# THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIES: DO THEY MATTER?

## MOVING THE CENTRE: THE SEISMIC SHIFT IN CHRISTIAN ADHERENCE

Not much more than a century ago it would have been possible to have designated Christianity as basically a Caucasian tribal religion. In 1900 over 80% of those professing Christianity lived in the Western world. Christianity's strengths were firmly focussed in the Protestantism of northern Europe, the Catholicism of the southern countries, and Orthodoxy in the east. The European colonisation of north America, and Latin America, and also of Australasia, had imported Christianity along with its European migrants and settlers. Elsewhere in the world the Christian faith existed in smaller pockets of missions. In Africa and the Pacific advances had been made among peoples of traditional cultures and religions. But elsewhere, especially in Asia, where the Christian faith came up against highly sophisticated and literate ethnic religions, prospects looked bleak. The Muslim world was then closed to proselytisation from other faiths, as it remains today. There were, it is true, the remnants of Christian communities in India and other parts of Asia and the Middle East, and in north Africa with histories stretching back far into the earliest centuries, but these were small and isolated. The Christian religion was firmly anchored in the West.

A century on and the face of Christianity has changed out of all recognition. In the Western world, with the possible exception of parts of the United States, we have passed into a post-Christian era, and though it would be superficial to measure the influence of the Christian faith by professions and numbers alone, it would not be incorrect to describe the faith here as a minority and embattled one. However the decline in the West has been matched by a startling expansion elsewhere. China reputedly has the fastest growing

Christian community in the world, officially 16 million but claimed by some to be nearer 70 million. The churches in sub-Saharan Africa are said to be growing daily at the rate of 3.5% and those in Latin America at 2.5%. Such statistics are problematic, but they do reflect a significant trend of religious adherence. In Asia South Korea experienced an explosion of Christian adherence after the Korean war, while the minority Christian communities in some Asian countries -especially India and Japan - have exercised an influence on public life out of all proportion to their numbers. It is perhaps symptomatic of this seismic shift in the geography of Christianity, that as early as 1961 there was a considerable contingent of Third World delegates to the Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi and a few years later a respectable number of Catholic Third World bishops at the Second Vatican Council. The prospects for further expansion must also to be recognised. The extraordinary expansion of Pentecostalism in South America and Africa, as well as in the West, must surely point to a profound dissatisfaction with a post-Christian secularised world view. And unlike most other world religions, Christianity has shown itself able to move by persuasion beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries in a way that Islam and Hinduism have not. (what I mean is that there is comparatively little conversion of Europeans to either Hinduism or Islam in the West, they remain basically migrant religions). Christianity on the other hand has demonstrated an infinite capacity to accommodate itself to local populations. Such a seismic geographical shift should not surprise us. It has happened before in the history of Christianity. The early church in north Africa flourished and dominated written theology for four hundred years, but then within a couple of generations it virtually disappeared as real force. The rise and fall of the north African church is symbolical of the ebb and flow of Christian history, and of how an apparently powerful and invulnerable church could so quickly decline. The expansion of Islam into north Africa caused Christianity to become a 'European' religion.  At the beginning of the 21$^{st}$ century it has can no longer be defined as 'European' but

can only properly described as non-western, or better Third World. The shift from north Africa to western Europe is now mirrored in the shift from Europe to the southern continents. The Western dominance of the Christian faith, and thus also of its theology, must now be seen as simply one stage, and a limited one, on the vast canvass of the story of the church. It needs to be put into perspective. There has been dramatic moving of the centre of Christianity. (William Temple realised this as far back as 1942: in his address on being installed as archbishop of Canterbury he pointed out, 'Gos has been building  a Christian fellowship which now extends to every nation … a great new fellowship has arisen. It is the great new fact of our era and one ground of hope for the future').

