GUEST POST: CULTURE AND THEOLOGY

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Category: Theology

I've said it before, and I'll say it again;Â the best thing about Twitter is the people you get to know through it. One of my favourite tweeters is Chris Howles. He teaches theology at a college in Uganda and tweets things which are informative, interesting and amusing. I can't read his stuff without wishing I was back in Africa. I hope that the time will come when Chris has the time to blog or write a book; in the meantime, this article based on his MA dissertation is a great read and an excellent follow up to yesterday's review of Bevan's book. He say a lot of things that I want to say; but he says them better!

â€œA man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the errors of his native villageâ€ , said C.S. Lewis in â€˜*The Weight of Gloryâ€™*. Thereâ€™s great profundity in that quote, as there so often is with Lewis, and it nicely encapsulates my argument in my Masters dissertation (in Theology and Mission, Oak Hill College 2011), entitled â€œ*Theology, or theologies? A demonstration of the contextual particularity of Western and Majority World theologising, and a proposal for their unification within the global theological process*.â€ (I know, I know. Dull title. I never mastered the art of good titles, unlike my university peer who entitled his geography dissertation about the changing distribution and social role of public toilets through the 20th Century â€œTo pee or not to peeâ€ .)

My dissertation emerged from a nagging doubt I had concerning the old missionary maxim â€“ that we are to â€˜work ourselves out of a jobâ€™. The idea was that the missionary should be a transient-beingâ€¦only ever staying long enough to hand over the work to some locally supported indigenous believer. Then move on. Again, and again.

Now, donâ€™t get me wrong. Like all maxims there is good sense holding it up, and there have been, and sadly continue to be, examples of missionaries outstaying their welcome and increasingly reigning in the potential of the church they are meant to be serving simply by their very presence there. However must that always be true?

My particular area of experience concerns theological seminaries in the Majority World, especially Sub-Saharan Africa. Could it be argued that having a long-term, culturally-diverse (from within the region, within the continent, and within the world) teaching faculty significantly enriches the quality of theological education that can be offered?

As I will argue in this post, the answer is yes! A loud and resonant yes! However the crucial detail that must be emphasised here (please imagine me standing on the rooftop with a megaphone at this point) is that the exact same principle works in reverse: Majority World faculty should be an integral part of Western theological schools. Unfortunately this has not been a priority up to now. A 2009 survey by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and CanadaÂ found that just 316 of 3,629 faculty members (8.7%) were non-Western. My own survey of Anglican training colleges in England in 2011 found the equivalent figure to be just 3.6% . Harvie Connâ€™s challenge to Western theological college principles remains timely: â€œHow much non-Western, non-white

experience is represented on your faculty? How â€˜colourfulâ€™ does your faculty look? How much training and experience do they bring from outside the Anglo-Saxon world?â€

Not much, it would commonly appear! And yet how much longer until the Western Church truly wakes up and understands the profound implications of the current make-up of the global church? If youâ€™re a regular reader of this Kouya blog, you donâ€™t need explaining that the past Century (with the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin-America and its decline in Europe and North America) has seen perhaps â€œone of the most dramatic shifts in Christianity since the Reformation.â€ (Timothy Tennent). The Church is increasingly polycentric and multifaceted. Are our seminaries?

The Western church has largely been slow to respond to these implications. Kenyan theologian John Mbiti complained in 1976 that, even with the apparent shift in the epicentre of world Christianity, there did â€œnot seem to be a corresponding shift towards mutuality and reciprocity in the theological taskâ€ , with the result that the global church was â€œkerygmatically universalâ€ but â€œtheologically provincialâ€ . Many scholars agree that this state remains today, commenting on how the Western church expects the Majority World church to use and benefit from their theologising, but without doing the same in return. For example, borrowing language from St. Paul in First Corinthians, Christopher Wright suggests that the attitude of the Western church towards the Majority World church is â€˜I have no need of you.â€™ Harvie Conn calls such attitudes in the Western church â€œethnocentric paternalismâ€ , â€œecclesiastical parochialismâ€ and â€œtheological colonialismâ€ , whilst Tite TiÃ©nou proposes â€œprovincialismâ€ and â€œarrogant regionalismâ€ , and Siu â€œtheological imperialism.â€ Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako describes the trend as the â€œone-sidedness of theological learning.â€ Ultimately the Western church, increasingly unable to ignore the Majority World church, is struggling to know how to learn from it. Mbitiâ€™s challenge on behalf of the Majority World Church to the West is still relevant: â€œWe know you theologically. The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?â€

