background to the first converts by North American missionaries. My great-grand-uncle, Rev.Orlandi Bairán, was one of the first Puerto Ricans to be ordained in the Methodist church in Puerto Rico. North American missionaries cared for my grandmother while her mother worked many hours during the day. At home my Evangelical identity was defined over and against Roman Catholicism.

On my father's side, however, the story was different, though never talked about. It is evident that in his family story the boundaries between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are blurred. I remember looking at some of my grandmother and grandaunt's closet and finding "necklaces made of beads with a cross attached to them." I also remember my father and mother's explanation of such artifacts: "Your grandaunt is a business woman, she sells and buys many things." At the time I did not know what they were and they became quite amusing for my explorations as a child. It was not until I was assigned to a Disciples congregation in a remote, strongly Roman Catholic rural community that I learned that those necklaces were rosaries and that my father's family, though some were members of the Presbyterian Church in Puerto Rico, continued to say the rosary and attended mass from time to time.

During the Holy Week of this year (2000), I preached at the Presbyterian Church where my father is a member, an ordained elder, and the treasurer of the congregation. During the Good Friday sermon, I referred to the suffering of Jesus at the cross as a witness of God's solidarity with those in suffering and pain. In the evening of Good Friday, my father asked me: "Why is it wrong to have a crucifix? Is not the crucifix a symbol of God's love for all of us? Why is it that we evangelicals have dismissed the crucifix? I do not think it is a bad symbol." I had to hold myself to the chair as I heard my father's statements. Is my father giving himself—and therefore myself—permission to appropriate a symbol that has been identified with superstition and idolatry by missionaries and the early generation of Puerto Rican Protestants?²⁸

Of all the members of my family household—which includes my extended family—those who are Roman Catholics are the poorest, and yet the strongest in times of daily adversity. They have always demonstrated tenacity and incredible persistence to keep themselves alive. They have also been the most ecumenical in the practice of

their faith. I can remember when my parents visited them at the other side of the island and would ask them to join in prayer, at their own home, to ask for God's help. I never witness disrespect or apprehension when my parents offered our prayers. I have to wonder what would have been the reaction of my parents if my Roman Catholic relatives would have offered a rosary or a prayer to the virgin for our well being.

Protestant, and, In conversation with the Spirits?

My third pastorate in Puerto Rico was in the coastal town of Dorado, in the *barrio* of Santa Rosa, the same town, *barrio*, and church where Ramona Alamo, the author of «A Empezar de Nuevo» was born and raised. Dorado is one of the towns in Puerto Rico with a high percentage of people of African descent. I was a pastor of a congregation of mostly African-Puerto Ricans and a number of people with mixed ethnic/racial backgrounds. It has been one of my most exciting pastorates in the island.

One evening I received a phone call from one Juanita. Juanita had asked one of the members of my congregation for my phone number. Juanita was a leader of the Roman Catholic parish in the adjacent *barrio*. She urgently needed to see me and talk to me.

Juanita was around fifty years old when I met her for the first time. I visited her at her home, where I also met her husband. She seemed very quiet and reserved, fragile at the time of the visit. I asked her what could I do for her. She stared at me for some time. I began to feel uncomfortable and asked again: "Juanita, what can the church of Santa Rosa and I do for you?"

Juanita gave me a big smile. She said: "Pastor, I am dying. I have a terminal cancer and I know I will not live for long. But I am well." I was saddened by her words. But there was some kind of certainty about what was going on in her life that amazed me. Then she asked, staring at me as she had done before, "Pastor, Do you believe in

spirits?” That is it! It came to my memory immediately! Juanita was one of the “mediums,” one of the spirits-mediators, in the community. How could I have forgotten when I had heard so many stories of her kindness and care for so many people, including some of the members of my congregation who consulted her in secret. And I wondered: “What does this woman, Juanita, needs from me?”

