*Pain on the Cross II (Black Crucifixion)* by Charles Nkosi (1976)
© Charles Nkosi

Bysame Mdluli says of this work that it depicts "a physically constrained Black body…before an alluring White presence, one that seems to mimic and infect it. The upper part of the image shows a helpless figure with a pencil piercing through its abdomen and its arms tied to a pole. The bottom-left figure is in a contortionist pose, with a chain tying one arm to both feet. This figure is preceded by one with outstretched arms, a gesture that appears to be breaking its chains."
https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/the-black-theology-in-sokhaya-charles-nkosis-paintings/

# The Ever Newness of the Gospel: Difference as Catholicity
John G. Flett

## 1. Catholicity and Deculturation

As with all the traditional marks of the church, definitions of catholicity abound. We begin with Vincent Miller's observation that recent debates have revolved around two issues. The first de-emphasizes catholicity as "geographical breadth" by recovering patristic notions of *kata holon,* catholicity as the "fullness of the faith."[1] The second "concerns the relationship of catholicity to the mark of unity."[2] We will turn to this question of catholicity and unity later. Our initial focus falls on the property of "fullness." In this regard Miller observes that "[t]he spread of the church is not the expansion of a cultural boundary, but the embrace of new cultures that provide greater insights into the gospel message."[3] Catholicity is the mark of difference and the church's learning about the gospel of Jesus Christ from its encounter with difference.

This sounds all well and good as a theological affirmation. The problem is that it simply does not accord with the stated experience through much of world Christianity. Here the discussion concerns much more the reality of deculturation or deracination: the uprooting of local peoples from the native environment and culture.

The stories are legion and range from lamenting the loss of "some very fundamental and noble values, or traditions" when indigenous Christians were

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[1] Vincent J. Miller, "Where Is the Church? Globalization and Catholicity," *Theological Studies* 69, no. 2 (2008), 421. While Miller's overall point holds, one might question the extent to which recent debates have deemphasised "geographical breadth" given that much of the discussion regarding the "new catholicity" sets itself in relation to globalisation. See Richard Marzheuser, "Globalization and Catholicity: Two Expressions of One Ecclesiology?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32, no. 2 (1995), 179–93; Avery R. Dulles, "The Catholicity of the Church and Globalization," *Seminarium* 40 (2000), 259–68; Robert J. Schreiter, "Globalization, Postmodernity and the New Catholicity," in *For All People: Global Theologies in Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 13–31; Peter De Mey, "Is the Connection of 'Catholicity' and 'Globalization' Fruitful? An Assessment of Recent Reflections on the Notion of Catholicity," *Bulletin ET* 13 (2002), 169–81; Aram I. Kekishian, "Globalisierung und Katholizität," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 53, no. 2 (2004), 218–38; Gerard Mannion, "What's in a Name?: Hermeneutical Questions on 'Globalisation', Catholicity and Ecumenism," *New Blackfriars* 86, no. 1002 (2005), 204–15; Kam Ming Wong, "Catholicity and Globality," *Theology Today* 66, no. 4 (2010), 459–75; William J. Danaher, "Catholicity and Globalization in the Anglican Tradition," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100 (2010), 147–61; John R. Wright, "Catholicity and Globalization: A Perspective From the Episcopal Church," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100 (2010), 75–89; Robert J. Schreiter, "Catholicity as a Model for Globalization," in *Theologie im Zeichen der Interkulturalität. Interdisziplinäre Herausforderungen—Positionen—Perspektiven*, ed. Claude Ozankom, and Chibueze Udeani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 173–86; Eleuterio J. Revollido, "Our Struggle for Life in Its Fullness in the Context of Globalization: A Challenge to Our Catholicity," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100 (2010), 28–36.

[2] Miller, "Where Is the Church?", 421.

[3] Miller, "Where Is the Church?", 423.

"taught to throw away all their traditional, and customary, practices, ceremonies, symbols, songs, and dances, with the attendant spirituality, and religious, or cultural, beliefs,"[4] to lamenting how imported theologies ignore local daily "existential realities…: sickness and healing, spirit possession, high infant mortality rates, crop failures, barrenness among women, unemployment, [and] job promotion."[5] Nor is the complaint exhausted in recognising that aboriginal peoples are "obliged to adopt western styles of worship and church leadership"[6] or that "[a]s Aboriginal people enter into the life of a Christian church community, they can find themselves compelled to leave their culture 'at the door'."[7] It is, instead, summarised by Keiti Ann Kanongata'a's observation that the peoples of the Pacific have been "raped of their cultural honour."[8]

Profound lived cost attaches to this loss of cultural honour, a cost Cameroonian theologian, Engelbert Mveng, names "anthropological poverty." This is the privation experienced when persons and communities are "deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world."[9] Such loss produces "a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person."[10] To cite an identical observation from theologian Terry LeBlanc concerning communities within his own Native American context, living with a "false belief that a relationship with their Creator required them to reject their own identity and adopt another—a European one," leads to "deep-rooted self-doubt at best, and

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[4] Dick Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 4, no. 1 (1988), 16.

[5] William Kenny Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology: A Response to Foreign Theologies," *Point Series* 40 (2016), 31. See the exact same assessment from Mercy Amba Oduyoye: "the missionaries told the Africans what they needed to be saved from, but when Africans needed power to deal with the spiritual realms that were real to them, the missionary was baffled. The ancestors were to be ignored; infant mortality and premature deaths were purely medical matters. Failure of rains and harvests were acts of God. Childlessness had nothing to do with witchcraft, nor was there any spiritual aspect to any other physical disorder or infirmity. The individual African in the process of being saved was told that witches do not exist, though the community continued to believe in the reality of evil that witchcraft represents. The missionaries' superficial assessment of the indigenous culture and its hold on the people who belong to it led to the Africans' superficial acceptance of Christianity." Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 14.

[6] Graham Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006), 311.

[7] Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston, and Brian F. McCoy, "Leaving Culture at the Door: Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006), 250.

[8] Keiti Ann Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual?," *The Pacific Journal of Theology Series II* 27 (2002), 25.

[9] Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa in the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (London: SCM, 1994), 156.

[10] Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation," 156.

self-hatred—a death more heinous than their physical eradication—at worst."[11] The consequences of deculturation, in other words, include psychosocial and physical death.

