

## **POSTCOLONIAL HERMENEUTICS**

### **The Generation and Communion of Indigenous and Historic Theologies**

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The ongoing breakup of colonial empire since World War II has afforded greater political self-determination apart from the former colonial powers.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, a post-colonial consciousness has emerged which is unique for its mixture of Western and non-Western sensibilities. Along with this, the Christian church outside of its historic regions has blossomed and achieved greater theological self-expression. Reading scripture for themselves, professional and non-professional Christian theologians and their theologies are growing and developing new traditions which while faithful to scripture are guided less and less by traditional Western contextual interests. In view of this, a number of post-colonial questions come to mind. Without the hegemony of western politics and theological structures, on what basis will Western theologians achieve understanding and agreement with their non-Western counterparts? Given the increasing diversity of theological expression,

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<sup>1</sup> I am very aware, however, that the global economy is having dramatic transforming effects upon many cultures. It is my contention however, that while standardization in production makes many indigenous products obsolete, each culture has a way of folding its own styles into these new artifacts.

could it be that Scripture in its many translations,<sup>2</sup> is itself the real point of contact for understanding and agreement? Will Western theologians develop the capacity to differentiate between a modest hermeneutical engagement required of them in the global, post-colonial setting and their rigorous control over their own theological tradition? How can theological partnerships be developed by which all of the parties achieve modes of learning together? Is there a future for theology which will be characterized by a kind of global tradition which bears the marks of both mutual enrichment toward unity and respect of the diversity of insight coming from every quarter?

It is often said that western Christian theology is in disarray, suffering from, among many things, the acids of historicism, reprimanding theological statement, leave-taking of Christian faith altogether in some kind of postmodern theology, or simply accommodation to sociological notions also according to some "post-" factor.<sup>3</sup> While some of these moves are being made, nations, churches and theologians are finding release from Western colonialist powers and influences, and a history to be told from the perspective of being-no-longer-a-colony, have profound implications for the future of global Christian theology. Whatever ought to be said regarding the problems of late-modern Western Christian theology, the burden of this paper will be to engender thought about post-colonial experience which will be necessary to confront if a respectful and mutually enriching theological partnership is to begin to be achieved.

Western theologians have a number of impediments to thinking globally with their non-western counterparts. In order to reckon with the challenges of making Christian theological claims within the Post-colonial world, Western theologians must become more conscious of how they make and have made their own claims to and sometimes against themselves and their national cultures. The modern critique of metaphysics, arising often from theological bases, is an important

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); and especially Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> By "post-" I mean primarily something which is past. In a previous article, "Postmetaphysical Hermeneutics," *Jian Dao* 4 (July 1995): 29-44, I argued that the turn of philosophy since the Reformation away from a priori theory to practical reasoning was a profoundly Christian development.

occurrence in the communal practice of theology.<sup>4</sup> Although metaphysics in theology very early became necessary for apologetical purposes, we must recognize that for most of its existence, it has served chiefly political ones. The ancient church sought to show how the God of the bible was the same absolute Being and won legal toleration for itself. This achievement of course developed into perennial task of supplying theological bases for what is now commonly called "Constantinian Christianity." Only very recently has western Christianity begun to think of itself as divested of the prerogatives and privileges of imperial authorization.<sup>5</sup> By doing so, however, it has the opportunity to recover its evangelistic task and its proper understanding of human equality and the peacemaking work which is the true extension of the kingdom of God.

The plurality of contemporary theological agendas and tasks I take, however, to indicate the demise of the metaphysical goal Western Christian theology. This demise has a political counterpart as well. A great deal of ideology is gone that once served the notion of a "Christian society" and went hand in hand with the philosophical dominance of the Christian theism. In its stead, metaphysics is, at most, very chastened and operative on modest levels of theological discourse. This is visible in the modest claims of much public theology, theology of religions, post-modern theology and post-Christian theology. In all of these there is some kind of attempt to offer a structure of argumentation or illumination which mediates beliefs and notions about ultimate reality and value within limited contexts, e.g., academic, media-based, and political. The modesty of these approaches is due, in part, to a negative necessity against espousing notions which could become hegemonic. Many theologians feels obligated to a modest approach for fear of generating an apologetic which might accrue a degree of public support, which would enable public institutions to be coercive, thereby making dissent a threatened public practice. After all, what could be called pre-twentieth century Christian public theology in the west consistently

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<sup>4</sup> This will happen in due course in non-Western theologies as well but for the present, the Western tradition often stands as a hindrance for cross-cultural theological dialogue if only because the philosophical literatures are unfamiliar.

<sup>5</sup> It is rather ironic that while the great contemporary theist, Richard Swinburne, while wanting to modify his theism against its radically monotheistic tendencies to make way for a proper trinitarian understanding of God, still selects of the iconography of Christianity and empire with a medieval depiction of an imperial counsel of three for the triune God.

and rather straightforwardly offered itself as national and institutional religious normativity. But the Christian gospel no longer ought to be used to generate principles of general religious normativity. Indeed, for many Christian theologians in the West, to do so has long been regarded as scandalous. Christian theology must renounce its status as most favored symbol-source for statehood and empire-building. In view of the modern practice of colonialism and the atrocities our own present century, the renunciation of special public privileges is made possible with the aid of the minimalist philosophies of analysis and the metaphysics of pragmatism.<sup>6</sup> That which can be required of a free society at large must be limited enough so as to allow the free exercise of religion by a wide variety of believers. Christian theologians have a belief, grounded in Scripture, that their God is the only true God and is the only source of life and truth, but they can offer no compelling argument to those who do not share their beliefs to submit to the authority of those beliefs.