My point here is certainly not Christian triumphalism - the damage done by such militant Christianity of the past should warn us against that. It is simply to point out that any adequate view of Christianity and especially of Christian theology has to take into account two essential perspectives: firstly, a long term historical view, and secondly a truly global one.

## CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY MUST TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE THIRD WORLD

(Thitd World is not used here in any pejorative sense of course: probably originating from the French revolution, and referring to the common people over against the power blocks of the nobility and the church, it was espoused by the non-aligned nations at the Bandung conference in the 1950s to set themselves apart from the West and the Communist Eastern block. It is a useful term for the undeveloped nations, even though inexact, and has been embraced by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians which has become a main platform for non-Western theologians).

If it is the case that the centre of Christianity has moved significantly, and that Western Christians are now so much in the minority, then we should expect this to be reflected in Christian theology - and I here take theology mean the coherent and reasonable interpretation of the Christian faith. If numbers count it should no longer possible to do Christian theology adequately today, or indeed to study it adequately, without taking into account the way theology is done in the Third World. It is very odd that very few of the leading (and indeed often very verbose) figures in today's Western theological debates seem to have noticed this. It is still the case that in some erudite theological circles (and I cannot resist including the Society for the Study of Theology in this category) that the mention of Asian or African Christian theology will still be greeted with an ironic raised eyebrow or with blank incomprehension. If acknowledged at all, Third World theologies are often regarded as an exotic, peripheral to the main task of theology, which is of course largely the preserve of clerical and academic white middle aged and middle class men. There is something bizarre about the assumption that Western theology still dominates and sets the agenda, when the world from which it emanates has become largely post-Christian. Western theologians seem to me to be writing longer and more incomprehensible books for the consumption of a smaller and more elitist audience. In the meantime the theological innovations taking place in the rest of the world are largely ignored.

Am I being too caustic? I don't think so. A few examples will illustrate. Hans Kung's *Theologie in Aufbruch* , which appeared in English under the rather pretentious title of *Theology for the Third Millennium*, makes the admirable claim that his new paradigm for theology 'needs world perspectives, so that the different continents .. have to be taken into the equation.' However one searches in vain in Kung's book for any reference to Asian and African theologians, let alone for any appreciation of what they doing. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. Kung works expicitly from a post-

Enlightenment, post-modern paradigm (his words) which takes no cognisance whatever of other forms of epistemology. Kung, like others who share his perspective, can only view non-Western Christian theology - and indeed other religions besides Christianity - from a circumscribed western mind set, which does not give him the tools to allow access to other theological ways of seeing the world. Or take again Karl Rahner's view of what for him are the two focal points of the history of Christianity. The first of these, the shift in early Christianity from the Jewish world to the pagan world, was indeed a radical moving of the centre. But Rahner's second focal point is not the movement of the Gospel from the European world to the non-European world which began in the 14th cent. and culminated only in the 20th. No his second focal point for Christian history is …. The Second Vatican Council! Such eurocentricity (or should we say Roma-centricity?) is truly mind blowing. Nor is this theological myopia confined to Catholics. Two of the most widely used 'theological; readers' (those edited by McGrath and Gunton) contain between them less than half a dozen contributions from the modern non-western world (nearly all from Latin America). The latter, while claiming to give the reader a selection of mainstream Christian thought, condescendingly dismisses what it terms all things non western - along with feminist theology!! - as 'local theologies.' And by implication hardly worthy of serious consideration. What the editors of this volume failed to see is that their own theological selections are equally 'local', being localised in the white, male Anglo-Saxon world. I have no wish here to rubbish the work of these theologians, all of whom have some valuable things to say. However their work illustrates the peculiarly western obsession with problems of modernity and postmodernity which derive from the European Enlightenment, and which are by no means of universal significance; there is here a lack of global perspective, and a tunnel vision which ignores most of the 21st century Christian world. As Desmond Tutu remarked a couple of decades ago, Western theology has some splendid answers, but they are

answers to questions that no one anywhere else is asking. If we live in a world in which economics, politics and everything else has been subject to globalisation, then we can no longer pretend that theology alone is still localised in the western world. For European and American theologians to ignore the contributions of theologians in the southern continents, and to fail to take them into account in their own attempts at rethinking what Christian theology means today, is to condemn theology in the West to a localised ghetto and ultimately to irrelevance. This is a new form of what Niebuhr once called the 'transcental irresponsibility' of contemporary theologians.

