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Ecclesial Questions for the Global Community

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Ecclesial Questions for the Global Community

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In recent times we, the church, are faced with the ever broadening scope of cultures related to Christianity. What it means to be "Christian" has come a long way from the W.A.S.P. profile that was previously a good cultural indicator. Now, as noted by Shenk, "60% of all Christians live outside of the traditional western heartland."¹ With this fact in mind, we have to ask ourselves two very important questions. How can the history of Christianity be represented in the most all-encompassing way, and what about the Christian present liturgy can be changed to incorporate a greater sense of cultural relevance for non-Western churches? This means taking another look at Africa and Asia and reevaluating how these cultures fit, not only into the history books, but into the way in which Christians perceive themselves today."



Peter Santandreu, 2009

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In recent times we, the church, are faced with the ever broadening scope of cultures related to Christianity. What it means to be “Christian” has come a long way from the W.A.S.P. profile that was previously a good cultural indicator. Now, as noted by Shenk, “60% of all Christians live outside of the traditional western heartland.”¹ With this fact in mind, we have to ask ourselves two very important questions. How can the history of Christianity be represented in the most all-encompassing way, and what about the Christian present liturgy can be changed to incorporate a greater sense of cultural relevance for non-Western churches? This means taking another look at Africa and Asia and reevaluating how these cultures fit, not only into the history books, but into the way in which Christians perceive themselves today.

This realization of “other” or “new” Christianities also forces us to notice the overwhelmingly Eurocentric flavor of our history books. For us in the West, this reading of church history makes sense, but to someone in the Asian or African church such a reading has little to do with their experience of Christianity. Andrew Walls says, “...[W]e think [that] by study of our own tradition we are doing church history. We are not—we

¹ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christianity* (New York: Maryknoll, 2002), xii.

are doing *our* church history.”² There is, as Walls points out, an “alternate Christian story.”³ A good deal of Eastern Christian history is virtually unknown to the West. The emergence of a Christianity closely related to the Persian Empire is relatively new information to any Western learner. It has been reported that this early spread of Christianity, brought by a missionary named A Lo Pen, reached even to China in 635.⁴ On this issue, Walls does admit that “It is a period little understood and the sources difficult to access; yet if we could understand it better, we might gain some clues to developments of much later periods....”⁵ Walls is correct in saying this. We could grow exponentially in our view of the early church if we did more research into the area of early Eastern Christianity. Shenk argues, “Christian history ought to be taught so as to expose students to the multiple dimensions of what is a dynamic process, one that reaches to all points on the compass.”⁶

In light of this new view of Christian history, it is also proper to talk about a “new” view of the Christian present. With such numbers as noted above of non-Western Christians, classical Western Christianity must ask itself how, and to what degree, is Western culture to be inserted into unchangeable Christian practice or doctrine. One place that we can best see the need for cross-cultural discussion is the liturgy.

Louis Weil speaks to this when he says, “A person cannot be a Christian ‘in general.’ We are baptized in a specific place at a specific time, so that although we are by baptism members of the universal church, our membership is always experienced in a

² Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again,” *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* July (2000): 7.

³ Ibid, 9.

⁴ Ibid,10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shenk, *Enlarging the Story*, xvii.

specific ecclesial context...”⁷ This is to say that we are so shaped by our situation in time and space that our Christianity necessarily is affected by and reflects our particular culture; or at least it should be. Accepting this view of Christianity has been a slow process for most Western expressions of Christianity when evangelizing Africa and the East. When it comes to the liturgy, we see that the “Western style” of doing things is somehow lacking for the East. What is good for Rome is not always best for Hong Kong or New Delhi. Woodward speaks to this when he relates the situation in the Indian church. He says, “In many Indian churches, as well as various Christian ashrams, priests have adopted the dress and rituals of the Hindu majority. The mass may begin with ‘Om,’ the sacred sound of the Vedas, and at communion the priest sometimes distributes traditional Hindu *Prasad* (consecrated fruits and sweetmeats) along with the Eucharistic bread.”⁸ It is at this point that we Westerners must look to our own history to better judge the present case in the East and in Africa.

The Western traditions have come about solely by way of melding Christianity with Western culture. In the gospels, we see a reliance on the Greek language. In Luke-Acts, we see that incorporation of Gentiles into the body of Christ. Later on, the Fathers extensively use Greek philosophy to explain Christianity in its cultural context. If we were to trace the progression of Christianity in the West even further, we would be confronted with many more examples of how the Christianity we have today only exists in its current form because it has been continuously shaped by the dominant Euro-Western culture. We can then use this reflection to better inform our theologizing related to the fuller incorporation of Eastern and African culture into their liturgies and overall

⁷ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship* (Cambridge: Crowley Publications, 2002), 54.

⁸ Kenneth Woodward, “The Changing Face of the Church” *Newsweek* April 16, 2001. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/79823/output/print>. Accessed on Oct.17, 2009.

expressions of Christianity. Weil argues on behalf of an “ecclesial model” when he says, “Unlike a ritual model imposed from above, in an ecclesial model the fundamental structures of Christian corporate prayer take flesh—yes, *are incarnate*—through the local community’s life.”⁹

On the other hand, it is important to think about these things in a manner fitting of their gravity. What we are talking about when we speak of liturgy and Christian life is something very serious and jealously guarded by the major churches of the world. In one case in particular we can see how this can be problematic. The church in Japan needs to import grape wine and wheat bread from the West. These elements of the Eucharist are not dietary staples in Japan and have little cultural significance to the people there. The question is, can the Japanese church use rice wine and rice bread in substitution for the communion meal at mass? The main problem that Rome has with such a request is the move away from the historical elements that Jesus actually used at the Last Supper. How much can we change the elements before we have changed too much? It is important to keep in mind that changing too much is a real possibility, and that the Church is right to be careful. This is not to make a definitive judgment of the situation but rather to present both sides fairly.

In conclusion, it would seem that theologians have their work cut out for them. With the recent effects of globalization being felt in the church, many new questions are being asked about diversity and plurality. These are important questions and should be treated as such. One way in which we can better confront these types of issues is to look to history. History, taken in its broader sense, includes not only the history of the West,

⁹ Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, 63.

but also the lesser known history of Africa and the East. In addition, while looking at Western history, we must have a critical eye to be able to determine how various Western cultures have affected what we know as “normative” Christianity today. Only after such a thorough examination will we be able to address the issues that face today our ever expanding church.

Bibliography

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