

**Timothy C Tennent**

# **Theological Translatability in the New Global Context**

**Timothy Tennent is President of Asbury Seminary in Kentucky with previous mission experience in India. He tells us that theological reflections from the Majority World church need to be a normal part of our theological study in the West and not just an adjunct from exotic climes. This is important because it exposes some of our blind spots and heresies and reminds us of the theological translatability of the gospel on many levels — including the theological. 1**

## **Introduction**

On October 31, 1517, a relatively unknown Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses of protest against abuses in the church to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This Latin document was quickly translated into German and, within weeks, had spread like wildfire across Europe, sparking what has become known as the Protestant Reformation. When Pope Leo X first heard about the ninety-five theses he reportedly dismissed Luther as a 'drunken German' who 'when sober will change his mind.' Later, as the movement grew, he still dismissed the growing discontent and calls for reform as a mere 'squabble among monks.' 2 However, before too many years had passed everyone realized that, in fact, Christianity, and indeed Europe itself, was undergoing profound changes which would alter the entire course of Western civilization.

Today, many new changes are underfoot which are transforming the church and the world in ways unprecedented since the time of the Reformation. For four hundred years Protestantism was essentially a Western cultural movement, with very few African or Asian actors on the Christian stage. For example, when William Carey, the humble cobbler who would later be called the father of the modern missionary movement, arrived in India in 1793 to preach the gospel, ninety-eight percent of the entire world's Protestants lived in the Western world. 3 Even one hundred years later, at the close of the 'Great Century' of foreign missions and the dawn of the 20th century, ninety percent of all Protestants still lived in the Western world. Is it any surprise that 19th century Africans often referred to Christianity as the 'white man's religion'? After all, most Africans had never met a non-white Christian in their entire lives. Is it any wonder that the most common description of a missionary in China was a *fan-kwei* or 'foreign devil'? A Christian was as strange and foreign to a Chinese as a Buddhist would have been to my grandmother who lived her whole life in the USA and, I am quite confident, never met a Buddhist in her life. For much of the world, Christianity seemed inextricably bound up with the rise and fall of Western civilization.

We are now in the midst of one of the most dramatic shifts in Christianity since the Reformation. Christianity is on the move and it is creating a seismic change which is literally changing the face of the whole Christian movement. Every Christian in the world, but especially those in the West, must begin to understand how these changes will influence our

understanding of church history, our study of theology and our whole conception of world missions. This article focuses on the shift in theological discourse, whereby the universal truths of the gospel are being revisited and retold in new, global contexts, a process I am calling *theological translatability*.

## **Moving from Cultural and Geographic Translatability to Theological Translatability**

One of the fascinating things about observing the current geographic and cultural shift in the centre of Christian gravity is that despite the dramatic growth of the Majority World church, the centre of theological education and Christian scholarship remains in the Western world. In fact, despite the growth of Majority World Christianity and the corresponding decline in the vitality of Western Christianity, there remains a very strong view that Western theological writings and reflection somehow represent normative, universal Christian reflection whereas non-Western theology is more localized, ad hoc and contextual. The view is held that while the rise of non-Western theological reflection may have some limited usefulness in particular local contexts, it remains irrelevant to and largely absent from Western theological discourse, which seems to carry a kind of universal validity. Having taught or spent time in several theological seminaries and Bible colleges around the world, I am always amazed at the dominant role of Western curriculum and theological textbooks in these institutions. Even materials which are occasionally published in the national languages of vibrant, growing churches are often either written by Westerners or are merely translations of Western texts which are received, read and studied as if they hold some kind of universal status.

I want to make it quite clear that my intention is not to be critical of the many wonderful and insightful contributions of Western theologians. Furthermore, I want to be equally firm in my deep appreciation for the whole field of systematic theology. A systematic theology is surely better than a random and haphazard one. I am not part of those who argue that all theological discussion in today's context must only be local, provisional, experimental and hypothetical. <sup>4</sup> There are far too many questions which should be common to all theological discourse regardless of time or space for us to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion about all theological enquiries. But there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Indeed, it would be arrogant for a Western theologian to believe that one or more of the theologies which our culture has produced have somehow managed to raise and systematically answer all questions, for all Christians, for all time. Every culture in every age has blind spots and biases which we are often quite oblivious to, but which are evident to those outside of our culture or time. Every culture has universal questions which we all share in as collective members of Adam's fallen race. Every culture also has questions and challenges which are peculiar to their particular context. Furthermore, there is a need for a reintegration of the various disciplines of theology such that systematic theology, historical theology and practical theology are in better dialogue with one another and all theology is done with a greater sensitivity to its universal and particular aspects.

