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Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology

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*Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis
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*Liberation Theologies, Post-Modernity, and the Americas
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*Religions/Globalizations: Theories and Cases
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From June 2005 to July 2006, I sought a deeper global understanding of theological challenges for the start of this millennium. Consequently, I visited England, Australia, India, Japan, Fiji, Hawaii, Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, and various locations within the United States.

Exciting challenges for theological education at the beginning of the twenty-first century consist of at least two important concerns. One deals with the increasing reality of the world context of all that we think, believe, and do. Some call this a question of globalization, internationalized multiculturalism, religious pluralism, postcolonialism, or the radical shift to a single, imperial superpower. In this macro context, the second issue confronts the interplay between particularity and universality. How does theological education respect the particularity of various expressions of faiths and spiritualities while, at the same time, discern how particularity adds to

the universal conversation among multiple communities of faiths and spiritualities? In short, can there be a healthy relationship between the local and the international, or the particular and the universal? This question has implications for the nature of theological education today. I argue that some of these implications can be grasped by facilitating a dialogue between the “First World” United States and the Third World (or so-called developing nations).

Gospel and Empire

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the subsequent decentralization of the U.S.S.R., the global scene has shifted radically. For the first time, the U.S. government became the sole, undisputed global giant. Prior to 1989, military language contained such phrases as “balance of power,” “spheres of influences,” and the protection of smaller “client states.” Since 1989, the language of the U.S. government — the sole military, political, and monopoly capitalist superpower — has shifted to “we’re number one,” “we won the Cold War,” “we have a moral — even God-given — responsibility of ruling the world.” In fact, this major shift in language has concrete implications in the real material world. The sole superpower is building an empire.

And a new form of religion, spurred on by institutions in the United States, has aggressively targeted the world for dominance. We might call this a third wave of Christian missions. The first wave was the so-called mainline churches and black church outreach — Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, African Methodist, etc. The second was the classic Pentecostal churches — that is, Church of God in Christ and the Assemblies of God. The new third wave existed before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it has taken off exponentially since the establishment of one superpower. In fact, its global missionary activities are supported by the U.S. government.

The third and new form of Christian missionaries, arguably the religious arm of the U.S. empire, is called neocharismatic Christianity. It emphasizes a wealth and health prosperity gospel, or the name-it-and-claim-it good news. If a poor person wants to be rich or have expensive things, he or she simply has to name what they want and claim it in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ wants poor Christians to have a Mercedes Benz because material things show forth the power and blessings of salvation. In addition to wealth advocacy among the individual poor, neocharismatic Christianity performs spiritual healing and deliverance concerts by the laying on of hands to cast out demons from inside the individual bodies of poor people.

What neocharismatic Christian missionaries do is mimic some of the same values of neoliberalism and U.S. democracy. They advocate individualism and prosperity. Culturally, they

export forms of U.S. culture and, simultaneously, they attack the indigenous culture in the Third World as heathenism, devil worship, and the Anti-Christ. And politically, they push for American interpretations of democracy and freedom. Militarily, they give religious sanction to U.S. armed services present on foreign soil.

Furthermore, throughout the Third World, neocharismatics have an international cable network called the God Channel. The American prosperity gospel preachers have developed an international mechanism that, like other global media, has to get clearance from the U.S. government to access satellites circling the globe to broadcast their Christianity to the Third World. Now one can be poor in the developing world, not travel from one's village, and still watch the major American prosperity gospel televangelists. The God Channel takes American imperial values, beliefs, and tastes, and deposits them into the homes, common yards, and hotels of the Third World. Here, the more one praises Jesus Christ, the more one becomes an American by way of neocharismatic theology.

For poor people in the developing world, neocharismatic missionaries link a U.S. vision to the vulnerability of their very being in terms of their faith with the divine. Religious hope becomes fused with American global perspectives. Neocharismatic Christianity is the fastest growing example of world Christianity, outstripping mainstream denominations and even indigenous religions.

Hence, if we academics are to teach theology as a critical practice, we need more profound theological investigations and sophisticated theoretical scaffolding in order to equip our students, disparate faith communities, and broader American constituencies.

A Global Theological Strategy

In this century, to do theology as if the United States is the only or most dominant social location of theological education is an incomplete strategy. Of course, those in the First World United States have a lot to contribute. Theological scholars in the United States have a long tradition and highly sophisticated investigation of God-talk and interreligious conversation. And so when the First World participates in dialogue with the Third World, the First World interlocutors bring their full selves to the table.

Still, our educational processes are so much more enriched by participating in the multiple ways that theological studies unfold in the disparate communities throughout the world, especially the

Third World. Such a dynamic interaction pushes U.S. intellectuals 1) to clarify taken-for-granted theological definitions; 2) to question their usual audiences; 3) to surface the unspoken American presuppositions; 4) to hear and experience new ways of doing theological education; 5) to realize that theological studies takes risks with the given faiths and spiritual traditions in a changing cultural context; and 6) to really perceive how all of our theological teaching and writing are subjective statements that achieve their universal significance when put to the test of non-Americans throughout the world.

Theological education at the dawn of the twenty-first century has to take seriously the realities of the peoples who occupy the majority of the world. Millions of these peoples, but not the majority, are Christians. Inevitably, as theologians engage world Christianity, we will enter pedagogical and epistemological encounters with peoples of other faiths and spiritualities. So one of the first lessons we might learn is that global Christian partnerships as well as global interreligious connections must move away from a posture of simply converting people to one's faith or a narrow interpretation of a common faith. No, what is needed is an orientation where we First World North Americans participate as equals with the rest of the global family. This in itself would be a radical shift because inherent to American culture is an unexamined arrogance that the United States is the best country in the world. This orientation too often permeates the church and its educators' approach in conversations with the Third World.

Second, theological education needs to accent more an interdisciplinary methodology. For the majority of the Third World, religious educators begin with a social analysis of their families, communities, countries, and regions of the world. They do not start with an idea removed from the prior reality of their social locations. Because all theologies emerge from the particular social situation of the theologian advancing the theological education, one needs a host of nontheological disciplines to help unravel how religion operates in a complex, particular, and messy environment. Political economy as well as psychology can aid the theological field.

Third, theological education has to become more a public enterprise. Unfortunately in the U.S. tradition, theological education stresses an individual journey or something that is mainly, if not only, accountable to a small group of 10,000 scholars. I do agree that this is one vital public. But there are other publics calling for accountability. If theological education is about the relation between "theos" and "logos," then "theos" and "logos" inhabit all of creation. There are additional publics that need the input of theological education, like the church and the wider civic society. And, because the United States is the sole imperialist superpower in the world, there is the public of the Third World.

Fourth, as we seek to have critical and self-critical conversation with the public of the Third

World, it is important to devise ways of forging ongoing, structured, and accountable ties with these regions. Although we in the United States are in an environment that fosters the belief that theology comes out of Europe and North America, if we reorient ourselves, we will discover the vast numbers of theological scholars in the developing world. We will also encounter the intellectual quality of their written production in the academic study of religions. One of the main reasons U.S. and European theology dominate the world is because many local publishers in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands are being blocked from global distribution.

Fifth, the biblical example of Jesus shows an individual who traveled the highways and byways affirming, critiquing, and relating to diverse peoples and communities in the world as he and his community knew the world to be. Jesus advanced theological education by linking the particular with the global (in what he considered by the world of his day).

Finally, when the First World United States develops ongoing ties with the majority of the world, one might discover that the global issue for theological education is not terrorism but poverty. This in turn might even help refocus our eyes domestically on the pressing issue of poverty within the fifty states of the U.S. itself.