



Expanding Our Vision: Insights from Emerging Theologies

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One of the more exciting developments on the contemporary theological scene is the emergence of new theological approaches: third world, feminist, black, and native American. This sudden outpouring of work over the last two or three decades has produced an almost overwhelming challenge to those who wish to be theologically up-to-date. One who wishes to be well informed must know not only what is published from German academic communities but also from Asian, African, Western feminist, and other groups. One's horizons must encompass theology which may look and sound substantially different from what one was trained to accept as respectable academic theology. Does this sudden influx of theologies from new places and new perspectives have meaning for the theology in which most of us in the West have been trained? Is the scope of theology forever changed? Will we always have to take seriously and incorporate into our perspectives such a wide range of approaches as today confront us? The response to all three questions is affirmative.

When using the term "main-line theology" or "dominant culture theology" I am referring to the theologies and theological approach which have dominated our religious thinking in the West. Various theological approaches may result in widely differing and even contradictory systems, depending on the particular shape of the conceptual base chosen. However, the dominant theological approach depends on Western philosophy and intellectual questions (e.g. the positivist scientific method) to shape questions, vocabulary, and conceptual apparatus for the systematic development of religious thought. Even when explicit dependence on philosophy is eschewed (as with Karl Barth), the theological approach is in conscious dialogue with and active interdependence on the prevailing intellectual systems. In brief, these theologies (the ones we have been trained in) all have a common root in the dialogue between the Good News of God in Christ and the multifaceted intellectual scheme in which Western culture expresses itself.

"Emerging theologies" are those various communications of the Gospel in dialogue with other cultures besides Western or with subcultures within the West. Emerging theologies do not share many or all of the Western dominant culture's intellectual assumptions about the nature of our relation to the world. For instance, African cultures do not exalt the primacy of logic and reason, so crucial to Western theology. They do not reject it; such an approach is simply foreign to traditional African cultures. Within the West, feminist theologies both reject the primacy of the intellect over affect, and insist on the centrality of personal experience and human interrelationships to the formulation of any valid theology. Such an approach marks these emerging theologies as fundamentally different from the dominant Western theological method. I

have designated all of these new theologies together as “emerging theologies.” These theologies are not all the same, but as I will attempt to show, they do have some significant common characteristics which will substantially affect our way of doing theology in the future.

When considering the interrelationship between the dominant culture’s theology and the emerging new theologies, one could take several different approaches. One might identify different countries and their theologies, and try to determine what major contributions those theologies make.¹ Or one might attempt to discern various themes in the emerging theologies, and on this basis to predict the ways in which these different theologies will develop.² In the notes the reader will find references to works which develop these approaches. I have chosen to focus on the admittedly dominant culture’s biased question of how the method and content of these new theologies can contribute to and change what most of our seminaries and academies now study as “Christian theology.”

I. MAJOR THEMES

Each of the emerging theologies is complex, has its own integrity, and cannot simply be reduced to a uniform shape in which each new theology is essentially the same as any other. But certain common themes and issues emerge; their frequency of occurrence almost of itself demands that one acknowledge their importance. My observations may suggest a harmony which is not so clearly present at an initial exploration and conjure up the illusion of a uniformity which does not exist. The value of my approach is, however, that it permits us to name areas in which some of the most radical and transforming developments are taking place in theology. Some of the themes and approaches are related to the dominant Western theology; others are not. In any case, the scope of developments ensures that new theology is emerging from the encounter; too much is happening for the old theology to remain the same.

¹John England’s *Living Theology in Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) provides an example of this approach.

²Alyward Shorter, *African Christian Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977) mixes this approach with a study of the limits and possibilities of the categories used about and in African theology and traditional religion.

A. New Tone. One of the important characteristics of theology which over the last nine hundred years has grown to dominate in the West is a tone of impartiality, the certitude of impartially ascertained and unquestionable truth. Deriving its model of discourse from the academic disputation or the classroom disquisition, and responding to the intellectual quest of the age, the underlying assumption was that abstract religious truth was accessible and could be apprehended with certainty. The boundaries of what could be asserted with certitude differed among Aquinas, Schleiermacher, and Altizer, for instance, but their effort was the same—to articulate the truth which is accessible to all who will accept the investigator’s (right) mode of inquiry.

