

# Majority World Theologies

Transformation

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## Abstract

With the shift of the center of gravity of Christianity to the Majority World comes a corresponding rise of new global theologies. These theologies need to be taken seriously as relevant to many contexts outside of the West, as well as being correctives to some Western theologies which have become imbalanced or have even gone astray. Significant challenges remain, however; the lack of resourcing (funding, education, publishers, etc.) continue to be impediments to the Majority World churches moving beyond just the three selves (self-propagating, self-governing, self-supporting) to the fourth self (self-theologizing). But churches globally theologizing for themselves is the antidote to an imperialistic Christianity from the West which has been the reality for far too long.

## Keywords

Majority World, Theologies, Christianities, World Christianity, Global Theology

The 21st century has been marked by many seismic shifts, but often one that has gone unnoticed, ironically even by Christians, is the rise of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. (This so-called “non-Western world” will be referred to by the preferred name “Majority World” in this publication.<sup>1</sup> The term Majority World is mainly only used in Christian circles; however, since this article is aimed toward Christian readers the nomenclature will be retained. It will also be retained for the sake of accuracy, as the majority of the world’s population lives outside the West.<sup>2</sup>) Even though the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the Majority World in the last few decades, as well attested in the writings of scholars such as Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Dana Robert, Todd Johnson, and Philip Jenkins, unfortunately tropes aligning Christianity with “white” and “Western” still hold sway.

The study of this field of the rise of Christianity in the Majority World has often been called World Christianity or Global Christianity. But much of the time, the focus has been either on demography (population statistics and religious data trends) such as *The Atlas of Global Christianity*, ecclesial expressions (the documenting of denominations, worship, practical outworkings of the faith) such as in the World Council of Churches, or persons and offices (the positioning of People of Color or Majority World Christians as leaders in the church, whether as clergy or missionaries or executives). What is not discussed often enough is the new vistas of theology which are an exciting development in the global church. This is a largely untapped field of study which could yield limitless arenas of research. But there is some trepidation about this topic from Western Christians,

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as—unlike population or cultural trends which may ebb and flow—theology is assumed to be timeless. The expectation is often that the global church may continue to become ever more diverse but the thinking should still be rooted in the past. This is understandable with a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8), but the confusion lies in the fact that while *Jesus* does not change, theology must adapt.

## What Is Theology?

Here is where we must define some terms: theology is not the same as timeless truth; rather, it is a subset of it. Timeless truth is how God sees the cosmos. Theology, broken down into its constituent Greek etymological parts, is “God words” (*theos* + *logos*), that is, how humans discuss or study God—so it is certainly a type of truth. But human beings inevitably see everything through our own lenses and filters. We respond to things based on our own cultures, our own experiences, our own history, our own traumas and fears, our own values, and our own priorities. Theology is basically our limited and biased attempts to grasp God’s timeless truths. I am not suggesting that it is wrong, but it is partial; so it behooves us to have the whole Church working together to see a fuller picture of God. It must be noted that this is not relativism. Relativism is that truth is rooted in the observer’s own self, so that whatever one perceives is the only way to see it and must be accepted as such. Rather, global theologies acknowledge *multiple* non-contradictory truths that need each other.<sup>3</sup> This is borne out by the fact that there are four Gospels. At least with the Synoptics, Matthew is viewing Jesus through a Jewish lens, Mark through a Roman lens, and Luke through a Greek lens. Misguided attempts to conflate all the Gospels into one super Gospel miss the point. Each has a different aspect of Jesus to highlight, and comprehending different themes about Jesus is important for our understanding of him.<sup>4</sup>

Theology is also *occasional*, meaning it arises out of specific cultural, historical, geographical, and contextual occasions. This is not only true of modern theology but also of biblical theology. The most obvious examples are the Apostle Paul’s epistles, which were directly responding to issues that different churches were going through, for example, the Corinthians were operating under the cult of worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, so Paul responded with a true Christian definition of what love is in 1 Cor. 13. The Mosaic law likewise responded to the idolatry of the golden calf with the Ten Commandments, atop which was highlighted the injunction against foreign gods and graven images. And the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther’s response to what he deemed to be the incorrect theology of the Roman Catholic Church regarding works righteousness, indulgences, etc. As such, it does not make sense necessarily for Christians to identify as Protestants in areas of the world where Catholicism has not touched, as there is no need for a “pushback” theology to a “problem” which does not exist there. And the original four Ecumenical Councils, which are generally accepted by most Christians, was able to articulate some of our most cherished doctrines (that have shown up most notably in the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Chalcedonian Confession) because they were responses against heretics such as Arius, Apollinarius, Pelagius, Macedonius, Nestorius, Jacob Baradaeus, and others.<sup>5</sup> In a misguided attempt to guard against relativism (which global theologies are not), the Western church has dug in its heels by insisting solely on its own interpretation. The problem is, without global theologies, the inevitable result is imperialism. That is the favoring of only one point of view over all others, as if only one culture can see God clearly (and to be fair, there are *multiple* Western theologies, so even just staying with the West does not take away the issue of a bewildering multitude of theologies). This was the Achilles’ heel of most missionaries of the past: not knowing the difference between their culture and their faith. So they propagated both. If they had only understood that the two are intertwined (though not inextricably), recognizing our lenses is the first step toward true

ecumenical unity instead of white supremacy (the inevitable outcome of a unilateral hermeneutic), which has no place in a religion that bears the name of Christ, the reconciler who breaks dividing walls.

