

## Moving from Christendom to a Global Church

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After reading Safwat Marzouk's intriguing essay, "Monstrous Empires and the Kingdom of God: What Do Monsters Reveal about the Empire?," I find myself as a theologian, most interested in his questions about the Kingdom of God rather than the exegetical claims about empire and monsters. My response engages the question Marzouk poses as his essay draws towards a conclusion: "How, then, should members of the Kingdom of God avoid becoming a monstrous empire?"

In general, Marzouk proposes Daniel 7 as "a resource" for faith communities to "avoid reproducing the empires they seek to oppose." Specifically, he offers three observations and warnings based on his exegesis of Daniel 7. First, his insightful dual reading of Daniel 7 offers encouragement to the marginalized and a challenge to the privileged. Second, God, not any emperor, is asserted as the ultimate authority. Third, "appropriate distance between the divine and the human" allows humans to assess commonalities and differences between communities without physical, psychic, or as I will claim below, *theological*, violence.

Marzouk's reading of Daniel 7 is intended to help faith communities resist the temptations of power, specifically the "temptation to control...[by] eradicate[ing] other people's unique identities." For Marzouk, faith communities must not fall prey to becoming "monsters of empire," but rather must resist those temptations and all forms of empire here on earth. Instead of asserting "sameness," the "kingdom of God does not attempt to make its members identical with each other." While Marzouk's final line highlights "cultural, linguistic, and racial differences," I will turn our attention toward resisting authoritarian assertions of theological sameness across differences of race, language, and culture.

Over forty years ago, Kenyan theologian John S. Mbiti argued in his essay, "Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church," that while the Church was experiencing exponential geographic growth, the Church remained "theologically provincial."<sup>1</sup> This major claim was based on both the sources and subjects of Western Christian thought. Regarding sources, Western theology is remarkably self-referential, so much so that Mbiti describes how he and other Africans felt about Western Christians knowing more about the heretical movements of the second and third centuries than about contemporary Christians living in the developing

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<sup>1</sup> John Mbiti, "Theological impotence and the universality of the Church" *Mission Trends No.3: Third World Theologies*, Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 8.

world: “We feel deeply affronted and wonder whether it is more meaningful theologically to have academic fellowship with heretics long dead than with the living brethren of the Church today in the so-called Third World.”<sup>2</sup> Regarding the subjects of theological reflection, Mbiti senses that the comfortable lives of most Western theologians inhibits them from understanding or addressing the survival needs of many in the developing world who are hungry, poor, and lack power. Mbiti’s fear is that unless there is “a little southward tilting of theology...the new centers of ecclesiastical gravity [in Kinshasa, Kampala, or Brasilia] will either be devoid of viable theology or be filled with theology which is largely impotent.”<sup>3</sup> Mbiti is making the point that Africans and others in the so-called developing world need to interpret the Christian scriptures for themselves and not blindly accept the teachings of imperial Christendom. Yet, two additional questions are in order. First, has the theological situation changed all that much since Mbiti wrote this essay in 1974? Second, what are the implications of Mbiti’s claims for contemporary Western Christians and theologians?

While many sense that Christianity is receding in the West (both in terms of influence and numbers of adherents) and that Christianity is growing exponentially in the global south, some empirical data is telling. In 1910, 66% of Christians worldwide lived in Europe and North America. In 2010, 61% of Christians lived in the Global South (63% of Africans are Christians).<sup>4</sup> While the number of Christians worldwide has quadrupled over the last century to 2.2 billion, the proportion of the world population that is Christian has remained constant at about one-third. In a dramatic change few saw coming, there are now nearly twice as many Christians in the global South than the global North. Yet the disconnect between Western and non-Western theologies that Mbiti described remains with us today. Why is this so? Why have forty-plus years of voices from the global South calling to be heard gone unheeded? Or, using Marzouk’s imagery, in what ways is Western theological reflection a modern, monstrous empire?

For some Westerners, as the similarities with Christians in the global South have grown over the last half-century, so have the conflicts and the distance between followers of Jesus Christ from different hemispheres. Much of the Christianity that is in Africa is a result of nineteenth century European missionary activity combined with indigenous African

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<sup>2</sup> Mbiti, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Mbiti, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” (2011), <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

spiritualities.<sup>5</sup> These religious mixtures often defy Western categories, such as “liberal” or “conservative.” Part of the legacy of colonial Christianity in Africa is that when some African Christians offer understandings of scripture as inerrant, of God as unchanging, or of restrictive roles for women in the Church, they are often more faithful to the pietistic teachings of Victorian era missionaries than contemporary Western Christians are. While Western Protestants have (generally) continued to revise theological understandings in light of scientific discoveries, philosophical change, and cultural contexts, Africans and others in the developing world have sought to maintain the specific teachings that they were given by Western missionaries. While some Westerners judge them for this doctrinal conservatism, solely blaming Africans for this predilection is misguided. In addition, many Westerners choose to ignore more calls for economic justice and debt relief from African Christians.

In the process of colonial missions, Western missionaries often communicated ideas and principles without always clearly communicating the reasoning or methods that informed those ideas and principles. Propositional truths were communicated rather than the tools of biblical interpretation and theological reflection. In this way, the empire (Christendom) maintained power and control over what colonized peoples believed and served as the gatekeeper for admission into the Christian faith. As decolonialization took place in the 1960s, Christians—such as Mbiti and others—wanted to be able to contribute to global theological conversations and to experiment with their own theological understandings. However, the Western Church was quick to pounce on attempts to include traditional aspects of African religion and cultures into Christian worship services or to appropriate cultural concepts in expressing traditional doctrines, such as in various ancestor Christologies. Mbiti wrote about the need for freedom in theological reflection, saying that theologians in the developing world “must be free to hatch their own heresies and theological errors, for often it is only in response to heresies and errors that sound theological orthodoxy is generated.”<sup>6</sup> Mbiti is seeking the space to resist the “imperial (theological) hegemony” of Western Christianity.