We spent two hours talking to each other. Yes, we talked about spirits. She even suggested that I would be more sympathetic to the world of the Spirits. She said: “Pastor, you can find them in the Bible and not all of them are bad spirits.” She talked about the “gift” she had received from God to help so many people. She lamented that her children had not been given the “gift,” though they “heard” mass and had the Eucharist every Sunday. Juanita seemed to be happy with her life, but she had a heavy heart and a deep concern for a many disoriented people in the *barrio*. She asked me, “Pastor, will you help them?” “Can I help spiritists?” I thought.

Just before I left, Juanita asked me if I would pray for her. She asked her husband to bring the Bible. She gave it to me and said, “Read, Pastor, read your favorite psalm.” We read and prayed... together!

Protestant and African?

The spirits visit me again...

To love me? Or To haunt me?

Many Puerto Ricans—and Caribbeans—celebrate and deny our African heritage.²⁹ We celebrate it when it points to our music, our sense of rhythm, our ability to cope in difficult situations, and our beauty and sexuality. We deny it when it points to economic and social status, to our religious worldview, to interracial and interethnic marriages, etc. In a course I taught in Jamaica, one of my students from the island-nation of Montserrat commented that she never had a problem with the dreadlocks of Rastafari groups until her daughter began to

grow them during a period of search for Caribbean identity. The Afro-Caribbean heritage is a “double edge” reality to many of us.

Angel Mergal, a distinguished Puerto Rican theologian, in a lecture to the New York City Police Department reminded us that our Puerto Rican culture is fundamentally African.³⁰ However, this *African culturae substratum* has density, has deep and broad coordinates that require careful mapping. Our African heritage has changed the demographics and the topology of our Caribbean being, but it is yet to be explored and assessed.

The exploration and assessment of our African heritage in the Caribbean requires careful work. For instance, the engagement of Christians with Rastafi groups is very fragile. Christian communities and leaders are identified as “Babylonians” because they have embraced the white-men’s religion, losing credibility in the nation-building and religious dialogue. On the other hand, Christians seem to be blind to the racial-class issues that shape the encounter between Christianity and Black religious experiences such as Rastafari, Shango, and Voodoo. We, particularly Caribbean Christians, are in a love-hate relationship with our African religious and cultural sources. This ambiguous and frequently manipulated relationship adds another level of complexity to the encounter: on the one hand, a level of adaptation, and on the other, a level of competition in the encounter.

One of my Jamaican students shared the story of Mr. Robert Cain. Mr. Cain is what we call in Jamaica a *mayal man*, a healer, a caregiver of the community. Many of the healing and caregiving practices of the *mayal man* are categorized under the rubric of folkloric religions, or popular religiosity and are not accepted by mainline and Pentecostal Christianity. It has been accepted that many of these practices come from the African religious and cultural milieu.

My student, the Rev. Black, a young minister in the Moravian Church, was the head pastor of a large congregation. Mr Cain had begun a small congregation in his community and had taken the role

of a pastor in the congregation. Rev. Black visited Mr. Cain's mother, who was sick and a member of the Moravian Church. To his surprise, Rev. Black saw members of his congregation who frequently visited Mr. Cain seeking for healing of illnesses that the medical doctors could not heal. Furthermore, Mr. Cain came to Rev. Black and introduced himself. After some conversation, Mr. Cain asked Rev. Black if he would take over and become the minister of the new congregation. Mr. Cain was certain that Rev. Black would do a wonderful job as the minister of the congregation. Rev. Black continues to be amazed by Mr. Cain's *double identity* as a *mayal man*, a Moravian Christian, and his ability as a new church developer despite the claims of his unorthodox faith.

I was a pastor in a Disciples congregation in the Westside of Manhattan in New York City. I served a congregation where most members were from the Dominican Republic. We had a young family who had recently arrived to the congregation. They became very excited about "how we are church," and became members of the congregation.

The oldest boy of this young family became very sick. Our congregation programmed prayer chains and vigils for the child and the family; we really got involved. The child's health, however, worsened. The family stopped visiting the congregation for a month or so. They returned with a healthy boy and with joy in their spirits. After some time, some of the elders of the congregation asked me if I could visit the family "to find out certain rumors about their faith." The elders indicated that this family practiced *Santería* and that they needed to be "disciplined" by the congregation. They also indicated that this became known after their child had improved from his health condition.