A caveat is in order here: perhaps part of the reason that Westerners have dominated Christian theology is not only because the center of gravity of Christianity remained in the West for roughly the second millennium of church history.<sup>6</sup> There is a more “meta” reason, and that is the Enlightenment project. Many Majority World Christians do not put the primacy of their identity in philosophical orthodoxies. That is a modernist perspective that deems a person to be Christian based on what they know, how much they know, and how correctly they know it. The Bible certainly does not discount correct knowledge (Paul, especially, was very clear to fight against false doctrines, for example, Gal. 1:6), but James makes explicit that knowledge without follow-through is useless (Jas. 2:19). Perhaps theologies are just not as much of an obsession/necessity for Majority World Christians as they are for Western Christians. But that begs the question: should they be? Or at the very least, at the risk of being imperialistic toward them,<sup>7</sup> should we Westerners be encouraging them to theologize/publish more? Because while ideas alone do not make one a Christian, ideas are the germs and seeds of correct behavior, and they are the beginning of good follow-through (Rom. 12:2), much as articulating marriage vows does not make one a good spouse, but if one takes those vows seriously through action, then one *can be* a good spouse. On the other hand, perhaps right action (orthopraxis) demonstrates that one already has correct theology (orthodoxy), as Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:16)? Or at the very least, doing the right thing but saying the wrong thing (though ideally one would want to do *and* say the right thing) is better than saying the right thing and doing the wrong thing (this principle is put forth by both Jesus in the Parable of the Two Sons in Matt. 21:28-32, and Paul in 1 Cor. 13:1-3).

## The Four Selves

In the last few centuries, the emphasis in missiological thinking, with respect to how Western Christians should approach Majority World churches, has been on the three selves: self-governing, self-sustaining, and self-propagating. Sometimes people mistakenly think that the Three Self Church is only in reference to the Chinese Communist governmental state church, but that is technically called the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and drew its name from the original three selves, which was a concept conceived of by American missiologist Rufus Anderson and British missiologist Henry Venn in the 19th century. In recent years, scholars such as Paul Hiebert of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School have advocated for a “fourth self”: self-theologizing.<sup>8</sup> One can have the three selves and still just mimic the West, like continuing to sing the magisterial Reformation hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in Chinese or Spanish. There is nothing wrong with that hymn, of course, but as stated above, protesting against the Catholic Church is not necessarily something that Majority World Christians would concern themselves with. Self-theologizing allows national churches to not only have their own leadership and their own funding and their own evangelism, but also their own thinking, which is relevant to their context. This includes not only writing theology but also writing their own hymnody, their own creeds, and their own liturgies. But in order to get to self-theologizing, the first step is education. This means that the Western world needs to partner with Majority World Christians in depth (discipleship and spiritual formation), not just more breadth (evangelism and growth in numbers). The implications of this include more resources (books that advocate learning rather than paternalism),<sup>9</sup> more funding (with a view toward sustainability), more seminaries that teach theology relevant to their contexts, and more publishing houses based in their countries. Interestingly, a side effect of more education is that it leads to societies becoming more democratic<sup>10</sup> (one principle of the Protestant Reformation, which

seems to be universal—and not just situated in the West—is the priesthood of all believers, 1 Pet. 2:9). Without self-theologizing, one cannot properly do the other three selves as they will be *philosophically* dominated by the West even if they are no longer *praxeologically* dominated by the West.

At the famous 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh—which, despite the fact that it was touted as the “birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement,” was mainly dominated by white Westerners—one of the few Majority World representatives present was V.S. Azariah from India, bishop of Dornekal. He gave the most memorable speech at that conference, closing with the words:

<EXT>The problem of race relationships is one of the most serious problems confronting the Church today. . . [there is] a certain aloofness, a lack of mutual understanding and openness, a great lack of frank intercourse and friendliness. . . Friendship is more than condescending love. . . Too often you promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your drawing rooms. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS!</EXT>

I had previously written that that clarion call to partnership and equality still rings true today, over a century later. Western theologians mainly cite the Gospel as couched in the language of rescue, which is essentially the lowest level in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The Bible, however, does not reduce the Gospel simply to a moment, to the act of rescue, as undeniable as the Cross is as the pinnacle of history. It moves us from “servants” to “friends” (John 15:15); from *agape* (charity or rescue) to *philia* (reciprocity); from disciples (followers) to apostles (ones who are sent out); from physiological/survival needs being met to self-actualization.<sup>11</sup>