Attempts to treat theology without context or to apply theology formed in one context to another are ineffective or, worse, harmful. The failed colonial project is the most obvious example in the recent past of the attempt to export theology without attention to contextual differences. The end of colonialism formally marked the demise of the global reach of the Western, Christian empire while also exposing the errors in theological understanding that

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the history of the Christian Church in Africa, see Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity In Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995) and Adrian Hastings, *The Church In Africa: 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Mbiti, 16.

supported and encouraged the colonial project. The twenty-first century calls for moving through and beyond the colonial, theological categories of saved/damned, Christian/heathen, white/black, and even Western/African. The future of constructive theology lies not in North America, Europe, or among white peoples. Instead, the future of constructive Christian theology lies in collaborations across cultural, ethnic, economic, and gender barriers.

When blinded by one's cultural context, theology is often thought to be objectively true, that is, any given biblical text has one, correct interpretation. Even among texts whose meaning is disputed, a set of common assumptions guide the hermeneutics. Mbiti and every other postcolonial theologian who has followed after him have challenged this universal theological approach as neglecting the particularities of context. Questions of culture, gender, socio-economic status, even geography and climate, shape the theological questions posed and the answers generated. Instead of an imperial approach that all theology is without context (because the imperial assumptions overrun difference and assert sameness), postcolonial theologians have taught us all that *all* theology is contextual and *every* theological conviction is shaped by the circumstances of the person articulating it.

The end of the Western Christian empire, or Christendom, is an opportunity not a threat. This is, in part, because, as Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako puts it, "there is no *one* centre from which Christianity radiates, and . . . it was never intended to be so."<sup>7</sup> The un-yoking of the Christian faith from institutions of power and prestige allows for, and even necessitates, a re-thinking of the Christian faith for the twenty-first century. This process of re-thinking and re-articulating Christian theology—and of holding all theological convictions loosely—is necessitated by changing contexts. Bediako considers "all theology, wherever it is produced, [to be] contextual and therefore provisional rather than universal. . . . theology itself is always a struggle with culturally-related questions."<sup>8</sup> As the times (contexts) change, so must theology.

The context of the production of Western theologies (power, privilege, safety) has unavoidably shaped the questions asked and the answers given. As Western society has become increasingly secularized and increasingly globalized, the context of theological reflection has changed. For the rich, the powerful, the privileged, there is no theological future within safe, comfortable bubbles. There are resources within the history of Western theology but they must be viewed with a hermeneutic of suspicion. The questions asked and the answers given must change. These changes cannot take place without engaging thinkers and ideas from other socio-cultural contexts with differing values and worldviews.

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<sup>7</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, 129.

My deeper—and longer-term—hope is that, through the end of the Christian empire, the stark distinction between Western and non-Western Christian theologies will disappear. I hope that deeply contextual theologies flourish around the globe and that thoughtful engagements arise across boundaries. These engagements will both allow for cross-fertilization of new ideas as well as self-critical re-assessment of one's own theological method and assumptions. Moving forward, good theological reflection cannot be done in a vacuum—particularly when that vacuum is achieved by intentionally, systemically, and systematically excluding rival or discordant voices. For those with privilege, listening to theologians from the majority world and those on the undersides of power is essential. Listening is the first step toward radically altering theological convictions that have appropriated divine authority towards abusive or prejudicial ends. Over the last five hundred years, the social consequences of Western Christian theological beliefs have been decidedly mixed. Alongside all the good works done in the name of the gospel is stacked the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide,<sup>9</sup> and other atrocities supported and endorsed by Christian theologians and the Church. Perhaps through the genuine encounter of Western theologies with non-Western expressions of Christianity, Westerners can see their cultural blinders more clearly, naming these biases, acknowledging these assumptions, and beginning to remove them. The ability to name, understand, and assess cultural influences upon one's own Christian theological reflection can help to ameliorate the deleterious effects of coming to understand and explain the gospel of Jesus Christ from positions of power, authority, wealth, and comfort.

If such deep listening and learning can occur across boundaries of race, class, language, gender, culture, and geography (such that the often implicit Western agenda can be interrogated and laid aside and the anti-Western rhetoric of some postcolonial theology can be suspended) there exists the possibility of true dialogue within world Christianity. Indeed, the goal would be dialogue, not a monolithic, global theology. Such dialogue would allow for the exchange of ideas in order to better interpret Biblical texts and encourage the development of local, indigenous theologies that are not isolated, but offer conversation with other contextual theologies around the world. One of the results of globalization is that peoples in distant geographic locations may be facing similar theological challenges. There will be opportunities for Christians in distant lands to share their responses to contemporary challenges. In so doing, communities seeking to live in the kingdom of God can work to avoid becoming a monstrous empire—and this will be done through listening and collaboration across boundaries.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the involvement on the Church and its leaders in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda see Timothy Longman, *Christianity and genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

*Questions for reflection:*

1. How does the fact that the geographic center of Christianity has shifted to the global south shape the way you think about the church? Can you see instances in your own faith life--whether personally or as part of a local church--in which this shift is having an impact?
2. How do you relate the impact of missionary work in bringing the church to new places (including many parts of the West) with the indigenous qualities of faith that are already in those places? Can you think of ways that your own context reveals the overlaps and tensions between missionary-driven and indigenously formed faith commitments?
3. What does the practice of "deep listening" look like to you? How do we listen across differences in a way that respects difference and also reveals connection?