I did visit the family, but I also knew that this was going to be a very difficult conversation. I did not have the slightest idea of how to approach the rumors. Should I just confront them with the rumors?

Should I introduce the issue by using a biblical example or some sort of communication strategy? The conversation began and it was a pleasant one. But I had to raise the issue.

I told the father that I had heard some rumors from the community regarding some *Santería* practices that were not congruent with our faith. I also expressed my concern for the well being of the family and the good intentions of the congregation in exploring these rumors. I noticed that the father was upset, the mother was gone from sight, and the atmosphere was tense.

The father said that they had gone to a *babalawo* seeking for advice and health. He said that "he had no money to spend on doctors who could not cure his son." He also said that he was grateful for the care and the prayers that the congregation "had offered" to God. But his son was in need, and he had to do something. He said that he visited the *babalawo* and followed the instructions for applying ointments and herbals to the boy's body. He also said that the *babalawo* insisted that the child should be checked by a doctor and that the prayers of the church were important.

In a sudden change of attitude, the father asked me what had he done wrong. I did not have an immediate answer to his concern. But some theological thought slipped through my lips, "Brother, who do you think is the author of the healing of your son?" He looked at me with surprise and astonishment and replied, "Christ, pastor, Christ. You are the theologian, you should know this better than I."

Protestant and immigrant, but with privilege. What to do with it?

My family's arrival to the United States marks a critical point in the reformulation of my Christian and Caribbean identity. As I mentioned above, as I arrived to the U.S., *I was given* an identity: I am a Hispanic/Latino. With Cubans, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, and others from different Latin American countries, different Latin

American cultural backgrounds, and different historical references to the Hispanic/Latino culture—many born and reared in the U.S—I was named Hispanic/Latino.

This process of ascribing identity has been a difficult journey for all of the members of our family. More than once my wife and I have to explain to our children what we have sort out about our imposed identity: we are Puerto Ricans and we are Hispanic/Latinos. More than once we have to remind our family in Puerto Rico not to tease our children with their hybrid identity—living in the U.S. and being Puerto Rican is a volatile and paradoxical combination. Frequently, we are confused.

The identity process becomes more ambiguous as we recognize that we belong to a privileged Hispanic/Latino/Puerto Rican group. While my family and I can go back to Puerto Rico and find ourselves “at home,” we have faced, during my pastorates in New York City and in our congregation, the tensions, contradictions, and struggle of Hispanic/Latinos who are immigrants and wrestle with all the uncertainties of such condition. Moreover, we have been shaken and moved by the very deep and difficult issues surrounding those whose country is the United States, and still live as exiles in their own motherland.

I have been in the United States for ten years. I frequently visit the Caribbean. However, I still wrestle with the implications of being part of the people of God in a truly exile situation—the Hispanic/Latino congregations. Maybe this is why I find so difficult to understand and accept the exilic metaphor from the voices of distinguished North American scholars who, with excellent rhetoric and argumentation, invite the North American mainline churches to live an exilic life and ministry. I truly wrestle with this.

I am also amazed by the power of the Holy Spirit in providing insight to understand this dilemma in the context of the Hispanic/Latino church life. The Apostolic Church, a non-trinitarian denomination (both

African-American and Hispanic/Latino) develops much of its theology from its worship resources, particularly hymnody.³¹ In the struggle with this conflicting dimension of my interpenetrated identity, I have found theological insight and challenge for my ministry in the testimony found in the lyrics of the following hymn:

“*The Undocumented*” by Ramón González

I left my country with the hopes of finding
a life different than the one I have found.
And I entered the American Union:
without a passport I arrived as an undocumented alien.

With a great dream of obtaining citizenship,
I tried immediately to be given employment,
And since the amnesty agreements were almost due,
I got papers even though they were all false.

