



Multicultural Christian Community—A Bouquet of Multiple Flowers

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Once America was a microcosm of European nationalities. Today America is a microcosm of the world.

—Molefi Asante¹

America is a nation of immigrants, and the story of the Christian community in America is formed and shaped by immigrants. The steady flow of immigrants resulting from the new U.S. immigration act of 1965 is challenging the churches to reevaluate their mission outreach. This involves not only welcoming Christians, but also engaging with people of other living faiths around the world who have become fellow inhabitants of the USA.

Many immigrants come as enthusiastic Christians, and they will not be content to be members of an established congregation that has no room for their gifts and contributions. In other words, they will not linger around long if they do not experience a genuine integration through an appropriate transformation of the existing communities. That calls for a new approach, attitude, and openness on the

¹Quoted in Ken Uyeda Fong, *Pursuing the Pearl: A Comprehensive Resource for Multi-Asian Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999) 230.

America's growing multiculturalism can be seen by Christians as a problem or as an opportunity. Viewed as an experience of Pentecost, it becomes the opportunity for churches and congregations to participate in a new and promising catholicity.

part of the established churches and their member congregations. The traditional assumption that these immigrant members will add a bit of variety to the congregation but eventually get assimilated into the dominant cultural values of the denomination does not always work. That assumption is also contrary to the New Testament vision of a Christian community of people with different gifts becoming one body. What is really called for is not just adding to the present variety but transforming “congregational perspectives and values” through the new immigrant members and the gifts they bring to the community.²

Multiculturalism and religious pluralism are not new to Christianity. Christianity as a new faith emerged in such a context. Ever since its founding, Christianity has been dealing with these issues, depending on the need of a given community, because every mission outreach is an encounter with a new cultural community. It is false to assume that mission outreach is only an encounter with the religious faith of a community. Every faith is couched in culture, including Christianity, and as such mission outreach is an encounter between cultures with their respective faiths: Christianity with its culture(s) and the others with their respective cultures.

THE PHENOMENON OF MULTICULTURALISM

Contemporary transportation and telecommunication facilities have greatly increased interaction among communities around the world, contributing to a new sense of global community along with the surge of economic globalization. From early times, people have been moving across the face of the earth. In recent decades, this number is on the increase. People move across cultural and political borders for various reasons: “political and military upheavals, economic inequalities, intellectual quests, natural disaster, and sheer wanderlust.”³ The impact of such mobility will no doubt be felt more in countries like the United States, which has a long history of immigration. Nonetheless, migration is a worldwide and not exclusively American phenomenon.

Indeed, it began at the dawn of the modern age, with the migration of Europeans, first to the Western Hemisphere, and then to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the rest of the world. By the middle of the twentieth century, there were significant European and North-American enclaves in practically every region of the world. Then, in the second half of that century, the current began to reverse, with people moving from the South (Asia, Africa, Latin America) to the North (Europe, the United States, Canada) as well as to the traditional Northern enclaves in the South (Australia, New Zealand).⁴

It is hard to predict the migration pattern of the distant future.

When people and communities move around they carry with them their his-

²Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelesford, *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 18.

³Justo L. González, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 4.

⁴*Ibid.*, 4–5.

tories, ethnicity, customs, and languages, creating a situation of multiculturalism in places that were hitherto monocultural or had only one or two dominant communities. Multiculturalism has become a reality in many countries of the world and it is here to stay. A new multicultural situation in a given community challenges its members to make hard choices, either welcoming and appropriately incorporating the newcomers, or resisting the gifts the new ethnic and cultural communities bring to them.

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The United States is moving towards a broader multicolored, multiracial, multiethnic, multilinguistic, and multicultural society. (In this essay I will be using the term multicultural to include all the above.) People have responded differently to this phenomenon. Those who oppose multiculturalism are of the opinion that the USA has been too lax and accommodative, and therefore they call for adhering to a more exclusive and stringent civil monoculture and plead for cultural homogenization. They are of the opinion that

A multicultural society is a contradiction in terms and cannot survive indefinitely. It either becomes monocultural or runs into trouble. There *are* multicultural societies, but they tend to be pre-modern, undemocratic in their political organization, and ridden by ethnic conflict when the ethnic groups are not geographically separated. Contrary to frequent assertion, America has never been a multicultural society, although it has had cultural ghettos.⁵

It is quite intriguing that people argue this way in a world where democratic nation-states like India (with 18 official languages), Switzerland (three), and Canada (two) have proved that multicultural societies are possible in spite of the challenges they constantly pose to these countries. The concern about multiculturalism is not about separation but inclusion. It is about democratic fairness. According to Hervé Carrier, the fight for culture is inextricably bound up with the fight for justice. Plea for culture is in fact a plea for justice and peace.⁶ It is about human rights and dignity.