Of course the reason this remains such a pertinent challenge for Western seminaries is because of the strongly-embedded presumption that still remains in our conscience: â€˜My theologising is culturally neutral. That from other places is heavily-influenced by the surrounding context â€“ It may be interesting in a quirky sense, but it doesnâ€™t belong hereâ€™ etc. This Western theological hegemony means that Majority World theologising is frequently forced into one of two inevitable cul-de-sacs; homogenous theologising (whereby scholars extract themselves from their own frame of reference and theologise within a Western discourse) or heterogeneous theologising (whereby scholars angrily theologise in direct and purposeful contradistinction to the theologies of the West). This results in either weakened church theology (for where homogenous theologising dominates, the churchâ€™s theological reflection suffers for the absence of multiple perspectives), or weakened church unity (heterogeneous theologising by definition leads to theological and

ecclesiastical fragmentation). Both trends are extremely damaging for the global Christian community.

And so to counter these trends three general mind shifts are required. First, Western theology must increasingly recognise its own contextuality. Western theologian do not extract themselves from their context in order to theologise â€“ that is clearly impossible. Secondly, Majority World theologians must increasingly discover their own theological voice based on their own contextuality.

However the third and climactic mind shift required is that Western and Majority World theologians must increasingly listen to, and exchange with, one another in order to avoid theological and ecclesiastical fragmentation. This process requires a deep and rich dialogue between different contextual theologians, a necessary discourse labelled as a â€œworldwide conversationâ€ , a â€œperennial interchange of theological acumenâ€ and a â€œglobal exchange of theologiesâ€ by TiÃ©nou, Siu, and Bosch respectively. Christopher Wright, for example, argues that â€œtheology, like mission, has to be â€˜from everywhere to everywhereâ€™ nowâ€ A particularly helpful description of the type of theological dialogue necessary is provided by Ott, who describes a round table, with no head and no ends, where all who are seated there are equals with voices to share as part of a mutual conversation. If seminaries are the backbone and storehouse of ideas for our future church, the process must begin there. And it must begin with the long-term teaching faculty. Theological teaching-missionaries from everywhere to everywhere - a worldwide process of global theologising whereby differing perspectives listen, share, critique, exchange, improve and develop one another.

The result?Â Firstly, global church unity would be deepened and strengthened as Majority World and Western theologians, denominations and churches would require one anotherâ€™s perspectives in order to enrich their own, leading to communion, fellowship, union and mutual appreciation across traditional boundaries. Secondly, theological enrichment, for dialogue between multiple perspectives has the potential to usher the worldwide Christian community into one of the most exciting periods of its existence. (As Andrew Walls explains, â€œwe may be on the verge of a theological renaissance. The deepening penetration of Christian thinking in the cultures of Africa and Asia could open up the most active and creative period of Christian theology since the deepening penetration of Greco-Roman thought brought about the great creeds.â€)

A diverse faculty is an essential requirement for effective theologising on both a local and a global level. Western missionaries in this context perhaps shouldnâ€™t be so quick to â€˜work themselves out of a jobâ€™. However Western seminary principals must be much quicker to work Majority World theology-thinkers into a job. As Vanhoozer argues, â€œthe way forward is not â€˜non-Westernâ€™ but â€˜more-than-Westernâ€™.â€