They had told me that in this country there is no hunger,
and that money could be gotten in abundance.
That’s why I left my parents:
to end the poverty in which I was living.

And now I find myself alone in a strange country,
and I confess to you that at times I have cried.
When I remember the ones whom I love,
only my God by pure love has consoled me.

Here Lord, you who cares for the forsaken,
I ask now that your grace never abandon me.
If in another time I felt in me arrogance, today repentant,
I ask for your forgiveness.

The other night I looked for
a person who could direct me to God.
On a street corner there was a church.
My heart invited me to go inside.

I heard in the message, that the minister mentioned
a nation that Jesus Christ had prepared,
where there are no hungers nor pains nor sadnesses.
That nation is the one I'd always dreamed of.

Excited, I converted to the Gospel,
and one day I hope to share it with my parents.
When I return to my land I hope to see them.
Of Jesus Christ and his love I want to tell them.

If we came to this country looking for money,
and the Gospel of Jesus Christ has saved us,
I came out winning and of this I am never ashamed.
It has happened to a lot of us undocumented aliens.³²

Protestant, and teaching world religions and world Christianity

My teaching at Columbia Theological Seminary has been exciting, though not without challenges. As the professor of World Christianity, I have taken the responsibility of offering courses that will help students understand the religious context where Christianity has vitality. Some of these courses focus on world religions, but with a particular emphasis on the encounter of these faiths with different traditions of Christianity.

One popular course among my electives is “World Religions and the Encounter with the Global Church.” One critical component of this course is our visits to different religious communities. The visits are carefully planned and organized. I take time to prepare the students and provide them with some guidelines regarding “proper conduct” when we visit the sacred places. I try to be thorough and comprehensive in this area.

Among our visits is the Ismaili Jamatkhana (Center) of Decatur. The Ismaili tradition—Islam—has the particularity of not allowing visitors to enter their place of worship, their hall of prayer. I told my students that we would be warmly welcomed and that we would have

a tour of the facilities of the Jamatkhana. I also told them about the restrictions regarding their place of prayer and worship. I must insert at this time that one of my colleagues and his class (on Paul Tillich) joined us for this visit but had no preparation for the visit.

After presentations and as the tour came to an end, we faced the beautiful doors of the prayer hall. The doors were closed. Suddenly, the president of the Jamatkhana asked for the doors to be opened and invited us to remove our shoes and enter the prayer hall. The reaction of the students was astonishing. My colleague and his group rushed to take their shoes and entered with no hesitation. I was frozen. I just could not get myself to move or to say anything. My students looked at me waiting for some sort of indication. I looked at the president and he just smiled. We entered with apprehension, and yet with awe. I finally got Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*. It was as if we would have compelled our Muslim friends to partake of the Eucharist!

These visits have also another interesting side. I have been invited by some of our friends of other faiths to teach in their religious schools about Christianity, Caribbean religiosity, and culture. In a very particular occasion I was invited to teach at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. My friend Swami Yogeshananda extended me an invitation to speak about Afro-Caribbean religions and the Christian faith. As I was concluding my remarks, I shared with the congregation the results of a survey which revealed two important reasons why people converted to Christianity from the Afro-Caribbean religions. The first reason was that people were liberated from the fear that overwhelmed their relationship with the spirits; second, that people were able to live in community and to trust others. I never thought I would get the response I got from most of the members of the Vedanta Center: They responded, “You have just revealed the reasons why we left our Christian churches!” Could this be an explanation for the crisis of the North American mainline churches?

**Being a parent in an intercultural context:
My children, Who are they? Who will they be?**

This Hispanic/Latino conflicting identity comes very close to me as I see my children growing in the United States. In one occasion, our family conversed about future female relationships—we have three boys, one thirteen, one nine, and one fifteen months. My wife insisted that they needed to marry Puerto Rican girls. My oldest son, who at that time was only eight years old, responded anxiously and confused, as if he had to make a choice of a life-time partner immediately: “Mami, do you know how many Puerto Ricans are at our school? Only two. Juan (his brother) and me.”