On the other hand, supporters of multiculturalism argue that cultural homogenization is in fact cultural hegemony. They point out that American unity is maintained at the expense of diversity. “According to them, the American Founders launched the nation on a continuing crusade to impose white, male, heterosexual, property-holding, Eurocentric culture on the diverse culture that then existed or later sprang up, or should have sprung up, in the United States.”⁷

⁵John O’Sullivan, “Reinventing the American People?” in *Reinventing the American People: Unity and Diversity Today*, ed. Robert Royal (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 278.

⁶Hervé Carrier, *Gospel Message and Human Cultures: From Leo XIII to John Paul II*, tr. John Drury (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1989) 43.

⁷Charles R. Kesler, “The Founding and American Unity,” in Royal, *Reinventing the American People*, 94.

Such polarization creates tension between those who would like the community to remain strictly faithful to the past legacy and those who would like to work towards a renewed and wholesome community looking towards the future. There is no doubt that whatever actions are taken at present will determine the type of the future community in the USA.

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Already in 1991 Ben Wattenberg pointed to the fact that the United States had emerged as the “first universal nation” and that accepting the reality of multiculturalism is its only option. Wattenberg, in a way, echoed the poet Walt Whitman’s description more than a century ago of the United States as a “nation of nations.”⁸ Wattenberg based his proposal on the following demographic changes:

Until 1960, about 80 percent of American immigration had come from Europe; since 1960, about 80 percent come from places other than Europe. They are predominantly Hispanics, Asians, Moslems [Middle Easterners] and Caribbean and African blacks. We are becoming what we had professed to be, the first universal nation, and we’re very successful at it. It is very much in the American interest—commercial, geopolitical, demographic, and ideological—to encourage this tendency toward diversity. We ought to encourage it, even if it itches a little. It’s one big reason America is, and will be, the omni-power.⁹

How the USA deals with its rising multiculturalism will be a model for other countries that are moving in that direction. The United States will have to create appropriate political and social instruments and institutions to deal with the change.

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Christians and Christian churches in the United States have their own share in dealing with multiculturalism. They are hardly caught by surprise by this phenomenon. Many debates, discussions, and programs have addressed the issue. However, the churches’ record of accomplishment has been rather modest, as the changes that are demanded are not palatable to many in the mainline/historic/old-line Protestant churches.

The ongoing immigration has resulted in Christian brothers and sisters from distant lands, belonging to different ethnic, linguistic, and racial groupings, now residing in cities and towns all over the USA. The people of other faiths among whom the U.S. churches did missionary work in faraway countries are now in their

⁸Andrew T. Kopan, “Melting Pot: Myth or Reality,” in *Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Edgar G. Epps (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1974) 38.

⁹Ben J. Wattenberg, *The First Universal Nation: Leading Indicators and Ideas about the Surge of America in the 1990s* (New York: Free Press, 1991) 45–46.

neighborhood, vigorously practicing their own faith as well as engaging in mission outreach, even to Christians. A multireligious situation has become a local reality rather than a concern of foreign missions. The title of Diana Eck's recent book, *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*,¹⁰ aptly captures this phenomenon.

PENTECOST CHRISTIANITY VERSUS ENDOGAMOUS LOCALE-CHRISTIANITY

The entire history of Christianity and its mission outreach can be read from the perspective of the relation between the gospel and culture. God has always used languages, signs, symbols, and tools in relating to humans. Incarnation was God's most direct encounter with humanity: God's self-disclosure in human culture at a specific place and time. Incarnation is divine *inculturation* as much as *translation* (Andrew F. Walls); it is *divine immigration* (Jung Young Lee).