There is something very wholesome and right about this renunciation which leads to two basic questions. If a theologian speaks from the determinations of her own faith, what possible regard should be paid to what she says by those who do not share her beliefs, other than a possible willingness to be informed by her? If the same theologian wishes to share in the pursuit of the common good in public life and no one else is speaking theologically or she must share her platform with members of other religions, on what basis can she impose her own theological discourse any longer? She is free to speak theologically in public as an occasion of declaring her faith, but then, her speech cannot be allowed to serve as a public norm. She may appeal in a subsidiary way to the harmlessness and well-doing of her Christian community, indeed, its civility, as was one of the subsidiary purposes of the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> The theology by which she

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<sup>6</sup> A rather wholesome pragmatism is evident in Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Metaphysical arguments were offered in support of the Christian message not only for evangelistic purposes, but also for politically defensive ones under the conditions of persecution. This is seen in the wider context of, e.g., Justin Martyr's use of Platonic and Stoic "proofs" for the truth of Christianity in the statement, "if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are we unjustly hated more than all others?" (Apol I, 20). In the famous passage where Christ is compared to Socrates, "For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught these things), not only philosophers and scholars

expounds the Christian message for believers and future believers, however, cannot survive the public strictures of consistent democracy which are determined to avoid every hint of enforced religious belief. If she desires for her arguments to "count" in public discourse she will have to show how her beliefs are compatible with notions of the common good and eschew much of what her traditional metaphysics once demanded.

Christian churches in the west now exist under these democratic and religiously pluralistic conditions. With Post-modernism, the old universalizing and secularizing ideology of liberal modernism is dead — the colony of the secular exists no more. In its place, a religious pluralism has emerged with one fundamental requirement: peaceful coexistence. This is the public fruit of religious liberty which Christian dissenters and non-conformists of other types legislatively achieved in the West from the 17th to 19th centuries. During these centuries, many Christian groups were beneficiaries of this religious liberty — from Congregationalists to Baptists to Quakers and hosts of other independents. In our present century, this is now extended virtually without limit to every recognizable religious community. Under the conditions of religious pluralism, democratic societies have no single religious body as dominant, in order to avoid policies which would hinder the free exercise of religion by any other group. Since every liberty is continually contested, if not in principle, then certainly in its application Christians and every other religious body will find their right to free exercise requires continual defense. This, however, is a small price to pay for otherwise unhindered opportunities to practice a particular faith and to propagate it by means of persuasion within the public square. Under these conditions, Christians are ready to learn some lessons which will be of eminent value when it comes to their relationships with fellow believers and their churches from other parts of the globe. Rather than a pluralism which relativises truth claims for the sake of peaceful coexistence, the recognition and respect for *Christian plurality* in the global context could prove to be a great boon for *fruitful co-laboring*.

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believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, and not the mere instrument of human reason..."(Apol II, 11) This begins a long tradition of securing political approval of Christian belief are a chief interest in the resort to metaphysical demonstration.

It is interesting to note the historical connection between various universal metaphysical claims which were associated with Christian truth under the culturally privileged conditions of imperial and national church Christianity. It is also interesting that with the removal of these conditions of official privilege the apparent necessity of developing metaphysical justification Christian theological claims is no longer so apparent. Metaphysics in theology continues to be practiced with zeal, but now as something more characteristic of communal interest rather than public interest. Absolute metaphysical claims, even minimalistic ones, are still constructed by particular persons in reference to particular communities and their guiding interests. No matter what or how it is argued, a theological or metaphysical claim is now recognized immediately for being just what it is, a product of local interests. Some kind of disinterested claim may be audible in our theological discourse, but the overall goals she pursues will be detected as conspicuously suited to believers and viewed by believers from other traditions or now no religious traditions whatsoever as still quite conspicuously Christian. As a result, it no longer at all necessary to bracket out the whole range of explicit Christian beliefs in pursuit of any kind of persuasive metaphysical notions. If, in this case, she is a somewhat typical evangelical, informed people will recognize, either in the foreground or in the background or her speaking, her belief in the veracity of Scripture and something like a critical realist perspective regarding the classic doctrines: the triune God, divine creation, sin, the deity and sole mediatorship of Christ, the message of salvation for faith, the people of God, the mission of the church, resurrection and final judgment and the renovation of all things in the eschaton. She and her community of belief may be just as interested in metaphysical questions as her liberal Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox relations, but the public utility and very possibly the academic potency of the arguments offered will strike the consciousness best only among those of their own community of belief and discourse. The one area, it seems to me, that Christian values have potency in public discourse is that point at which spokespersons from a given Christian community claims for that community the virtue of self-restraint with respect to necessary co-existence of differing communities of belief and the virtue of self-criticism with respect to that given Christian community's infractions against necessary expression of public respect.

