

SYMPOSIUM:

THEOLOGIES IN CONTEXTS

SEEING WESTERN THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

– Paul Richardson

All round the world, at the present time, new approaches to the study of theology are making their appearance. Black Theology, African Theology, Asian Theology, the Theology of Liberation, and now Melanesian Theology, are all giving the universal church fresh insights into the meaning of Christian faith. In the past, missionaries from the West tried to present the gospel to people from different cultures in concepts that were meaningful to them. The result was what some Africans have called “stepping-stone” theology, a useful but transitional stage on the road to the development of indigenous theology. Now Christians from the third world are producing their own interpretations of the Christian message in terms of their own cultures and worldviews.

Actually, this is not a new development in the history of the church. Theology has always been contextual, although the term itself has only been used in the past 15 years or so. Unfortunately, theologians of a previous age were not always aware of the way in which cultural factors shaped their thinking. As a result, there were bitter disputes between, for example, Latin and Greek theologians, in which both sides failed to understand the contribution to their disagreement made by differences in language and philosophical background.

In modern times, awareness of what Richard Niebuhr termed “the social sources of denominationalism”, has been a big spur to the ecumenical movement. As pluralism in theology continues to develop, acknowledgment of the fact that theology always has been, and always will be, contextual could be a powerful factor influencing Christians to look with sympathy at different expressions of the faith around the world. It might also prevent us trying to set up any one form of theology as a norm

or a standard, by which all the rest must be judged. This is a trap, into which people from the West sometimes fall. They assume that their own theology is somehow neutral and objective, a scholarly enterprise relatively free of cultural bias. There are even third-world theologians who encourage these Western illusions. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, claims that Liberation Theology offers a new way to do theology, far removed from the remote, academic Western approach. Gutierrez has a point, in that Liberation Theology is far more self-conscious about its relationship to everyday struggles than is most Western theology; but even European theology can be seen as a response to the pressures of society.

A good example of this is provided by perhaps the greatest Western theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth. Barth has described how the key moment in his own theological development was the day he opened the newspaper to read a letter in support of the German Kaiser's war policy signed by almost all his old teachers of theology. This shattered Barth's faith in liberal theology, and launched him on the path that led to his great commentary on Romans, with its affirmation that all we know of God is what He chooses to tell us in His Word. The rise of Hitler and the Second World War only confirmed Barth's negative assessment of liberalism, and of the ability of human beings to discover the truth about God through religious experience, or with the aid of their reason. Neo-orthodoxy has its roots in the crisis Western Europe passed through in the first half of this century. Ironically, those theologians who claimed to be critical of human culture, in fact, shaped their theological outlook in response to political events.

Neo-orthodoxy was succeeded in the West by various forms of "secular Christianity". Again this represented an attempt to respond to developments in European culture. In the 1960s, the major challenge came from the dominance of empirical philosophy, and the scientific worldview, to which this is so closely linked. Science has undermined religious belief in a number of ways. Undoubtedly, it has given people confidence in the ability of human beings to solve any problem by technological innovation. As John Robinson put it in *Honest to God*, quoting Bonhoeffer, man has "come of age", and he no longer needs God to hold his hand. The American theologian, William Hamilton, provides a personal anecdote,

which helps to show what this means. Hamilton tells how he stood with his young son looking up at the sky at night. He tried to excite his son's wonder at the beauty of the stars, but the boy was a true child of modern America: "Which one did we put up there?", he asked.

Perhaps the most important way in which science has challenged religion lies in the method that science has adopted. The scientist bases his conclusion on evidence he can observe, quantify, and evaluate. He always looks for a rational explanation of what he can see. He recognises no *ples tambu*, and refuses to accept that any event should be outside the scope of his investigation. He cannot afford to put things down to "acts of God", or explain phenomena in terms of divine causation. If he did, he would be expressing defeat. The words of Laplace to Napoleon are well known: "God – I have no need of that hypothesis."

All this has made Western theologians reluctant to see God as the explanation for events in the world, in case they be accused of advocating belief in a "God of the gaps". At the same time, empirical philosophers, heavily influenced by the scientific method I have tried briefly to outline, have pressed theologians to give evidence for their beliefs. As a result, the dialogue with science and empirical philosophy has come at the top of the agenda for many theologians in Anglo-Saxon countries.