All of this lies far from the language used at the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala, 1968, which defined the fullness of catholicity in existential terms as the fullness of life, as "a call to participate in the wholeness of life in fellowship with God."[12] Anthropological poverty is not reducible to a "theological problem." It is an immediate evil to be confronted. Yet the very disconnect between these theologies of catholicity which promise a fullness contingent on local expressions of the gospel, and the actuality of deculturation as experienced by Christian communities demands investigation. More specifically, the question posed here concerns whether and how theologies of catholicity might support and promote the forces of deculturation. In this regard, the question follows that posed by Maori theologian, Winston Halapua: "Are we in the Pacific participating in a process of doing theology which embodies the dehumanisation of our own people?"[13]

The argument proceeds in the following stages. First, it considers the identification of the church ecumenical as the proper site for curating difference. Second, it charts the treatment of difference within ecumenical documentation, before turning, third, to the account of the church's movement through time which underlies this treatment. Fourth, it examines the way in which the very attempt at producing contextual theologies succeeds in affirming the mechanism by which the church is deemed to transcend all particularities. It concludes not simply with hints at a revised theology of catholicity, but with a reflection on how catholicity demands changes to the structuring of theology.

## 2. The Apocalypsis of Mission

Component in recognising the reality deculturation is the identification of causality, and cause is often attributed to Christian mission. It is not uncommon to hear "mission" named as responsible for "all sorts of atrocities and enormities committed

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[11] Terry LeBlanc, "Mission: An Indigenous Perspective," *Direction* 43, no. 2 (2014), 152. The famous "Hocking Report" observed that "the position of these uprooted Christians was the more unhappy since their tutors in the faith were seldom inclined to admit them to social equality." William Ernest Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 31.

[12] Norman Goodall, ed. *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Uppsala July 4-20, 1968* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 13, 8.

[13] Winston Halapua, "Fakakakato: Symbols in the Context of the Pacific," *The Pacific Journal of Theology, Series II* 20 (1998), 22.

in the name of Christianity."[14] In what Klauspeter Blaser names a "moderate form" of the complaint, mission "stands for the disruption of the indigenous and native patterns of life…; for the imposition of a monoculture; for the religious and intellectual arrogance of the white race."[15] These are significant charges, but not yet as bad as Blaser's "worst case"—here, mission means "*destruction*: genocide, contempt for and liquidation of cultures, political oppression and economic exploitation."[16] In short, mission lies responsible for the processes of deracination due to its promotion of a cultural hegemony which advances Western cultural concepts as normative for the gospel and so proves prejudicial toward local cultures, deeming them to be uncivilised, pagan: lesser.

One can certainly find confirming accounts of the above in local experiences of Western missions within world Christian discourse.[17] At issue, in other words, is not the simple criticism of Western missions and the myriad ways in this might be developed. Attention here focuses instead on the categorical and singular nature of the complaint, its pronouncement with all the confidence of the self-evident, and the accompanying consequences of this ground clearing exercise.

Writing in 1987, Lamin Sanneh lamented "the guilt complex about missions that so often prevails in liberal counsels."[18] With this, Sanneh is not affirming the Western missionary enterprise as a natural good. Quite the contrary, he rejects every missionary legitimation located in "colonial annexation and subjugation," whereby "[n]ative lands and labor were expropriated, commercial and administrative agents appointed and deployed, mission stations set up, and church life and practice regulated," to the extent that "'Europeandom'…spread abroad" and was "legitimized by the sacraments of the church."[19] Sanneh's lament, instead, concerns how the categorical rejection of mission amounts to a rejection of indigenous agency and a

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[14] Klauspeter Blaser, "Should We Stop Using the Term 'Mission'?," *International Review of Mission* 76 (1987), 68.

[15] Blaser, "Should We Stop Using the Term 'Mission'?," 68.

[16] Blaser, "Should We Stop Using the Term 'Mission'?," 68.

[17] See, for example, the 1971 depiction of mission by Emerito Nacpil as "a symbol of the universality of Western imperialism among the rising generations of the Third World," and the related complaint regarding the "continued dependence of the weak upon the strong and the continued dominance of the strong over the weak, notwithstanding our efforts and protestations to the contrary. Under this kind of partnership, the missionary becomes the apostle of affluence, not sacrifice; cultural superiority, not Christian humility; technological efficiency, not human identification; white supremacy, not human liberation and community." Emerito P. Nacpil, "Mission but not Missionaries," *International Review of Mission* 60 (1971), 359.

[18] Lamin O. Sanneh, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex," *The Christian Century* 104, no. 11 (1987), 331.

[19] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 24.

White liberal continuation of the colonial project. Or, the simple rejection of mission belongs to the ongoing processes of colonisation.

Sanneh details his position as follows. First, Western guilt perpetuates an interpretation of history that assumes "the impregnable nature of Western priorities and the derivative character of local responses and reactions."[20] Not only is this position anachronistic, dismissing the intercultural transmission of the faith present at its very beginnings and basic to its historical continuity,[21] but it also dismisses the missionary movements within, and between the global South, and from the global South to Europe and North America.

Second, this simplistic rejection of mission fails to appreciate "the deep conflict between missionary Christianity and foreign colonialism" and so fails "to realize how missionary Christianity undercut Europe's imperial designs."[22] On the one hand, mission contained within itself the seeds of resistance to Western controls. To dismiss mission is to dismiss the forms of political resistance and the protections of cultural heritage that occurred in the local appropriation of the gospel. On the other hand, this failure directs attention away from a key theological impetus for missions assuming a cultural character: the reduction of the faith to a territorial religion bound

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[20] Lamin O. Sanneh, "World Christianity and the New Historiography: Historical and Global Interconnections," in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 98.

[21] See Andreas Feldtkeller, "Missionswissenschaft und Interkulturelle Theologie: Eine Verhältnisbestimmung," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 138 (2013), 8–10.