The lessons of Christian history with its universalisms and colonialisms and the emergent human right of religious liberty and the public virtues arising from it, place the diverse Christian communities of the world and Christian theology itself on wholly different ground. The scandal of past political alignments and arrangements which fostered Christian belief on coercive bases is no longer at all tenable. "The freedom of the [Western] Christian" in the twentieth century, anticipated by the non-establishment of religion in the founding of the USA, takes on meanings Luther could hardly have anticipated. Formalizing itself in the *Barmen Declaration*,<sup>8</sup> theologians are freed — and consigned to doing theology from within and for the church no matter how critically informed they are. At first, it may have seemed as if this public de-centering of theology which too great a humiliation to bear and we continued to do a kind of theology according to a very chastened metaphysic as if we were informing public religion and/or morality. But even this is not the nature of the case. If, on the other hand, we embrace this humbling freedom as the liberation of the theological task, no longer burdened nor implicated in the construction of ultimate justification for coercive political programs, but rather accepting its communal limit, it may very well realize a new flourishing within the habitation of the pluralistic human community.

This liberation means that the Christian theologian returns to her classic task of reformulating while expounding the doctrines of faith as the ongoing challenge of faith seeking understanding. The North American legacy of schism between fundamentalist and modernist put theology in a terribly unfruitful condition, though probably unavoidable. But now, the believing among children of the fundamentalists and the modernists, mostly types of evangelicals if not converted to Catholicism or Orthodoxy, must contend with the fact that while they must learn to do theology under this "liberated" condition as majority Protestants,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Something which Eberhard Jüngel has explored extensively although inadequately. It must be remembered that while the liberal/conservative battles in Switzerland just before the turn of the century resulted in the disposal of confessional norms in institution of the national church. This did not occur in Germany as the fortunes of Harnack show in the *Apostolicumstreit*. Thus, very curiously, even Bonhoeffer could not bring himself to renounce the national church ideal and there continues something of a public debate on a national church ideal in Germany.

<sup>9</sup> Probably the most visible example is that of the English theologian, Alister McGrath, whose *Christian Theology* (1997, 2nd ed.) is used more widely within the evangelical spectrum than any other, represents this new evangelical reality.

they must learn to do so under the conditions of an even greater reality: Post-colonial, global Christianity.

The realities of global Christianity are so very complex, and yet its features are religiously incomparable. The religious incapability exists along the expanding front of its multiple expressions, linguistic adaptation and institutional variety. There is no religion in the world of cultures that comes close to the number of boundary crossings made by Christianity. In the past, because of the imperialism of the West, many of these cultural boundary crossings were messy, often violent affairs. Much of the messiness remains. This is so much the case that many of us who do academic theology in the West at times feel inclined toward something like the Japanese "No Church" movement. The present century so near to its close has had more than enough of its messiness and violence within the confines of the Western cultures themselves. We must press on, however, renouncing sinful ways of the past and return to our learning of the ways of God in the world through Christ and to become acquainted with the immense realities of the emergent and expanding Christian communities propagating and living the gospel. The missionary movement of Christianity from the Western nations remains formidable. But there are many signs along with this that far and away, the propagation of the Christian message is done by a majority who are non-Western Christians. Religious and cultural boundaries are being crossed as never before, but now by persons with non-Western faces. The demise of colonial sovereignty throughout the world, once a ruthless vehicle for the crossing of cultural boundaries, is now the occasion for an increase of these crossings. The Christian missionary can still be a rather embarrassingly westernizing presence, e.g., ignoring or even abetting multi-national corporate development in the Third World. But this situation is rapidly changing in view of the growth of self-sustaining indigenous Christian communities and contextualized missionary theology. The larger cultural reality in which the indigenous churches are emerging is often analyzed under the notion of "post-colonialism"<sup>10</sup>. This post-colonial situation for the Christian churches

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<sup>10</sup> The term "Post-Colonialism" presents us with the end of colonialism and that which follows. Inquiry after the complex cultural repercussions of decolonization take into account such developments such as migration, cultural hybridity, globalization, bilingualism, the abolishing of essential binaries, and finally, visions of political liberation. These themes appear now typically in world literature, perhaps the best known example in Salman Rushdie and his novels, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* both of which possess a subtext characterized by "post-coloniality." Cf. Ian



needs to be interpreted theologically. It helps us to locate a new orientation for an immense dialogue across the world of the Christian theology which has been taking shape throughout the second half of this century.<sup>11</sup> Use of the term post-colonial is helpful, I believe, not so much because

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Adam, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), where, in a very interesting fashion these two literary movements are contrasted based upon relation but contextual distance. Post-colonialism has its own theoretical orientation and is actually an older movement than post-modernism appearing literary forms which anticipated the dismantling of colonial sovereignty and de-colonization. This book engages a number of texts by authors such as Jerzy Kosinsky, Peter Carey, Salman Rushdie, Wilson Harris, Merle Hodge, Nelson Mandela, Angela Carter. Another important piece is by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 781-798, emphasizes not a return to pre-colonial conditions but a whole new condition where concerns such as nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism, culturalism are now an essential part of post-colonial public life. The vital issue here is the fact that all of these symbols and systems are inadequately grounded in the actual life of post-colonial societies and yet they represent kinds of ideals which are alive in its discourse.

