

DISCUSSION

A PROPOSAL FOR CONSTRUCTING MELANESIAN THEOLOGY

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I have just conducted a survey on Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran seminaries in Papua New Guinea. The survey inquired about the state of enculturation, the maturity of the seminarians, and the study program. Enculturation may be looked at from three levels: the staff, the life style, and the study program. The expatriates outnumber the local staff members in the three groups mentioned above. Furthermore, the life style is Western in varying degrees. Likewise, the study program, which is copied from seminaries abroad, is not enculturated, although there are attempts to insert a few subjects towards enculturation. The staff members and seminarians of the three groups all clamoured for materials in Melanesian theology, spirituality, philosophy – in short, Melanesian thought. The overburdened staff feel that constructing Melanesian theology is far beyond their capacity.

If the graduates of the country's seminaries are Westernised, what gospel will they spread later? They also preach a Western Christ, and will be unwitting tools of a continuing Western religious colonialism. This is exactly the challenge. Even American theological journals are now concerned about producing an American theology, a move away from the European domination of theology.

What is the present state of theology? Scholars have finally realised that the theologies written by Western theologians are not universal, but local, theologies. By this, we mean a unity in faith, but a pluralism of theologies. This growing realisation began in the 1950s in parts of Africa and Asia. Schreiter assigns three reasons for this shift.¹ The first reason is that there were not ready traditional answers for the questions being asked.

¹ In this paper we shall be following Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books/London: SCM Press, 1985, reviewed in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 1-2 (1985), pp. 211-214. All page references are to this book.

Examples are the complex questions which missionaries ask on the problems of Melanesian marriages. Secondly, “old answers were being urged upon cultures and regions with new questions” (p. 3). Thirdly, “the realities of the new questions and old answers pointed to a concern that recurred in churches around the world: *a new kind of Christian identity* was emerging, apart from much of the theological reflection of historical Christianity” (p. 3). Thus, liberation theology emerged from Latin America. African and Asian theologians are doing their respective theologies. But what is the state of theology in Melanesia? From my impression, much of the cry is “let us do Melanesian theology”, but little action has been done.

The Proposal

To develop Melanesian theology is a giant task. It needs a joint effort. I am proposing that both the Melanesian Institute and the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS) join hands to answer this task. In particular, the proposal has a long-term goal and a short-term goal. The long-term goal is that there be a regular conference like the Waigani Seminar, held annually by the University of Papua New Guinea. If a conference on Melanesian theology is convened regularly, and its proceedings published, the fruits will be a growing literature, which can be used by the future and present ministers and educators. But, before that long-term proposal be attained, first the short-term proposal has to be realised. What is that? I suggest a seminar on methodology. We agree that Melanesian theology is best done by local theologians. But they need the tools. In the old days, it took several days for the local people to chop a tree with their stone axes. But the introduction of steel axes made them chop trees much more quickly. In other words, a methodology on how to do Melanesian theology will hasten the construction of Melanesian theology.

Let us give more details about the seminar on methodology.

Who may be invited to this seminar? This brings us to the topic of the local theologian. According to Schreier, both outsiders and insiders are needed. An expatriate can challenge and enrich the local community. Thus, expatriates contributed in the development of liberation theology in Latin America. Aside from the professional theologian, the community must also be considered. We know that the writers of the New Testament

were influenced by the local theologies of their respective communities. In recent times, a shining example is the village of Solentiname in Nicaragua. “The community is a key source of theology’s development and expression, but to call it a theologian in the narrow sense of authorship is inaccurate” (p. 17). Likewise, prophets and poets may also be local theologians. The prophet judges the theology developed by the community, but the poet captures those symbols and metaphors which best give the expression of the community’s theology. I suggest the seminar be limited to around a dozen such theologians mentioned above. These participants are asked to write their papers on methodology, and illustrate it with a common topic.

What is that common topic? Since this is an ecumenical conference, the topic must be a non-controversial one, that is, one with doctrinal consensus. The topic may be Christ, the local community, and so forth. Furthermore, I suggest that the topic be not so obvious. For example, there is quite a literature on the meaning of Melanesian salvation, which is quite akin to the biblical concept. If the tree is to be known by its fruit, then the theological attempts in using the methodologies of the participants will likewise show.

