

## World Christianity in Dialogue with World Religions

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### Introduction

Even if the study of Christianity's interreligious and intercultural dialogues is associated with concerns found primarily in the non-Western worlds, the two forms of dialogues actually have their origins in the Western academy. For Christianity, interreligious dialogue is a response to the plurality of religions while intercultural dialogue responds to the cultural plurality within the Christian tradition itself. They are, respectively, Christianity's engagement with what has come to be known as World Religions and Western Christianity's engagement with what has come to be known as World Christianity. The present article looks at the genealogy of both these engagements and explores their implications for Christian theology, offering a glimpse into the different methods theologians employ today in apprehending the new situation.

### Advent of World Religions

Let us begin then by pointing out that it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the idea of "World Religions" became a dominant discourse, due in part to the Western academy's greater awareness of the pervasive nature of the various religions of the world, in particular those arising from the East and which are not part of the Abrahamic faiths. Interest in them was sparked as evidenced by the increasing number of translations and availability in the West of scriptural texts of non-Western traditions like Max Müller's monumental fifty-volume *Sacred Books of the East*.

Interestingly enough, even as these other religions have existed for millennia with most predating Christianity, Westerners were wont to use the term "religion" when referring almost exclusively to the Christian tradition. Books on religion present ideas from only within the Christian tradition and universalized as if their characteristics apply across all the religions of the world. The coinage of the term "World Religions" can therefore be viewed as an acknowledgement that other religions differ radically from Christianity and should therefore be appreciated in their own right. It appeared, according to Tomoko Masuzawa, to be "a turn away from the Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic conception of the world, toward a more egalitarian and lateral delineation" (2005, 13). But it was also

just as much the European academy's attempt at maintaining hegemony indirectly by othering and classifying "the rest" in contradistinction to what the "West" had hitherto known religion to be. Moreover, interest in the world's other religions were at times also motivated by the intention of asserting Christianity's uniqueness and superiority. Stephen Bevans offers an incisive description of this with reference to the first ever interreligious gathering in 1893, as well as the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh of 1910 in which the modern "master narrative" was in full force and the "demise of other religions was confidently predicted" (Bevans 2010, 6).

Of course, we know now that the other religions did not fade away as, according to Richard Seager, the Asians at the Parliament were intent on checking Christian missionaries and Western aggression, and asserting the integrity of their own religious traditions and gaining public support (Seager 1995, 97). Ironically, it was because of the Parliament that the other religions began to gain recognition in the West. For, instead of Christianity advancing to the East, the Ramakrishna mission, Zen Buddhism, and other Eastern religious movements were able to make significant inroads into Europe and America. This was in part due to a speech delivered by an invitee to the Parliament, Swami Vivekananda, who enthralled the West with the inclusiveness of the Eastern traditions and their spiritualities (Vivekananda 2013).

### **The Advent of World Christianity**

Along the same lines, the idea of World Christianity arose towards the end of the twentieth century. While it did appear previously (as in Henry Van Dusen's 1947 book *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* [Van Dusen 1947]), it was only in the last two decades or so, according to Charles Farhadian, that the term "world Christianity" became popularized in a series of publications that started with Dana Robert's essay, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945" (2000), Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2002), and Lamin Sanneh's *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (2003) (Farhadian 2012, 3).

Like the idea of World Religions, the idea of World Christianity was also as much in view of the West having taken for granted Western normativity for too long. It was a response to the realization that Western Christianity is not the only one there is. Thus, World Christianity is but an acknowledgement that non-Western Christianities do exist and cannot continue to be perceived as extensions of European Christianity: they

have to be considered in their own right. Previously, because European Christianity considered itself normative and universal it audaciously presented itself as “Christianity,” without any preceding adjective or qualifier. It simply passed itself off as “Christianity” just as Christianity passed itself off as “religion” a century earlier.

But, with the decline of Christianity in the West and the increase in the membership of churches in the Global South, it was impossible for Western Christians not to notice that, just as the West is post-Christian, so Christianity is post-Western. According to empirical studies on the global ecclesial landscape, Christianity has shifted, demographically, to the South (Johnson and Bellafatto 2013, 19–20). The exploration of World Christianity, therefore, has primarily to do with examining the different forms of Christianity around the world especially in the South, usually in comparison with forms found in the West. The pluralistic expressions of Christianity are, therefore, of interest to World Christianity. Peter Phan describes this interest:

the rise of the concept of World Christianity has brought to the fore the realities of different and multiple Christianities, with their distinctive traditions in theology, liturgy, spirituality, and ecclesial organization. This heightened consciousness of ecclesial variety and multiplicity in turn fosters new and diverse theological methodologies. (2012, 183)

Thus, according to Dale Irvin, an important task for World Christianity in the first decades of the twenty-first century is to call the disciplines and fields of study in the theological curriculum to account for representing various forms of knowledge as being universal (Irvin 2016, 3). Here it would be necessary for World Christianity, in light of the many World Religions in its midst, to engage in dialogue not only across cultural traditions (Asian, African, Latin American, Oceania, Latino/a, Black, etc.) but also across religious traditions (Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism Shinto, etc.). This is the imperative for World Christianity at present.