<sup>11</sup> The theological literature is immense, I include here some of the most important titles: K. P. Aleaz, *The Gospel of Indian Culture* (Calcutta, 1994); Daniel Von Allmen, "The Birth of Theology: Contextualisation as the Dynamic Element in the Formation of New Testament Theology," *International Review of Missia* (1975): 37-52; M. Amaladoss, et. al., *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore, 1981); F. J. Balasundaram, *Contemporary Asian Theology* (Bangalore, 1995); S. Batumalai, *Asian Theology* (Delhi, 1991); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra, 1990); Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford, 1992); Kwame Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," in Samuel Vinay and Christ Sugden, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (Grand Rapids, 1984), 81-121; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, 1991); Dean P. Dien, "Dancing with Tribes: The Relationship of the Church with Indigenous Religions in the Philippine Context," *Asia Journal of Theology* (1994): 77-88; Kosse Kuzuli, *Teaching Theology in the Ubangui* (Ph.D. diss., TEDS, 1990); Wing-hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena, 1983); John Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi, 1986); J. Massey, ed., *Indigenous People: Dalits* (Delhi, 1994); J. M. de Mesa, *And God said, "Bahala na!" The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context* (Quezon City, 1979); Mark R. Mullins, "New Religions and Indigenous Christianity," *Japan Christian Quarterly* (1991): 1-45; Lesslie Newbegin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, 1989); Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru, 1984); C. C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Avebury, 1987); J. Okpong, ed., *Evangelization in Africa in the third Millennium* (1992); J. Provost and K. Walf, eds., *The Tabu of Democracy* (1992); Robert Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (London, 1991); S. Sumithra, *Christian Theology from an Indian Perspective* (Bangalore, 1990); Tite Tiénou, "Biblical Foundations for African Theology," *Missiology* (1982), 435-48; M. Vetakanam, *Christology in the Indian Context: An Evaluative Encounter with K. Rahner and W. Pannenberg* (Frankfurt Am Main, 1986); Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as the Prisoner and the Liberator of Culture," *FT*, (1981): 39-52; Andrew F. Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in Philip C. Stine, ed., *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years* (Leiden, 1990), 24-39; Andrew F. Walls, ed., *Exploring New Religious Movements* (1990).

the whole of the non-western world has passed or is passing through stages of departure from colonial domination — this is obviously not the case, but, because of the habits of Western consciousness. Colonialism took generations to develop in the popular mind<sup>12</sup> respecting what we now call the Third world, or better, "Two-thirds" world. The colonial instinct and bias will not be easily expunged. With or without the new theological learning by westerners, however, global theology is upon us. We will either allow it to reshape our hermeneutical thinking or fall farther and farther away from making a relevant and cogent theological contribution to the global church in its many forms.

In spite of whatever colonialist biases remain, a global theological consciousness is very much in the making. It is quite clear that while western theological texts are readily available to theological students world-wide (where they can be afforded), indigenous practices of biblical interpretation and independent theological reflection are always primary. The modern Christian paradigm of theological insight: Scripture/exegesis/proclamation/theological reflection (as a community endeavor) now takes place entirely within the native language and context. As a result, new theological traditions are appearing as a burgeoning process globally.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that these traditions bear the marks of sophisticated theological exposition and are in turn, easy to dismiss. But the theologian does not have this option. To the extent to which theological statement is operative within any part of the global church, the theologian is obligated to take note of it, either to learn or to correct it. Hardly the prerogative of western theologians exclusively, it must now become an inclusive task, shared in by as wide and diverse a community of Christian theologians as possible.

Under colonial and missionary-led conditions of the past, indigenous theologizing tended to be culturally conservative, first and second generation Christians developing missionary hagiographies which resisted any apparently innovative theological statement. But as the post-colonial experience prevails, indigenous churches and larger Christian communities become more confident in their theological abilities. The liberative principles of the Christian message become an

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<sup>12</sup> Exemplified by the Rudyard Kipling poem, *White Man's Burden*, of 1899.

<sup>13</sup> It hardly matters whether the new theologizing takes place within a literate culture or not — many of these traditions begin along oral lines but are in a process of becoming literate because of Scripture.

imperative are exercised for many reasons, e.g., at times because of the prejudices of missionaries who lack the ability to fully respect the culture in which the labor, at other times because a particular native preacher/lay-theologian is simply so gifted an independent community of Christian belief is engendered. If one were to measure the prominence of theological trends by the sheer volume of output, we are rapidly coming to the point, if we have not reached it already, where non-Western indigenous theological reflection is becoming the dominant form. As Western theologians adjust to this emerging situation, they will not abandon the fruits and habits of their traditional and critical thought, but they will have to accept a new kind of pedagogy whereby this legacy undergoes a new critical evaluation by non-western partners. As the case is made for traditional and critical thinking within the learning conversation of global theological partnership, modification of this thinking through the exposure to new insight and wisdom will take place. Contextualization in theology has already been attempted in many quarters, but often on a one-way basis. Contextualization will have to give way to globalization where multiple partnerships establish themselves. One can already envision not so much a pure recovery of historic forms or the pure construction of a theology,<sup>14</sup> but intelligent amalgamation together with and as ministers, evangelists, liturgists, professors and laity at the intersection of the many paths of post-colonial global Christianity. For the late modern Western theologians, the contribution of the historic and self-critical components to theological reflection may be welcomed. A degree of self-criticism has already been evident to the non-Western world in the reasoning and process of de-colonization, after all. What kind of theological metaphysics develops remains an open question. But as to critical thinking, I have no doubt these new Christian communities need it, will embody it and bring it into the language and action self-correctives vis-à-vis beliefs and practices which might threaten rather than promote human well-being. This is a very large issue for Western theologians and their communities of belief: they themselves can no longer afford to practice traditional and critical theology in isolation from the interrelationships of post-colonial global Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of our Habitation. Tradition and Theological Construction* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994).