## THE CONTEXTUALITY OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIES

All theology is ultimately contextual. It arises from a specific historical context and seeks to address that context. The questions which it asks, and the answers which it seeks to give, are determined by the specific historical situation in which it find itself. For some systems of theology this may be no more than the intellectual tradition in which it is situated, and it may seek no more than intellectual explanation. On the other hand few theologians of the past have been able, or indeed wanted, to abstract themselves from events going on around them, and these events, especially the more dramatic ones, have shaped both the questions they have asked and the theological answers they have proposed. Augustine's *City of God* would hardly have been written without the sack of Rome by the Goths, nor would Barth's commentary on Romans had the First World War not taken place. To understand Third World theologies we need, quite explicitly, to take serious notice of the circumstances - historical, social, political and cultural - in which these theologies arise. Most Third World theologies are quite explicitly contextual, beginning usually from the concrete context, and from this base in experience working back to the sources of Christian tradition in the Bible and history of doctrine.

What then is the nature of this new perspective on doing theology today, the 20th century phenomenon of the globalisation of Christian thought? The first thing we must say is that some the formative influences on the origins of Third World theologies came from the West itself. Third World Christianity as we know it today was largely formed in the cauldron of the European colonisation of the rest of the world, and the mission effort from the West which largely accompanied the colonising powers. Beginning in earnest with the great voyages of discovery in the late 15th century, the expansion of Christianity to South America, Asia and Africa usually followed European colonial expansion. This association of the cross with the sword left a continuing legacy which is yet to be completely overcome. The twin legacies of the western colonial enterprise on the one hand, and the Christian missionary movement from the West on the other, have thus in no small measure shaped the agenda for non-Western theology. It cannot avoid grappling with the legacy of poverty, exploitation, and the misuse of power; but at the same time it must also address the conflicting claims of Christianity and other religions, and the challenge of doing theology from within cultures and intellectual traditions shaped by those other religions.

In rising to these challenges Third World theologies turn back to the roots of the Christian faith, to the text of the Bible and Christian tradition, and seek to hold this in fruitful tension with the contexts in which they exist. But their use of the Bible and tradition is determined by the new perspectives of their peculiar situations. The assumption behind contextual theology is that Christian theology is not one monolithic entity but that it must adapt itself to the significant changes in the context in which it operates. As John MacQuarrie points out, this means that no theological system is ever final (not even that of Barth), but that (in the words of Stephen Sykes) Christians, along with everyone else, have to live with the continuing possibility of differing theological

views. This view is not especially modern. As long ago as 1659 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith urged its members

'Do not show any zeal and do not for any motive try to persuade peoples to change their rites, customs and habits unless they are most openly opposed to (Catholic) religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than to transplant France, Spain or Italy or any other part of Europe into China' - or indeed into anywhere else.

Article 34 of the Anglican 39 articles sings a similar tune (though here of course with its suspicious eye on the Roman church itself): 'It is not necessary,' declared the 17th cent. Anglican divines, 'that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one and utterly alike; for at all times they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversities of the countries, times, and men's manners.'

