

THE DYNAMIC OF GLOBAL WESLEYAN THEOLOGIZING INTERACTING WITH THE NEW GLOBAL SOUTH

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I. Introduction: theologians for Christianity's "new heartlands"

The development of Christian thought and the varying emphases of theology through the major geo-cultural shifts of Christianity provide insight and perspective to the contemporary shift of Christianity's "center of gravity." Historic panoramas inform global theologizing in relation to the "new heartlands"¹ of the Christian faith. The raising of informed theologians in this new region, their theologizing, and the interaction of theology—South to West, West to South—is vital to the church's grappling with a fuller theological matrix of understanding for the 21st century.

II. Christianity's global shift

Christianity's center of energy has shifted. Focusing on Africa, Philip Jenkins noted: "Between 1900 and 2000, the number of Christians...in Africa grew from 10 million to over 360 million, from 10 percent of the population to 46 percent. If that is not quantitatively the largest religious change in human history in such a short period, I am at a loss to think of a rival."² He continued: "Over the past century, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America."³ Jenkins further noted:

As long ago as the 1970s, this global change was discussed in well-known works by European scholars like Andrew Walls, Edward Norman, and Walbert Buhlmann...It was Buhlmann who coined the term 'the third Church,' on the analogy of the Third World. The phrase suggests that the South represents a new tradition comparable in importance to the Eastern and Western churches of historical times.⁴

In *The Next Christendom*, Jenkins wrote: "Southern Christianity, the Third Church, is not just a transplanted version of the familiar religion of the older Christian states: the New Christendom is no mirror image of the Old. It is a truly new and developing entity. Just how different from its predecessor remains to be seen."⁵

¹ "Center of gravity" and "Christian heartlands" are terms used by some scholars of the geo-cultural moves of Christianity including Andrew Walls and Phillip Jenkins.

² Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

³ *New Faces*, 2.

⁴ *New Faces*, 3.

⁵ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 214.

In the “post-missionary” era, African theology written by its own sons and daughters is emerging. Such writings have risen mainly since the independence movement in Africa of the 1950s and 60s.⁶ David Gelzer in 1970 wrote: “African theology – in the sense of theology ‘done’ by Africans – is relatively new. Indeed African theologians as a recognizable professional group did not exist until rather recently.”⁷

Tite Tiénou poignantly noted: “Ideas have a way of shaping history.”⁸ Though the growth of Christianity in Africa during the 20th and into the 21st century has been exponential, Christian theology as an informed discipline has been lagging. Still, numerous ideologies, philosophies, and theologies are emerging, and these theologies are shaping the church in the “new Christian heartlands.”⁹ Accordingly, Andrew Walls observed that “...what sort of theology is most characteristic of the Christianity of the twenty-first century may well depend on what has happened in the minds of African Christians in the interim.”¹⁰

III. Background: major geo-cultural shifts

Andrew Walls delineated six major shifts through Christianity’s history.¹¹ He labeled the fifth period as “the age of expanding Europe.”¹² Out of this age came the “‘*cross-cultural transplantation*’ of Christianity to people outside of Europe.”¹³ And out of this move “the seeds of Christian faith had been planted in the Southern continents; before long they could be seen to be fruiting abundantly.”¹⁴ Walls continued: “The recession of Christianity among the European peoples appears to be continuing. And yet we seem to stand at the threshold of a new age of

⁶ On the development of Christian theology in Africa, see Richard J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 26-43.

⁷ David G. Gelzer, “Random Notes on Black Theology and African Theology,” *Christian Century* XVI, (1970), 1091-1093; quoted in Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology*, 38.

⁸ Tite Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1990), 48.

⁹ See Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-first Century,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Dec. 2001, 46.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Walls, “Towards an Understanding of Africa’s Place in Christian History,” in J. S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, 180-9.

¹¹ For his overview, see Walls’ *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), ch 2.

¹² Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 21.

¹³ *Missionary Movement*, 21.

¹⁴ *Missionary Movement*, 21-22.

Christianity, one in which its main base will be in the Southern continents, and where its dominant expression will be filtered through the culture of those continents.”¹⁵

Walls observed: “Throughout Christian history so far, the overwhelming majority of new Christians have come from the primal religions—far more than from Hinduism or Buddhism, incomparably more than from Islam.”¹⁶ This has been true in Africa and largely the reason for the exponential rise of Christianity in the 20th and 21st centuries.