But this scientific model of inquiry and expression is not a value shared with emerging theologies. Common to all of them is a sense of personal and community involvement with the theological issues. In this respect the new theologies have more in common with the monastic theology displaced in the West by Scholasticism. They would agree that one ought not to hide one’s personal involvement with the theology one is expressing; it is necessary and appropriate to articulate it because that passion is part of one’s theology. John Cobb, introducing the feminist

theology of Marjorie H. Suchocki, praises her ability to demonstrate that “passion and insight and force of argument can go together.”³ C. S. Song uses “passion” as a term of praise when describing a theology of liberation emerging from Asian peoples’ suffering and encounter with the liberating power of God in Christ; Latin American theologies of liberation insist that theology must begin with experience, and reflection on that experience, rather than with deduction from abstract norms.⁴ Passion and the expression of personal involvement are not weaknesses to be hidden; the emerging theologies regard them as strengths to be used.

The insistence that theology must begin with and express corporate and individual experience is not simply a demand that religion be heart-felt. Rather, the experience of all the people, especially the poor and the excluded, must be data for and a shaping influence on theology. The interpretation of Scripture, its application, norms by which one judges, the content of one’s theological system or beliefs; all must be expressive of and revelatory to the experience of a people. Theological truth is evoked from the lives of the people encountering Christ; it is not decreed from above or demonstrated through past authorities. Further, theology which is not consonant with the people’s experience is irrelevant or even to be rejected by them.

B. Awareness of Pluralism. Much of Western theology’s past has been characterized by a concerted effort to construct a system which is true, adequate, or sufficient. After the notion of historical relativity was introduced into theological discourse in the nineteenth century, most theologians asserted that theological and religious systems changed in different historical and cultural contexts. But emerging theologies would for the most part go further than that.

³Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) viii.

⁴Choan-Seng Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982) 59; Alfred T. Hennelly, “Grassroots Communities: A New Model of Church?” in *Tracing the Spirit*, ed. James E. Hug (New York: Paulist, 1983) 60-82, treats both these communities in their original forms, and their implications for more economically developed nations.

They would suggest that pluralism of theological systems and constructs is to be expected and indeed necessary.

Two sorts of pluralism are involved: pluralism of theologies and explanations of Christian belief and practice, and pluralism of Christianity with other religious-cultural systems. All of the emerging theologies endeavor to express the perceived essentials of God’s self-giving in the Jewish-Christian revelation in and through another cultural-political-social mode of expression than the one Christianity used during most of its history.

In its first few centuries, these theologies suggest, the Christian community learned to express itself in the form of Hellenism, and that expression has modified itself substantially as the cultural context has changed. Today as great a shift as that from Jewish to Hellenic Christianity is taking place. The appropriateness of theological expression in Western intellectual constructs is not denied, but other approaches are identified as having equal and complementary value. Many discussions about missions and the missionary enterprise focused on the question of indigenous expression of the Christian faith. Such questions are multi-faceted and complex. The clear consensus is that various cultures and people must find their own ways to express the Gospel, even if these seem quite different from the accustomed ways. The search for a universal theology is regarded as illusory and inauthentic. A pluralism of theologies is demanded by the

very nature of God's revelation in Christ to all peoples.⁵

An acceptance of pluralism within Christianity leads to an issue which has been of great importance for the Christian community: what is the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions? If one accepts the necessity of a pluralism of religious expressions within the Christian tradition, should one also expect and even desire a pluralism of religious traditions to continue to exist together? The form in which this question is raised is not always the same, but by and large the response acknowledges that regardless of any quest for a pure ideal, the world is religiously pluralistic, and this given reality must in some way express God's will for us.