Self-theologizing is an endeavor that feels fraught with peril for some Western Christians, but this is a blind spot because even Western Christians have done no other than self-theologize for their entire existence. The concern, of course, is syncretism and heresy. And those are valid concerns. But in an effort to safeguard against those, sometimes Western Christians “throw out the baby with the bathwater.”<sup>12</sup> But when looking at the development of Western theology over the centuries, it is clear that as culture changes and new situations arise, there is a corresponding need for new theologies. There has been a progressive codification of Western theologies, not just doctrines like the Trinity and original sin (issues championed by Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine of Hippo, respectively) at the original four Ecumenical Councils, but also the four “solas” of the Protestant Reformation set forth by Martin Luther, the Great Commission of Matt. 28 advocated by William Carey, and the general shift from postmillennialism (an optimistic eschatology in vogue in the 19th century) toward a more pessimistic (or some might say realistic) eschatology of premillennialism or amillennialism in the 20th century given the downturn in world politics and Christian expansion. This coheres with Martin Luther’s injunction to be *Reformata et semper reformanda* (“Reformed and always reforming”). It is not as if theology stopped and crystallized for all time in the 4th century, or the 16th century, or the 20th century; rather, we must acknowledge that we should always be making course-corrections and adapting our theologies—based on God’s word—to the changing cultures constantly shifting around us.

Nonetheless, even if one acknowledges that Western theologies are also responses to situations, cultures, world events, and ontologies, there still remains the legitimate fear of letting anything be counted as a Christian theology. Paul Hiebert acknowledges this, and rightly says that four hermeneutical “checks” against syncretism and heresy must include: Scripture (Christian beliefs and practices must be biblically based); the Holy Spirit (the Counselor has the ongoing work of instructing us in truth); the church acting as a community of interpretation (this guards against privatization of faith and individual misinterpretation of Scripture); and tradition/creeds (we stand on the

shoulders of those who have articulated faith before, so there should be at least consensus on basic/essential theological points).<sup>13</sup>

Now that we have established what theology is (as opposed to truth), the need for the fourth self (self-theologizing), and the appropriate boundaries therein, we will turn our attention to generalities and particularities of Western and Majority World theologies.

## Western vs. Majority World Theologies

Although Western theologies (and no less Majority World theologies!) are not monolithic, there are certain generalities one can extrapolate about them based on general cultural assumptions and worldviews. This will be approached with three questions: What is unique to Western theologies? What is unique to Majority World theologies? And what can Majority World theologies teach Western Christians?

First, what are some theological issues that Christians wrestle with in the West that perhaps Majority World Christians don't because they haven't had the need to? The following is a non-exhaustive list:

- mode of baptism: paedobaptism vs. credobaptism; dunking vs. sprinkling
- status of the papacy
- Calvinism vs. Arminianism
- complementarianism vs. egalitarianism
- *filioque*—should it be in the Nicene Creed or not?
- cessationism/dispensationalism vs. the continuing of the gifts of the Spirit
- *Sola fide* vs. The New Perspective on Paul
- inerrancy vs. infallibility
- which Bible translation is best: KJV, NIV, ESV, NLT, etc.
- the validity of contraception or not
- the good life vs. non-flourishing
- LGBTQ vs. cisgender
- the economy: capitalism vs. socialism
- the ethical dilemma of suicide/euthanasia or not

Notice that Western theologies tend to mostly be binary; Majority World theologies tend not to be. The recent release of the second edition of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*<sup>14</sup> illustrates this point quite well: his updates include issues that very few in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are that concerned about.<sup>15</sup> It is surprising that they are not updates attendant to the realities of world Christianity, but rather mainly concerned with recent debates among white, Western theologians in the academy, such as the eternal subordination of the Son (that wouldn't even cross the minds of Majority World Christians that Jesus wouldn't be co-equal with the Father), or Molinism (God's sovereignty and human responsibility aren't "contradictions" that need to be reconciled in the Majority World mind), or miraculous gifts of the Spirit (which are givens in global Pentecostalism). Respectfully, I think this volume should be renamed *Western Systematic Theology* to be more accurate.

On the other hand, what are some theological issues that Christians wrestle with in the Majority World that perhaps Western Christians don't because they haven't had the need to?

- Honor/shame
- Ancestor worship, evil spirits

- Persecution
- Occult/shamanism/witchcraft/magic/sorcery
- Poverty
- Conflict
- Engaging other religions / power encounter
- Polygamy
- Sacrifice

These issues are realities in the Majority World that many Western Christians never teach about, think about, or read about. They are not even on the radar of most Western seminary textbooks and courses.

Finally, what are errors in Western Theologies that Majority World Theologies can help correct?