If they accept the global situation, western Christian theologians will be ready to engage post-colonial theologies under the guidance of hermeneutical strictures rather than those which generate theological statement.<sup>15</sup> This should be obvious, that indigenous theology itself can be generated only by members of an indigenous Christian community through the reading and proclamation of "indigenous scripture." Only Christians from a given cultural milieu can generate and recognize the unique metaphorical and realistic expressions of their Christological center. Only indigenous interpreters can effectively bring the fruits of their theological labors into the communal engagement of the hermeneutical intersection. Certainly confessions of faith are needed in the new churches of the world. But neither the west nor even hermeneutical encounter can produce indigenous confession. The hermeneutical encounter seeks a common confession of Christian on a global basis, but it must first seek to encourage confession on a local basis. Scripture spawns confession and sound hermeneutical encounter will encourage this advanced stage of Christian theological generation. A global Christian theology which many contemporary theologians envision will not be some single distillation of the burgeoning integral theological productions of the post-colonial world, but an informed theological-hermeneutical standpoint, a kind of theological intersection formed by the emerging global churchly and theological partnership. Although this partnership is not at all well-developed — in many cases we in Western Christianity and they in the Christianity of the Third World are only vaguely aware of the remote existence of the other — the benefits of post-colonial thinking can also accrue to us as we receive forgiveness and acceptance from our Third World partners and a new urgency for mutually informing hermeneutical conversation and theological cross-fertilization. This hermeneutical intersection could become a vital resource for encouraging the local processes of theological reflection which embody vital faith and communal concern, as well as self-critical habits of thought. The theological virtue, perhaps, of

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<sup>15</sup> There are elements here which are present early on in the thinking of leaders within or along side of the WCC as traced by G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons So Far* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20-24, what is different in the present article is the supra-denominational character of the proposal. There is simply too much independent Christianity globally today to be given anything like adequate treatment by the structure and functioning of the WCC. Instead, it is how Scripture is being proclaimed and interpreted indigenously that remains the only and truly outstanding rallying point as the authority over all the new and historic churches and theological paths.

conceiving of this intersection in strictly hermeneutical terms is a chastened approach, as well, especially on the part of the westerners. Rather than prescribing an impossible set of theological constructions let alone aspiring to a general theological form, a theological-hermeneutical intersection, or forum, provides for a place of mutual respect and responsiveness in an increasingly complex global Christian and non-Christian environment.

The hermeneutical nature of a global theological forum maintains its chastened quality also by not prescribing its norm. My claim here is based upon a certain degree of confidence that the norm already exists, that of sacred Scripture. Even where other norms of tradition and reason to varying degrees and of varying types are present, scripture defines in some incontrovertible way the source of the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord in whom Christians of the growing indigenous communities believe. By recognizing Scripture as hermeneutical norm at the intersection of global Christianity, we likely come closest to one which has not been posited by any one member or block of members of the hermeneutical forum. The fact that Scripture is read as normative for faith in new contexts, giving rise to new theologies is an immense topic in itself, and I can only begin to explore this here.<sup>16</sup> I might add that, even if citing Scripture as norm for a global hermeneutical forum is not theologically chastened enough from a kind of theologically pragmatist point of view,<sup>17</sup> my contention would still be that to respond to the ways in which Scripture is functioning within the post-colonial contexts could be shown to be the most theologically and critically rich resource for comprehending what is going on religiously and culturally there as a result of the expansion of Christianity. I raise the wider issue of entire socio-cultural contexts because the Christian communities and their theologies develop, of course, in relation to other adjacent communities, religious and otherwise. It is then to the function of scripture, indigenized within the many Christian communities globally, to which I now turn.

What I wish to do at this point is to lay out what seem to me to be three fundamental conditions for theological consideration and hermeneutical reflection with respect to the function of Scripture within

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<sup>16</sup> For a recent evangelical perspective on this matter, cf. J. I. Packer, "Theology and Bible Reading," in *The Act of Bible Reading* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Embodying something like the concerns expressed in, Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1983).

the post-colonial environment. While it may seem that I have left open the possibility and tolerability of heterodox statements in non-western theology, this is certainly not the case in view of the evangelical doctrine of the *sufficiency of Scripture*. It may be that for periods of time — just as in the early church — deficient theological statements will appear but we should be confident that persevering scripture-reading entails a self-correcting, i.e., self-critical component. Confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in all reading of scripture should engender confidence that aberrant readings, something theologians as much as anyone else is susceptible to, will, in the course of time and under the respectful scrutiny of fellow believers, give way to more orthodox readings, is basic here. The first condition to which I will attend is the very notion of "indigenous scripture" along with its primacy as source of Christian faith and identity. How is it that translated Scripture comes to be indigenized within a new Christian community and what is the significance of this theologically? What does it mean, precisely at the point of the translated scripture, i.e., given the fact that the theological words and notions now found within the Christian scriptures had their origins in these other written and/or oral religious traditions? The second is how the Scripture as the message proclaimed and studied is linked to the generation of new religious metaphors and behaviors contextually conditioned by the cultural locations of a given community of interpreters. The third is only a question as to how post-colonial interpreters are interacting with other religions which existed prior to the emergence of the new Christian communities. In conjunction with this question then is that of how aware these Christians/new theologians are of the culturally transforming influence they are having simply by communicating the content of Scripture and developing indigenous ways of expressing that content through their contemporized Christian message.