The pressure that we first-generation-immigrant parents put on our children can be overbearing. Our two boys know more English than Spanish, but are required to speak Spanish at home or among other Spanish-speaking people. On the other hand, they can instruct us in the “American ways,” decode the multiple symbols of their generation, decipher for us the language despite of so many different accents in the southern United States English, and yet, they identify themselves as Puerto Ricans.

Moreover, in the context where we live—Decatur, Georgia—the Hispanic/Latino population is not significant, though is growing considerably. Thus, my oldest son finds himself with no “cultural enclave” where to explore his cultural identity. In our attempt to provide him with Puerto Rican sources, my wife and I have reminded him of our African heritage. Interestingly, during his middle school years he has found grounding in the African-American community. Frequently Carlos Andrés will consider himself as Black.

My son’s cultural experience has taken our family to explore another dimension of our African heritage, the African-American experience in the United States. Though in many ways similar to our Puerto Rican culture, we have found significant, enriching, and

challenging differences. These differences have also given us a new window to the race issues in our Caribbean context.

Additionally, the context of the United States, and particularly the south of the U.S., has exposed our children to a diverse religious context. My children have friends who are Christian, Muslims, Hindu, Ba’hai, Jews, and other religions. The encounter and dynamic of their faiths with the faiths of their friends is exciting and intriguing. My second son, Juan, is my companion to inter-religious activities and for his age, is quite versed on people of other faiths. He is also very Evangelical in his piety and theological convictions.

The dynamics can be further described with the following testimony. Our oldest son was invited to spend the night at one of his Jewish friend’s house. His friend’s father asked him if he wanted to participate in the evening prayers during Hanukkah. Carlos Andrés asked if he could have some time to think about it. He told us that he first thought about what his mother would say (his mother is a very Evangelical Christian) and then about what I would say (he described me as somebody who is always mingling with everybody) to his dilemma. After some thought, he told his father’s friend that he would participate, but that he was not ready to say the prayers. The family hosting him received his decision with joy.

Carlos Andrés arrived home the next evening and could not stop speaking about this experience. It was clear that he had been very close to God. Two months after the Hanukkah experience, Carlos Andrés came into our bedroom and with tears in his eyes told his mother and me that he wanted to be baptized. In his testimony to the congregation before his baptism—he wanted to be baptized in Puerto Rico in a Disciples of Christ evangelical congregation—he witnessed to the presence and pull of God in his life at the Hanukkah celebration at his friend’s house. He also said—which almost brought me down from the pew—that he wanted to study more about God in other people’s faiths. I am still praying and wrestling with this unique process

of commitment to the Christian faith through a Jewish ritual in my son's life.

Protestant, Caribbean, and Western

I am unable to deny my Western heritage. I am a Caribbean with European ancestry—Italian and German—and well educated in the Western educational systems. If I leave out this part of my biography I would be deceiving myself.

I have struggled with my European and Western heritage, particularly as a student of missiology. It is becoming evident that the Western theological structures in which I was trained do not help me, or our Christian communities in the Third World, to do theology/missiology from our interpenetrated cultural reality. I have, however, benefited the education, for I am able to discern and be critical about my own development as a mission scholar.

In addition to my theological and missiological studies at Princeton Seminary, I have some training as an engineer. Science and mathematics constitute important disciplines with which I continue to be in conversation.

One important book that continues to help me bridge my Western education and my Caribbean identity is James E. Loder and W. Jim Neidhardt's *The Knight's Move*. In their discussion about science and theology I find some refreshing insights that speak to the relationship between apparent contradictions. I find their discussion about the Strange Loop to be persuasive and suggestive.³³ I would like to quote an important citation from Niels Bohr which they include in the beginning of their third chapter and points to the issues facing the rediscovery of Caribbean Christian identity:

... [There are] two sorts of truth: trivialities, where opposites are obviously absurd, and profound truths, recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth.³⁴

“You will know the significance of the dry land and the shore only if you swim in the sea”

My testimony is about unclear boundaries, and maybe this is the reason why theologizing about them is so difficult. My testimony is about invitations that I take from God to explore God's activity and newness in my own biography, and maybe this is why missiology is so appealing to my vocation. I have been blessed not only by the experiences, but also by the invitation to be critically introspective about them. I owe this awareness to my professors at Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Alan Neely and particularly Dr. Charles Ryerson III, and his significant contribution to religious studies.