IV. Theologizing is underway

The sixth major geo-cultural shift is well in process. Christianity is strident in the Global South. The gospel has spread to vast areas. A plethora of theologies pepper the new Christian landscape—inculturation/identity theologies, Black theology, liberation theology, Black feminist theology, grassroots theologies in abundance, numerous African Independent/Instituted Church theologies, various stripes of Pentecostal theology, including prosperity and deliverance, orthodox theology, including various traditions of evangelical thought, etc. Many mission and denominational initiatives have been directed to areas of the Global South. Tite Tiénou noted that some in the evangelical camp embrace a “proclamation without reflection” approach, sometimes viewing reflection as “an adversary of Gospel proclamation.”¹⁷ Tiénou continued: “The irony is that such a perception is, in itself, a theological decision. In a paradoxical way, evangelicals in Africa (and doubtless elsewhere) have a theology of no theology!”¹⁸

Harold Turner wrote: “Here at the growing edges of Christianity in its most dynamic forms, the theologian is encouraged to do scientific theology...because he has a whole living range of contemporary *data* on which to work. It is not that these dynamic areas of the Christian world are free from imperfection; but being full of old and new heresies, they need theology and offer it an important task.”¹⁹

H. Ray Dunning observed: “Doing theology is as important to the life of the church as it is unavoidable. The church is, we hope, more than an institution...The pronouncements of the

¹⁵ *Missionary Movement*, 22.

¹⁶ *Missionary Movement*, xv.

¹⁷ Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, 46-47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹ H. W. Turner, “The contribution of studies on religion in Africa to Western Religious Studies”, in M. Glasswell & E. Fashole-Luke, eds., *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London: SPCK, 1974), 177f.

church through its ministry should be *as theologically sound as possible*.²⁰ In view of the new demographic, doing theology in a way that is "as sound as possible" is vital for the family of faith in dialogue across regional and worldview boundaries.²¹ This calls for all to engage such dialogue in a spirit of grace and humility.

Amidst partial, shallow, and distorted representations of biblical Christianity, Tite Tiénou proposes that "sound theology" is the great need. He challenged: "How shall we, African evangelicals, recapture the initiative? This, to my mind, should be the most important question we ask ourselves when we plan a theological strategy. Such a strategy should be characterized with two words: *positive theology*. . . For too long, we have been on the defensive! For too long, we have been content to criticize! For too long, our theology has been a reactionary theology!"²²

Harry Sawyerr posited that "there is a strong case for a Theologia Africana which will seek to interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in the new faith."²³ Sawyerr emphasized the role of orthodox doctrine and stated, "...the answer lies in the rigorous pursuit of systematic Theology, based on a philosophical appraisal of the thought-forms of the African peoples."²⁴

V. *The call to sound theology*

The ethos of the New South calls for a theology that wrestles and seeks to be aligned with truths of the Holy *Scriptures*, is guided by the counsel of the Holy Spirit including the Church's collective *tradition*, filtered by *reason*, and informed by *experience*—then *done* by the Church as a "hermeneutical community."²⁵ These basic components form what Paul Hiebert, et al. refer to as "a meta theology."²⁶ This is a guide, "a biblically based way of doing theology that sets limits to theological diversity."²⁷ An evangelical concept, it assumes a "high view of Scripture,"

²⁰ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 9. Emphasis added.

²¹ Some paraphrasing of Dunning as previously quoted.

²² Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, back cover.

²³ Harry Sawyerr, "What Is African Theology?" in John Parratt, *The Practice of Presence: Shorter Writings of Harry Sawyerr* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 99.

²⁴ Sawyerr, 99. Sawyerr is an African Anglican.

²⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 383-84.

²⁶ *Folk Religion*, 384.

²⁷ *Folk Religion*, 384.

placing confidence in openness to the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures. Likewise, the Spirit continues working in the faith community where the *whole church* seeks understanding and engages the testing of beliefs in the spirit of communal learning.²⁸ Wesleyan methodology is added into the formula as *reason* engages the inspired canonical writings, is guided by *tradition*, and informed by *experience*.