Let us consider first the fact that indigenous Christian communities rather quickly develop a sense of association with scripture which bears the sociological features of a text original to that community. The fact that the text which is used is a translation into the Mother tongue of the community is only one of the many factors which contributes to a reconceiving of this adopted text at some point and for its future as an "original text" of the community. The biblical teaching that the nations are adopted into the family of Abraham through Christ, that the nations are the ultimate object of the divine mercy, very often encourages this reconception on a temporal and theological level. As with virtually

every faith-filled reading of scripture, there is certainly always a *chastened reading*, a sense that its story is "about them," the descendants of Abraham and the apostles. But there is also in every sense a *courageous reading*. This is the sense that the story of scripture is also "about us," i.e., that the indigenous Christian community. In this reading, the indigenous Christian community is, in some sense, created by God just as Israel itself was, and which now, "at the fullness of time," belongs to God's ongoing creative act of enfolding believers from all nations into one great family of the redeemed. The sense that this community belongs to the fulfillment of scripture rather naturally gives rise to the sense that this scripture belongs to the community.

Although the chastened reading of scripture, a historical (and potentially critical) one to some extent does recognize the reality of temporal, cultural and ethnic difference between its original referents and the newly emergent believing community, the courageous reading, which is the basis of their faith, resists notions of religious/spiritual disjunction with those original referents. Indeed, while recognizing difference, the "voice" of the text beckons these contemporary readers to see their community as part of the divine plan contained within the understanding and message of the original referents of Scripture. Historical readings of Scripture can potentially become more sophisticated and intellectually astute, but nothing can change how the functional reality of the courageous reading — even for "post-Christian" readers — will have its impact. The recent impulse within the Society of Biblical Literature to return to the study of the "Old Testament" rather than the "Hebrew Bible" on the part of non-Jewish western interpreters reflects a little bit of what I am endeavoring to describe here.

Theological meanings of the presence of an "indigenous Scripture" are many. For western and non-Western theologians, what with the increasing sophistication of translation principles and methods and a positive regard for "pre-Christian" religious language,<sup>18</sup> we confront immediately the matter of a theology of religion. Rather than a wholesale negation of other religious traditions, the translation itself suggests that there is something helpful and anticipatory of the Christian message while be a fuller understanding of it. The fact that religious/theological

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. the recent policies of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

language and symbols were regarded as "appropriate" to Christian scripture, is highly significant. The other fact, that these words and symbols have found an entirely new textual and religious world also precludes, to a significant degree, debates which might resemble western ones over "natural theology." The fact that competing "indigenous" religious texts raise fundamental questions about what common religious language and symbols mean within a given cultural/social situation predetermines the occurrence theological debates which will be resolved within and among religious traditions rather than on some neutral ground outside of them.

Another factor in the translation as a stimulant for a theology of religions is the very act of translating itself. Since the doctrine of scriptural inspiration finds functional expression through the belief in God's providential preservation of the biblical text, it should not surprise us to discover that in most cases, the very practice of translation is considered a religious act, much like the act of copying the ancient text once was. This often overlooked point reminds us that while we have always recognized how theological judgments are involved in the practice of translation, we need to assess how it is seen to have a place within the faith and theological reflection of the Christian community itself.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of biblical literacy also takes on theological meaning — something which was often associated with the priesthood of all believers within the Protestant tradition and more recently, by the likes of George Lindbeck and other postliberal and narrative theologians. Ecclesially, the matter of congregational biblical literacy corresponds closely to the "congregationalizing" of global Christianity. The liberative dynamic of every individual member of the Christian community entering into the process of interpretation as bible readers, anticipating the content of proclamation and transforming them into potential lay theologians in cultural contexts with rather rigid hierarchical traditions needs to be included in our hermeneutical framework. There was a time, and in many of the ancient and older western ecclesial institutions still exists, very deep prejudices, dogmatically and canonically grounded, which were resistant to the individual interpreting Scripture and the local churches generating their own liturgical responses to collective readings. The prophetic text of Scripture produces experience which resembles

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<sup>19</sup> We do not have time here to consider the almost sacramental vision of biblical translation, e.g., the traditional "indigenous" Burmese translation associated with missionary martyrs.



and even reproduces prophetic activity. But given the strictures and structures of institutionalization, such impulses have often been regarded the way independent prophecy was regarded as false by the early and late Medieval church. Certainly there is a plethora of sub-Christian extra-scriptural prophesyings and scriptural "interpretations" in the world and more than there will be an exponential increase of them. But it is necessary, it seems to me, to exercise theological confidence, that in the majority of cases, the Spirit of God and the communion of saints will direct the processes of scriptural interpretation in wholesome ways. The globalization of Christianity, and in turn the globalization of scripture, means that there are probably no conceivable institutional structures capable of exercising the kinds of interpretive regulation which would be "necessary" to avoid the possibility of sub-Christian interpretations.<sup>20</sup> The liberative nature of biblical literacy cuts away not only at structures of hierarchical authority external to the Christian community but also internally, especially where missionary elitism or residual elitism from the culture itself have been allowed to perpetuate themselves. Collective participation in the practice of biblical interpretation and theological statement congregationalizes all of these structures as well and should be a part of any future post-colonial hermeneutic. The result will probably be the creation of new communal structures yet again. If duplication of Christian communities belongs to the future of the long term commitments to the partnership of global Christian faith, hopefully not to the long term detriment of wholesome Christian community in a given society.