In incarnation God enters the human sphere with all its cultural accomplishments and constraints. In incarnation the divine not only engages humanity in general but also embraces humanity through a select community with all its particularities—ethnicity, language, and other cultural components. In incarnation God experiences creation and history in a most intimate way. Jesus, the Incarnate, was also born into a world of cultural plurality—Jewish, Roman, Greek, and others. Already by the time of Jesus, Jerusalem, besides being a religious center for Jews, was also a center of trade and commerce, a place of foreign political power and competing religions. Jesus had his own share of encounters and dialogues with other cultures. As he was growing up, Jesus had to make cultural adjustments to be true to his prophetic and theological vocation. His message had to be tuned into and embedded within the best available cultural-linguistic resources.

Christianity burst on the scene as a multicultural community on the day of Pentecost when believers filled with the Holy Spirit began to speak in different languages. At Pentecost multiculturalism is embraced and celebrated to the amazement of the bystanders: "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:8–11).

I do not know of another faith tradition embracing such a plurality of community right from its inception. People heard the same message in different languages! If that was possible then, why cannot it be now?

On the day of Pentecost, three thousand persons—diaspora Jews, proselytes, and probably pious enquirers—speaking several languages, belonging to different ethnicities and nationalities, were baptized and added to the community. "Christi-

¹⁰Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper, 2001).

anity produced a new human being who was totally different from the world's nationalities, not by transforming the basic nationality but by transforming the limitations of national identities."¹¹ The only way to name this social phenomenon is to call it a Pentecost miracle, as Christians have done through centuries. The seed of a new universal community (to be the permanent nature of Christianity) is sown in the context of the aging Roman Empire, *the* secular universal power.

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This dynamic of multiculturalism continued in the early formation of Christian communities that transcended the constraints of class, race, ethnicity, color, gender, and profession. The very first Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) had to debate the role and place of circumcision in Christianity. As recorded in the book of Acts and other New Testament writings, similar gospel and culture issues emerged again and again in this young community. The community had to resolve them with its own meager resources until Christianity assumed the privilege of a state religion in the early fourth century. The imperial sponsorship in 313 and the comfort of stability that it brought made Pentecost Christianity (which was manifested on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem) slowly shift to an endogamous locale-Christianity. For many reasons, Christian communities often became single language and/or ethnic populations. However, such singular cultural fellowships were not meant to be the norm but only a transitory entity. When occasions made it possible they were expected to reclaim their true identity as a Pentecost fellowship, embracing the fullest possible plurality of the community in a given context. When that vision vanished, Christian communities succumbed to the temptation of becoming an endogamous locale-Christianity.

New disciples fall into similar temptations again and again, like the early converts at Corinth. The Christian converts of Corinth were no strangers to multiculturalism. Corinth in the middle of the first century C.E. was a prosperous and populated trading and manufacturing city. It was a venue for biennial Isthmian Games second in fame only to the Olympian games. But they gave in to the temptation of narrow parochialism when defining their identity, with claims of, “I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ” (1 Cor 1:12). Paul places before these Christians the significance of cooperation and collective spirit and the centrality of Christ for the Christian faith (1 Cor 2–3). The deep-seated human tendency to divide human community into in-groups (insiders) and out-groups (outsiders) breaks down, and a new sense of *koinonia* is cre-

¹¹Virgilio P. Elizondo, “Benevolent Tolerance or Humble Reverence? A Vision for Multicultural Religious Education” (1997), in *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 87.

ated. The challenge will be to preserve and perpetuate this new community in spite of its fragile and countercultural nature. Therefore, the relation between gospel and cultures, or mission and cultures, has been an inherent issue in Christianity since its inception.

To fast-forward, social and historical circumstances led several earlier immigration communities to succumb to the temptation of being endogamous Christians in their new environment of North America. The preservation of race, language, and other ethnic and cultural particularities in an alien land justified such an expression. The transitory localized nature of Christianity has become the norm, rather than the expression of Pentecost Christianity. However, the increased multiculturalism in the United States and around the world now makes it possible for churches to reclaim and live out the Pentecost nature of Christianity in a much more intentional way, opening themselves to the pluralism of the communities already existing in the neighborhood. Embracing multiculturalism is not an option for Christians but a mandate. It is a call for discarding a false notion of Christian community, despite its long-cherished legacy.