Andrew Walls has called this tension between the universal and the particular the 'pilgrim' principle and the 'indigenizing' principle. <sup>5</sup> The pilgrim principle is the *universal* force of the gospel which transcends all the particulars of our own cultural background and gives us what Walls calls a common 'adoptive past' whereby we are 'linked to the people of God in all generations.' <sup>6</sup> The pilgrim principle emphasizes our common identity in Jesus Christ, quite

apart from our particular language, culture or background. In contrast, the indigenizing principle is the *particular* force of the gospel which reminds us that the gospel really does penetrate and become rooted in the specific particularities of our cultural life. We live out our Christian lives within very specific contexts, each of which has its own peculiar challenges and opportunities. Indeed, one of the enduring lessons of the Jerusalem Council is that the apostles did not command the early Gentile believers to forsake their cultural background, but to remain in it as devoted followers of Jesus Christ. They, like us, are called to serve as agents of transformation *within* a particular cultural group, rather than being extracted from that group. The indigenizing principle emphasizes our identity as members of a particular culture into which Christ is extending his Lordship and reign.

Problems arise when we unduly emphasize one of these principles over the other. An undue emphasis on the pilgrim principle assumes that all the issues we face in our culture are the same faced by every culture. In other words, our own theological reflection is universalized for the entire world. Because our issues must surely be the same as theirs, and we are confident in our own theological and exegetical abilities, then there is no point in humbly listening to the insights of Christians outside of our cultural sphere. An undue emphasis on the indigenizing principle assumes that every issue which the church faces is, in the final analysis, so contextualized and conditioned by the particularities of the local setting and the time in which we live that we become skeptical of the ability of any theologian to speak with authority or confidence about the claims of the gospel on someone outside their own cultural arena. An overly weighted emphasis on the indigenizing principle fails to recognize our common identity as sinners in need of the grace and redemption which has been offered freely in the Lord Jesus Christ for all peoples, regardless of language or culture.

I am arguing for a proper balance between these two principles. On the one hand, I want to clearly affirm the magnificent universal truths of the gospel which are true for all peoples, of all cultures, throughout all of time. On the other hand, I also affirm that there is much we can learn from the particular insights of the emerging global church. I also believe that there is much that we can offer the newer churches outside the West because of our background and years of sustained theological reflection. Likewise, they can help to fill in the gaps in our own theological reflection, especially by exposing areas where our reflection has been biased and resistant to the actual teachings of Scripture. Indeed, I believe that there is a growing realization that the Majority World church may play a crucial role, not only in revitalizing the life of Western Christianity, but in actually contributing positively and maturely to our own theological reflection. <sup>7</sup> The day of regarding the theological reflections of the Majority World church as something exotic or ancillary, or as the object of study only for a missionary or area specialist, is now over.

The positive role our Majority World brothers and sisters might play in our own theological formulation has become particularly evident in recent years as Western scholarship has focused increasingly on issues related to gender, sexual standards and homosexuality. Philip Jenkins, in his *The New Faces of Christianity*, recounts the story of a meeting between several Anglican African leaders and their Episcopalian counterparts to discuss homosexuality and other related issues. After several hours of heated discussions between the conservative Africans and the liberal Episcopalians, the African bishop asked his Episcopalian colleague, 'if you don't *believe* the Scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?' <sup>8</sup> It is thrilling to see those who once were the object of our missionary endeavours, now bringing the gospel back to us and reminding us of that which we have largely forgotten. There is an

African proverb which comes from the Akan in southern Ghana: 'The mother feeds the baby daughter before she has teeth, so that the daughter will feed the mother when she loses her teeth.' <sup>9</sup> Perhaps there is a lesson here for us. The growing and developing church in the Majority World is producing a number of important theological insights which, if heeded, could help to stimulate Christian renewal in the West. While it would be a mistake to underestimate the corrosive influence Western liberal theology has had in the Majority World church and in some of the well established seminaries, many hopeful, promising trends abound. There are five broad trends in the lives and witness of the Christians in these newly emerging churches which I find very encouraging.