Ironically, I also owe this introspective inclination to an imposed identity: my Hispanic/Latino reality. This imposed identity provided me with the space and distance needed to begin to explore these and other experiences with different “spectacles” (as my Caribbean friends would say). I also owe this introspective inclination and awareness of my interpenetrated Caribbean identity to my family and the congregations where I have served. They provide the experiences, insights, and theological musings to think missiologically about these issues. They are the receptors of the Gospel and they help me see, hear, and touch the dynamics of the Gospel experience with our deepest realities. They live in a constant movement between the dry land and the sea. And when they stop at the shore, they share the newness of the Gospel in their lives. They embody the newness of the paradox we are as Caribbean people!

My grandfather on my mother's side was a sailor. He was born in the small town of Guayama, popularly known as the “town of the warlocks.” He was a great swimmer. He did not compete in any national or international competition; and if he would have—impossible at that time—he never would have won. He was not a swimmer, as we understand a swimmer today. He was a great swimmer according to sailor standards. That is, my grandfather had the ability of suspending

his body for hours *within* the ocean. You could only see his forehead, eyes and nose barely above the ocean line. He knew how to dwell in the ocean, with a minimum consumption of energy in order to survive in the water. He used to tell me, "People think that swimming is about speed and style *on top of the ocean*. Anybody can learn to do that. Real swimming is about *becoming part of the sea without being the sea*. You are here, you dwell in her, and yet you do not let her drown you. She keeps you afloat, as you keep the right balance within the ocean: That is the key to survive in the ocean! Oh yes, grandson, only by dwelling in the ocean will you discover the significance of the shore and the reason for the dry land."

May God help us and be with us in such an adventure of faith!

Notes

- 1 *In honour of my mentor and friend, Charles Ryerson, III*. This article is a revised version of a presentation at "Currents in World Christianity: A Seminar," March 2000, sponsored by the Pew Charitable Funds and Princeton Theological Seminary and convened by Dr. Andrew Walls. The final version of this article was done through the support of the Lilly Theological Research Grant—Faculty Fellowship—that I received for the academic year 2000-2001.
- 2 K. Klostermaier, *Kristvidya: A Sketch of an Indian Christology*, (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1967), 20, quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 147.
- 3 Rubem Alves, "From Paradise to Desert," in *Third World Liberation Theologies*, edited by Deane William Ferm (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986) 94, italics are mine.
- 4 Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1952), 26-27.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 See Virgilio Elizondo, *The Galilean Journey* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) and *The Future is Mestizo* (New York: Meyer-Stone, 1988), Justo Gonzalez *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 84; Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996); Daisy Machado, "Being Ecumenical in the Barrio," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3 (1995) pp. 6-13.
- 8 See Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, "Mission at the Borders: Developing our Mission Praxis Through Biography" *Presbyterians Mission for a New Millennium*, eds. Patricia Loyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis. (Louisville: Geneva Press, forthcoming).

