

## “Globalizing” the Liberal Arts: Issues and Challenges for Teaching

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My goal in this presentation is fairly modest. I want to share my experience of teaching a course from a global perspective and to raise some of its issues and challenges in classroom; and by doing so, I want to invite the audience to enter this dialogue. I will address the issues primarily in my discipline, history of Christianity; however, I believe that those specific issues are also relevant and applicable to broader academic fields.

I have been teaching history of Christianity here at Westmont since fall of 2004. I teach History of World Christianity and specific periods of Christian history, such as early and medieval Christianity, Renaissance and Reformation, modern Christianity, etc. History of World Christianity is my staple course, offered every semester. However, there is a distinct challenge in teaching this course. Its scope covers about 2000 years of Christian history with a global perspective—so, not just traditional “Western”<sup>1</sup> Christianity but world Christianity around the globe in 15 weeks! Of course, this forces me to be greatly selective in content, and yet substantially “comprehensive” in a global sense at the same time. Thus, there is a tension between breadth and depth and my selectivity reflects my value judgment.

Before I go on, let me share briefly my educational history. I grew up and was educated in Seoul, Korea up to the age of 17; then I immigrated to the United States with my family. I went to high school here for a year and half and then to college. When I was in college, I took a “Western Civilization” course (there was no “World Civilization” course back then); and my major was history, focusing on medieval and early modern Europe. All this is to say that in my higher education, I was trained in and from thoroughly Western and/or North American content and ways of thinking. In my doctoral work, I focused on the second and third century Christian self-definitions vis-à-vis Greco-Roman world, specializing in early Christian interaction with Greco-Roman philosophies, literature, and cultural values.

Given that educational and research background, when I first started teaching this History of World Christianity course, I was preoccupied with teaching myself “non-Western” or Third World Christianity, and I simply inserted this non-Western content into the course; I knew it was not the best way, but “for the time being” I settled with teaching some aspects of non-Western Christianity. Hence, I presented to the students the Jesuit missions in Japan, India, China, and Latin America in the 16th and 17th centuries; Protestant missionary movements in the 19th and 20th centuries; and the global Christian movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the 20th century. Given the survey nature of the course, I focused more on providing what I thought significant *information* on the topics.

There are two initial issues and assumptions to be pointed out here. First, the basic assumption with which I operated was the pervasive but faulty assumption that Christianity was a “Western religion” until modern times (or even now). The non-Western Christianity, according to this assumption, did not exist basically until the last century. The second operating assumption was that adding content of later Western Christian mission movements in the non-Western world was somehow enough for a global perspective. My underlying approach to global Christianity was one-directional: from Western to non-Western without the reverse.

Of course, it did not take long for me to realize that both of these assumptions provided a rather shaky ground, in fact an embarrassingly misguided ground, for teaching world Christianity. Concerning the first issue (the assumption of Christianity as a Western religion), if one studies the origins and histories of Christianity without a preconceived or presumed notion, it becomes all too apparent and obvious that Christianity was NOT a “Western” religion until centuries later. In the first seven or eight centuries at least, Christianity’s main geographic centers were the cities and provinces of the Mediterranean world, covering North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Four of the five ancient patriarchies of the church were located in the East (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) except Rome. Until the Muslim conquest of the Middle East and North Africa in the late seventh and subsequent centuries, Christianity was not only present but mainly blossomed in the “East”—the Eastern Mediterranean world. Only with the rise of the Holy Roman Empire in the ninth century (and later the Medieval Christendom), do we see the rise of “Western

Christianity” in Europe strong enough to be independent and influential. Hence, first and foremost, I had to change my fundamental operating basis and starting point of my teaching in looking at all too familiar history all over again to discover and then to dispel “the myth of Western Christianity” (Jenkins, 16). The non-Western Christianity existed from the beginning and flourished throughout world history.

Concerning the second issue (the issue of confusing Western mission with non-Western Christianity), I had to not only distinguish Western mission in the non-Western world from indigenous non-Western Christianity but also challenge my notion of world Christianity. For one thing, my uni-directional notion of global Christianity went hand in hand with confusing Western mission with non-Western Christianity. For another, teaching content without the context of non-Western Christianity resulted in some unexpected responses from students; some students were rather quick to judge rather than to comprehend, quick to conclude rather than to reflect or appreciate, which were opposite responses of what I expected. Teaching the content of non-Western Christianity without its proper context, and even without the context of non-Western cultures, worldviews, and values, would not do justice, since Christianity has always interacted with and has been embedded in particular and specific cultures throughout history. These starting points (or assumptions) of teaching world Christianity were just as important as the goals of teaching.

With these initial issues in mind, let me dwell on some of the related issues and challenges. First of all, one of the challenges in teaching world or global Christianity or

globalization/globalism of any topics is the question of a model: What is a proper model of global Christianity or globalization of Christianity?<sup>2</sup> Or is there one? If so, is it one of assimilation or pluralism, unity or diversity? What kind of role does socio-cultural pluralism play in global Christianity? Is there a certain standard or center of globalization by which it should be measured? How can we find common categories of interpretations? How does one define the common “center,” “norm,” or “context” in each discipline/subject? How does a global Christianity exhibit its unity and diversity? What would global or world Christianity ultimately look like?