## **Five Trends in the Theology of Majority World Christians**

First, these believers accept the authority of Scripture and would, by Western standards, hold a theology which would be considered conservative, orthodox and traditionalist. <sup>10</sup> The sheer numbers of Majority World Christians who affirm the authority of the Scripture could stand as a powerful bulwark against the winds of scepticism which have swept across much of the Western academy and church. Second, Majority World Christians are more likely to be morally and ethically conservative. The fresh voices of the Global South on issues such as homosexuality and abortion could provide some needed relief for Western conservatives who are exhausted from the seemingly never ending conflict which these issues have produced in many Western denominations today. <sup>11</sup> Third, these new, younger churches are more likely to be sensitive to the Christian responsibility to address issues related to poverty and social justice. <sup>12</sup> Evangelicals, in particular, have sometimes drifted from a more holistic integration between spiritual and social issues which characterized much of evangelical theology and experience. After all, evangelicals played a major role in such important social movements as health care, putting an end to slavery, child labour, promoting female suffrage and supporting the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In more recent years evangelicals have been less engaged in issues such as poverty, environmentalism, ethnic reconciliation, AIDS, prison reform and the ethics of war. Majority World Christians often live in worlds characterized by such widespread corruption, poverty, disease and oppression that these issues cannot be conveniently ignored as they often are in our large, seeker driven, and entertainment oriented middle-class churches. Fourth, these younger churches are very experienced at articulating the uniqueness of the gospel in the midst of religious pluralism. Many of the younger churches are springing up within the larger context of the sometimes dominating presence of some other non-Christian religion such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. In my experience, because of their own backgrounds as well as their close proximity to other living faiths, Majority World Christians understand more profoundly the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions. They often approach the continuities with less defensiveness while, at the same time, they can be surprisingly frank and candid about the glaring discontinuities which inevitably arise when other religions fail to recognize the true dignity of Jesus Christ.

Finally, they are more likely to grasp the corporate, (not just individualistic) dimensions of the teachings of the New Testament. This is, perhaps, one of the most glaring blind spots in traditional Western theological reflection. The social arrangements of the Majority World world are far closer to the dynamics present in the first century than either is to modern Western societies. This factor has certainly influenced the direction of theological discourse in the West. If these five trends continue to be present in the lifeblood of these new southern

Christians, then I am convinced that these Christians will emerge as the new great hope for the sustenance and transmission of the Christian faith in the 21st century.

## Theological Translatability: A Definition

The premise of this article is that the theological reflections of the Majority World church need to be heard as a part of the normal course of theological study in the West. Certainly *our* theological discourse is being widely and carefully studied by Christians outside the West. It is time that we enter into a more mutual exchange of ideas. John Mbiti, considered one of the pioneers of African Christian theology, once lamented how Africans had dutifully travelled to the eminent European and North American theological institutions for higher studies without finding any corresponding interest in their own theological reflections. Mbiti said, 'We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been, in a sense, your theology. We know you theologically. The question is, "Do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?"' <sup>13</sup> The answer up to now is that we really haven't wanted to know much about the theological reflections of Majority World Christians. Mbiti went on to point out that 'it is utterly scandalous' for students of Western theology to know more about the theology of heretics long dead than they do about the living theology of hundreds of millions of living Africans today. <sup>14</sup> Clearly, the borders of theological discourse can no longer afford to stay within the familiar perimeter of Western discourse.