As one might expect, African and Asian theologians have wrestled most directly with this question, and most have responded with some variation on the notion that all religions are truly expressive of some dimension of the divine reality, but also derive their value and significance as manifestations of the God revealed in the divine fulness through Christ. None the less, these other religions, which may be quite different in fundamental ways from Christianity, may also reveal something of the divine fulness which is not shown clearly or perhaps at all in Christianity. Thus while Christ is the central interpretative focus of the totality of human religious expression, a multiplicity of different

⁵Anselme Sanon, in "The Universal Christian Message in Cultural Plurality," in *True and False Universality of Christianity*, ed. Claude Geffre and Jean-Pierre Jossua (*Concilium* 135; New York, 1980) 81-95, discusses this issue in terms of an African theological perspective. Native American expressions of the issue insist on the necessity of a plurality of expressions to correspond to the multiplicity of reality. See e.g., Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) 12-13.

religious traditions may be right and productive for the concrete situation of our world.⁶

C. Ethics. One of the most significant aspects of the emerging theologies is their refusal to divide theology into the areas which have become standard in Western theology. Ethics and theology are one, they assert; there is no real division. Even if the two are considered distinctly from each other, they are not truly separate. Ethics and theology are one because our behavior and our beliefs spring from the same source within us and express the integrity and harmony (or lack thereof) within us.

This contemporary conviction emerges from two distinct influences. One is the focus in twentieth century biblical theology on God as a God who acts in history to change and transform peoples and events. (The Scriptures are to be interpreted as salvation-history.) Because their theology is based on the apprehension of a God active in human history, their focus is on the divine-human interaction in history, rather than on the pure doctrine or right teaching about God so essential to Scholastic systems. Their primary emphasis is on the experience of God which is to be reflected on, rather than on the speculative system as such.

The second source of this emphasis is the intellectual and political power of liberal democratic ideologies and the movement through revolutionary or reformist means to promote justice and freedom for all peoples and for individuals. Regardless of the many variations on this theme, these movements share a common assumption about human nature. Human beings of their very nature have certain basic rights as human beings, including that to political, religious, and economic freedom, as well as the right to justice on a personal, national, and international scale. The U.N. Charter on Human Rights is merely one attempt of many to articulate this consensus.

Different theologies have articulated the centrality of an ethics of justice and liberation, and have connected this ethics directly and immediately with related assumptions about God's justice and redeeming love, and God's relationship to the world. In Latin America, for instance, Marxist analysis has provided a conceptual basis which links together theory and activity (theology and ethics) in the notion of *praxis*. It insists that theology must be a critical reflection on historical *praxis*, which illumines and enables the liberating history of the world and especially of the church. In its orientation toward the kingdom of God, theology must advocate justice, most especially for the poor and dispossessed, who have been deprived of it, and should also explore and encourage the liberation of peoples, particularly those who have been excluded from freedom by others. Thus the ethics of liberation theology demands a "preferential option for the poor."⁷

⁶A significant number of anthologies contain papers and articles about this issue from Christian and non-Christian perspectives. For instance, *Attitudes Toward Other Religions*, ed. O. C. Thomas (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981); *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God* (London: SCM, 1982) explores this issue comprehensively from an Asian perspective.

⁷Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) 3-19.

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Not only Latin American, but also Asian, Black, and feminist theologies have been influenced by such an interpretation of the centrality of liberation and justice. All theology is by definition political theology: such theologians as the black James Cone and the white feminist Rosemary Ruether insist that because all theology emerges out of a socio-economic and political milieu, the ethical ideal it advocates must be incarnated in a tangible and earthly context.⁸

Some of the emerging theologies do not depend so directly on Marxist social analysis, but assume with equal intensity that the Gospel must be enfleshed in the living reality of the world. For instance, Mar Osthathios from South India begins with the reality of the divine Trinity, which he perceives as perfect communion, and argues that God's nature as triune requires that the earthly community be without class divisions, in perfect equality. The ethic which demands the abolition of the caste and class system, and the sharing of material and spiritual goods, flows directly from the theology of trinitarian life.⁹

Such an approach to theology denies completely the notion that theology is a looking at questions about God which can somehow be divorced from the way in which one explores ethical issues and one's own involvement in the world. Theological theory includes ethics and ethics flow from a theological starting point; neither is complete without the other. Furthermore, each is engaged in critical interaction with the other. For instance, a theology which defends patriarchal oppression invalidates itself; exploitation of the laboring classes by a ruling elite is an evil which vitiates any theology which tries to cover it up or justify it. Furthermore, the ethical behavior of the theorist is a dimension of the whole theological system. The function of theological-ethical work is in part to transform the person studying or using it. A theology which is not directed to the transformation of both the world and the ones reflecting about the world is not an adequate theology.