RECLAIMING PENTECOST CHRISTIANITY AS A NEW CATHOLICITY

If not included already, the Christian newcomers in the neighborhood and those hitherto relegated to the margins of the (Christian) societies will be able to enrich historical churches in North America with their experience, articulation, and practice of the Christian faith, shaped by their worldviews and cultural heritages. Their experience of the divine, gained through the means of their own cultures, and their spirituality and religiosity, shaped by their cultural perspectives, are equally as valuable as the experiences and religiosities of other Christians. Robert Schreiter explains this as follows: “One must posit a certain commensurability of cultures, in the sense that all cultures may receive the Word of God and be able in some measure to communicate with one another, despite real and legitimate differences.”¹² Thus, these Christians offer once again the opportunity of multiculturalism to expand the horizon of Christianity—as on the day of Pentecost—leading to “new catholicity,” that is, a new vision of the church that will embrace varied cultural expressions of Christianity in a creative mutuality.¹³ In the words of González, “To say that the church is ‘catholic’ means that it includes within itself a variety of perspectives. To say that it is ‘one’ means that such multiplicity, rather than dividing it, brings it closer together. This is the miracle of communication, which in Christian theology we ascribe to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

The United States has the largest Christian population in the world. There are approximately 235 million Christians, accounting for 85 percent of the total popu-

¹²Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 128.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 20.

lation.¹⁵ According to one projection, even after fifty years, that is in 2050, the USA will retain this status, with the then Christian population of 330 million forming 82 percent of the total population.¹⁶ However, immigration will change the ethnic composition of the Christian community along with the rest of the population. Some of the early signs are already on the horizon. In the Boston-Cambridge area about half of the active congregations worship in languages other than English.¹⁷ The Hispanic population is already the second largest ethnic community in the USA with a population of 37 million, and the Asian and Middle Eastern populations are showing steady increase. With the steady migration of Afro-Caribbeans and people from Africa, even the African American identity is in the process of being redefined.

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Philip Jenkins, in his much-debated book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, points out that, unlike the churches in Europe and North America, churches in the global South are thriving and expanding. However, their practice of Christianity is “far more conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teachings.” They possess “a very strong sense of supernatural orientation” and preach “deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism on clear scripture authority.”¹⁸ The irony is that the bulk of these Christian immigrants from the global South are bringing with them the same evangelical fervor with which Protestant missionaries went out of Europe and North America from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

How will the churches in North America make use of these new vitalities brought by their Christian sisters and brothers from the South who are now at their doorstep? Will they write off their evangelical fervor as charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic and keep them at a distance? Often failing to find that kind of lively evangelical fervor in their partner mainline churches, some of the immigrant Christians are turning to the more conservative Christian denominations. If the traditions born in the mission fields out of the traditions sent to them from Europe and North America are not welcomed in the present mainline churches, those mainline churches will become parochial, remaining unto themselves and retain-

¹⁵David B. Barrett et al., eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 1:772.

¹⁶Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 90.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 7–8.

ing their own priorities. The option for historic churches is not to give up their identity *in toto* but to reformulate themselves within the multicultural realities of their present contexts. Their new identity will be found along with that of the others; they will enrich one another like flowers in a bouquet.

A bouquet of multicolored flowers is the metaphor I would like to use for such a possible multicultural congregation or Christian community. Flowers of different color, texture, and genetic pool are held together in a common bond through the power of the Holy Spirit. With that collective bond a multicultural community in a given place will be a slice of humanity as God intended it to be, cherishing the beauty and upholding the strength of its centered diversity. To accomplish this, each community will need to divest itself of all its exclusive sociocultural ethos and construct a new identity as an inclusive community.

Creating a strategy for mission and ministry to achieve this goal is a crucial issue for Christians on all sides of the spectrum—historic churches of the Western tradition, missionary non-Western churches, and the marginalized ethnic church communities who have evolved their own ways to meet their needs as Christians. Virgilio Elizondo, with his long experience of multicultural ministry, has the following remarks about a way forward: “In my experience, a truly multicultural congregation emerges through three phases or moments....[c]onfession, conversion, and construction. But I suspect the first and foremost question is, Does the congregation really want to be multicultural family?...Or...Does the congregation want continuity with just a bit more color and foreign accents?”¹⁹

A fair assessment of the status of multiculturalism within a given Christian community requires, in the words of Elizondo, an *intra-ecclesial inter-cultural dialogue*.²⁰ The goal of the dialogue is to discover how the community deals with ethnic/cultural pluralism. Does a hierarchy of status exist? A gradation of expectations, a classification of responsibilities and privileges? What and who determines them? What forces perpetuate them or challenge them? What is the record of change, reform, and renewal, if any? Answering these questions will allow Euro-American churches to begin reaching out to multicultural communities. This will be a good beginning for a genuine process of confession, conversion, and construction.