Church history has again and again demonstrated that the gospel is culturally and geographically translatable, that is, it has found new homes in a vast number of cultures and places. The Christian faith successfully penetrated Jews, Romans, Greeks, Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Berbers, Syrians, Persians and Indians. Within a short period the feat was repeated with Vandals, Goths, Celts, Angles, Saxons, Scandinavians, Slavs, Turks, Russians and Chinese. This pattern has been repeated over and over throughout church history. Today the worship of Jesus Christ is as likely to be heard from a Swahili-speaking Bantu as from a Spanish-speaking Bolivian. It is clear that the gospel has the potential of being infinitely translatable. What we further need to recognize is that the Christian faith is not only *culturally* translatable, it is also *theologically* translatable. I am defining theological translatability as *the ability of the kerygmatic essentials of the Christian faith to be discovered and restated within an infinite number of new global contexts*. Today, theologies are being written in Creole as well as in Korean and in dozens of other languages. To be frank, some of these new theologies are too particularized and isolated from historic Christian confessions to be useful for nurturing the faith of the worldwide church. However, many of these theological reflections have the potential of shedding new light on the gospel and helping to correct blind spots and biases which have developed in our own theological reflections. <sup>15</sup> What is unique about this particular time in Christian history is that today we are not observing a geographic or cultural shift to *one* new centre, but a more complex, multifaceted emergence of what John Mbiti calls multiple 'centres of universality.' <sup>16</sup> The problem is that even while many in the West are acknowledging the rapid globalization of the church, we remain theologically provincial. As Mbiti has pointed out, even though the center of gravity has shifted from the North to the South, there does 'not seem to be a corresponding shift toward mutuality and reciprocity in the theological task facing the universal church.' <sup>17</sup>

## Implications of Theological Translatability in the New Global Context

This article is a call for a whole new generation of Christian leaders to take up the challenge to approach the theological task from a more global perspective. What are some of the practical implications of this?

First, it is vital that we become more informed and conversant with the growing theology from the Majority World church. The global myopia is illustrated well by the 1991 publication of *Doing Theology in Today's World*.<sup>18</sup> Despite the auspicious title, the book is primarily an exploration of the diversity within Western theological traditions by Western writers.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, the voices of Majority World theologians from Africa, India, China and Korea are not heard. One of the more helpful books which has appeared in recent years is by William Dyrness entitled, *Learning about Theology from the Third World*.<sup>20</sup> This book is an excellent introduction to theological contributions of Majority World Christians. In short, we can no longer afford to ignore the *theological* implications inherent in the demographic reality that Christianity is currently experiencing a precipitous decline in the West and that the vast majority of Christians now live outside the West. The typical Christian is no longer an affluent, white, British, Anglican male about forty-five years old, but a poor, black, African, Pentecostal woman about twenty-five years old. This reality will inevitably shape and form the development of theology since new questions are being posed to the text within the larger context of poverty, powerlessness, pluralism and the inevitable challenges which occur when vernacular languages begin to wrestle with theological issues.

Second, it is important to realize that, while we may live and work within certain well defined theological systems such as the Reformed or dispensationalist traditions, we must recognize that none of these systems is universal, even though the kerygmatic truths which they seek to organize and reflect are. This fact should not lead us to abandon the important task of writing systematic theologies which seek to reflect a consistent system which best reflects our understanding of the whole of the biblical data. Furthermore, this should not lead us to abandon our commitment to teach from a particular theological perspective. Nor should entering a broader, global theological discourse lead us into some nefarious world of theological relativism. Nevertheless, certain adjustments must be made. We need to recall that the Scriptures, the creeds and the ecumenical councils did not seek to establish any particular overarching theological system. We need to realize that the majority of the teeming millions of new Christians who are coming into the church are part of independent and indigenous churches that have no clear historical connection to the Reformation. In fact, most of these new Christians cannot be easily categorized under any of the traditional and familiar headings of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant. These Christians had no part in the European 'protest,' so it is difficult to call them Protestant. They are not related to the pope or the magisterium in Rome, so it is difficult to call them Roman Catholic. They are not submitted to the authority of any of the Eastern patriarchs, so it is difficult to call them Eastern Orthodox. Many belong to independent Pentecostal movements. Others cannot even fit under this broad heading. This is why in the 1982 edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* several new categories were added, including 'non-white indigenous' and 'crypto-Christian.'<sup>21</sup> The 2001 edition of the same work changed the name of the 'non-white indigenous' category to 'independent' and added an additional category of 'hidden' believers. The encyclopedia also reclassified millions of believers from the 'Protestant' category to this

new 'independent' category. <sup>22</sup> We must find new ways — which may actually be a recovery of more ancient ways — of engaging in a more globally informed discourse with committed Christians from around the world. Hopefully, not only will this effort help enrich our own theological perspectives, but, more importantly, it will lead us to a deeper understanding of the *depositum fidei*, that ancient apostolic faith which forms our common confession.