What these statements were saying was that Christianity does not demand that a person's heritage, traditions and genealogy have to be swept away, in the interests of a bland theological conformity. The global story of Christianity would perhaps have been very different if this guidance had been taken seriously, and we would not have had to wait until the 20th century before coherent alternative theologies to the dominant Western tradition began to emerge. One can perhaps (within the modern period) trace the origins of such protest theology back to the period of the early Catholic missions. Somewhere around the year 1700 a young Congolese girl of royal birth, Kimpa Vita, converted to Catholicism. Soon after her baptism she began to experience visions and to claim prophetic gifts. She identified Jesus and the apostles with her own black race, saw Christ's role as a black liberator from poverty and oppression, and looked forward to millennium upon earth. In 1706 Kimpa Vita was condemned as a

heretic and burnt at the stake. Tradition has it that she died with the name of Jesus on her lips. The main themes of her oral counter theology - oppression, poverty, liberation,
hope, and above all the identification of Jesus with each and every nation - remain central to the agenda of global theologies today.

It would be tempting to make a generalisation and argue that each of the three continents which have produced the bulk of written Third World theology has contributed its own unique perspective: Latin America (through the Theology of Liberation) to the need to do theology within the constraints of political and economic oppression, Africa to the need for theology to recognise the integrity of culture, and Asia to the task of doing Christian theology in a multi-religious situation. In very broad terms this is probably a helpful model, and is reflected in the development of the Ecumencal Association of Third World Theologians. However each of these three elements has played some role in theology throughout the globe, and in practice it is not always easy to disentangle them in the neat way this model would imply.

In the remainder of this lecture I want to try to unpack these three elements - poverty, politics, and religious plurality -in a little more detail and hopefully in so doing suggest ways in which non-western theologies might inform the way theology is done in the west.

## THEOLOGY AS POVERTY

Theology's engagement with the economic and political world in modern times is perhaps best known from the rise of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America. The Theology of Liberation, despite its shortcomings and its many academic and cultural despisers, has had a huge impact on theological thought. It was the second bombshell of the 20$^{th}$ century to be dropped upon the playground of the theologians, awakening some of them at least

from their dogmatic slumber. It was a new theological method, a new way of doing theology, which argued that theology is essentially a practical task which issues in action that makes a difference in the social, political and economic spheres, and which seeks to redeem not only individual human nature but also society as a whole.

For the Theology of Liberation poverty , the unacceptable divide between elites and the underclasses, the exploitation of the latter and the inequalities thereby produced, is a result of the way in which societies are structured. Injustice is structural, inherent in the kind of societies which have been created in order to benefit the powerful at the expense of the exploited. The role of theology therefore is not simply to preach individual salvation (though it should do that) but to seek to transform the structures of an unjust society and make it more approximate to the kingdom of God. It can well be argued that some at least of these structures in the Third World are the direct consequences of colonialism, and of a neo-colonialism engineered on the basis of colonial structures by corrupt leaders after their independence.The consequences of colonial exploitation remain some of the most important determinants of the Third World today, and to that extent we in west cannot simply wash our hands of them. The situation in the former colonial world, with few exceptions, gives little grounds for optimism. According to the International Labour Organisation the three quarters of the world's population which lives in the Third World enjoy only one fifth of the world's generated income - the poorest 10%consume less than one and a a half percent of the world's wealth; over 40% (some 700 million) are destitute, and around a quarter of a million children die each week from preventable illnesses. It is this which is the context in which Third World theology operates. It is little surprising then if its agenda is less concerned with the niceties of philosophical doctrines or how to relate belief to modernism and postmodernism, but is concerned

rather with poverty, oppression and marginalisation. As Gutierrez has remarked, 'The question (for theology) is no longer how we are to speak of God in a world come of age: it is rather how to proclaim him Father in a world that is not human, and what the implications might be of telling nonhumans that they are children of God.'