[22] Lamin O. Sanneh, "Should Christianity be Missionary? An Appraisal and an Agenda," *Dialog* 40, no. 2 (2001), 88. One might add to this complexity by recognising that as a public, political and religious action, so mission excites public, political and religious responses, including from state actors and from those advancing political ideologies. See Ryan Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity," *History and Theory* 41, no. 3 (2002), 307–25. Take, for example, the 1952 work authored by Nosipho Majeke and titled *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* (Johannesburg: Society of Young Africa). This work identified Christian missions with "the evils of western imperialism," and rejected any claim that missions sought the emancipation of the poor. Majecke holds that "we would have a false perspective if we accepted these grandiloquent aims at their face value and assume that there was some mysterious milk of human kindness animating the hearts of the English." Mission proceeds instead "from a capitalist Christian civilization and unblushingly found religious sanctions for inequality, as it does to this day, and whose ministers solemnly blessed its wars of aggression." Cited in Irving Hexham, "Violating Missionary Culture: The Tyranny of Theology and the Ethics of Historical Research," in *Mission und Gewalt: Der Umgang christlicher Missionen mit Gewalt und die Ausbreitung des Christentums in Afrika und Asien in der Zeit von 1792 bis 1918/19*, ed. Ulrich van der Heyden, Jürgen Becher, and Holger Stoecker (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 196. And, because the author was assumed to be a Black South African "'writing back' against colonial domination," it was taken seriously as reflecting a "genuinely Black viewpoint." The problem is that "Nopisho Majeke" was not Black, but a pseudonym for Dora Taylor, the English wife of an economics lecturer at the University of Cape Town, and her position represented a Marxist perspective on missions. Hexham further suggests that the apologetic nature of the text contributed to a larger project by which the Nationalist Government sought to eliminate missionary interference on behalf of the black population.

to European identity.[23] Deterritorialisation—the recognition that the West does not constitute the singular cultural form of the faith, that one does not need to become Western to become Christian—is one of the key ancillary consequences of mission.[24] Or, to cite Joest Mnemba: "No longer does our faith depend on your story."[25]

Third, this account treats Christianity as essentially a religion foreign to the non-Western world, one incompatible with local cultures. Not only is Christian contact interpreted "as political imposition and cultural interference,"[26] but it assumes, to again cite Sanneh, that "aboriginal populations could form no adequate concept of Christian doctrine to have embraced the religion correctly. So their profession of Christianity is misguided and mistaken, if not downright corrupted."[27] The suspicion remains that the local response to and diverse appropriations of Christianity remain inadequate, that cultural wholeness[28] means the retention of pre-Christian religions, and that these local agents are without true agency before the might of Western civilisation.

Fourth, as the simple rejection of mission denies local agency, so it denies the possible good of a local Christianity: "Christian missions offered a crucial haven for those trapped in ultimate despair and disenchantment, and thus became a boost for peaceful social change. For women, prisoners, lepers, the outcast, and the oppressed, mission was often a lifeline."[29] To acknowledge this good is to acknowledge that local agents positively and constrictively appropriate the Christian gospel and that it is embodied in vibrant communities.

Sanneh's observations concerning this lazy rejection of mission indicates the ways in which the possibility of catholicity is already stymied through the denial of indigenous agency. Note that most local complaints concerning deculturation refer not to the presence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but to some form of refusal that the gospel can be embodied in local terms. The "enlightened" rejection of mission is one such form of refusal.

Recognising this, however, does not quite capture the full nature of the

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[23] See Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

[24] Dale T. Irvin, "Ecumenical Dislodgings," *Mission Studies* 22, no. 2 (2005), 198.

[25] Joest J. Mnemba, "African Christology: Images of Christ in Africa," *Religion in Malawi* 2, no. 1 (1988), 32. Thanks to Jason Goroncy for the reference.

[26] Sanneh, "World Christianity and the New Historiography," 98.

[27] Sanneh, "World Christianity and the New Historiography," 102.

[28] To paraphrase Frantz Fanon, the mummification of culture is itself part of the toolset by which Whites gain control. See Frantz Fanon, "Racism and Culture," in *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 34–42, here 38.

[29] Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, 89.

problem because the categorical rejection of mission serves a purpose—it names the necessary site of and mechanisms for the Christian encounter with difference. The structuring logic underlying this purpose is as follows: ignoring any potential complexity within a two millennia long endeavour, it is necessary to assume an immediate and undifferentiated identification of the faith in this missionary form with the processes of colonisation: mission equals colonisation. "Mission" as now an essentialised abstraction[30] assumes the quality of a scapegoat. Invested with singular responsibility, its sacrifice purifies the faith of any alignment with the processes of colonisation. Into this purified place steps the church ecumenical as the proper location for the realities of cultural difference, and the site of unity over against the ravages of mission and colonisation.[31] Naming the context as a "world council of churches," sets cultural difference within a particular framing set of questions: namely, the relationship of the church's catholicity to its unity. And, as Jospeh Komonchak suggests "[w]hen unity and catholicity are practically identified, locality can only be…left without intelligible content.[32]

## 3. Diversity and the Threat of the "Non-Theological"

When housed within the ecumenical discussion, the question of difference becomes exhausted within a framing contest of "unity" and "diversity." In comparison to the litany of discourses concerning the nature of "unity,"[33] "diversity" resolves into a singular definition found in §2.2 of the 1991 Canberra Statement, "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling." It reads as follows: "Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and

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[30] "Mission" within this discussion emerges as a blanket idea with an identical practice and experience across all time and in every place. This posture also submerges a vast range of ancillary ideas (conversion, salvation, church, etc.) and contextual theological challenges (ancestors, spirits, religious pluralism, etc) as immaterial to this abstracted idea of mission. Nor is there any discussion of indigenous agents as translators, facilitators, itinerant missionaries, community leaders, etc.

[31] By the mid-twentieth century, the talk was of moving from the "missionary" to the "ecumenical era," but even within the ecumenical movement itself this problematic juxtaposition of mission and church was being called into question. See "The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity," *The Ecumenical Review* 4, no. 1 (1951), 66–71.

[32] Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic," *Jurist* 52 (1992), 445.

[33] See the discussions and associated bibliographies in Timothy T. N. Lim, "Toward Ecumenical Unity: An Analysis and Preliminary Proposal," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2012), 397–408; David M. Chapman, "Ecumenism and the Visible Unity of the Church: 'Organic Union' Or 'Reconciled Diversity'?," *Ecclesiology* 11, no. 3 (2015), 350–69.

Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8)."[34] Note that this "definition" does not actually define diversity, and certainly fails to identify ways in which it might prove integral to communion. It, rather, *locates* diversity: it points to the ground of diversity in *context*. As to diversity itself, this is an essentialised reality itself withdrawn from the particularity of contexts (there is nothing diverse about diversity) and appears to be something available for affirmation or repudiation in response to the prevailing authority of a "common confession"; that is, even as it is located within "various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts," diversity is something surface, available to being conceded. The prevailing authority directing such potential surrender refers not to a contemporary common, a "common" set of lines of enquiry and experiences as they exist within world Christianity. It refers to the "common" of established or "historic" traditions, the common confession of the Western located traditions as they have existed through time. The dominant interest in the definition lies not in an interrogation of diversity. It lies in the asserted caution regarding limits and legitimacy,[35] and this is set against the only named theological benchmark: the "sameness" of Jesus Christ through time.