D. God's Relationship to the World. Every theology has had to wrestle with the question of God and God's relationship to the world. Perhaps the two most important contributions of

emerging theologies to this theme are: a notion of God which refuses to reflect the needs and expectations of the powerful, and an interpretation of God's relationship to the world which includes all people, and the whole world.

All emerging theologies insist that whether consciously or not, mainline Christian theology has presented a notion of God which reflects the interests of those who control the political, social, economic, and religious systems. These questions may be raised in different forms. One is the portrayal of God in exclusively patriarchal imagery, an objection raised by some of the Asian theologians such as Katoppo and Song, as well as by Western feminist theologians. Katoppo, for instance, insists that patriarchal images of God violate the insights of Asian religious consciousness into what is in the Scripture, as well as the being of women who seek full liberation in the Gospel. The development of a fully Asian theology demands the inclusion of feminine im-

⁸James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 39-83; Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 12-46.

⁹Mar Osthathios, *Theology of a Classless Society* (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1979).

agery of the divine to express in human terms the fullness of the divine love and activity toward us.¹⁰

Not only has the divine fulness not been represented in our theology; the notion of God has been used to support an ideal of society in which some members can be oppressed in what is designated as the natural order of things. Christians have worshipped and theorized about a God who remained unmoved in the heavens, but could be reached by people who supplicated him, regardless of their obedience to God's imperative of justice. The notion of such a God is utterly contrary to the revelation which this God is supposed to have given in the Scriptures. The God of Scripture is a God of justice, who evokes and demands just behavior from true worshippers. The theological fruit of an understanding of God must be the working out of justice in the world; otherwise the theological vision of God is untrue and distorts God's self-revelation.¹¹

Our picture of God, these emerging theologies assert, must express God's redemption of the poor and oppressed, not merely of the powerful elite. Furthermore, the relation of God to the whole human community also must include the interrelationship of God to the cosmos. God relates as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, not just to humanity's history, but to the whole of creation. This insistence on a theology of creation, particularly characteristic of feminist and Native American theologies, is usually accompanied by a concern to know how human history relates to cosmic order.

Much of Christian theology has focused on humanity's relationship to God; emerging theology is less specifically anthropocentric and asks about the interrelationship between God and the whole of creation. To separate a sacred history of a few human creatures from a neutral or profane cosmos, or to identify a spiritual reality as good and material reality as evil or inferior to the spiritual is unacceptable. All which is created by God, is an expression of the divine life, and is all in and of itself of great value before God.

Furthermore, this reality is interconnected in what might be called an ecology of creation. The earth is not simply a stage for human history, with the universe as a backdrop. The cosmos has a life of its own in which humans share. Humans depend on and act in the cosmos; and the

universe itself acts on and through human beings. Human activity or decision-making which neglects the cosmic dimension of our lives (or which neglects the truth that we are a dimension of the cosmos) is wrong and distorted. Any theology must include in its perspective our interconnectedness with the universe, appropriate attitudes, responsibilities, and the shape such a context gives to our relationship with God, other persons, and all reality.¹²

II. TRANSFORMED THEOLOGICAL VISION

The twentieth century has experienced a transformation in theology of a magnitude which has not been seen since the second century. No one today can

¹⁰Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, 63-79; C. S. Song, *The Compassionate God*, 14-16.

¹¹Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 194-196.

¹²Highwater, *The Primal Mind*, 119-132; Vine Deloria, *God is Red* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973) 91-150; Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk*, 72-92; Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 45-48.

claim to be theologically aware without some acquaintance with various emerging theologies. One must have this consciousness not only to be well informed, but because these theologies are now a part of the theological life of the Christian world, and will increasingly shape the theological vision of *all* who do theology. Only by means of such breadth of vision can theologians express the faith of a multifaceted Christianity in a pluralistic world.