- Excessive individualism
- The flaw of the excluded middle<sup>16</sup>
- Materialism as a key to happiness
- Over-reliance on Enlightenment thinking
- Paucity of pneumatology
- Excessive triumphalism instead of a theology of lament
- Soterian gospel (only focused on “Jesus died for your sins” rather than the Kingdom of God)
- Regarding salvation as just a moment rather than as a process
- MTD (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism), which is often the practical form of faith many Western Christians hold in reality
- Starting the Gospel with us (our own sin) instead of starting and ending with God (a recognition that he is the beginning and end)
- Lack of emphasis on prayer
- Focus more on programs over people
- Being time-oriented over relationship-oriented
- Seeing warfare as political/physical rather than spiritual
- Overemphasis on ecclesiological identity (denominations)
- Focusing on propositional truth over hospitality
- Not valuing the wisdom of elders/parents

This last question about correction is not often one that Western Christians are comfortable with, because the assumption is that education and teaching can only go one direction. But in a polycentric Christian world where we are moving beyond “from the West to the rest,” not only must mission go “from everyone to everywhere,” but so must theology.

This begs the question: if one culture of Christians has struggled with a theological issue based on a historical or contextual occasion, must other cultures of Christians accept it as well? Most Western Christians would say yes, Majority World Christians must all accept the Nicene Creed (or even more narrowly, most Western Protestants would say yes, Majority World Christians must accept the four “solae” of the Reformation). But the same people who would say that would balk at Majority World theology being imposed on them. In reality, Andrew Walls writes that when 20th-century Pentecostal Nigerians are shown the Nicene Creed, “they accept the creed of Nicea, but they display little interest in it: they appear somewhat vague about the relationship of the divine Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> Would this satisfy most Western Christians, that many Majority World Christians would accept it—not begrudgingly but with a shrug? If not, Western Christians should

also ask themselves the same question: if Majority World theologies were put before them, wouldn't they also (if they accept it at all) do so with a shrug since it does not feel applicable to their own context? But perhaps there needs to be an attitudinal change on both sides: the principle of "if it is important to you, then it is important to me" ought to apply. True ecumenical unity should come from a place of mutual respect, not just tolerance.

One example of an African creed is written by Vincent Donovan, a Spiritan Catholic priest and missionary to the Masai in Tanzania. After spending much time among them, he wrote this (admittedly this is from a white Westerner, but he was trying to channel their culture and context):

*We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.*

*We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.*

*We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.<sup>18</sup>*

I believe this "African creed" is a good start. I see it as a hybrid: although it employs some African vocabulary ("safari"; "hyenas"), it still feels very Western in the way that it is structured and in some of the language (e.g., using "Lord," which was originally the Greek pagan term *kyrios*; but to be fair he also employed the term "High God," which is more relevant to an African cosmology of diffused monotheism<sup>19</sup>), but at least it does a better job than the Nicene Creed of highlighting things like Jesus's humanity, his poverty, his miracles, his social rejection, and the thrust of his mission being love (not just propositional truth). It certainly could be more pneumatological (it says very little about the Holy Spirit). But at least it helps to drive the impetus forward of more theological production from the Majority World and the need for more indigenous examples of this.

In addition to all the above which are about theology, there is also the necessary extrication of culture from theology. There are many Western Christian *cultural* practices that have nothing to do with theology but are simply tradition, for example:

- the "office" of pastor (technically only bishops, elders, and deacons are church offices);
- sermons preached standing up facing an audience (Jesus often preached sitting and surrounded by the crowds);
- youth ministers and youth congregations (separating generations is unthinkable in many Majority World churches);
- "quiet time" (an individualistic withdrawn prayer time with God in solitary);
- raising support for overseas mission trips (tentmaking is a more biblical model);
- using organ or acoustic guitar for musical worship;

- the demand for identifying each person’s specific calling (corporate or general calls are more common);
- the offering basket (though tithing is a biblical injunction, the manifestation of how this is done varies greatly);
- church buildings (many churches around the world—and in the Bible—were done in homes); and
- the order of worship.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these, but because they are practiced in many Western churches, it is assumed that they are issues of theology rather than simply manmade traditions that have developed in the churches, and therefore should not be codified as sacrosanct.<sup>20</sup>

## Majority World Theology Publications

My book *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth* (co-edited with Tite Tiénou, the former Dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)<sup>21</sup> offers sample theologies from around the world, for example, a chapter on the theology of dance among Alaskan Inuits, another on Palestinian liberation theology, a chapter on Korean cultural links to the Old Testament, and another on visual theology in a particular African tribe, etc. I liken it to an arboretum with multiple trees; although one may see side-by-side a Cedar of Lebanon, a Japanese bonsai, a California redwood, an Australian eucalyptus, an African baobab, and a Brazilwood tree, despite their diversity there is something in common about them all that makes them all unmistakably trees.<sup>22</sup> So it is with Christian theologies: African, Asian, and Latin American theologies can still be Christian while being culturally distinct, just as a bonsai and a redwood—while looking incredibly different—both count as trees because there is a recognition that all have roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves. This is why the cover of my book features a variety of types of wood, of all shapes and sizes and colors.