Biblical literacy theologically also means a theological rereading of prior religious texts and indeed a culture's entire literary and/or oral tradition according to a kind of *preparatio evangelica*. As with ancient Christianity especially, the search for signs of the "Old Covenant" within these traditions is of great interpersonal interest to the emerging Christian community. We have already considered how the appropriateness of indigenous religious language and symbols encourage a Christian theology of religion. It is at this juncture that this process could become quite advanced. In a very natural way, New Testament Scripture (e.g., Acts 17 and Hebrews), calls for a search for foreshadowing and nascent notions visible in the pre-Christian religious past. There is no question

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<sup>20</sup> It is my hope that theological partnerships at the hermeneutical intersections of global Christianity and real mutuality would foster kinds of wholesome interpretation intended here.

that the Christian community will regard these as prevenient notions, as incomplete and corrupt, nevertheless, like Justin Martyr, et.al., the process of recognizing how Christ was already Lord of these particular people before he is known as Savior is a profoundly Christian theological process identifying the experience of good ancestors as something corresponding to positive states of "pre-conversion" — "foretastes" of grace.

Of course not everything translated scripture in the hands of new Christian communities does is merely the conversion of given religious terms and symbols. It also means the displacement of many others. We can anticipate much religious conflict<sup>21</sup> in these matters. Post-colonial conditions mean — and probably have meant for quite some time — that religious liberty is regarded as a most desirable socio-political benefit. There are many places however, where this benefit is nigh unto meaningless. Indeed, under the conditions of post-colonialism, the potential for destructiveness is not always from the Christian side. Christian communities will exercise a liberty to propagate their message nevertheless and bear the consequences. The political reality is only part of the context of conflict of course and it is religious conflict, hopefully primarily at the theological level, which must be dealt with. There is a vast difference between the theological conflicts between missionaries and the representatives of indigenous and national religions other than Christianity. The new conditions of indigenous Christianity with a partial set of common religious terminology standing and speaking vis-à-vis their cultural but not religious fellows makes for an incomparably more complex encounter. What happens theologically under these conditions provides a prime example of how incapable of providing direct help western theologians will be. Other than supplying examples from historical theology and supportive counsel, the details of interreligious dialogue and debate among the members of an entire cultural group exceed the competencies of nearly everyone from outside it. No doubt the biblical texts conveying the experiences of prophets such as Elijah and Jonah and of apostles such as Paul on the Aereopagus will supply the primary theological source materials for contemporary interreligious encounter. The encounter and even conflict will hopefully

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<sup>21</sup> Although I disagree with Wolfhart Pannenberg at a number of crucial points in this, his exposition on the conflict of religions is of great value; *Systematic Theology*, v. 1, tran. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 119-88.

always be regarded along the lines of evangelistic moments rather than political contests. Needless to say, however, the theological developments are entirely unpredictable at the outside, but if respectful theological relations exist across the global Christian spectrum, positive engagement, even in the midst of harsh political realities might be encouraged to prevail. Academic theology has a crucial role to play as well, not only in developing a hermeneutics of interreligious encounter but also in supplying fair-minded representations of the theologies of the non-Christian religions. Where it is not competent again, will be in the crucial areas of defining or adjudicating the interreligious encounter. The resources of academic theology will be vital for the indigenous Christian locked in interreligious conflict in order to help them find the philosophical and psycho-social resources they will need to maintain respectful regard for their religious interlocutors.

The second major area I wish to consider, in this paper, but only very briefly, is that of the relation between the reading, interpretation, propagation of the message of indigenous Scripture and metaphorical generation. There are, in the evolution of Christian theologies, two great complexes of significance which flow out of and later enhance biblical and theological interpretation: the record of exemplary believers and the recognition of workable metaphors which powerfully illustrate or illuminate the Christian message in ways which correspond in simultaneously to scriptural referents and to local, cultural referents. It is this latter point which I wish to focus upon here. The history of theology is full of reflection which not only employs metaphor, e.g., the "Sonship" of the second person of the Trinity; but also theologizes from the a favored metaphor itself, e.g., the "eternal generation" of the Son and the "primacy" of an "ungenerate" "First Person" — not to mention the "problem" of the three-in-one. Theologizing the metaphors themselves became a development which has often caused more problems for theology than helping to elucidate Christian faith and there are some helpful lessons for future theologians here. It became an over-interpreting of Scripture as well as traditional materials. Given this cautionary example, metaphorical generation is the great opportunity and privilege of each emerging Christian community. This already happens in the process of translation on multiple occasions within "indigenous Scripture;" indeed it is because of this that new Christian communities come to regard it as indigenous. But in the course of time, the community, however much it reveres the personal biography of its

founders and the complex of favored metaphors in their preaching and teaching, it must come to recognize that these metaphors are not original sources of faith in themselves and therefore have some canonical limit as to number and type. New types and additional highly illuminating metaphors must not be discouraged. They will come to the surface of expression, they will be analyzed according to what is known from the perspective of faith, but where they stand the tests of the community of interpreters, they must be celebrated. The origination of new metaphors to aid in theological maturation of Christian community is never an insignificant development.