Social and political issues which have been traditionally regarded as 'Third World problems' are now firmly on our own agenda (whether recognised by the professional politicians or not). Poverty is certainly one of them. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (UNDP and World Bank) eg. reported in 1996 that UK is the most unequal country in the West, and the gap between the rich and the poor is as bad as in Ethiopia and Nigeria; that the poor in UK have the same incomes as their counterparts in Hungary and Korea; that the richest fifth now have ten times the incomes of the poorest fifth; that the poor have a per capita income 32% lower than the comparable group in the US and 44% lower than the comparable group in the Netherlands. Another survey in 1996 showed that deprivation is as bad in Britain now as it was in the 1930s, that malnutrition is stunting the mental and physical growth of those living in poverty, and that one in three children born in the UK is born into poverty. These are figures we usually associate with the Third World. Several surveys since then suggest that poverty has actually got worse under the present government, despite its much vaunted aspirations to eradicate it. A recent survey indicated that while the salaries of the highest paid had increased 80 fold over the last decade those of the poorest paid had barely kept pace with inflation; another that City of London executives had awarded themselves no less than £8.8 million in bonuses alone this year. One might also remark on the substantial amount of political power which is now in the hands of unelected and unrepresentative bodies - another characteristic of the Third World. Democracy is certainly under threat (not least in Cumbria as current discussions on reorganisation show!) Against such a

background it would seems clear that charity is not enough, but rather the whole social and economic structure within the UK needs to come under critical analysis and scrutiny. This is precisely what the Theology of Liberation is all about and it is not surprising that its message is finding increasing resonance.

One reason why the Theology of Liberation emanating from Latic America has - at least in a modified form - has found credibility in the West is perhaps because it developed within the perameters of ther western philosophical tradition. What of its more alien counterparts in Africa and Asia? Have they anything to offer us?

## CHRISTIANITY & POLITICS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Perhaps nowhere has the responsibility of theology to address political issues been more dramatically illustrated than in the role of Black Theology in the overthrow of aparteid in South Africa. The progressive banning of political protest organisations in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s led to the emergence of the churches and other Christian organisations becoming almost an unofficial opposition, both in outspoken condemnation of human rights abuses and in organising protest rallies. By 1985 it is estimated that nearly 12,000 South Africans, including some 2000 children, had been detained without trial. It was against this background that a group of lay people and theologians of all races came together to formulate their response to tyranny in a document called 'Challenge to the Church, a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa.' The Kairos Document, as it became known, ran into several printings, gathering ever more signatories. It was a compelling theological analysis of the abuse of power under apartheid. It argued both from the Bible and from other theological sources that a state which wilfully engages in oppression and structural violence has no theological legitimacy, and it called on all Christians to action to change what it saw as a sinful situation. The impact of the Kairos document upon the

Christian community in South Africa was considerable, and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that it had a major impact in the overthrow of the apartheid system. The role of leading theologians, most notably Desmond Tutu, in conducting the subsequent Peace and Reconciliation hearings was also immense.

Less well known, but equally dramatic, was the participation of Christian thinkers in what might be called the second wave of independence movements elsewhere in southern Africa, in the replacing of one party states under dictatorial leaders by more open and democratic government. The case of Malawi is especially remarkable. Here, after nearly 30 years of absolute dictatorship, in which all opposition had been crushed, often brutally, the Catholic bishops in 1992 issued a revolutionary Pastoral Letter, in which the truth was finally exposed. It called for far reaching social, political and economic reforms. So radical were its proposals that the bishops were for a time under threat of execution. Again the argument for reforms was primarily a theological one: the church, the Letter argued, could 'not ignore or turn a blind eye to the people's experience of injustice' because human beings are made in the image of God, and like Christ, the church is called to proclaim liberty to those in captivity. Secular commentators agree that the Pastoral Letter was the single most important factor in the restoration of democracy in Malawi. Even less well known - and much less supported both within and outside the African continent - has been the brave criticism, at great cost, of the brutal regime of Mugabe by Catholic and Anglican bishops in Zimbabwe,

We must grant that some of the churches in the UK - and perhaps especially the Anglican church during the Thatcher era - have in the past made some pointed criticisms of successive governments. However seems to me difficult to imagine any of the episcopal and archepiscopal sound bites in the media over the last year or so changing the world: as a whole they betray an alarming lack of

critical analysis and a serious absence of theological argumentation! What I am suggesting is that the churches in the Third World, which more often than not face hostile governments, have shown themselves far more aware of their prophetic responsibilities than the churches in the West.