Other examples could be given of the way in which Western theology is culture-bound. A major problem for the church in Western Europe is the alienation of a large section of the working class from organised religion, and this has led to a growing interest in Marxism, as can be seen from the *Theology of Hope* of Jürgen Moltmann, or the political theology associated with J. B. Metz. With the growth of the women's movement, particularly in the US, Feminist Theology has moved to the centre of the stage. Conservative evangelicals often claim to be an exception to this pattern, on the grounds that their theology is shaped solely by scripture. Their attitude to scripture, however, which leads them to treat it as an inerrant authority in matters of faith, can be seen as the result of many people having to live in a constant state of flux, without meaning or purpose. Peter Berger has written about the "homeless mind" of the 20th century. Confronted by the complexities and uncertainties of life today,

men and women look for security and certainty, for a fixed point by which they can take their bearings in life. Contemporary evangelicalism has been able to tailor its message to meet this need.

Where does all this lead us? In one important aspect, the knowledge that all theological reflection is, to some degree, culture-bound can be a source of relief and liberation. It should set us free from the subconscious assumption that Western theology is somehow the norm by which we are to judge every other type of theology. In other words, it spells the end of theological ethnocentrism. At the same time, an understanding of the relationship between theology and culture, along the lines I have indicated, is bound to call into question the possibility of any talk about God at all. We seem to have arrived at the conclusion that all views are the products of cultural determinants. All theologies are equal, but all are equally wrong. Time precludes a full response to this problem, but I would like to plead for *interaction* as the best model for understanding the relationship between religion and culture. In this brief paper, I have been chiefly concerned with the impact of culture on religion, but a complete account of the relationship between them would have to look at religion's influence on culture. Some historians, for example, have argued that scientific progress occurred in the West because Christianity provided a worldview that made this possible.

There is no trans-cultural essence of Christianity, at least not one to which we have access. There is no way in which we can come to know God, and speak of him except in terms of our own culture. Even the New Testament presents the gospel message clothed in the cultural dress of its time, and, as James D. G. Dunn and others have pointed out, it contains a variety of theological viewpoints. We have no privileged road to truth that by-passes culture. This makes pluralism inevitable. The universal church is bound to be the home of different theologies. Let us hope they will live together on good terms! However, let us not conclude from this that discrimination is impossible. The question must be faced as to whether a particular theological position is Christian or not. There is no trans-cultural norm by which we can judge, but, since all our theologies are meant to be *Christian* theologies, I think we are entitled to look for some family resemblances between them. In seeking to decide whether a certain form of theological expression is acceptable or not, we should ask, not whether it

corresponds to a given standard, but whether it belongs to the family. In its own idiom, does the theology we are discussing show signs of kinship with other theological forms in different cultures? Pluralism in theology does not mean there will be no need for judgment and discrimination, only that the task of evaluation must be performed with enormous sympathy and empathy.

THEOLOGIES OF THE “THIRD CHURCH”

– **John D’Arcy May**

Walbert Buehlmann, the director of Franciscan missions, was sitting in his office in Rome one day, when he realised something was wrong with the map of the world on his wall. After pondering it for some time, he reached for the scissors, cut the map in half, and transposed the two halves. Now it looked right: the Pacific was in the centre! He has been thinking how, long ago, the Mediterranean (lit.: “the sea at the centre of the earth”) had ceased being a barrier to the peoples living around its shores and had become a high road of travel, a medium of communication between them, thus giving rise to the civilisations of North Africa, the Middle East, Greece, and Rome, and later Europe. Today, the Pacific is becoming the new Mediterranean, our true central sea: jet travel shrinks distance, and a hitherto unimagined community of diverse peoples is gradually taking shape.

In his book, *The Coming of the Third Church*, Buehlmann shows how the continents of “the South” will be the Christian continents of the future. By the year 2000, perhaps two-thirds of all Christians will live in the countries of the so-called third world, and the church’s centre of gravity – meaning power and resources, teaching authority, and theological creativity – will slowly but surely be shifting south. This process is already evident in the significance of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America, the Liberation Theology that is their voice, and the consequent weight of the joint statements of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference, as it responds to these new developments.

I would venture to say that all the very diverse theologies emerging from the third church have one basic theme in common: liberation. To