Ecumenical documentation has been consistent regarding the fear of and associated need to control diversity. The 1968 statement produced at the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church," notes that diversity is important when in service to "the one unchanging apostolic heritage," but its first word is that diversity threatens "a perversion of catholicity."[36] The basic and consistent account finds its most blatant expression in the

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[34] See "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling – The Canberra Statement," World Council of Churches, accessed 26 January, 2021, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement. One could reference further discussions, such as the differentiation between "provisional" and "integral" diversity as developed at the 1996 Faith and Order commission meeting held in Moshi. See Alan D. Falconer, ed. *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 107. But, even with these addendums, the basic line of argument remains intact.

This definition is clearly deficient, but the common defensive posture which develops when one observes this deficiency echoes the lines of the 1962 New Delhi statement on unity: The church includes "the reconciling grace which breaks down every wall of race, colour, caste, tribe, sex, class and nation. Neither does this 'fellowship' imply a rigid uniformity of structure, organization or government. A lively variety marks corporate life in the one Body of one Spirit." W. A. Visser 't Hooft, ed. *The New Delhi Report: Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 119–20. We will turn later to how verses like Gal. 3:28 can amount to a denial of difference.

[35] Michael Kinnamon defines "unacceptable diversity" as occurring in "idolatrous allegiance to things that are less than ultimate." Michael Kinnamon, *Truth and Community: Diversity and Its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 113. Ecumenical sensitivities seemingly prohibit naming examples, but one might point to the church under National Socialism, or the Vichy Regime, or during colonisation, or apartheid, or what one sees occurring in the USA today. It seems, in other words, to be a problem dominated by the Western tradition.

[36] "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church," in *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of*

2003 "Princeton Proposal": "We may rightly celebrate diversity and difference. But diversity is easily conscripted to sinful purposes: and it is not easy to separate the diversity that should be valued from the diversity that must be deplored."[37] The lack of agent is notable: who are these Christians who might nefariously conscript this deplorable diversity for sinful purpose? The most apparent answer must be those struggling with questions of diversity and difference; those members of the body of Christ disembodied through deculturation and who are active in seeking local embodiments of the faith.

In opposition to this potential of diversity to corrupt and pervert, the Princeton Proposal sets the priority as a "shared identity," meaning that the "[e]lements that constitute our differences must be questioned, judged, reconciled and reconfigured within the unity of the Body of Christ."[38] Diversity assumes one end of a continuum, while unity and truth occupy the other end.[39] With unity the unquestioned good and with diversity possessing an innate capacity to intrude upon that good, a zero-sum game develops. As illustrated by David Carter, a focus on diversity stimulates the "empirical danger of the Church allowing valuable parts of its precious heritage to be obscured by later developments, which, though not necessarily wrong or unfruitful in themselves, may obscure or overlay other truth of arguably more fundamental value."[40] Again, the arbiters of this value remain unnamed, but the danger presented by diversity is clear: even as it might contain truth, it nonetheless threatens the embodied reality of the church. Diversity disembodies the church.

Although this approach to diversity appears within even the most contemporary of ecumenical statements,[41] some recognise its deficiencies. In 1994, the then General Secretary of the WCC, Konrad Raiser, rejected the apparent "pressure of having to dissolve…differences into consensus," calling instead for an

the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Uppsala July 4-20, 1968, ed. Norman Goodall (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 15.

[37] Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *The Ecumenical Future: Background Papers for in One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 27.

[38] Braaten, and Jenson, *The Ecumenical Future*, 28.

[39] Kinnamon, *Truth and Community*, 2.

[40] David Carter, "Legitimacy of Development within the Apostolic Tradition," *One In Christ* 29, no. 3 (1993), 228.

[41] See the 2013 statement "The Church: Towards a Common Vision." This includes positive affirmations of "a diversity of gifts," but this diversity of gifts direct attention to "ministry" and specifically to how the diversity of ministries necessitates "a ministry of co-ordination." *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), §52. Diversity centres in the unifying office of the episkopé and without reference to any particularity of context. Beyond this, the diversity of "local" expression is permitted only as subject to proper limits.

"ecumenical intercultural hermeneutic."[42] Such an approach, it was hoped, would produce criteria for a different understanding of unity. This proposed direction found a constructive beginning in the 1995 WCC report titled "On Intercultural Hermeneutics."[43] This text affirms that in the act of translation the "gospel assumes a new cultural form," and that there exists "no 'pure' gospel that can be understood apart from the various forms in which it is embodied in culture and language."[44] It names the challenge some Christians experience in living "integrated lives," in being Christian in relation to, and not in alienation from, the cultural communities of their birth.[45] Against this background, diverse expressions of the faith help the churches "discern the richness of the gospel,"[46] and the communion of difference constitutes "a sign of God's reconciling purpose for all humanity in a world where the powerful often suppress diversity by destroying the culture of the weaker."[47]

Matters revert to the ecumenical norm, however, with the 1999 publication of the official "instrument" to assist in the "ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics," titled *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*.[48] Its first deliberate step shifts the focus from an "intercultural" to an "ecumenical" hermeneutics, a "hermeneutics for the unity of the Church."[49] Its point of departure is not context, but the "one Tradition" as providing the singular measure for discerning "the authenticity of faith in a situation of conflicting cultural perspectives, frameworks or hermeneutical principles."[50] This capital 'T' one Tradition stands above all the lowercase 't' traditions, meaning that, even while it is "embodied in concrete traditions and cultures," it remains beyond those traditions and cultures. Thus, when the document turns to questions of context, all the necessary work has already been done: no theological meaning comes *from* context; all theological meaning already exists in fullness in the one Tradition, the tradition whose capacity to be embodied is contingent upon its being beyond every context.

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[42] Konrad Raiser, "The Future of the World Council of Churches and the Role of Faith and Order within the Ecumenical Movement," in *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith & Order*, ed. Thomas F. Best, and Günther Gassmann (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 171.

[43] "On Intercultural Hermeneutics: Report of a WCC Consultation, Jerusalem, December 1995," *International Review of Mission* 85 (1996), 241–52.

[44] "On Intercultural Hermeneutics," 243.

[45] "On Intercultural Hermeneutics," 251.

[46] "On Intercultural Hermeneutics," 244.

[47] "On Intercultural Hermeneutics," 245.

[48] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999).

[49] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 9.

[50] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 15.

Reference to context in the text follows the now familiar restrictions of reading and interpreting scripture, the capacity of context to produce false interpretations of the gospel (which it names as racism, sexism), and the experience of alienation from context (causally linked to the "imperialist impulses" of the "many missionaries" who "became colonialist").[51] With context this lifeless entity, the key tension emerges as the relationship between contextuality and catholicity.