## THEOLOGY IN A MULTI RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

But there is another reason for taking Third World theology seriously. It is simply that the periphery (Third World) has now itself moved to the centre (Europe). The last half century has seen an unprecedented movement from former colonies to former imperialist countries in Europe - a reversal of the flow of populations which began with the voyages of discovery in the 15th century. Some forms of Christianity have also made this round trip. This is especially true of Black Christianity. The Christian faith exported by European missionaries to black Africa, appropriated and indigenised by local populations, is now arriving back on our shores. migrants from Africa and the Caribbean have brought with them their idiosyncratic Christianity, and established and expanded their churches in Britain. Some of the so-called African Independent Churches, indeed, make it their specific aim to re-Christianise this country. The Pentecostal element, often refined and transformed by different cultures and ethnicities, has provided an additional mix and one which is the fastest growing Christian movement in the UK. In this respect then (whether we notice it or not) non-western Christianity is already on our doorsteps.

This flow of populations has not been entirely, or even dominantly, Christian, of course. In that respect it has forced Western theology to re-consider the interrelationship of Christian belief with Islam, Hinduism, African spiritualities and a whole host of other religious as well as secular traditions. The dismissive stance of a Barth towards religion, or the spiritual neo-colonialism of Rahner's

‘anonymous Christians’ are hardly sustainable options any longer, for they fail to take either the claims or the experiences of other spiritualities seriously in their own right. Scarcely more convincing are intellectualist approaches which uncritically base themselves upon post-enlightenment philosophical assumptions. (It has always seemed to be quite extraordinary that theorists of what has been called - a contradiction in terms if ever there was one - the ‘theology of religions’ invariably never ask what Asian and African Christians, who have to live out their faith in a different religious context, have to say about these things!)

It is a fact of history that Christian missions attained their greatest success in those areas of the world which practiced ‘traditional’ religions. Latin America, Africa, tribal areas of Asia, the Pacific - these were the places where Christian missions had their greatest impact. By contrast the conversion of peoples of ‘world faiths’ has been meagre. There are many reasons for this, some of them sociological and political rather than religious. The story of African Christianity makes it all too clear (in contrast to the orthodox mission accounts) that the traditional religions of christianised peoples does not just disappear on conversion. If it is not consciously ‘converted’ into Christian dogma and practice it simply goes underground until a more convenient time. The impetus for the rise of African Christian theology in the 1960s was simply that the time had come when a more confident and self-conscious African church discovered its Africanness (partly in the wake of political independence and movements like negritude). A large part of this Africanness was black African culture, which is essentially a religious culture. Christianity was seen no longer as something completely different but as not discontinuous with pre-Christian African religiosity. There is aa profound theological presupposition here, namely that God is in all cultures and therefore in all religions, and that however special and unique Christian revelation may be it is not entirely discontinuous with all that had gone before. Consequently the expression of Christianity

in any given context must draw from that context, must indigenise, incarnate, adapt, contextualise itself, interacting and drawing from the religious culture of that context. (Closer to home we might reflect that the oldest Viking cross in the UK, at Gosforth, built on the same priniciple: most of its beautiful carvings relate to Norse myths as a way into the final panel depicting the cross). This is a theme has filled several books. To take two very different examples: as long ago as the beginning of the last century a Bengali convert, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, not only tried to christianise the Hindu religious ideals of the ashram and the sannyasi (the wandering monk) but, more important, developed a whole theology around the conviction that Hinduism was a *culture* (rather than simply a religion) which could be freely used as a framework for Indian Christian theology ('by culture we are Hindus, by faith we are Christians,' he claimed). His seminal work initiated a Christian-Hindu dialogue which still important today. Nearer to our time there is the remarkable case of Takizawa Katsumi, a Japanese philosopher-theologian. Takizawa was recommended by his mentor (the famous Zen Buddhist philosopher Nishida) to travel to Germany and study under Karl Barth. He went on to develop Barth's christology of 'God with us' in an innovative way into a concept of a universal spiritual capacity for God, but to interpret Christian awakening in terms comparable to Zen Buddhist enlightenment. Takizawa is recognised today as one of the leaders of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. While both these examples may seem controversial they at the very least show there are large areas of interreligious debate which have scarcely been thought of in the West