- 9 My Evangelical identity is best described in José Miguez Bonino book, *Rostras del Protestantismo Latinoamericano* (Grand Rapids and Buenos Aires: Eerdmans and Nueva Creación), 11-56.
- 10 Alves, "From Desert to Paradise," 99.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 12 I John 1: 1-4.
- 13 Two examples are Sam Sharpe, a Revivalist in Jamaica—and later a national hero—and Boukman a *houngan* (a voodoo priest) in Haiti. Both were critical figures in the struggle for emancipation and liberation in their countries from the colonial powers. But we usually do not study them or their religious background as sources for our Christian theology. See Elizabeth Abbott, *Haiti: An Insider's History of the Rise and Fall of the Duvaliers*. (New York: Touchstone Book, 1988) and Winston Arthur Lawson, *Religion and Race: African and European Roots in Conflict—A Jamaican Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996)
- 14 For a brief reference to this historical period and the emergence of the Caribbean Conference of Churches see Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, "Rhythms of Unity and Development: Ecumenism in the Caribbean, 1960-1997," *History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume Three* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, forthcoming). See also Dale Bisnauth, "Religious Pluralism and Development in the Caribbean: Questions." *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (September 1982), p.22.
- 15 Darrell Guder, "Risking Beginnings: Mission and Evangelism after Christendom," (Inaugural Address, Columbia Theological Seminary, March 28, 2000, unpublished manuscript), 7.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 17 Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico, 1899-1987* (Costa Rica: DEI, 1988) 82-95.
- 18 For a discussion on the contribution of colonial powers to the erosion of Christendom see Andrew Walls, "Christianity in the non-western world: a study in the serial nature of Christian expansion," *Studies in World Christianity* 1.1 (1995): pp. 9-20.
- 19 Lucas Torres, "El Avivamiento: Toma de conciencia en cuanto a nuestra identidad puertorriqueña expresada en la adoración y la música," (Asamblea del Centenario, Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico, 15 de febrero de 1999, unpublished manuscript), 3-4.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Ramona Alamo, *A Empezar de Nuevo* (Bayamón: Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico, translation is mine.
- 22 See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996); Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992) and *Christianity in Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Dana Roberts, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24 (2000): 50-58. The journal *Studies in World Christianity* published by Edinburgh and Orbis is another resource.
- 23 Andrew Walls made this comment as he responded to my presentation at the Seminar at Princeton Seminary.
- 24 J.M.W. Schalkwijk, "Mission in the Micro-World of the Southern Caribbean" *International Review of Mission* LX (April 1971): 203.

- 25 Charles Anthony Ryerson III, "Meaning and Modernization in Tamil India: Primordial Sentiments and Sanskritization" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1979), 21.
- 26 Guder says "Barth, in effect, is proposing that the church return to its New Testament beginnings to discover its vocation today." *Risking Beginnings*, (Inaugural Address) 13.
- 27 I referring to the patristic phrase "risking Christ for Christ's sake" which was used by M.M. Thomas to entitle his book *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987).
- 28 Justo González has written a provocative article entitled "Hanging on an Empty Cross: The Hispanic Mainline Experience" in *Protestantes/Protestants* edited by David Maldonado Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 293-303.
- 29 Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, "Nos llamaron: mulatos, fiesteros, pero redimibles: Antropología misionera y protestantismo en Puerto Rico," *Apuntes* 14.4 (Winter 1994): 109.
- 30 Angel M. Mergal, *Puerto Rico: Enigma y Promesa* (San Juan: Editorial Club de la Prensa, 1960), p. 115; y José Luis González, *El país de cuatro pisos* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1983), pp. 20-23, 28.
- 31 Daniel Ramirez, "Flor y Canto Apostólico: Preliminary Inquiries into Latino Pentecostal Hymnody," (Paper delivered to the Society of the Scientific Study of Religión/PARAL-CUNY, Nashville, TN, Nov. 9, 1996).
- 32 This hymn was translated by Melanie Mitchell and myself.
- 33 James E. Loder and W. Jim Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move* (Colorado: Helmers and Howard, 1992) 35-59.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 35.

Comment

AN ECUMENICAL HANDBOOK

Josè Maria Vigil
Translated by Paul Burns

An Ecumenical Handbook

Recent press reports say that the «Pontifical council for the Unity of Christians, of which cardinal Walter Kasper is President, is preparing an ecumenical handbook, intended as a guide for dioceses and parishes in inter-confessional activities». I am fully in accord with the timing and the need for a handbook, not only for inter-confessional and even inter-religious activities, but also for ordinary activities within a single confession. Ecumenism is not just for dialogue with others; it is also dialogue with ourselves. Inter-religious dialogue will be useful only if it is preceded by an «intra-dialogue», for a possible handbook to which I put forward the following minimal principles.