The resulting theology must affect, inspire, and enliven every level of the life of the community of faith. Wesleyan-Holiness theology calls us to a Scriptural understanding of salvation history and to a grasp, for individual and communal life, of redeeming grace from the Triune God to effect a restoration of the *imago Dei* in sin-broken humankind. This restoration brings transformation in relationships, vertically with God and horizontally with fellow humans.

In the church's theological task, such Scripture-sourced theology, guided and interpreted by these vital components, comes at a price. Theologians are needed who will seriously connect solid, informed principles of Bible interpretation with theological scholarship, theologizing within their own worldview. Indigenous theologians and missiologists, informed by the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, must step up to bring informed perspectives and principles to the whole enterprise. Because the church is on mission, the pastor trained in theological essentials, guidelines for effective Scripture interpretation and critical theological thinking, becomes key in moving theology to the laity. As the pastor teaches and preaches, lay people are better equipped in sound doctrinal understanding, lessening the risk of heresy.

VI. Shaping global theological dialogue

“Faith seeks understanding,” therefore “theology is.”²⁹ Believers need to understand more deeply the issues of their faith. In today's geo-cultural reality, the Church faces the opportunity and responsibility to share, grapple, listen, communicate, and translate sound theology in openhearted interaction across worldview boundaries. Ray Dunning insisted: “Theology is a dialogue.”³⁰

²⁸ *Folk Religion*, 385.

²⁹ “Faith seeking understanding” is the definition of theology set forth by St. Anselm of Canterbury. Noted for one reference in A. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 5.

³⁰ Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 11.

In this new demographic, one challenge for theologians is to avoid what Charles Kraft calls “ethnocentrism in theological matters.”³¹ In today’s global ethos, doing theology must seek to “sit where the brothers and sisters sit,”³² seek to view and grasp issues through an unfamiliar worldview.

Certain theological awareness and categories are necessary for sound biblical doctrine to be grasped in any worldview. As a part of its theological education, the church must view the effective conveyance and translation of this awareness and these categories as foundational to theologizing, and thus to be engaged by emerging theologians.

It is a challenge for Western theology to grapple with issues that are not questions for Westerners. Western theologians must dialog with church leaders, thinkers, and theologians, including those emerging, in the new Global South; Western theologians must grasp “non-Western categories” as expressed by their Southern counterparts. Southerners must understand the major themes of historical orthodox theology, and must comprehend the theological constructs and categories as expressed in the Wesleyan hermeneutic. Each cultural perspective, those of the South and the West, should engage the other, seeking to understand the other as cogs on one gear engaging the cogs of another.

Because Christianity attracts more peoples from primal/folk traditions than from established “world religions,” Christian theology must address the concerns within these traditions. While continually anchoring to the “big rocks”³³ – God, creation, sin, salvation, and Christ’s return – thinkers from both the West and the South are called to process, with appropriate methodology, issues that are “real-life” for those of primal/traditional orientation. Paul Hiebert and others have delineated issues that call for sound theologizing. These are noted below with brief commentary and questions:

1. *A theology of the invisible*³⁴

Here the authors suggest that such a theology “must take seriously a Trinitarian understanding of God ... who is continually involved in his creation by his providence, presence,

³¹ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 12.

³² Concept expressed in John V. Taylor *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 196.

³³ Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 370.

³⁴ *Folk Religion*, 270.

and power.” Here a biblical understanding of the unseen spirit world, those of the realms beyond—heaven and hell, and those of the “excluded middle,”³⁵ the “transempirical realities of this world,”³⁶ must be studied and theologized. Andrew Walls wrote of the African crossing the frontier between the empirical world and the spiritual world—crossing and re-crossing that frontier in both directions every day. To the African it is an “open frontier.”³⁷ The African deals with questions to which the typical Westerner is often oblivious. How does one assure a successful marriage? Who caused the death of a child? Why did a competitor land the job? Questions of “the uncertainty of the future, the crises of present life, and the unknowns of the past,”³⁸ including relations with ancestors, all are processed through realities of the transempirical, for the African—as well as many peoples/cultures of the Global South. What do the Scriptures say about such issues? Such a theology is often not high priority for the Westerner, but is important in the Global South.

2. *A theology of worship and submission*³⁹

Who is God in relation to humankind? Is He to be worshipped for who He is or is He there for the sustaining of human life? Is He to be revered in loving submission or is He to be controlled and manipulated for humanity’s needs and wants? Who is the human family? What are issues in the God-human relationship in the Scriptures? Is God near to humankind (immanent) or is He far (transcendent)? A theology of worship and submission could go deep and uncover more layers.