Another book with a similar title was recently released, *Majority World Theology*.<sup>23</sup> One of the major differences, of course, is the obvious: in my title I pluralized “Theologies” with a recognition that pluralism<sup>24</sup> (which is different from relativism) is a major reality today. Second, Green, Pardue, and Yeo’s volume is extremely robust—clocking in at over 700 pages! The diversity of authors is impressive, appropriately from all parts of the world. Third, my book is organized more along the lines of geography and with less reference to topic (I let the authors choose their own topic organically, whatever fits their context best); whereas *Majority World Theology* is organized according to more traditional Western systematic theology categories, like Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology (I do wonder, had they chosen the topics themselves, what else might have surfaced).<sup>25</sup> I am grateful for contributions like this, as I do not see these as in competition with one another but rather as complementing one another. After all, the whole point is that the world is an enormous place and there is room enough for all. As many cultures as exist in the world today, correspondingly that many theologies need to exist in the world today, if theology is truly how we see God speaking into different occasions or contextual situations.

The aforementioned volumes, while having chapter authors from varied places, were ultimately edited and published by Westerners. Though Tiénou is originally from Africa and Yeo is originally from Asia, both are now based in the West. Although I am ethnically Asian, I was born and raised in the United States. And although Pardue teaches in Asia, he is a white American (this parallels Vincent Donovan’s situation). For a real purity of Majority World theology, the impetus, editing, authoring, and publishing, all ought to be in, from, by, and through the Majority World.



Three notable one-volume Bible commentaries include the *Africa Bible Commentary*, the *South Asia Bible Commentary*, and the *Comentario Biblico Contemporaneo* (from Latin America). What is unique about these is that they had no Western involvement to get launched, at least initially. The ABC was written entirely by 70 black African scholars and published by an indigenous Kenyan publisher.<sup>26</sup> The SABC likewise drew from an entirely South Asian authorship and published by a national Indian publisher.<sup>27</sup> And the CBC did the same with Latin American authors and a publishing house from Argentina.<sup>28</sup> Also, these commentaries are actually unrelated to each other, except that all caught the attention of Zondervan—a Christian publisher in the United States—who has globally distributed them.<sup>29</sup> Still, they were originally derived from, and published in, the Majority World. While these are exciting ventures, there are some challenges such as: Do all the authors need to be from that continent, both culturally and racially, or do any in the global diaspora count? Do all the authors need to possess a PhD in biblical or systematic theology, or is a Masters sufficient? Does it matter if they received their degree in their own culture and context, or is it OK if they received their education in the West? What theological or denominational bent is preferred? What languages ought these be written or published in? Can they be translated? The ABC, for example, had the advantage of most of the Christians in Africa being Anglophone. So, publishing all in English made it easy to not only work with a common language but also for global distribution. The SABC has the same advantage. The CBC is contending with the bilingualism of Spanish and Portuguese and then subsequent translation into English for a worldwide audience. There is a Middle Eastern one that has been published in Arabic but is not yet translated into other languages.<sup>30</sup> And there is also a Slavic one in the works for Eastern Europe.

There are also multi-volume series such as the Africa Bible Commentary Series and the Asia Bible Commentary Series. And, of course, a great number of individual theology books have been written.

All of the above are available in the West. Although they were originally published by national publishers, the Langham Global Library—a ministry of the late John Stott—has been a big advocate of these and has partnered with them to make them available in the Western world. However, it must be noted that these are all evangelical in flavor which is why they have Langham/Zondervan backing. Some might think this biased or *prescriptive*, as if Langham is forcing their hand toward this theological perspective. But perhaps this is actually more *descriptive*, that Langham is simply revealing what is organically happening in the Majority World.

There are obviously many other works that are unknown or inaccessible to the West, due to factors such as lack of advertising, specifically defined geographical distribution channels, written in non-Western languages that most Westerners are not fluent in, etc. It evokes the words of John the Evangelist who said, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). At the dawn of this new age of World Christianity, the number of books that could be published out of the Majority World truly seems limitless.

## Majority World Hermeneutics

However, content is not the only thing to be concerned about. Of prime importance is hermeneutics. *How* one interprets a particular text is just as important as *which* biblical texts one might focus on. For example, some black Christians are named Moses (this is very anecdotal, but I have never met a white Christian named Moses) for obvious reasons: not only was Moses a prince of Egypt, but he led his people out of slavery. This fits well with the black Christian narrative in finding identity with the African continent (content) and the liberation from oppression and bondage (hermeneutics), as opposed to white Western Christians who may simply spiritualize the Exodus.