The participants may also be asked to make explicit what model and approach they follow. Allow me to expand this statement by again following Schreiter.

Models of Theology

I will make some summaries of Schreiter, and comment on his ideas. Schreiter says there are three models of theology: (1) translation models, (2) adaptation models, and (3) contextual models. Let us go over each one.

1. Translation Models

This model follows a two-step procedure: (1) the Christian message, and (2) its translation into new situations. In liturgy, this will mean keeping the essentials, and allowing the accidental to vary from place to place. This is also the place of the “dynamic equivalence” method of bible translation. For example, in a place where people do not know sheep, the equivalent sacrificial animal is to be used. Thus, in Papua New Guinea, “Pig of God” was suggested as the dynamic equivalent of “Lamb of God”.

What are the good points of this area? It can be done by expatriates. It has been the most-common model used in catechetics and liturgy. Theological categories (e.g., grace, salvation, the concept of God) can be adapted to local languages. It presupposes only one model, which can be adapted in other cultures.

What are the weaknesses? Let us begin with an example. In Western countries, the church bell has been the instrument for calling people to church services. Expatriate missionaries tried to adapt it by using the drum. But the similarity ends there. Local people may associate the drum with erotic dances. Hence, the drum has another set of meanings. The weakness, then, is a positivist understanding of culture. More attention is given to the surface patterns of culture instead of its deeper meanings. Secondly, the translation models go against the principle of incarnation, which accepts what is good in the culture. Incarnation is a two-way traffic: it gives and it also receives. But the translation models presuppose only a one-way traffic. One example is the eucharist. Schreier writes (pp. 8-9):

do bread and wine constitute essentials (kernel) or accidentals (husk) in the celebration of the eucharist? Different Christian groups are answering this question in different ways. If one takes one line of analysis, the Lord Jesus Christ took the staples of His culture and sanctified them; we, in turn, should do the same with the staples in the respective cultures. Many Protestant denominations have followed this line. On the other hand, the eucharist is the prime symbol of Christian unity; hence the elements that make that union possible should be the same everywhere . . . How is one to decide? And equally important, who is to decide?

2. Adaptation Models

Whereas expatriates did the work in the translation models, the locals do the work in the adaptation models. The locals, who have been trained in Western schools, come back to adapt theology in their own cultures. Thus Placide Tempel used Neo-Thomistic philosophy as a framework in developing his Bantu philosophy in 1944.

Strengths: (1) it has local authenticity; (2) it has respectability in Western circles.

Weaknesses: (1) it “presumes a method in theology, whereby an articulated philosophical foundation forms . . . the basis . . . for a systematic theology. . . . It has difficulty explaining the role of the local communities in theological process” (p. 10). Although the adaptation models take culture more seriously than the translation models, still the former “often will try to force cultural data into foreign categories” (p. 10).

According to Schreiter, a variation of the adaptation model is the planting of the seed of faith, and allowing it to interact with the native soil. This is the model presented by Pope Paul VI. What are its strengths? It takes seriously the local culture with its own categories. It also respects the apostolic tradition, and the tradition of the local culture. What are its weaknesses? Schreiter says the ideal circumstances are rarely present, because of rapid culture change. Modern communications are shrinking the world into a global village.

3. Contextual Models

Models under this type recognise culture change. There are two types: (1) ethnographic approaches, such as Black Power in the United States, theology of women, the drive to create supra-tribal families in nations with diverse peoples; (2) liberation approaches. The liberation approaches are associated with Latin America, where Christians are undergoing political, economic, and social oppression. Whereas the ethnographic approaches look for issues of identity and continuity, the liberation approaches concentrate on social change and discontinuity.

Like the previous models, the contextual models also have their strengths and weaknesses. The strength of the ethnographic approach is its starting with the needs of the people (and not by questions imposed by other Christian churches). Its weakness: (1) the project is often not carried out beyond the first steps; (2) it can be a conservative force in situations where change is needed; (3) it “can become prey to a cultural romanticism, unable to see the sin in its own historical experience” (p. 14); (4) since this model requires cultural analysis, it can only be done by experts. Hence communities are excluded from this form of theologising.

The liberation approach also has its weaknesses. It uses the Marxist model of social analysis, which has not yet been resolved. Furthermore, it

is simplistic, in seeing issues as either just or unjust, black or white, without possible colours in between.