Third, this open and honest exchange will help us to recognize some of our own, less obvious, heresies and blind spots. I have already criticized the misguided tendency within most of Western, mainline Protestantism to secularize Christianity and abandon the historic confessions of the Christian faith. I have expressed a sincere hope that the global church may help to gently, but firmly, guide mainline Protestantism back into the mainstream of historic orthodoxy. However, the evangelical churches have their own set of problems. Evangelicals have been guilty of turning the gospel into a market commodity, all in the name of evangelism. Far too often the gospel is handled as something to be packaged, popularized and marketed to various identifiable market niches. The call to repentance, the certainty of final judgment and the reality of hell are seldom mentioned lest it lead to a decline in our 'market share.' Evangelicals would rather be a respected 'acolyte in the Temple of the Global Market God' than a prophetic voice in a culture that revels in using religious, even Christian, language to baptize the autonomous self. <sup>23</sup> So as we evangelicals in Western churches enter into a more sustained dialogue with many poor and persecuted Christians from around the world who are eagerly reading the Bible and living faithfully for Jesus Christ, it may help to expose our own deep heresies and revitalize our connection to historic Christian faith.

As we engage in this important, although somewhat painful, task we will come to realize that the Christian gospel is translatable not only on the linguistic, cultural and geographic levels, but also on the theological level. At each of the crucial junctures in the ongoing story of the recession and advance of the church, the theological translatability of the church was tested. Frequently, as in the Protestant Reformation, the newly emerging Christians were forced to restate the *kerygma* in ways which enabled them to clarify for their own time the crucial issues of the day which were necessary to keep the church faithful to Christ and the gospel 'once for all delivered unto the saints.' Today, as we are in the midst of another major period of recession and advance, it should not surprise us when, during the emergence of these Christian movements, new forms of theological discussions will emerge. The point of this article is to demonstrate that these new conversations demand our full and undivided attention. The theological discussion emerging in these new global contexts is not a 'mere squabble' among a bunch of new Christians with strange faces from even stranger places, but rather the voices which are transforming the Christian church and changing the trajectory of human history.



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## Endnotes

1 This article is taken from Tennent 2007

2 Bainton 1950:85

3 Barrett and Johnson 2003:331

4 Bosch 1996:427

5 Walls 1996:7-9

6 Walls 1996: 9

7 It is beyond the scope of this article to explore how the immigrant populations of North America represent the fastest growing segments of Christian growth in the West. In Boston, for example, more people have quietly come to Christ in the many ethnic churches in Boston than during the entire Great Awakening in Boston. Doug Hall has called it the 'quiet revival.' This immigrant revival can be observed in many of the large urban areas of America and Europe. For example, the largest church in Britain is a Pentecostal church led by a Nigerian pastor.



8 Jenkins 2006:1

9 Stinton 2004:252

10 Berger 1999:6. This also explains my disappointment in Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine's *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* published in 1991 by Fortress Press. Despite the title, the result is neither Christian, nor systematic. Their notion of global theology is to embrace what they call a neotranscendentalism which discards all fidelity to the Bible (see p47f) and replaces it with an emphasis on human experience and the common phenomenology of world religions. The result is a work which neither reflects the actual faith of Majority World Christians, nor is it faithful to historic Christian confessions

11 I am particularly mindful of how these issues have dominated the discourse of the PC (USA), the United Methodist, the American Baptist, and the Episcopal churches in recent years. These issues have, at times, so dominated the agenda of the church's national meetings that many other important and global concerns have been neglected

12 Jenkins 2006:62, 63

13 Mbiti 1976:16, 17

14 Mbiti 1976:17

15 An excellent example of a theological work written from an African perspective can be found in Wilbur O'Donovan's excellent volume, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (1992, 1996) Carlisle:Paternoster

16 As quoted in Bediako 1995:157

17 Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church," as quoted in Bediako 1995:154

18 Woodbridge and McComiskey 1991

19 There is one chapter dedicated to Eastern Orthodoxy, but this does not reflect the locus of the growth of Majority World Christianity

20 Dyrness 1990

21 The 'indigenous white' category was changed to 'independent' in the second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*

22 The 1981 edition (p6) projected 154 million Christians in the 'non-white indigenous' category. The name of this category was changed to 'independent' in the 2001 edition and the 2000 figure was revised to 385 million 'independent believers.' The *World Christian Encyclopedia* also found 'hidden' believers within Hinduism in seven countries and 'hidden' believers within Islam in fifteen countries.

23 The phrase and metaphor originates with Harvey Cox 1999: 393