Even within the Western world, hermeneutics can differ. George Hunter looks back at European history and sees at least two major models of mission: the Roman vs. the Celtic. The Romans were the center of power, the ones who ushered in a top-down paradigm in dictating to the masses. No surprise, the Roman Catholic Church adopted this model since it originated from Rome, and out of this one monarchical epicenter radiated the setting of the theological agenda for the rest of the world. This was literally a Western-centered model. However, the Celtic was a bottom-up model which originated from the fringes of the empire rather than the center. One of the ways these two differed was the order of operations of missions. The Romans started with presentation of the Gospel, then moved to decision, and finally to assimilation. In contrast, the Celts began with fellowship, moved to ministry and conversation, then ended with belief and an invitation to commitment.<sup>31</sup> One way of saying this is that the Roman way was “believing before belonging” and the Celtic way was “belonging before believing.” This means that hospitality—not propositional truth—led the way, much as Donovan’s African Creed highlighted love above all.<sup>32</sup> This is a meta-hermeneutic, reading Scripture in light of *ethos* and *pathos*, not just *logos*.<sup>33</sup>

Esau McCaulley offers an African American biblical hermeneutic—obviously this is Western but it is not white, highlighting the Majority World diaspora in the West as a paradigm that is important to also pay attention to. In a radio video interview with Southside Rabbi, McCaulley says:

We literally have a thing in the culture called Anglophiles, people who love British culture: British movies, British actors, British theology, British literature, British evangelicalism, right? So you can literally say, “I just love British stuff!” Or even in the worship movement with Australian evangelicals, ‘cause there’s a whole theology there, there’s a whole flavor. And nobody really says, “You can’t say British evangelicalism or Australian evangelicalism.” But the moment you have strong affirmations to blackness, then people start going, “Hold on!” I talk about this book, I’ve talked about this in every interview, and nobody’s called me out. You remember this? You have to be like deep in evangelicalism, but it was called *The Celtic Form of Evangelism [sic]* in the ‘90s, where they’re saying, “This is how the Celts evangelized people.” And this book sold like wildfire! . . . Imagine if I put a book out, *The Black Form of Evangelism*—“well, you can’t talk about race, I don’t see color!” . . . You can tell when I’m reading a German theological book, vs. a British theological book, vs. an American evangelical theology book. They feel different. And people have talked about tracing the German heritage in biblical studies. So what I’m saying is, if everyone gets a culture and an interpretive tradition, why can’t black people? And the reason why black people can’t—and this is the important part—is because black hermeneutics are not simply neutral, they’re challenging the dominant culture. . . they’re dangerous.<sup>34</sup>

McCaulley’s book *Reading While Black* highlights some of the ways that African Americans might interpret Scripture differently from white Americans. One example is the bent toward justice, seen in the focus on the Old Testament prophets, and the Lukan writings in the New Testament which really emphasize social justice and multiethnicity.<sup>35</sup> Puerto Rican theologian Orlando Costas offers his own situatedness in *Christ Outside the Gate* and *Liberating News*, where he unpacks evangelization from the Galilean periphery, namely that Jesus chose the fringes of society (similar to the Celts on the edge of the Roman Empire)—the multiethnic and lower socioeconomic bracket of Galilee as opposed to the center of power of Jerusalem—to be his ministry headquarters,<sup>36</sup> and eventually going so far as to die “outside the gate” (Heb. 13:12-13) for our sins. And Jackson Wu’s book *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* emphasizes the honor/shame paradigm that is prevalent in the Pauline writings. Too often Westerners reduce the Gospel to an innocence/guilt rendering, whereas in actuality first-century Jews—being Semitic peoples technically on the Asian continent—would have read Scripture more similarly to modern-day Easterners, not Westerners. Such

characteristics include “past-time orientation, respect for hierarchy, interdependence, group orientation (collectivism), face, modesty, and harmony with others.”<sup>37</sup>

Other books worth noting include *African Hermeneutics* by Elizabeth Mburu; *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* by Boaventura de Sousa Santos; *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* by Soong-Chan Rah; and *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien.

Returning to the Zondervan/Langham commentaries listed above, the *Africa Bible Commentary* was the first one to be released, back in 2005. It has, however, had some criticisms leveled against it, namely that it still feels too Western in its exegesis. Part of the reason for this is because of the authors themselves. Though they are all black African nationals, almost all of them have been trained in the West. This is the inevitable problem with hermeneutics: it is not simply the embodiment of the authors (their race or nationality or culture), it is what well they have drunk from—in this case, Western seminaries and universities. I do very much appreciate the spirit of John Stott and the Langham scholarship, which offers full tuition coverage for certain promising Majority World theologians to receive their education in the West, along with the insistence that if one receives this financial assistance, one must return back home to the country of origin to serve, instead of staying in the West (something which happens much too frequently), which would constitute a “brain drain.” But to solve the exorbitant costs of sending Majority World students to Western theological institutions, not to mention the imbibing of theological content at these Western institutions, which may be wholly irrelevant to Majority World contexts, ultimately the goal should be to establish national seminaries that can train people properly for their own contexts without them having to travel overly far or pay beyond their means.