## THEOLOGY AS POPULAR AND NON ELITIST

These last two examples might be thought somewhat elitist: actually they are not. They are real attempts to relate a Christian faith which was introduced into Asia in its western form to the culture and experience of ordinary Asian people. Like most of the

cases I have referred to they stem from a conviction that theology must be a public and open theology, that it must be able to speak to ordinary people in their situations and make a difference to the real world in which people live. In other words, theology is regarded essentially a popular, non-elitist undertaking, it has to communicate itself to the masses. The received understanding of theology as dominated by the tyranny of the study and issuing in largely impenetrable volumes of dogmatics, is here stood on its head. Indeed in many Third World contexts theology is not even *written* theology; in countries with varying literacy rates, theology is often primarily oral. The spoken word counts for more than the written word, and so song and poem, narration and story, become more effective vehicles of theological thought. As the Kenyan bishop Okullu put it: 'when we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to the Christian home …We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying impromptu singing in the independent churches.' Such oral theology often arises out of desperate and oppressive circumstances. Let me take a couple of examples. Here is a song by Tesfaye Gabbiso, whose lyrics became the common property of Christians during the dark period of Ethiopia's history in the 1980s, when Christians among others suffered war and famine, and became a special target of state persecution:

When we saw the anger of the enemy
When we measured our strength
When in despair we wailed 'woe to us'
You, Emmanuel, arrived in time for us.
Your enemy is roaring to swallow you,
Don't be scared due to the noise
God will snatch you out of the enemy's mouth
And will lock his jaws,
He will show him clearly that he will never leave you.

Like the biblical psalms such language can be interpreted both in a spiritual sense or of social and political oppression. Or listen to another piece of oral theology, this time a village woman from a dalit, outcaste, community which is still horrendously discriminated against even in modern India:

Hunger pangs drive us to toil every day
We slave all day for a handful of meal,
The merciless masters pursue us on one side,
And our starving children cry out on the other.
We have become the victims of the earth's displeasure.
So shall we cast our burdens on our God
And dare to stand in the struggle for human liberation.

What we have here is the reclaiming of theological discourse by the non-elitist underclass, the democratisation of theological language. Not here the stranguated prose and dense obscurities of so much modern theological writing! It is the methodology of doing theology here rather than its 'orthodoxy' or otherwise which I want to draw attention to - a way of doing theology which encorporates and encapsulates a popular grass roots religiosity, and thus of spontaneous song, prayer and story. In one sense this was also reflected in the 'base ecclesial communities' which both preceded and enriched Liberation Theology, and many of the written texts of Latin American liberation theology indeed pay tribute to these communities as a way into a new kind of theologising.