Contextuality is understood as necessary for the localisation of the faith, but in only one instance might contextual interpretations "contribute to a fuller interpretation of the Gospel" and so "speak to the Christian community as a whole": that is, when "a particular context points to injustice or to liberation."[52] While this may appear to grant context some theological significance, it accomplishes the opposite. Locating meaning in a political moment allows the extraction of some generic theological principle, while the form that this liberation takes is often regarded as non-transferable to other political contexts—that is, contextual theologies are affirmed precisely in the absence of any structural import for the church catholic.[53]

Catholicity, by contrast, is understood as drawing these local communities towards the fullness of the faith through "collegial and conciliar structures, by mutual accountability to the Gospel, and by prayer for the eschatological work of the Holy Spirit."[54] As this definition of catholicity suggests, this "hermeneutics of coherence" rehearses established ecumenical themes of an *episkopé* and the conciliar tradition, and the "hermeneutical function" of these institutions especially in helping people "recognize and actualize" their gifts.[55] It does not entertain ways in which difference might itself inform structure; structure appears as that which guides the hermeneutical task and so is not itself subject to contextual investigation. The text concludes with the now familiar exhortation to look to "the One who is both in and beyond time, to the One 'who is the same, yesterday, today and forever' (Heb 13:8)."[56]

Both the formal definition of diversity and the development of an ecumenical hermeneutic trade on a fundamental resistance to granting diverse Christian

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[51] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 29.
[52] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 31.
[53] This valorises the local socio-political application of theological principle, rather than understands contextual theologies as themselves issuing potential substantive challenge to those theological principles and their embodiment in institution, structure, and ritual.
[54] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 29.
[55] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 35.
[56] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 42.

expressions any material significance for the church catholic. Both approaches at least name difference as a necessary component of the church's embodiment in particular contexts, as part of its historicity. But it is this very historicity which relativizes every particular embodiment in relation to the church catholic. As the formal definition of diversity demonstrates, diversity refers simply to context and benefits from no overt theological attention. All the theological language is reserved for unity. In more explicit terms, the divide, to cite the 1994 Faith & Order report, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia,* is between the "theological" and "the non-theological."[57] The key consideration, in other words, pertains not to difference, but to fundamental theological assertions concerning the visible movement of the church through time as itself necessary to unity.

**4. A Contingent Institution and so a Universal History**
This ecumenical discussion of catholicity is consistent in its referral to hierarchy, canon, and creedal formulation. It is consistent, in other words, in directing attention to the ecumenical councils beginning with Nicaea in 325 and its formalisation of catholicity as a mark of the church. A particular logic frames this historical moment as the formative moment of the church. It begins with an assertion regarding the body of Christ represented in the New Testament—the evident ferment of this body is not the normative condition for the church through time. This early period was one of transition, specifically a transition from missionary communities to the institution of the church. Only with the first seven ecumenical councils did the church codify its proper order and so its structures for governing difference.[58] But while these

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[57] Thomas F. Best, and Günther Gassmann, eds. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith & Order* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), §21, 241. Joseph Kononchack in his excellent treatment of the church local and catholic, observes how in received treatments "the generative principles of the normative instances of the Church are 'theological' or 'divine', the individuating principles of these local churches are commonly said to be simply 'socio-cultural' or 'human'." Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic," 418. The local church, in other words, is important as housing a type of "universality," something that is true of all churches, while its locality includes nothing of bearing that might inform the nature of this entity. "The socio-cultural and historical elements that may enter into the definition of 'local' are not regarded as ecclesiologically significant except at best in some secondary sense. They are not among the constitutive principles even of the 'particular' church" (p. 419). Diversity "is ignored as something accidental in the Aristotelian sense and therefore not of interest in defining the substance of the Church as realized either locally or universally" (p. 418).

[58] Even as Mark Burrows argues for a more substantial recognition of context as of material significance for theology, he nonetheless identifies "creedal claims (*regulae fidei*), the formation of a Christian canon, and apostolic authority (*magisterium*) as the consolidating boundaries within which Christian identity could be defined in the midst of the enculturation that was the consequence of cross-cultural missionary expansion." Mark S. Burrows, "Globalization, Pluralism, and Ecumenics: The Old Question of Catholicity in a New Cultural Horizon," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29, no. 3/4 (1992), 363–64.

instruments of creed, canon, and hierarchy garner the attention, their regulatory power is contingent upon the underlying account of Christian history and the idea of the contingent coming-into-being of the church.

Depicting the first century as a period of ferment implies that the church, even if its 'fullness' is asserted, did not yet exist in mature form; a point illustrated by the oft-referenced *in nuce* catholic structures within the pastoral epistles. Jesus did not himself institute a church, so it is claimed, as much as he started a "movement." A sociological assumption follows: movements are inherently unstable and only survive in history as they assume institutional form. This coming-into-being of the church as a visible society within history was the result of a period of maturation through time, from the ferment witnessed to in the New Testament to the institution of the church. This process of maturation occurred not as the result of accidental cultural developments—it was the contingent acting of the Spirit in history. This acting, it is argued, found confirmation in the early ecumenical councils, meaning: first, that whatever the cultural origin of these structures they are not simply identifiable with those origins; and second, that a particular validation accrues to *this* history of maturation. This is not any history. It is the history of God's acting in time to bring the institutions of the church into being, institutions which are necessary to the continuity of the gospel through time. As *this* history, the history of the creation of God's own body (to cite a 1968 Faith and Order discussion), it is a "universal history, in the sense that all groups, tribes, nations, imperia, races, and classes are involved in one and the same history....So long as in the West Christianity was identified with a special 'Christian culture', limited to Europe, no more could the germs of universality in the Christian message bear fruit either. The universalizing and unifying of history started in the ages of mission and colonialism, and is now in this generation penetrating human minds everywhere as never before."[59] Christian history is a singular history which shadowed the course of Western civilisation, and was revealed to be so precisely in the history of its movement beyond its European borders to encompass the whole world within it.

Observe that this history of the church's contingent coming-into-being is not based in the actuality of Christian history itself. It is a theological history, a theology of continuity and how continuity is maintained in relation to difference: that is, in the elimination of difference. The touted unity of the ecumenical councils rests in cultural exclusion, in the reduction of Christianity to those who thought in Greek and Latin.

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[59] *New Directions in Faith and Order, Bristol 1967: Reports—Minutes—Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 25.