Now, the ABC is undergoing a revision to address the overly-Westernized theology in the commentary. That is all well and good; however, the real genius of these volumes is not just in the verse-by-verse exegesis but perhaps even more in the sidebar context boxes that help interpret the culture alongside the scripture. That remains valuable regardless. Hopefully, the revised commentary will feel truly African, even while recognizing that there are very few “pure” cultures on earth anymore in light of globalization: every Christian has been influenced in some way by the West, and the hope is that the influence can flow in the other direction as well. That will prevent it from being colonialism, and will breed a truly global hermeneutic.

## Conclusion

This new era of World Christianity has many implications for missions, evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation, and theological production. Lamin Sanneh wrote, “The fact of Christianity being a translated religion places God right at the center of the universe of cultures, with the effect of all cultures being denied the center, becoming thereby equal in their status as historical bearers of Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, it is not new at all. A polycentric Christianity was the reality of the first millennium of the Church.<sup>39</sup> We are now seeing a new Reformation—a return to the roots—rather than a revolution. But it is a moving forward in its originality, much as the New Jerusalem is not an exact replica of the Garden of Eden, but retains its spirit and essence. It is an exciting time indeed as Christianity moves forward to new horizons while rooted in historicity and the timeless truths of God.

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## Notes

1. Sometimes other terms have been employed, such as: Third World (not preferred since that is a passé vocabulary relic of the Cold War); Global South (used by secular organizations such as the United Nations, but it is mainly an economic term referring to developing nations and as such it leaves out Asia which is in the Global North and also has a lot of economic development in certain parts); AfAsLa (Africa, Asia, Latin America) as opposed to EuNaPa (Europe North America, and the Pacific—the last which refers mainly to Australia and New Zealand), which were terms coined by Patrick Johnstone, the original author of *Operation World* (but the terms, while accurate, never really caught on); and of course non-Western World (which is not ideal because it is defining people as a negation of the West rather than in relation to themselves). Some people use the term Two-Thirds World (TTW), which is also acceptable, as it has the same idea as Majority World, in that Two Thirds of the world's population live there.
2. This is similar to how the term “ethnic minority” in the United States has been supplanted by the term People of Color (POC; or even more recently BIPOC which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) because POCs are soon not going to be in the minority population anymore in the United States—many estimate before the year 2050.
3. The famous story of the blind men and the elephant is helpful here. One man touches the trunk and thinks it's a snake. Another touches the side of the elephant and says it's a wall. Another touches the tail and thinks it's a rope. A fourth touches the ear and perceives it as a fan. In order to have a complete picture of the whole elephant, all must bring their own piece of the puzzle to the table. Or to give a more biblical illustration, David Livermore, President of Cultural Intelligence Group, said:

The question was posed to people around the world about the Prodigal Son: why was he in the pig pen? Russians said “because there was a famine in the land.” Tanzanians said “because no one gave him anything to eat.” US Americans said “because he squandered his wealth.” But what did Jesus say? v. 13: because he squandered his wealth (so the Americans are correct); v. 14: because there was a famine in the land (so the Europeans are correct); and v. 16: because no one gave him anything to eat (so the Africans are correct). All are correct! We must acknowledge there are such things as *wrong* theological perspectives, but that doesn't mean there can't be multiple *right* theologies.

4. Whether or not this is accurate, the four Gospels in European art have often been correlated to, and depicted as, the four living creatures around the throne as mentioned in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. Some say that Matthew is the winged man because that Gospel emphasizes Jesus's humanity; Mark is a winged lion because he emphasizes Jesus's royalty; Luke is a winged ox because that evangelist emphasizes Jesus's sacrifice; and John is an eagle because he focuses on Jesus's resurrection.
5. Another way of saying this is, “heresy is the mother of orthodoxy.” People saying or doing something wrong forces society at large to articulate and codify what is right. A humorous contemporary example is the infamous case of the woman who sued McDonald's when she spilled hot coffee on her own lap and burned herself, and she claimed ignorance of the temperature of the coffee. Obviously, everyone knows that coffee is hot, but because of this incident, hereafter McDonald's was forced to print on all their cups “Caution: Hot Liquid.” Likewise, the Trinity has always existed, but we would never have had the impetus to concretize it into creedal form without people rejecting the Triune Godhead.
6. Though certainly not in the first century; see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
7. This is similar to the question of: should we encourage democracies around the world, or is the very concept of a democracy a Western imposition? Self-rule seems like it respects the local culture, but perhaps their local culture is more hierarchical by its very nature in which case a monarchy or dictatorship

