

Introduction:

Toward Theology in an Australian Context

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1. Australian Christianity?

Whatever the assessment of Australian Christianity, the statistics on World Christianity are impressive. It embraces some 985,000,000 people and is still growing. From the year 1900 to the year 2,000 A.D., Christians will have moved from 28.7% of the world's population to 31.4%. (Hally:12).

More crucial is the fact that by the end of this century most Christians, including three-quarters of all Roman Catholics, will live in the Southern Hemisphere and in "Third World" countries. The old Northern Hemispheric, Mediterranean-European-North American centres of gravity in the Christian world will be eclipsed. (Here is one reason we begin this collection on doing theology in Australia with contributions from Third World theologians).

New forms of Christian religious experience and worship, Christian theological and artistic expression, Christian accommodation to ethical issues and political systems, will be added to the already immense diversity to be found in historical and contemporary Christianity. (Whether a religious message can pass from one context to another unchanged is felicitously discussed below by *T. V. Daly*, Ch.4).

To say all this, of course, is simply to say that Christianity is one of the Universal religions, that it possesses in fine degree polymorphous versatility, that it is "exportable". ("Primal" religions, by contrast, are not for export).

Struggling forms of British Christianity — products of England's "bleak age of religion" — were exported to Australia 200 years ago. Ever since, the

task of creating an Australian identity in religion — as in culture and politics — has baffled and taunted us. The familiar question and quest persist. Even while our La Trobe conference was under way, Australia's most notable historian, Manning Clark, was lecturing at Harvard on "The Making of Australia", gathering his material around one question: "Must Australia always be a colonial or client state, or can it pursue a cultural and political identity of its own?"

There is a powerful concern on the part of many Australians, and not least among theologians, to articulate an Australian identity — an "identity" which may well be plural, layered, complex and in process. The La Trobe Conference gave evidence that there are theologians here open to all forms of reflection that can provide insight into depth features of the Australian "context", which is to say, the Australian people — their land, institutions, world-views, life-styles, self-images. John Eddy (Ch.6) refers to the boom in studies which should form the background for any truly contextual reflection in an Australian setting: historical, anthropological, and social, as well as literary and cultural. Here is homework for Australian Christians intent on indigenisation of a Gospel universal in intent.

2. The General Context for "theologies-in-context"

This volume is a child of its time. Today, religion and theology are readily seen as culturally and communally conditioned — and as rightly so. *John Mibiti* (Ch.2) can speak of the "Gospel" entering and traversing culture, but he demands at the same time "a genuine Christianity which is truly made in Africa." "Imported Christianity," he declares, "will never, never quench the spiritual thirst of African peoples."

We are well acquainted with ancient claims that religious experience and theological dogma are supra-cultural or a-historical or peculiarly individualist. In our time (since the mid-19th C), such contentions have been upheld by existentialist, mystic and fundamentalist. But a counter-tradition has established itself in Western scholarship over the past two hundred years. An array of scholars — heirs to Enlightenment criticism of religion and to Romantic or developmental views of history, and themselves victims of "the crisis of historical consciousness" — have been documenting the extent to which religious activity and theological reflection are historically, socially and culturally bound.(Marty: 1971).

For one thing, Historical-Critical study of Western Scriptures challenged the view that these sacred books were lead-encased repositories of truth untouched by human history. It demonstrated that Hebrew and Christian Scriptures not only shaped communities; they were shaped by them. And these religious communities were not exempt from the contingencies of history.

At the same time, the study of world religions was moving onto a positive, scientific and comparative base, and inexorably removed religion from isolation by locating it in cultural history.

In addition, the emerging science of Sociology was struggling to understand the new context created by urbanization, industrialization and the “complexification” of society after the 18th C. It noted how traditional religious experiences and values, uprooted from the cozy context of peasant or village life, had to struggle to survive in the new context of factory cities. (The process of modernization, however, is a global one of such subtlety and complexity, says *Thomas Luckman* in Ch.11, as to confound all simple theories of the role of religion in social change.)

Meanwhile, throughout this whole period, Theology entered ever more deeply into its own crisis — and that is part of our special concern in this volume. The sometime Queen of the Sciences talked about “God” but, unlike modern sciences, could not “produce its object for public scrutiny.” “God” — to borrow the title of Gordon D. Kaufman’s book — became “the Problem”. At least one author below wonders whether there are any gods other than the gods of human conceiving. (In Ch. 5, *Gordon Dicker* intriguingly conceives God as an Aussie Battler. But what is this Divine Battler’s relation to *Benjamin Reist’s* “God of the Contexts” in Ch. 12?) While philosophers in England were wondering about what it meant to “do philosophy”, theologians were puzzling about what it meant to “do theology”. How should Theology proceed?

3. Theology, Anthropology and Religion

Modern theologians proceeded in a variety of ways but of particular interest to us are those who, in one way or another, turned theology into the study of man caught in the act of being religious. From Schleiermacher to Bultmann (1951:191) and Buber (1965) and Von Balthasar (1967), this anthropological note is sounded. Feuerbach, Marx and Freud took “theology turned anthropology” to mean that human words, images, paradigms and projections exhaust what people earlier had spoken of as divine reality. But many theologians argued that anthropology is simply the *first* word in theology: one must begin by concentrating on the believing subject before one speaks of revelation, metaphysics, speculation or transcendence.