By the sixth century, according to Andrew Walls, it became routine for the church to divide along cultural and linguistic lines.[60] The early councils, in other words, were the moment of the greatest schism in the Christian church. This schism established the rules governing difference, rules which remain operative in this period of post-colonial world Christianity. Or, to cite Christopher Duraisingh, it belongs to "Western metaphysical and theological traditions…to privilege and valorise unity, harmony, and totality and thereby to denigrate, suppress, and marginalize multiplicity, contingency, and particularity."[61] This posture, Duraisingh continues, leads to the assumption that only "European history…shares the same horizon as Christian history," and that the "plurality of cultures and traditions that make up the Christian faith have place only as they are amalgamated into a monolithic history or tradition."[62] As the continuity of the church followed these cultural lines, so all other cultural forms became classified as non-theological.[63]

This, it must be reiterated, is a theology of linkage to origins and of the necessary embodiment of the faith through time. It is a framing position and illustrated as so, first, by grounding the growing diversity of world Christianity in this "history" via Western missions; as occurs, for example, in the aforementioned dismissal of missions as colonisation and the coordinated assertion of the church catholic as unifying cultural difference. Second, it is illustrated in the expectation that "Christianity exists in three more or less permanent modes: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox."[64] This not only interprets the contemporary plurifomity of the faith through key events in Western history, thereby granting the claims of a singular church history "universal application," but also reads diversity as division (and so against unity) and forces those localities to address questions as they occurred in other times and at other places.[65] By this measure, the pluriformity of

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[60] Andrew F. Walls, "World Christianity and the Early Church," in *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*, ed. Akintunde E. Akinade (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 27.

[61] Christopher Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (2000), 680–81. On early theological definitions of multiplicity as sin, see Matthew John Paul Tan, "The Love of Many Lands: Theology, Multiplicity, and Migrant Identity," in *Scattered and Gathered: Catholics in Diaspora*, ed. L. Budde Michael (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 96–111.

[62] Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic," 681–82. For an identical argument, see Dale T. Irvin, "From One Story to Many: An Ecumenical Reappraisal of Church History," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28, no. 4 (1991), 537–54.

[63] See John G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

[64] Andrew F. Walls, "Eusebius Tries Again: The Task of Reconceiving and Re-visioning the Study of Christian History," in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 77.

[65] For Dick Avi, "[t]he old conflicts of the Reformation in Western Christendom had been resurrected in Melanesian Christianity. In the religious sense, the people are alienated from their

world Christianity is not itself a good—it exemplifies on a global scale the outworking of a "primary" Protestant/Catholic schism, "primary" because it is a schism within this history.

## 5. Transcending Particularity, Denigrating Contextuality

Speaking from the Melanesian context, Dick Avi's constructive response to the experience of deculturation, one common through the literature, is to name contextualisation as the necessary avenue for "recovering the broken ties between…their own people and culture."[66] It is hoped that the production of local theologies will help reconstitute cultural value and patterns of relationship. But it is exactly on the possibility of contextualisation that the premise of a universal history exerts significant pressure. The very move to amalgamate Christian pluriformity into a singular history that shares the horizon with European cultural history reduces diversity to "additions…or modifications of what is essentially a European or Western religious meta-narrative."[67] As the above 1968 Faith and Order statement makes clear, it was the gospel's movement beyond the (Christian) cultures of Europe that revealed the universality of this history. Read in reverse, the contemporary diversity of world Christianity is linked to the colonial expansion of the West and the continuity of Jesus' body retreats from this colonial moment back through the history of Europe to first century Israel.

At this point, the very notion of a contextual theology becomes unhelpful. With the idea that "the crucial events and processes in Christian history" took place "in the Mediterranean world in the early Christian centuries, and in the West thereafter," all other theologies and embodied forms become "an optional extra, determined by local needs."[68] This finds expression, for instance, in the "celebration" of contextual theologies in terms of their meaning for specific contexts, and not as of determinative significance for the so-called "one Tradition." It also appears in the determined shape of contextual theologies. As Jione Havea observes, the impetus behind contextual theology is one of "transporting and constructing meanings that are relevant in different locations," and basic to this is the "tendency to omit the differentiating and excess stuff. In this regard, contextual theologies, in subtle ways, resurrect the drive to harmonize, at the expense of diversity and complexity."[69] This includes limiting

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society, and are living in Europe or America." Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," 16.

[66] Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," 16. See also Joe Gaqurae, "Indigenization as Incarnation: The Concept of a Melanesian Christ," *Point Series* 8 (1985), 208.

[67] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 538.

[68] Walls, "Eusebius Tries Again," 14.

[69] Jione Havea, "The Cons of Contextuality…Kontextuality," in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-*

contextual theologies to certain modes, either via reference to local metaphor (for example, verandah,[70] coconut,[71] or pig[72]), or via liberative political application of the theological tradition, especially as this liberation serves the instantiation of democratic models.[73] There is, in other words, a general neglect of narratives unpalatable to Western academic theological discourse even while common points of focus within the social sciences—such as the importance of dreams,[74] the refugee experience,[75] healings or exorcisms,[76] or the instruction of the ancestors.[77] Furthermore, extensive bibliographies can be drawn up concerning these themes within theological discourses through world Christianity, meaning that the concern can be neither the 'academic' quality of the questions nor their import for theology!

It is further the case, as indicated in *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, that the act of recognising "legitimate contextuality"—determining whether contextual work might transgress imposed ecumenical limits—is the responsibility of communities for which the descriptor "contextual" does not seem to apply. (Note that these texts never actually name instances of a legitimate contextual theology.) On the contrary, as the embodied form of a contingent divine institution, so the structures and associated artefacts become universal, meaning: detached from context. Avery Dulles, citing Thomas Aquinas, postulates that catholicity indicates "freedom from all the limitations of particularity. Because it possesses this property the Church…is able to transcend the frontiers of place and time and to include people of every kind and

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*First Century*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans, and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 47.

[70] See Stephen Pickard, "The View from the Verandah: Gospel and Spirituality in an Australian Setting," *St Mark's Review* 174 (1998), 4–10. Cf., the critical response in Tracy Spencer, "Getting off the Verandah: Contextual Australian Theology In-land and in Story," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006), 323-41.

[71] Sione 'Amanaki Havea, "Christianity in the Pacific Context," in *South Pacific Theology: Papers from the Consultation on Pacific Theology, Papua New Guinea, January 1986*, ed. R. Boyd Johnson (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987), 11–15.

[72] Ama'amalele Tofaeono, "Behold the Pig of God: Mystery of Christ's Sacrifice in the Context of Melanesia — Oceania," *Pacific Journal of Theology* 33 (2005), 82–101.