A third area of theological inquiry in the post-colonial situation to be considered has to do with the ethics of Christian interpretation. A question seems to beg the asking, "How do the theological interpreters of indigenous scripture perceive their culture-altering labors?" In many ways, it seems initially, it is the most evangelistic interpreters who are stimulating most of the alterations. What should we, let alone they, make of charges within certain anthropology and sociology circles that this alteration constitutes something of a genocidal act? From the perspective of the real evangelistic types, the alteration is a matter of the eternal salvation and the only true fulfillment of religious hope. Before we attempt to tackle the criminal charge however, we have to look closely at the whole spectrum of Christian theological reflection within the Post-colonial world. In many places, especially in Asia, there is quite an extensive awareness of the varieties of Western stances toward the truth claims of the bible and its imperatives and to varying degrees there are comparable Asian Christian stances. There are, that is, significant local communities and numbers of individuals who have adopted a less than "evangelistic" mode of Christianity and somewhat pluralistic notions of inherent theological significance of non-Christian religions. What must not be underestimated, however, is the impact of translated, indigenized scripture within the larger culture.

Of course, wherever Christianity is growing, it is in some sense evangelistic, but this is not the only sense in which it is culture-altering. That bible translations are read outside of strictly religious contexts, indeed, that individual and private religious experience is generalized simply through biblical literacy and popular book-buying is a religious novum, as it has been since the late 16th century in the west. The invitation to read this religious text critically, with or without academic sophistication, by people irrespective of sex and class, is as culturally

subversive as anything short of violent revolution or military-backed colonization. That this subversiveness can be conspicuously non-violent and non-retaliatory is perhaps part of the reason for the burgeoning of indigenous Christianity. That this is the case — with further expansion likely — should cause Western theologians pause to take stock of this situation and, most of all, of the nature of their own tasks.

There just may be in the above and many other factors, a compelling reason to return to the question of the essence of Christianity given the growth of Christianity in the post-colonial Third World and the religiously secular First World. That Christianity has emerged in the late-twentieth century with a vital theology and public presence with less and less benefit of political, social and cultural promotion is really quite extraordinary, given the close relation between many of the world's religions and these very potent structures of human community. This is not to say that I would allow for some kind of historical proof for the truth claims of Christianity. My only appeal would be to recognize a new impetus for theological vigor and its recovery in the west, if, and only if, it is prepared to accept the obligations of mutual respect and understanding within a hermeneutical partnership. This is suggesting a great deal seeing that such a partnership is global in scope and far too complex to allow for theologizing at a distance and for its competent development, never apart from the genius of the indigenous Christian communities interpreting indigenous Scripture for themselves. If, however, we are prepared to learn about what is being done theologically and to participate in constructive encouragement with our fellow communities in the two-thirds world, the likelihood of mutual enrichment of the immensely diverse global Christian community appears to be quite high.

### ABSTRACT

The questions that Kurt Richardson attempts to address are:

Without the hegemony of Western politics and theological structures, on what basis will Western theologians achieve understanding and agreement with their non-Western counterparts? Given the increasing diversity of theological expressions, could it be that Scripture in its many translations, is itself the real point of contact for understanding and agreement? Will Western theologians develop the capacity to differentiate between a modest hermeneutical engagement required of them in the

global, postcolonial setting and their rigorous control over their own theological tradition? How can theological partnerships be developed by which all of the parties achieve modes of learning together? Is there a future for theology which will be characterized by a kind of global tradition which bears the marks of both mutual enrichment toward unity and respect of the diversity of insight coming from every quarter?

He laid out three fundamental conditions for theological consideration and hermeneutical reflection with respect to the function of Scripture within the Post-colonial environment. the first deals with the effect of the translated Scripture on the indigenous people; the second has to do with the relation between the reading, interpretation, and propagation of the message of indigenous Scripture and metaphorical generation; the third area to be considered has to do with the ethics of Christian interpretation. His appeal would be to recognize a new impetus for theological vigor and its recovery in the West, if, and only if, it is prepared to accept the obligations of mutual respect and understanding within a hermeneutical partnership.

## 撮 要

作者在這篇論文中提出以下的問題：當西方神學家放下本身神學及政治建構的霸權時，甚麼會成為他們與非西方神學家達成互相了解及共識的基礎？既然神學論述已日趨多樣化，《聖經》與及其繁多的譯本，會不會就是這種互相了解及共識的接觸點？西方神學家是否有能力區分他們的舉動，甚麼是全球化及後殖民場景要求他們進行的適度的詮釋互動，甚麼是他們對本身神學傳統的牢固掌控？怎樣可以使各派別具有同心學習的態度，從而建立神學上的夥伴關係？一種強調從彼此學習，以致趨向合一，及尊重分歧的全球性神學傳統能否在未來出現？

作者進而針對《聖經》在後殖民場景下可發揮的功用，提出三個神學及詮釋性反省必須關注的基本範疇：第一，是處理《聖經》譯本對當地人民的影響。第二，是探討本土人從譯本的閱讀、解釋及宣講得來的《聖經》信息，與信仰隱喻產生之間的關係。第三，是建立基督教詮釋的倫理。作者最後指出，惟有接受一種相互尊重及了解的詮釋性夥伴關係，神學才能重新擁有活力及於西方復興。