I think that the study of popular spirituality, and with it oral theologising, in the West has also been left too much to the historians and sociologists. Most academic theologians give the impression that there is something faintly embarrassing about seeking to take account of and encapture popular Christianity into their theological tomes. It is a matter for the 'impartial researcher'

with sceptical presupposition to investigate the Pentecostals, the black churches, the evangelicals and so on, and to present his or her findings as curious exotics which have very little to do with the real business of theological study. This kind of approach raises, I believe, a very fundamental issue: who owns Christian theology, to whom does speaking about God belong? To the ordinary Christian believer, who may be unsophisticated in the technical theological disciplines, or to the highly trained expert? Put another way, is theology the task of the priests and academic theologians only or is it the task of the whole people of God? Tied up with this is the question of theological language. The Christian message was originally one of proclamation. A good case could also be made out that the language of the ecumenical creeds, obscure and esoteric though it sounds to us today, was the common parlance of its time. Sadly one could scarcely say the same of much theological writing today. Aside from the excessive prolixity of some of our leaders of theological thought, too much theological writing inhabits a realm in which only the tiny minority of academic elites dwell, so that it no longer communicates to the very people it is (presumably) meant to edify. It has become a language game - often a densely obscure language game - played by a privileged circle. I am not pleading here for a pietistic devotional style of theology which is all too often uncritical and undiscerning, and which does not address itself to contemporary issues. But I do believe that a theology which does not address itself to the real experiences of ordinary people, and in language which a reasonably intelligent person can understand, needs seriously to question its reason for existing.

## CONCLUSION

The responsibility of theologians to address poverty and economics, politics, and religious diversity is not of course new, even in the West. What is new, I believe, is the urgency with which theologians in the Third World are addressing these issues, and

especially the way in which a serious analysis of contexts has revolutionised the method of doing theology. I suggest that at the very least Christian theologies from the Third World can help us become aware that we need to address with more clarity the multi-religious, political, and economic issues which confront us (at whatever level). Perhaps more important they can call us back to the real purpose of theology: that it is not just for the few experts but it for all believers, and that it needs to address those both within and outside the Christian community in language that is clear and intelligible.

The globalisation of Christian theology leads us to question - with a very large dose of the hermeneutic of suspicion - the approach to Christian theology which has been largely accepted in the West since the Enlightenment - perhaps since Constantine - and which is to a large extent still claimed, implicitly or explicitly, to be universal. It has given us a new theological epistemology, an alternative way of seeing the world as the context within which theology is to be done. It has brought theology back to its original purpose, that is as not simply reflection in detachment, but as reflection from within commitment. It has raised questions which force theologians (if they are to be at all relevant) out of their philosophical and linguistic ghettos into the public places where faith has to interact with culture and religions, with society and politics.

But perhaps the church has been here before. There is a remarkable similarity in some ways between some aspects of Third World theologies and another tradition which has been equally marginalised, even ignored, in western theology: I mean the Syriac speaking tradition of the Middle East. The Syriac tradition, whose most able exponent was Ephrem in the 4$^{th}$ century, 'provides,' as Sebastian Brock has shown, 'a refreshing counter balance to an excessively cerebral tradition of conducting theological inquiry,' which finds a remarkable resonance in much Afrcan and Asian

theology today. This ancient tradition set aside the hellenistic approach, with its obsession with philosophical defintions and systems, and its emphasis on Jesus as Logos, and instead found its expression in poetry, symbol and orality, and its basis in social poverty and in the human Jesus who is one with us. Perhaps it is high time the West rediscovered the Syriac fathers as well as engaging with the best of Third World theologians.

In his book *Atoms and Icons* Michael Fuller writes as follows:

'The scientific quest is not for fact, for complete knowledge of what is 'out there' - that is something we can never know. It is, rather, a quest for an ever more accurate *model* of what is out there; for a greater verisimilitude in our understanding of reality.'

The theologian, I believe, is engaged in a similar task. God, as we all acknowledge, is ultimately unknowable, we perceive him only through the lenses of our experience, shaped as it is by the genealogy, the context and the tradition within which we stand and live. What the globalisation of Christian theology in our time has given us is a richer variety of models with which to understand God and the world, models which grow out of the experiences of others with different genealogies, different traditions, and different contexts. The global spread of Christian theology gives us deeper and more varied insights into the meaning of God and the world drawn, as the visionary writer of the Book of Revelation has it, from 'every tribe, tongue and people.'

John Parratt