It is not just the new immigrant Christian communities and the local ethnic minority communities that pose multicultural challenges in North America. New cultures and countercultural movements have also emerged within historic churches (e.g., the youth culture and feminist or womanist movements). In addition, groups such as seekers, single parents, gays and lesbians, “believers not belongers,” “uninvolved but religious,” “spiritual but not religious,” post-Christian and neo-pagan movements, some of whom are in the grips of atheism

¹⁹Elizondo, “Benevolent Tolerance or Humble Reverence?” 90.

²⁰Virgilio P. Elizondo, “Conditions and Criteria for Authentic Inter-Cultural Theological Dialogue,” in *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* ed. Claude Geffré et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984) 19.

and nihilism, are raising new challenges for the ministry and mission of the churches.²¹

The challenge of multiculturalism has created opposing reactions. If Christians and churches see it as a new Pentecost experience, they will be able to welcome it. Today, we have unparalleled opportunities to build, intentionally and actively, a culture of pluralism among the people of many cultures and faiths in America. We may *not* find ourselves fragmented and divided, with too much *pluribus* and not enough *unum*. If we can succeed, this is the greatest form of lasting leadership we can offer to the world.²²

RESOURCES AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

Is a new beginning possible, overcoming what has gone on for several centuries? Humans have a tremendous capacity to overcome social hurdles if they are motivated and challenged to use their freedom and flexibility appropriately. While creation or biological evolution may have imposed certain irreversible limitations on humans, matters pertaining to social evolution can be changed and completely reversed as determined by a given community.²³

Open and bold interactions going on between Christians of different ethnic and cultural communities everywhere are slowly changing situations. Hitherto segregated monocultural churches are opening up to multicultural fellowship, making Christian communities truer to their calling: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17). There are a number of multicultural congregations and multicultural ministries and mission programs in North America. But they are few and far between, remaining as specialized ministries instead of being the core thrust of the ministry of the present time. Christian communities are deeply immersed in society's mixed reaction to multiculturalism.

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To be true to their calling to be a new humanity and a foretaste of the new creation, Christians and churches should welcome the flowering of multiculturalism in North America as an opportunity to reclaim their authentic nature as Pentecost Christians, celebrating it as a gift that will help them become a "new catholicity." This new catholicity will be different from the earlier attempt made during the mission outreach from the West. It will not try to create a universal

²¹H. George Anderson, *A Good Time to Be the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997) 9.

²²Eck, *A New Religious America*, 26–80.

²³René J. Dubos, *Celebrations of Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981) 251.

church through homogenization, which in many non-Western contexts ended up reprintinizing westernized Christianity. It will envision community as a bouquet of multiple flowers.

Such a vision of the new Pentecost, expressed in multicultural communities, is the need of the time; it is needed by the church:

- to develop an authentic global Christianity as an alternative to the present economic and political globalization;
- to enable greater creative cultural synthesis, enriching life for all;
- to dismantle the prejudices that have kept communities apart;
- to strengthen our witness and evangelism, locally and globally;
- to become a “mediating institution” (Peter Berger), advocating for peace and justice;
- to create enriching and empowering liturgical and worship resources;
- to generate mutually complementary and critical theological reflections and articulations;
- to propose imaginative rereading of the Scripture and traditions, creating an international hermeneutic community;
- to develop crosscultural ministerial formation programs;
- to offer culturally sensitive multiple methodologies for dealing with pastoral issues;
- to engage in multifaith relations and dialogues for a shared, more humanized future;
- to be an example for unity of humankind;
- to produce Christian education and other pedagogical resources with due attention to cultural diversities.

This list certainly looks like a tall order to fulfill. The hope is that it can be accomplished by way of a collective faith journey that will be totally dependent on the gifts of every member and community and on the guidance of the Holy Spirit as it was witnessed on the first Christian Pentecost. This journey calls us to face and discard the prejudicial fear of the other—different, stranger, alien, foreigner, colored—so that the gifts within our several multicultural communities can be brought together in a charming bouquet of multiple flowers. ⊕

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