This volume stands in this latter tradition. It is a product of its time not only in its consciousness that religious experience and theological utterance is, and must be, context-dependent. Most of its contributors are also concerned that their first word in theology be a word about human beings, about the human venture, in particular about the Australian experience. At the heart of the La Trobe conference were *four workshops* (Chh. 6-9) on “the Australian context” with rich insights thereon coming from historians, sociologists, comparative religionists, poets, writers, artists (and their interpreters). What is the “religious dimension?” Where is “the sacred” in the Australian reality?

As children of our time we are prepared at least to consider some unsettling propositions:

- (a) that traditional religions have no monopoly on religion. Poets and artists, for example, may quest for — and reveal — the sacred in the midst of the secular. (Witness the papers by *James Tulip* and *John Henley* below).

- (b) theologians have no monopoly on religion. One reason is that there is more to religion than theology. Ninian Smart's familiar "six dimensions of religion" include myth, ritual, social organization, ethics and experience, as well as belief and its systematic statement. A second reason is that the burgeoning scientific study of religion certainly studies religion, but not from within any confessional circle. It does not "do theology" but takes the theologies done as further data for its study of man.
- (c) Christian theologians have no monopoly on theology. As *Henk Van Der Laan's* contribution (Ch. 10) reminds us "theology cannot be identified with Christian Theology." Not only are there many Christian theologies (as Van Der Laan relates) but there are any number of theistic religions where theological reflection flourishes or has flourished. Theologies today come in many colours.

4. Why Start with Black Theology?

James H. Cone leads off this collection with a definition of Theology as Black Theology. His is one of a number of political theologies which have emerged in the last two decades. They share a basically anthropological understanding of theology and see the primary problems of contemporary theology as privatization and politization. Examples include Richard Schull's *Theology of Revelation*, Michael Novak's *Dionysian Theology* (or *Theology of Play*), the *Political Theology* of Johannes Baptist Metz, as well as the *Liberation Theologies* of Gustavo Gutierrez and Cone himself.

A crucial feature of the *Liberation Theologies* must be noted. Whereas Metz, for example, can see his theology as basically continuous with the Western tradition of secularization (which began, he claims, at least as far back as the anthropocentric theology of Thomas Aquinas), the *Theology of Liberation* sees itself as a theology of the Third World (including Afro-Americans) which has not shared in but been the victim of Western history. It is, therefore, not a product of historical continuity but of radical discontinuity.

In this context, James Cone has advanced a *Theology of Liberation* between the poles of power (enslavement) and freedom (liberation). He sees this almost exclusively in terms of the black community:

"There is only one principle which guides the thinking and action of Black Theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God's liberating work in the world."(1970:33)

To be sure, Cone defines "blackness" as "an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression". It refers, he says, to all who are oppressed, whatever their colour. The "black community" means the common life of the downtrodden. But it is important to notice, as many have pointed out, that this is a secondary reading.

In the late sixties, when I first heard Jim Cone give this message on a college campus in Ohio, I observed and felt the polarizing effect of his words. It may

still be felt. When liberation is defined by Cone as “the destruction of everything white”, and when blackness becomes a criterion for God’s chosen people, Black Theology may suddenly appear to whites as a reverse version of racist political religion.

For this very reason, and because of its clarity, power, concreteness and biblical base, it seemed salutary to begin this collection with such a statement. Cone’s purpose, as Professor of Theology in an old and prestigious centre of white European-American establishment theology, is intimately connected with his mission of forcing whites into new dimensions of awareness.

5. Omissions and Possibilities

This anthology is but one moment in a beginning. There are gaps, silences, omissions. No voice speaks herein from the Christian Orthodox Churches (imported along with hundreds of thousands of “new Australians”), or from Feminist Theologians (who have found authentic voice in North America but still struggle to be heard here). There are no contributions from Muslim theologians (although upwards of a quarter million persons have recently come to Australia from Muslim lands). Nor have we heard from Jewish theologians or Hindu Bhakti theologians or Australian aboriginal religion. /Cf. Wilson 1979/.

It is typical of the counter-currents at work in the Christian world that at the very moment ANZSTS was sponsoring a Conference on “Doing Theology in an Australian Context”, the Faculty of Divinity at Harvard was offering a Proseminar on “Theology in World Perspective: The Next Move”. “In human history thus far,” they said, “theology (or something like it) has appeared in sectors: Christian theology, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, etc.” Now, they continue, we plan to consider “the possibility of a global theology, continuous with and subsuming the disparate particular traditions of the past”, and to explore “the historical, academic-rational, and religious groundwork on which such a theology must be built.”

When *Anthony Kelly* (Ch. 3) proposes, in his fine programmatic article, that Australian theology should proceed within a “framework of collaborative creativity”, a broad context of fruitful interaction, will his words perchance be more prophetic than even he intended?

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