[73] For an examination of the types of tensions surfacing in this discussion, see Mark G. Brett, "Postcolonial Ecumenism and Its Multiple Contexts of Solidarity," in *Indigenous Australia and the Unfinished Business of Theology: Cross-Cultural Engagement*, ed. Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 17–24.

[74] Linda Darwish, "'When Your Heart Is Touched, It's Not a Decision': A Narrative Analysis of Iranian Muslim Conversion to Christianity," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 47, no. 1 (2017), 45–77.

[75] Sebnem Koser Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 4 (2006), 817–53.

[76] Allan H Anderson, "Exorcism and Conversion to African Pentecostalism," *Exchange* 35, no. 1 (2006), 116–33.

[77] Paul Grant, "Strangers and Neighbors in Precolonial Ghana," *Fides et historia* 50, no. 2 (2018), 94–107.

condition."[78] This constitutes the ground of possibility for the recognition of difference: by conceiving the structures that constitute this body as embodied and visible—that is, in history—as themselves beyond difference.

By extension, first, these now "transcendent" structures, practices, institutions not simply can, but must be replicated across cultures for they constitute the embodiment of the faith. Apart from such, the faith is without materiality.[79] Second, the expectation is that these structures are beyond particularity and so do not bear any cultural baggage. This is the theological ground which ratifies colonisation. Difference bears no meaning for these structures. Difference either affirms these structures via the celebration of the diversity (subject to proper limits), or threatens them by naming them as particular and located, and so available both to contextual critique and to being ignored. Such is the dynamic of deculturation: the denigration of local culture by denying formative and material meaning to that culture through the location of all meaning in the visible forms of a universal history. Or, as I was taught by Aboriginal scholar, Naomi Wolfe, indigenous peoples encounter Galatians 3:28 as a text of violence: the church proclaims itself to be already a community that encompasses all difference—even before it meets difference, even before it meets local community.

## 6. Catholicity as the Becoming Being of the Ever-New Gospel

Such is the dilemma of catholicity: the account of the contingent coming-into-being of the church in history and of its continuity through time is a framing theology of that body's encounter with difference. The contingencies of a particular location in history and culture reduce every other contingency to the status of "non-theological," as bearing no material significance for the being of the church. As Duraisingh suggests, the "identification of the Christian tradition with the ancient and the medieval past of Latin and Greek Europe is…to deny the possibility of genuinely new insights of faith and witness being brought into the stream of the traditioning process of the global Church."[80] This is the root and branch of the deculturation experienced through world Christianity. Ending its perpetuation and supporting the processes of healing and restoration already underway means attending to the frameworks underlying catholicity.

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[78] Avery R. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

[79] See the type of discussion that occurred within German missiology after the Nazi period, and the significant difficulty in rethinking what constitutes the material, in John G. Flett, and Henning Wrogemann, *Questions of Context: Reading a Century of German Mission Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 89–103.

[80] Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic," 682.

The key theological move rests in affirming multiple histories of God's redemption. This is not an argument for pluralism because such too readily reaffirms Western claims regarding ownership of Jesus's body.[81] Rather, the inclusion of multiple histories means naming local embodiments of the gospel as necessary to the fullness of Jesus Christ. Catholicity's positive ground lies in the theological commitment that God shows no partiality (Lk. 20:21; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6). Catholicity expects the ever-newness of the gospel—for the gospel's ever-new embodiment in communities of difference, difference which is to be preserved as itself necessary to the identity of being in Christ,[82] and the fullness of the knowledge the gospel which results from this ongoing contingency. Catholicity is the living encounter with this gospel and so the conversion of the Christian community itself.

So understood, Catholicity necessitates the rejection of any meta-theory that *a priori* organises difference before its encounter. This definition simply takes seriously that catholicity draws the Christian community toward the eschatological fullness of the faith. As the key hinderance to this fullness lies in the aforementioned singular history, so the work of reconstruction begins by denying that the New Testament witnesses to a period of ferment awaiting a later maturity. By contrast, the evident dynamic summarised by the term "ferment" is one of creation, of new creation. The contest, the uncertainty, the error, the theologising, the communion, all of these constitute the sign of maturing communities of faith. The ground of catholicity lies in the promises of God: in Pentecost; in Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the hated representative of empire; in the deliberations of the Jerusalem council; in Paul's account of justification; in the untidiness of Galatia and Corinth; in manifold struggles of cultural difference, social practice, religious authority, and the impositions of control in the people of God; and in the recognition of every tribe and tongue; that is, in the recognition that these peoples remain identifiable in their difference. The refusal to grant diversity any theological ground is not simply impossible via even a surface reading of the New Testament, it is indicative precisely

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[81] There needs to be an extensive work done on "theologies of linage," i.e., stories of the "arrival" of the gospel in a geographical region. Indian Jesuit, Michael Amaladoss, for example, observes that "the trend in Europe and America seems to focus upon a Christology based on the historical Jesus Christ, we in Asia underline…the cosmic Christ." Michael Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation of Indian and African Christianity," *AFER* 32, no. 3 (1990), 165. He grants, in other words, the theological formulation of historical continuity through Europe, this identifiable movement of Jesus own historic body via a chain of custody known as apostolicity, while securing Indian cultural heritage through a departicularised Christ.

[82] "The challenge of catholicity becomes a demanding one, indeed, since it requires of us an openness for some level of contextual preservation, for a commitment to preserve the integrity of those specific 'locations' from which we raise our voices in praise of the Christ." Burrows, "Globalization, Pluralism, and Ecumenics," 363.

of the cultural claims embedded within the "history" of catholicity.

The Spirit structures the body of Christ, and does so after the manner of the Spirit—the Spirit who blows where it wills. The Spirit is the teacher impelling the community beyond the rooms it keeps locking. The Spirit cannot be set over against the ever-newness of the gospel, as though the reality of the gospel's polyvocal and polyform embodiment were not the primordial acting of Spirit as a rushing wind and as tongues of fire. This is evident, as Jean-Marie Tillard suggests, at Pentecost: "The local—with all it entails of the cultural, the 'contextual', the geographical, the religious, the historical—belongs to the material in which the *ekklesia tou theou* is truly incarnated. Inculturation or 'contextualization' do not constitute an *a posteriori* undertaking. It belongs to the very rise of the Church of God. It is part of the very reality of catholicity."[83] The action of the Spirit in speaking the polyvocal word is the form of the body of Christ coming into being. Pentecost is the revelation by the Spirit of the livingness of Jesus Christ, the revelation of who Jesus Christ was and is. Prior to the Pentecost event, in other words, Jesus never spoke in a way that was not already polyvocal: Jesus did not act in isolation and only secondarily gather a community. The opposite is true: the gathering of his disciples is ingredient to Jesus' own identity.[84]

Note further that while the contests evident through the New Testament resulted in much theological work, the event of new creation was not itself the identified site of division. The danger of schism rested in the mandated application of set structures, and not in the incorporation of difference with its contextual embodiments. As promise, catholicity is not a matter of order and control. It is an expectation that the power of God resides in a community of manifold difference, difference which is neither suppressed nor governed, but is constitutive of that community.