From a religious perspective, what unites world Christianity would be the Bible and Jesus as revealed in the Bible. This is a starting point of my teaching. Christians throughout history and Christians of varying convictions today more or less agree that the Bible, Scripture, holds a certain special status and authority, a revelatory status and authority, which distinguishes itself as something more than any human book. And Jesus revealed in the Bible is more than a great moral teacher; he is a unique figure, the Son of God, Messiah, and Savior of the world, however his self-claim is interpreted. Therefore, historians, recent demographic researchers, and sociologists use the following definitions of Christians for their statistics:

1. “A Christian is someone who describes himself or herself as a Christian, who believes that Jesus is not merely a prophet or an exalted moral teacher, but in some unique sense the Son of God, and the Messiah” (Jenkins, 88).
2. “Followers of Jesus Christ as Lord, of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment” (Barrett and Johnson, 857)

3. “Those who claimed to be Christian, either by individuals themselves in a government census, or by the churches to which they are affiliated” (Johnstone and Mandryk, xx)

In my classes, some students rightly point out that the “standard” or the “core”—the Bible and Jesus in the Bible—itsself is culturally conditioned and interpreted; the Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic in the Near Eastern, Jewish, and Greco-Roman contexts over a 1500-year time period, and Jesus lived as a Jewish man in the first century CE. That is certainly correct. In this sense, each cultural interpretation or experience of the Bible and Jesus may be, or rather should be, pluralistic and diverse; indeed, each experience should be considered equally valid and authentic in order for a Christian experience to be truly world-wide and global. This is what we call “contextualization,” that is, the process and ways in which different people groups understand and appropriate Christian doctrines and practices in their own social and cultural contexts. And this is where particularity becomes a part of universality.

However, each particular experience of the core or center (Bible/Jesus) would not be the normative experience on par with the biblical revelation. In other words, African experience of Jesus is just as valid as European experience of Jesus; Asian experience of Jesus is just as authentic as American experience of Jesus. Therefore, “cultural particularities are ‘situations’ in which Christian people receive and give theological shape to the gospel. No such situation constitutes a privileged cultural context as such” (Mouw and Griffioen, 156-67). What is rather normative for all of those diverse

experiences would be their accountability to the center or the core—how they interpret, experience, and relate to *Jesus revealed in Scripture* in their own local contexts. In this sense, the particular cultural appropriation of the Christian center—the Bible and Jesus in the Bible—is essential to global experiences and expressions of Christianity; in turn, it is the “universal” center that preserves the value and necessity of contextual pluralism. In fact, only in light of such a “center” can those diverse expressions of Christianity make a legitimate claim of validity and authenticity (Mouw and Griffioen, 147). The joy and challenge of my teaching is then to show students how those different versions of Christianity form a unity, and to help students distinguish and discern the “core” of Christianity (the non-negotiable) from the cultural “accidents” (the negotiable).

Second, I want address the challenge of guiding students to see how “a cultural repositioning of the [Christian] faith” (Noll, 219) and “rethinking of values” has occurred as Christianity was transmitted and communicated from one culture to another.

This repositioning and rethinking should take place not only on the content level but fundamentally on the contextual, worldview, and pedagogical (methodological) levels. This means that in my teaching, I need to reach and sometimes challenge students’ worldviews and value systems beyond the level of presenting information and content. In other words, I need to address more of “why” and “how,” not simply “what,” “who,” “when,” and “where.” It certainly challenges us to allow ourselves to experience a paradigm shift—a rethinking of values and perspectives—as well, even as we teach the materials. This could be a real challenge for all professors who already feel stretched too far and too thin in incorporating global content in their courses. For one thing, time is a

real issue because it takes a good amount of reading and reflection for us to do that; locating and obtaining resources could be another challenge.

In teaching “cultural repositioning of Christianity,” it is important for me to show students that world Christianity is not the same as non-Western Christianity. World or global Christianity is larger than non-Western Christianity or Western Christianity and includes the kinds of influence non-Western Christianity has been making in Western/North American Christianity as well as the influence of Western/North American Christianity on non-Western Christianity. All too often, the influence of non-Western Christianity on Western and world Christianity is overlooked and ignored, compared to that of Western Christianity; part of the reason is because rational, abstract, systematic theological construction has been one of the key measures of Christian influence. It has been Western propositional theology arising from and embedded in the European and North American context that set the theological trend in the world, corresponding to the political and economic grouping of the developed nations. What about non-propositional, narrative, descriptive theologies of the Third World, which are just as profound, insightful, and articulate? Could they be considered just as seriously and appreciated? Better yet, could other forms of “theology” such as indigenous liturgy and practices (including prayers, sermons, hymns, and even dancing) be included in theological influence and reflection? Once again, part of difficulty is that it is hard to find primary documents or materials in English that I could readily use in class. However, I could at least raise these kinds of questions in order to assist students to recognize and acknowledge the proper influence of non-Western Christianity.