### **Implications for Christian Theology**

The first point to note is that the differentiation between “Christian lands” versus “mission lands” or between “historic churches” versus “younger churches” is no longer relevant. Irvin contends that the “strange bifurcation of the history of Christianity into church history and mission history has seriously distorted our understanding of World Christianity” (Irvin 2016, 19). It has also to be acknowledged that “Christianity is spread primarily by local believers and developed by them in local ways. Attention

to the activities of foreign missionaries has tended to obscure this fact, and the present diversity of world Christianity is testimony to it” (Kim and Kim 2008, 210). Hence, Christian theology for the world church is necessarily the theology that evolved from both the West and non-Western nations, many of which were Christianized in previous centuries but are now active agencies of missionary activity. If the latter’s theology has been successfully inculturated, it should, on the one hand, have distinguished itself from the theology of its colonial founding church and, on the other, be truly integrated into its own local contexts, as evidenced by its being accepted as part of the religio-cultural matrix of society.

This leads us to the next and more important point, i.e., that Christian theology can no longer be done in isolation but must engage with the theologies of other religions and local and contemporary cultural traditions. Numerous efforts have been made here and Christian theologians who are ever conscious of the need for engagement with the local cultures and religions have evolved distinctive methods for theologizing. Stephen Bevans offers four models of how theology is presently being done by theologians with a World Christianity consciousness. He labels them the (1) Contextual Model; (2) Neglected Themes Model; (3) Global Perspective Model; (4) Comparative Theology Model (Bevans 2106).

(1) In the Contextual Model the theologian focuses on particular contexts and social locations and brings the issues and concerns from there into a mutually critical correlation (and confrontation) with Christian scripture and church tradition. Elizabeth Johnson’s *Quest for the Living God* is a representative text of this method for engaging in the theology of God (Johnson 2007). Instead of discussing what has traditionally been framed as ‘the problem of God,’ Johnson addresses the vision of God as experienced by Christians from a variety of contexts: secular, suffering, oppression, womanist, racist, religious pluralism, etc. It becomes quite clear that the context shapes and determines how one thinks about and experiences God.

(2) In the Neglected Themes Model attention is given to specific themes that mainstream theology often neglects but are nevertheless of significance to the Christian faith and life of Christians especially those who are living in the margins, and in particular those from the Global South. Kwok Pui-Lan’s *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* can be seen as a corrective to the colonial and imperial, as well as the masculine and patriarchal, approaches that have dominated the many fields of Christian theologies for centuries (Kwok 2005). Kwok employs postcolonial theories and women’s experiences as starting points to interrogate a range of theologi-

cal issues from biblical hermeneutics, Christology, political theology, creation and the environment, and other themes of specific concern to those liberated from colonialism as well as women liberated from patriarchy.

(3) The Global Perspective Model does theology from a world perspective, taking seriously the experience and thought patterns of people everywhere. Raimundo Panikkar's *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Panikkar 1973) offers an all-encompassing view of how the Christian understanding of God as Triune can be discussed from a global perspective. He premises his investigation by positing that the Trinitarian worldview is not unique to Christianity but can be discerned across the religious traditions and is in fact a fundamental human experience. He coins the term *cosmotheandric* to describe the all-embracing and integral vision that Reality is constitutive of the three-fold dimensions of the cosmos, theos, and anthropos or the universe, divine and human.

(4) The Comparative Theology Model engages with the scriptures and doctrines of other religious traditions to enrich Christian theology and open it up to wider horizons for apprehending the Absolute and the mysteries of life. Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha I Could Not be Christian* is a theological autobiography which exemplifies this model (Knitter 2009). It does this by engaging Buddhism in order to better appreciate the teachings and practices of Christianity. Reflecting on Buddhist categories such as nirvana and sunyata, as well as compassion and meditation, Knitter digs into Christian tradition to discover similar doctrines or practices for comparison. He then highlights under-emphasized elements in Christianity that Buddhism has helped him see as useful for his own Christian faith.

### Conclusion

As can be seen from the discussion in this brief article, Christian theology has taken on new directions and new methods on account of the development within Christianity in the context of the changing global ecclesial and religious currents. With the advent of World Christianity theologians have been prompted to pay greater attention to the experiences of Christians and churches in what were previously regarded as being at the peripheries of Christendom but are now serving as its center. A major thrust of these new forms of theologizing is that they cannot ignore the fact of the World Religions, all of which have their own visions and theologies of the Absolute, life and of the universe. In short, doing theology today must take into account the fact of World Christianity encountering World Religions.

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