3. *A holistic theology*⁴⁰

Paul Hiebert et al. referenced “God’s work in the whole of creation.” They continued:

This begins with a theology of cosmic history: of God, the heavens, and eternity. This answers the ultimate questions raised by high religions regarding the ultimate origins, purpose, and destiny of all creation. It must include a theology of...humans created in the image of God, the fall, God’s redemptive acts in the Old Testament, Christ’s death and resurrection in the New Testament, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church...It must... include a theology of God’s work in the lives of individuals: of the meaning of

³⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 196ff.

³⁶ *Folk Religion*, 49.

³⁷ Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 2, December 2001, 49.

³⁸ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 197.

³⁹ *Folk Religion*, 371.

⁴⁰ *Folk Religion*, 371-72.

life... need for guidance, and longing for justice, and explanations of death, disasters, the unknown and evil in poverty, injustice, racism, and oppression...A whole theology must also include nature: its design, its voice praising its Creator, its suffering at the hand of evil, and the new creation in which it will be fully restored.”⁴¹

These are only some of the issues to be theologized in “a holistic theology.”

4. *A theology of the kingdom of God*⁴²

Here theologians reckon with the sovereignty of God, the establishing of His righteous reign, and His role in redemptive history. The big view shows how the coming kingdom intersected with space and time on this earth via God in Christ who gave up His life to redeem sin-broken rebels and to disarm “the principalities and powers” and thus “made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”⁴³ Redemption’s work has begun, but the full glory of the kingdom has not yet been unveiled. Believers live in the “already,” but also the “not yet” kingdom. The ramifications of this theology for those in all worldviews are many.

5. *A theology of power and of the cross*⁴⁴

How shall Christians deal with “power” and “the cross”? The authors suggest “they face two dangers: On the one hand, they may avoid every kind of bold and sensational act for fear it is magic, even when God asks it of them. The church then is poor in the manifestations of God’s power. On the other hand, through zeal to demonstrate God’s power Christians can run after the sensational, even when God does not will it.”⁴⁵

A Scriptural study of God’s power includes the view in creation, in sustaining, in relation to ‘Satan and his hosts,’⁴⁶ in redemption, as cosmic Conqueror and present and ultimate King. Included in this study is the issue of human relation to divine power and its use in this world.⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Folk Religion*, 372.

⁴² *Folk Religion*, 373.

⁴³ Thomas A. Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” Ch. 10 in Anthony N. S. Lane, ed., *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press and Baker Book House, 1996), 196.

⁴⁴ Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 373-74.

⁴⁵ *Folk Religion*, 373-74.

⁴⁶ *Folk Religion*, 374.

⁴⁷ *Folk Religion*, 374.

6. *A theology of discernment*⁴⁸

Since many are fascinated with the sensational, with “signs, wonders, and miracles,” and because “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1 NIV), and also because there are innumerable “human experiences”⁴⁹ a theology of discernment is vital for orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

7. *A theology of suffering and death*⁵⁰

What does the Bible say regarding “sickness, injury, suffering, and death”? How shall one view them in a fallen world? How should believers navigate lifestyles in relation to physical health?⁵¹ These are significant issues for the world’s peoples.

8. *A theology of the church as caring community*⁵²

How does the community of faith care for the “fallen, sick, oppressed, and needy”?⁵³ How does she work with victims of “hostilities and jealousies of life that give rise to witchcraft?”⁵⁴ How does she minister to those caught in crises such as “droughts, plagues, and wars?”⁵⁵ How does the community “read the Scriptures together and hear what God is saying to them in their particular contexts?”⁵⁶

These areas call for theologians, from both West and South, to give much attention via reading, study, thinking, writing—yes, theologizing.

VII. *The Church of the Nazarene: engaging the New Global South*

Because of its message of the “radical optimism of grace” to transform individuals and communities, and because of its theological and missiological framework for communicating the message of “holiness of heart and life,” the opportunity for the Church of the Nazarene to develop raising theologians in this new context, is golden. Wesleyan-Holiness theology must be present *shaping ideas*, and thus history. Included in the church’s theology is its practical and

⁴⁸ *Folk Religion*, 374-75.

⁴⁹ *Folk Religion*, 375.