Presuppositions and Method. No one will ever again be able to do theology assuming that the opinions of white male intellectuals ought to set the norms and terms for theological discourse. If a theological approach does not at least acknowledge the multiplicity of people involved in the Christian community, it cannot be taken seriously. But such an assessment cannot pretend that all people are the same, the experiences and ways of looking at the world fundamentally identical, and that one can theorize boldly about a common human condition. On the contrary, the multiplicity of concrete human socio-economic, sexual, and political factors will of necessity become part of the theological equation. Because the concrete human condition is of as much importance as abstractions, if not more so, the ideal of a *theologia perennis* will appear increasingly illusory.

Theological systems or approaches will be of two major sorts. Some will explicitly acknowledge their espousal of one particular point of view, with no attempt to articulate or treat with equal empathy another perspective, as with James Cone's Black theology. Others will acknowledge their own specific starting point and take explicit account of how other perspectives can be taken seriously and integrated with their own. In either case the particulars of the human condition are taken with profound seriousness. Furthermore, the equal, if not preeminent, right of the dispossessed to enter the theological dialogue is underscored.

Relation between Theology and Ethics. Even if one allows a conceptual distinction between theology and ethics, no one can any more dissociate the one from the other, either theoretically or practically. One must ask of any ethical system what its theological assumptions are. From where does it derive its alleged absolute or even relative norms? From whose experience? What interpretation of the Scripture? Who derives benefit from the following of these moral principles? Whose *telos* governs decisions? On the other hand, one must also inquire

about the ethical consequences of any theological system. What, for instance, are the consequences of an approach which radically separates the divine and the human spheres from interacting with each other? Such an approach is intolerable to a theological vision transformed through contact with the emerging theologies. Although everyone admits that no one will ever live up perfectly to her or his ideals, we can no longer escape our responsibility to gauge the helpfulness of any theology with respect to the ethical behavior of its proponents. How seriously should we take a theology which asserts that all people are brothers and sisters, yet does not produce any significant awareness and movement among its adherents to act to make that vision a reality? We today must ask those hard and embarrassing questions about our own theological approaches.

The New Humanity. Most theologians today would acknowledge and lament the general exclusion of women, Blacks, Asians, etc., from the theological

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discussion, recognizing that their different experiences bring a richness to the theological dialogue which it very much needs. But theology is expanding its very notion of human to include all of these people who have been excluded. Our notion of humanity must incorporate the wealth of people's concrete experiences, with their joy and pain, and their varied religious expressions.

Furthermore, this vision of humanity must encompass not only the human race, but the whole created universe which is interconnected with us. Humanity finds its full meaning and its function in relation with other beings on the earth, and with other parts of the universe. The universe is both one interconnected reality and a plurality of beings living together. How can these interconnected parts live together? Is destruction a necessary law? What is the human role in this cosmic ecological system? Theology today has no moral option but to address these questions with utmost seriousness.

Image of God. Classical theologies have tended either to focus on the transcendent reality of the divine, or to center on the relation between God and humanity, especially as expressed in Jesus Christ. In either case, the divine was described in terms which remarkably coincided with the interests of the dominant white male ruling classes. The abstract characteristics of God corresponded to the professed values of this group, and Jesus either reflected their ideals or those values they believed that they needed to complete and save themselves.

Such an image of God is inadmissible to theology today. The emerging theologies have made us too conscious of the idolatrous character of our portrayals of God. The notion of God in theology now must neither categorically separate the divine and human nor simply identify and conflate the two. God and humanity are not to be identified with each other and the notion of transcendence still retains power. However, equally important to the divine reality is its relatedness to humanity as an integral character of its being. This relatedness flows directly from the divine trinitarian life. God's suffering with the world, particularly with the poor and the oppressed, is integrally part of the divine reality, and is radically different from the common classical notion of *aseity* (God's existence grounded and dependent only on the divine self).

This communion of the divine with human life also necessitates our description of God in ways which include somehow the whole of the human condition in union with God. Male and female, Asian, African, Native American, etc.—no one set of images can fully express the divine reality, but all can and must be used to explore the fulness and splendor of the divine life revealed to us all.