- Never more to speak of «the» true religion. They are all true. Phenomenologists of religion have long considered as obsolete the

distinction between revealed and natural religions. The best theologians view all religions as «revealed».

- Not to hold that the Christian religion has the fullness of truth... it too has limitations of which it ought to take stock, blind points that it should try to make up for, and an institutional framework universally recognized as obsolete, which it should de-idolize and relativize.

- It is imperative to abandon the inclusivism and accept the pluralism of the means to salvation. Just as it was possible to move beyond the exclusivism («outside the Church there is no salvation») professed by Christianity for more than a millennium and a half, so it is possible to abandon its new version, the currently official inclusivism («outside Christ there is no salvation»). The institutional Church is hostage to its own dogmatic pronouncements and will not be able to change until a new theoretical revolution takes place in it. Meanwhile, only the firm position of lucid and liberated Christians will do true service to the updating of Christianity.

- It is urgent to abandon the myth that God wanted one single religion and that all others are human errors. Every religion is a spark of God's infinite Light placed in human beings, more or less well perceived. Religious pluralism is good and there is no reason to reduce it. A single world religion is neither likely nor even desirable as an end point for humankind.

- «The» chosen people does not exist. The Jewish people were not it and neither are Christians. All primitive peoples have believed themselves «the» chosen. But God is not unjust, and God chooses all.

- Jesus' ecumenical, dialoguing, open tolerant, optimistic... approaches are still the best model Christianity can offer and adopt in regard to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue.

- We need to reconsider the christological dogma of Nicaea-Chalcedon, which acts as an «enclave of fundamentalism» within Christianity. We must not limit ourselves to reinterpreting it, leaving its

basic affirmation intact, but confront its roots as well. How does it arise, where does it come from, with what authority, what validity or meaning does it have? We cannot make the essence of Christianity consist in canonizing the reflections of certain primitive communities, unduly considered to be the complete word of God and so irreformable. This belittles God, Jesus, and Christianity.

- We must accept once and for all that no one is in «a gravely defective situation of salvation» on account of the religion or Church into which they have been born. We cannot believe in an unjust God.

- The time of classical missions is over. Proselytism has to be abandoned. Mission is justified only if it is going to listen as much as proclaim, to learn as much as to share. The mission of mission is none other than the spreading of love, of inter-religious dialogue, and of seeking forgiveness.

- A sincere ethic of freedom, which would renounce inherited coercive means (conquests, inquisition, confessional States, colonialisms, lack of religious freedom...) and even those still practised (infant baptism) will reduce Christians in numbers, but increase them in truth. So the crisis of falling numbers may be a crisis of growth in quality and in truth, and should be hailed with optimism if it is put to sincere use.

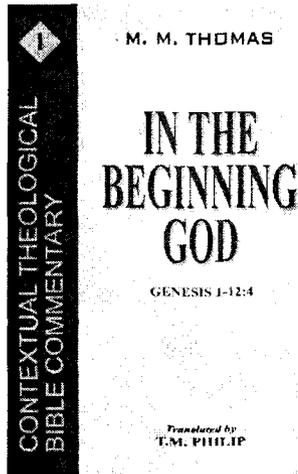
Adopting the Golden Rule («Do to others as you would have them do to you», present in all the great religions of the world as almost literally identical expressions) as the practical agenda for inter-religious dialogue. The best thing religions can do is to join together in service of life and of peace in the world, based on the option for the poor. This is the way to the unity (not unification) we all desire.

In The Beginning God

Genesis 1-12:4

M.M. Thomas

Translated by: T.M. Philip



Contextual Theological Bible Commentaries of Dr. M.M. Thomas, originally written in Malayalam, is a unique experiment at developing a contextual theological hermeneutics from an ecumenical perspective. The theological import of the biblical text is explored in relation to the struggles for humanisation and challenges of pluralism. The 25 books in the series cover the entire biblical corpus from Genesis to Revelation. The basic objective is to promote the theological formation of the laity for their life and witness in the secular world.

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