Even so, there is a perennial temptation to depend on what is familiar and what has been traditional to us as a measuring stick, such as Western modernism. The fastest growing group of Christianity worldwide is what are called Pentecostal and charismatic Christians. These Christians emphasize experience on par with reason (or over reason at times) and take the biblical authority seriously (more seriously than their Western counterpart). They not only take the biblical accounts of miracles, healings, exorcism, supernatural signs, and wonders at face value but expect to experience them in their practice of Christian faith as an ever present reality. Even with the surprising growth of these groups in North America and even Europe, the traditional post-Enlightenment Western worldview is skeptical and reluctant to accept the validity and vitality of this kind of faith expression. This supernatural Christianity is often brushed aside as a Third World phenomenon, steeped in its animistic, primitive, and pre-modern culture and worldview. Indeed, the non-Western world did not undergo anything comparable to the Enlightenment and modernism of the West; does that mean then that their understanding and practice of Christianity is somehow inferior to its Western counterpart? Settled and contextualized in their cultural particularities, non-Western Christians are developing indigenous forms and expressions of Christian faith still congruent to the ancient faith. If we see and practice Christian faith through their eyes and experiences in their own contexts, modern Western Christianity—with its individualism, rationalism, naturalism, and materialism—seems rather alien to the original apostolic faith.

What about religion and politics? In terms of the church and state relationship, should the modern Western idea of democracy and strict separation of church and state be normative for Christians in the non-Western world? Should the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America be held accountable for their commitment to “democracy and freedom” in the way Americans understand them?<sup>3</sup> Or should the church and state relations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America be treated on their own terms—in their own unique political, religious, and socio-cultural contexts, which often require deeper and more careful interpretations and analyses than the common stereotypes?

As each particular culture offers an opportunity and challenge in interpreting and practicing Christianity, there is a tension between Christian appropriation of culture and syncretism. Christians in the West are often oblivious to the fact that the cherished veneration of saints and Virgin Mary was a result of, at least in part, the interaction of Greco-Roman and Germanic “pagan” culture. In general, Christians in the West tend to be much more lenient to Western syncretism than to non-Western Christian enculturation. Therefore, Asian ancestral veneration, Indian caste church, or African animism pose a greater threat to orthodox Christianity than the American gospel of health and wealth, empirical and process theology, and some European deconstructionism, which are equally syncretistic.

Here, it is important to note that I am not rejecting or criticizing the Western tradition of Christianity; I am rather pointing out a much needed recognition of non-Western and Third World contributions and worldviews to world Christianity. We will serve our

students better if we approach and teach world Christianity NOT as a post-colonial reaction to or a backlash against Western Christianity or merely as a part of political correctness. If we do so, we only reinforce the traditional “normative” claim of Western Christianity, for or against which other forms of non-Western Christianity should be measured, appreciated, or depreciated.

As I conclude my talk, let me share with you the following reflection. Teaching with a global perspective challenges us to be more interdisciplinary in our methodology and pedagogy. I approach History of World Christianity not only from historical and theological venues but also from anthropological, sociological, literary, and even economic viewpoints. Cultural and ethnic studies, change in global demography, political discourses and situations, and social patterning and consciousness do matter in studying and teaching world Christianity.

Finally, teaching world or global Christianity demands sensitivity to and concern for some of the pressing global concerns, such as AIDS epidemics, genocide, wars, poverty, ecological crises, religious fundamentalism, etc. Those are the very issues and challenges that affect and provide an immediate context for world-wide Christianity on a daily basis. Global Christianity faces global human needs and challenges that are systemic, multi-dimensional, and multi-layered. Once again, this is where the particularity meets universality. What is going on in the Middle East and Sudan, what took place in Bosnia, and the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union do matter for studying world Christianity. Teaching any subject in global context should encourage and lead students

to be more interdisciplinary in their thinking, more holistic in their approach, and more cross-cultural in their analysis and interpretation.

### Works Cited

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## &lt;Footnotes&gt;

<sup>1</sup>I use the words “Western” and “non-Western” throughout this presentation for lack of better terms but with some uneasiness and tension. I use “Western” to refer to what is traditionally considered European and North American and “non-Western” to refer to what is now considered Asian, African, and Latin American, the Third World. However, it is noted that the West and East or the West and non-West distinctions were not historically clear cut and consistent. I use the words “Third World” and “global” only in the recent context (i.e., during the 20th century) for historical reasons, given the recent phenomena of the emergence of the Third World and globalism/globalization. Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, uses the “global North” and “global South” for the traditional “Western” and “non-Western” distinction.

<sup>2</sup>I make a distinction between world Christianity and global Christianity for a historical reason. Whereas global Christianity is a relatively recent phenomenon with globalization, “world” Christianity has been in existence since early Christianity. Still, I use the word “globalization” or “global” with some reservation. Those words have already come to us with social, political, and economic baggage implying a one directional or one dimensional outlook and suggesting more of an assimilation approach.

<sup>3</sup>On this topic, I regret that I was unable to read and engage with a recent article by my colleague, Chandra Mallampalli at the time of my presentation. See Chandra Mallampalli, “World Christianity and ‘Protestant America’: Historical Narratives and the Limits of Christian Pluralism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30:1 (2006), 8-13.