The diverse form of its embodiment indicates the nature of the gospel's transmission. The gospel is only an embodied reality, that is, it is a reality in history and so a located reality. Contextualisation, in this respect, is a misnomer. As the gospel was and is never contextless, so the gospel is always only ever recontextualised, only ever embodied and shared between bodies. Jesus's location was within first-century Jewish culture and under the conditions of Empire, and his gospel was then immediately spoken by Parthians, Medes, Elamites, along with the

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[83] See Komonchak, "The Local Church and the Church Catholic," 443.

[84] David E. Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), x.

other peoples listed in Acts 2, including even the seat of Empire. Nor is this dynamic limited to the New Testament period alone. Theorists of world Christianity point to these same forms of embodiment throughout Christian history.[85] As a living history, the fulness of truth lies not in seeking some distillate beyond culture, but in the process of "opening itself to the polysemic meaning and significance of the other and [in] willing to be informed and transformed by the very different cultural expressions of the stories of God's presence in Jesus Christ."[86] By contrast, to conceive the gospel as a "kernel" capable of being separated from the "chaff" of culture and the non-theological, is to again promote one's own local embodied forms as normative and so as *the* form of catholicity.

The acting of the risen cosmic Christ is an embodied acting, acting in the forms of embodiment expected within each locality. Not simply in forms that might be common to our locality, recognisable by us and which we might identify as material, but in those foreign to us, in dance, in dreams, in healing, and in exorcism. Nor is this limited to readily identifiable practices. It includes, following Kosuke Koyama, even such fundamental elements of human experience as the conception of time. For example, while Koyama affirms that the "purposefulness of history" as central to the faith, he rejects limiting the notion of purpose to a "linear history."[87] Lineal history, in his opinion, underlies imperialism and "notions of manifest destiny." Based on the range of different experiences of time present in different cultures, Koyama argues that "[a]ll images, be it a straight line or circle or triangle or pendulum or zigzag or a point should be freely used to express the *shekhinah* of God in history."[88] The gospel is good news as an embodied reality—it is good news for people as the event of being reconciled with God and with one another—and it is the reality of these embodiments in their difference which witnesses to the reality of the gospel as good news for the whole of creation.

## 7. The Joy of Acknowledging Others

While this beginning theological work may sound well and good, idiosyncratic theological formulations perhaps constitute the worst form of privilege against the

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[85] As one example, see Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

[86] Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic," 687. Or, to cite Karl Barth: "Now the good news of Jesus Christ is not a dead commodity handed over to us so that we can 'have' it. Beware of this capitalistic conception of Christianity in any form, old or new!" Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 19.

[87] Kosuke Koyama, "New World – New Creation: Mission in Power and Faith," *Mission Studies* 10, no. 1-2 (1993), 73.

[88] Koyama, "New World – New Creation," 73.

realities of deculturation and its various supporting substructures. One might refer to any number of historic theological exhortations that call for the "permanent imperative of openness to others."[89] Whatever our self-evaluated individual posture, the established structures of the theological economy disguise the inherent privilege underlying the imperative to be "open" and reduce those exhortations to tropes unable to surmount the forces of conformity. For example, even as much is made of the "shift of Christianity south," the power—the capacity to name and evaluate theological discourses and methods—remains entrenched in Europe and North America. While it is not uncommon to find the celebration of the diversity and polycentricity of the faith within Western theological discourse, it is much less common and in direct contravention of the Spirit's acting at Pentecost to find the promotion of polyvocality.

Nor is this observation benign. Papua New Guinean theologian William Longgar laments a "lack of reciprocity," whereby "dominant Christian groups" continue to impose "their theologies on receiving groups, with a resulting tendency to ethnocentrism, ignorance, and intellectual dishonesty on the part of the dominant Christian groups."[90] These serious charges demand a response, and many theologians writing in the context of deculturation find a part answer in the development of contextual and local theologies. The failure to support these theologies, through the curation of "imposed shrunken spaces,"[91] limiting these voices to "special issues" in journals, reducing contextual questions to fetish interests outside of the "main subjects" promoted within theological curricula, marginalised by the very structuring of degrees and the categorising of fields, viewing them as derivative to theology proper, or as a "practical application" following some more fundamental theological discourse—all of this must be accounted as contributing to the ongoing reality of deculturation and in express opposition to the acting of the Spirit.

To think of catholicity as itself the process of becoming catholic is to be intentional in relation to these structural issues. Catholicity assumes the posture of expecting newness, expecting the contingent acting of the Spirit and of the living Jesus Christ. If the acting of the Spirit expresses the promises of God embodied in the living Jesus Christ, then the fullness of the gospel is a contingent reality, contingent

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[89] Dale T. Irvin, "Towards a Hermeneutics of Difference at the Crossroads of Ecumenics," *Ecumenical Review* 47, no. 4 (1995), 490.

[90] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 26. Maori theologian, Winston Halapua, even asks: "Are we in the Pacific participating in a process of doing theology which embodies the dehumanisation of our own people?" Halapua, "Fakakakato: Symbols in the Context of the Pacific," 22.

[91] Gemma Tulud Cruz, "Between Identity and Security: Theological Implications of Migration in the Context of Globalization," *Theological studies* 69, no. 2 (2008), 371.

on bodies of difference embodying the gospel. Though some might experience the pain which accompanies the opening of closed histories, catholicity as the corresponding reality to this acting of the Spirit rests in "the joy of acknowledging others," to cite Pope Francis.[92] The project of theology needs to be structured so as to reflect this fullness.

In 1987, Sione 'Amanaki Havea observed that the theologies of Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Barth and Brunner developed against the background of crisis. We might pause to consider how pathologies of trauma might inform visions of institutional unity and the control of particularities, but this would be to miss Havea's main point. The theologies of the Pacific "are deeply involved in celebrations."[93] In celebration lies the origin and end of catholicity.

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[92] See §§218-221 in Francis's 2020 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

[93] Havea, "Christianity in the Pacific Context," 11.

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