⁵⁰ *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵¹ *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵² *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵³ *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵⁴ *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵⁵ *Folk Religion*, 377.

⁵⁶ *Folk Religion*, 377.

encompassing soteriology including a powerful Christology and relational Pneumatology—all freighted with incredible meaning in the context of the New South.

Scholars of Africa’s traditional religions and worldview indicate that Africans from these backgrounds value *peace*, *harmony*, and *wholeness* as a moral and spiritual pursuit. As the Scriptures are made available and taught to these peoples, many of them identify with the Old Testament and with the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament (this part of the NT because of Christ’s mastery of the powers, the spirit world). In both Testaments, Africans are captivated with the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. This premium on *wholeness* provides the perfect bridge to the Wesleyan understanding of salvation as the restoration of the *imago Dei*, and thus *wholeness* in God, that was so damaged in the fall in Eden.

Because this relational restoration is a central motif in Wesleyan soteriological understanding, traditional Africans grasp a new way of thinking when Christ’s incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection are set forth in their meaning and glory. Africans quickly identify the Adam of Eden’s Garden as the “first ancestor,” the “head” of the human family. When they understand that his act of turning from the Creator to the created ones in rebellion plunged the whole family into an unbelieving *state*, each turning to “his own way” (Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:10-12), they are set to begin to grasp the concept of *original sin*.

In expounding the Romans 5:12-21 “First Adam, Second Adam” passage, Bishop John Taylor gives insight as sees it through African eyes:

‘In Adam all...’ wrote the Apostle, and Africa understands that better than we. She knows what it means to be *in* the first ancestor, to live in the organism which is growing out of him, to be him, his blood still coursing the living veins, his soul infused in the body, his destiny and disposition working itself out through time. But fundamental to that destiny and disposition is the estrangement, the inability to find or face the all-pervading Presence of God. The terror of the Presence, the ‘panic’ dread, compels Man to make a god who is remote, to raise a hierarchy of intermediaries that thrust him still further away, and to live in a microcosm, making his family unit all in all. Here is the universal irony of Man’s situation, that what seems to be a search for God is in fact a flight. Everyman is in Adam, and Adam is hiding from God.⁵⁷

Enter: the Second Adam! One commentator suggests that this Romans 5:12-21 passage may be titled, “‘Christ and Adam,’ since the weight of Paul’s argument is not upon the first Adam’s sin, and the death that followed, but upon the ‘*much more*’ *grace* that is in the last

⁵⁷ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 125.

Adam, reversing the fall and ushering in eternal life for all who believe in Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵⁸ The “*much more*” grace—that’s the emphasis of Wesleyan-Holiness theology and a gripping truth for all the world’s peoples!

When Christ, through His atoning sacrifice, is shown as the mighty cosmic Conqueror, Christus Victor, over sin, Satan, the dark transempirical powers, and death, those of traditional orientation in the New South find another resonating connector to the Gospel. “For what purpose did Christ come down from heaven?” asked Irenaeus, one of the Early Church fathers. “Answer: ‘That he might destroy sin, overcome death, and give life to man.’”⁵⁹

The Church of the Nazarene setting forth the Wesleyan Scripture way of salvation, the *via salutis*, provides an understanding of transformational grace, that grace makes *whole*, brings *peace* and *harmony* to the whole of life. Likewise, the church’s teaching on the Holy Spirit also points to vital theology for the New Global South. The awareness of the Spirit as *Parakletos* – Comforter, Counselor, Convictor, Friend, Guide, Effector of Salvation, Agent of Healing and of the Fullness of God’s Life and Power – assists those in the vibrant heartlands to see the practical, in-life, everyday ministry of God.

VIII. Conclusion: Strong African Wesleyan theologians

Philip Jenkins insisted: “the New Christendom is no mirror image of the Old. It is a truly new and developing entity. Just how different from its predecessor remains to be seen.”⁶⁰ African Nazarene leaders are on the journey. With intentional strategy and by God’s grace, we can encourage a track, a means to empower strong Wesleyan-Holiness scholars/thinkers/theologians in Christianity’s new vibrant lands.

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⁵⁸ William M. Greathouse with George Lyons, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Romans 1-8: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 160.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 3.14.7. Quoted in William M. Greathouse, *Love Made Perfect: Foundations for the Holy Life* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1997), 55.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 214.

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