- is actually more respectful. Even in the West, if an American suggests to a Brit the abolition of their monarchy, that may rub them the wrong way if they feel like that disrespects their culture, as the Queen is as much a British institution as the signature red postal boxes or Hackney Carriages for London taxis.
8. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 58, 83, 97. Much as C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* outlines four Greek words for love—three of which many people know (*eros, philia, agape*), but the fourth which most cannot name (*storge*), the first three selves are quite familiar to many people but not the fourth.
  9. Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, in his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, famously pushed back against a “banking” system of education where the teacher simply tells the students what they need to learn. Rather, education should be dialogical where both sides learn from each other.
  10. Andrea Palpant Dilley, “The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries” in *Christianity Today* (January 8, 2014). This article highlighted Robert Woodberry’s doctoral dissertation which found that democracies sprung up in the wake of Protestant missionary efforts, because of the emphasis on literacy, since democracy is predicated upon an educated populace.
  11. Allen Yeh, “‘Give Us Friends!’: V.S. Azariah and the Call for the Four-Self Church” in Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou, eds., *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2018), 3–23.
  12. Theology’s content is—at the its core—the Gospel. But its form is shaped by the culture. Like water, which must be carried by a vessel and is inevitably shaped by it but not tainted by it, good theology should be carried by (and will inevitably be shaped by) culture but not tainted by it. If the water/theology is tainted by the vessel that’s carrying it, that is syncretism and that’s where it veers into something negative. But we should not get rid of contextualization for fear of heresy. See Allen Yeh, “The Road Ahead” in Allen Yeh, et al., *Routes & Radishes and Other Things to Talk About at the Evangelical Crossroads* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 47.
  13. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 91.
  14. Released December 8, 2020.
  15. The Majority World Christians who *are* concerned with such issues are mainly the ones who have been influenced in this direction by Western Christians.
  16. This is the idea that there are three levels of reality: the top level which is God / the divine; the bottom level, which is the material world of humanity; and the middle level, which contains ancestors, angels, demons, evil spirits, etc. Most Western Christians only acknowledge the top and bottom levels but completely leave out the middle. This befuddles Majority World people who—upon receiving the Gospel of the Great Physician from Westerners—expect that some Christian version of shaman or witch doctor be sent in to heal their sick in the name of Jesus, but instead just encounter science and Western medicine which only attends to them physically and not holistically.
  17. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 5.
  18. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 148.
  19. Diffused monotheism is the belief in a single supreme god but under which there exist other lesser powers / subordinates which serve the supreme god, namely divinities, demigods, angels, ancestors, mediators, mediums, etc. It is monotheistic but polydivinistic. This concept was originally postulated by E. Bolaji Idowu.
  20. Frank Viola & George Barna, *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008).
  21. Dr. Tiénou originally hails from Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa. TEDS was one of the pioneers of having a Majority World scholar lead a major Western Christian institution. My own Dean (of the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University), Bulus Galadima from Nigeria, was positioned similarly. Also worth mentioning was the original leader of the Edinburgh 2010 conference, Daryl Balia from South Africa; the second-highest ranking official in the global Anglican Communion, John Sentamu of Uganda who is the current Bishop of York; the current CEO of the Lausanne movement, Michael Oh (who is Korean American); the late Lamin Sanneh (the D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School).

22. Yeh and Tiénou, eds., *Majority World Theologies*, xv–xvi.
23. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo, *Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021).
24. This is simply the fact that there exist multiple cultures, races, languages, and perspectives today.
25. Friedrich Schleiermacher divides theological thought into four fields: biblical theology, dogmatics, church history, and practical theology. This Western way of organizing Christian thought has dominated global seminary education for the last two centuries.
26. Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2010).
27. Brian Wintle, ed., *South Asia Bible Commentary* (Udaipur: Open Door, 2015).
28. C. René Padilla, Milton Acosta, Rosalee Veloso, eds., *Comentario Bíblico Contemporáneo* (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2019).
29. The irony is not lost on me that Zondervan is also the publisher of Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.
30. Andrea Zaki Stephanous, ed., *Arabic Contemporary Commentary* (Doha: Dar El-Thaqafa, 2018).
31. George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West. . . AGAIN* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 42–43.
32. I remember when I was in Kenya and I visited a church. The moment that they recognized me as a visitor (and I’m not sure whether it was because I was a foreigner or because I was a Westerner) they invited me to preach at the pulpit! That struck me because of their extreme hospitality, granting me the place of honor even though it was my first time ever visiting this church and they didn’t even know me! But it also made me think: there is no way that would ever happen in a Western church. Western churches (at least of the more conservative variety) would put propositional truth over love (probably to the chagrin of the Apostle Paul considering 1 Cor. 13:1-3, or even the ancient pagan Greek value of *xenia*—hospitality—so prevalent in Homeric literature like *The Odyssey*) and guard the pulpit at all costs.
33. Aristotle’s three-fold paradigm for communication.
34. Southside Rabbi, Season 2, Episode 11, “Reading While Black: A Conversation with Esau McCaulley”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dtnQZtVZio>
35. Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 74–79.
36. Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 62
37. Jackson W., *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul’s Message and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 11.
38. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).
39. Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 215–216.

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### Author biography

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