So, for the exposition of Schreiter's thoughts on theological models. Although I agree with much of what he says, I have a few misgivings. In the case of the adaptation models, Schreiter mentions how Placide Tempel, who was trained in Europe, used Neo-Thomism in writing his Bantu philosophy. While this accusation may be true on the individual basis, it is not true on the non-individual basis. We may compare the role of the theologian with that of the grammarian. The people who speak a language certainly know its syntax and grammar, but it requires a grammarian to make explicit the grammar in print. Every people group has its worldview, which contains the people's philosophy, categories, and implied theology. If a theologian makes explicit the people's implied philosophy and theology, the result is quite different from the individual basis, as in the case of Placide Tempel. Whether or not the non-individual approach be considered as ethnographic under the contextual category is not clear – if one is to follow Schreiter.

Schreiter says Pope Paul VI's approach of planting the seed of faith and allowing it to interact with the native soil is weak, because the ideal circumstances of culture are rare, and because of culture change. Culture is never static, because it changes. But, in spite of change, there is cultural continuity. Furthermore, the history of dogma, beginning from apostolic times, shows how Western theologies were produced, because of this interaction between faith and culture.

Schreiter speaks of the either-or disjunction between the theologian, or expert, and the community. This need not be the case in the analogy of the grammarian, and the people who speak the language.

In the proposed seminar, the participants should be aware then of what theological model they follow. Aside from the model, they should also be clear about the approach, which we shall explain further.

Approaches to Local Theology

According to Schreiter, there are four possible approaches to local theology: (1) theology as variation on a sacred text; (2) theology as wisdom; (3) theology as sure knowledge; and (4) theology as praxis. Let us

go over each approach, and see which approach may be the most profitable for Melanesia.

(1) *Theology as variation on a sacred text.* In medieval times, theology primarily consisted of commentaries on the Bible. The homily, or sermon, may also be a type of such commentary. Another variation is the narrative or story. “Retelling of biblical stories subtly weaves together biblical and contemporary narratives to open the semantic possibilities of the biblical text” (p. 82). A third form is the anthology. The *florilegium* (a compilation of short texts from the Fathers and other authorities), the *catena* (a chronological chain of commentaries on a single biblical text), the *philokalia* (a collection of texts of a single author) – all bring together discrete units of texts from authors, for a stated purpose (p. 82). Schreiter says cultures with a strong oral focus will find this type of approach quite appropriate. Many of the people in Melanesia are illiterate, because it has an oral culture. Schreiter says, further, that “proverbs, old stories, and the like, are, therefore, legitimate vehicles for the developing of local theologies” (p. 84).

(2) *Theology as wisdom.* This approach is concerned with the meaning of texts, and with experience. It wants to unite the world and God. It is characterised by the images of ascent and descent, or that of a journey. Examples of this kind of approach are the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Johannes Scotus Erigena, St Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, Teresa of Avila – to mention a few. Schreiter says this kind of approach “will be a likely development in those cultures that have maintained their important rites of passage. It provides a way to bring together the wisdom of the ancestors, with the wisdom of Christ, the first ancestor of faith” (p. 87). Since initiation rites are still vigorous in Melanesia, this approach to theology may also be tried.

(3) *Theology as sure knowledge.* This approach has predominated and overshadowed the other approaches. Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Karl Barth, and others used this approach. The audience of the theology of this approach is the classroom of the universities and of seminaries. This approach uses human reason, the social and natural sciences, in arriving at sure knowledge. This is the locus of the classical definition of theology as faith in search for understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*).

(4) *Theology as praxis*. This approach maintains that both reflection and action are essential in its dialectic. The purpose of the dialectic is to “disentangle true consciousness from false consciousness” (p. 92), in its concerns for oppressed Christians. It is the approach of liberation theology.

Is this approach useful in Melanesia? Liberation theology is done where there is oppression, which is usually economic in nature. Poverty, in my opinion, is not yet critical in Melanesia. But liberation theology may be used in other forms of oppression. In Papua New Guinea, women are only second-class, and often oppressed by men.

The four approaches have their merits. All may be used in Melanesia. Hence, we suggest that they all be tried in the proposed seminar in the construction of Melanesia theology.