

THE ENKINDLING OF MERCY IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

Theresa Lowe Ching (RSM)

Oral Presentation

My brief presentation will take the form of a series of captioned images that highlight many of the main issues that I have surfaced in my paper. Far more evocative than words can be, the images will likely conjure up even more implications that I have already suggested.

(The slides that follow corresponds the numbers in brackets in this text)

Thus, here we have the issue of multiculturalism framed within the context of the massive migration of persons (1), African slaves (2,3) and indentured labourers (4) and the colonial legacy of the Caribbean (5) as a mixed blessing, bringing political and legal systems of order (6). This has given stability to the region, but along with and the plantation economy (7) that has left a legacy of persistent poverty and class, racial and social inequalities and the denigration of persons with untold psychological damages, particularly among the majority Black population of the territories. This initial insertion of the Caribbean into the global reality has only intensified in this era of recognized globalization (8) and the consequent inequalities of nations (9) with dire economic, political and social consequences.

The missionary activities (10, 11) of the Church initially coincided with the objectives of the colonizers in equating Christianizing with civilizing. It is into this context and with a similar mentality that the Sisters of Mercy (12) originally entered the scene and the formation of a multicultural community has persisted up to today.

The emergence of the liberation movements of the 60's and 70's brought in their wake the beginnings of a Caribbean theology with a strong critique of the colonial religious legacy and a decided emphasis on the need for God's redemptive liberation. The almost exclusive focus on the Black experience brought about the affirmation of

the dignity of black persons. Reflections on African religious traditions (13) surfaced significant insights and challenges. In particular the Rastafarianism and Pentecostalism, both with roots in African religious experience have arisen as forms of protest movements against colonial oppression and imposed religious forms and not to any one group of people.

The world wide impact of Rastafarianism (15) in the form of Bob Marley's music (16) for instance does indicate the significance of a specific contribution that can come from a particular context. Also the rapid spread of Pentecostalism (17,18) can signal the importance of forgotten, neglected or hitherto unknown aspects a religious heritage that belongs to humanity as a whole in particular, the active presence of the Spirit of God that is always ready to empower and direct human lives.

However, the overemphasis on the African heritage in the Caribbean multicultural context runs the risk of once again unleashing the dominating tendencies of groups with certain advantages over others e.g. the majority over minorities or the more powerful over the less powerful, as the case might be. Hence Mercy's affirmation of the particular contexts where it is presence throughout the world, as this Conference is recognizing will allow and its commitment to multiculturalism (19) to truly begin to be effective in bringing about a prophetic acceptance of differences (20) and respect for the other, the migrant, the poor, especially women, etc. In this way Mercy's direct intent to embrace our multicultural reality, with a courage born of confidence in the ever-present power of the Spirit of God, will indeed enable us to contribute significantly to the formation of an alternative world society of peace and justice towards the coming Kingdom of God. (21)

What then are the challenges to Mercy seeking to enkindle the fire of God's compassion caring for all in Jamaica and, indeed, the entire Caribbean multicultural context? Given the multicultural composition of Mercy in the region, it seems to me that the recognition and exploration of the rich cultural heritages that inform the lived experience of its member promise much by way of a more respective affirmation of one another and the courage to relate to "the other with understanding and compassion. In order to do this, however, Mercy in Jamaica would have to reflect upon its past and present experience of being a multicultural community in service of

a people of various culture and racial backgrounds. It would have to examine the extent to which its founding and earliest members perhaps shared in the general missionary mentality and attitudes evident in the Church as a whole. It would have to ask what aspects of the critique of the colonial past as brought forward by Caribbean theologians might still apply today.

The endeavour to explore the Caribbean multicultural reality could also bear powerful witness and challenge to the entire Institute of Mercy, as strive to en flesh our expressed commitment to embrace our multicultural, international and now I should say global reality as a strong imperative in the twenty-first century.

In view of the threat that the development of a monoculture that is being fashioned by the market economy of a global scale, the Institute of Mercy could, in turn, offer prophetic challenge to a world divided on so many fronts, yet claiming to be one, affirming the postmodern recognition of diversity yet driven by the exigencies of technocratic reason to bring order and control into play in order to achieve the unity that remains nonetheless elusive. Indeed, as Douglas Hall maintains, “the great paradox” is the “modern desire for mastery that in its quest for universalizing and totalizing comprehensive, its system was obliged to exclude or repress that which lay outside it, thereby calling its universal and total comprehensiveness into question.”¹

After all, this post-modern context of our contemporary world does have positive elements capable of creating that alternative vision that we seek. A careful and self-critical use of many of its elements can contribute towards the creation of a new world of greater peace, justice and equality, such as we envision. Basic to the question of multiculturalism that is the immediate focus of this paper. Is the respect for particularity and difference that is rooted in the postmodernist acute awareness of the limitations and fragility of human existence that opens up human life more positively to the transcendent. As Douglas Hall expresses it, “Postmodernism aims to situate reason, reminding modern pretenders of a God-eye point of view that they are in fact historically conditioned, culturally conditioned and sexually gendered finite beings.”²

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press, 2003), 16.

² *Ibid.* 23

Thus, as Mercy seeks to move forward in this direction (Cf. Direction Statement), it might be helpful to consider these constructs of cross-cultural hermeneutics suggests by Yeow Choo Lak in an article entitled, “Christianity in a Southeast-Asia Metropolis: Cross Cultural Hermeneutics,”³ They are as follows

- ❖ A ‘situational construct’ that “indicates one area of responsibility and concern in the midst of the varieties and dynamic current realities
- ❖ An “exegetical construct” that “suggests that we are to understand the Gospel and the Christian tradition vis-à-vis current givens”
- ❖ A ‘missiological construct’ that “equips people of God with a missionary commitment that is informed by a theology that is capable of more than simply illuminating current givens with flood light of the Gospel. It can also help manage and direct the changes currently taking place along lines more consonant with the Gospel and its vision for human life in God.”
- ❖ An ‘educational construct’ that “gives shape, content, direction and guidelines to our theological education” aimed at providing leadership in the field”⁴

Thus, he finally contends:

In modest ways, cross-cultural hermeneutics endeavours to uncover and be convinced by the truth of our Christian faith – not as a collection of abstract doctrines but as a living tradition and heritage that is capable illuminating our contexts and also of supplying motivations and directions for transforming them⁵

In conclusion, the challenge to Mercy itself is to preserve the identity and integrity of all its members in promoting genuine respect for particularity and difference even as it seeks that union and charity that is the hallmark of the Mercy way of life. From this standpoint, it will be truly empowered to be and live Mercy in a broken, fragmented world, to be in solidarity. In this way, we will truly be empowered to enkindle the fire of Mercy in our very own times and to answer the “Call to Compassion” as expressed thus in poetry and in life:

I listen to the agony of God

³ Yeow Choo Lak, “Christianity in a Southeast-Asia Metropolis: Cross Cultural Hermeneutics” in Mercy Amba Oduoyoye and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology* (New York/Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi Rodopi BV, 2003), 13-37

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Ibid, 36.

I who am strong
With health and love and laughter
In my soul

I see a throng
Of stunted children reared in wrong
And wish to make them whole.

I listen to the agony of God-
But know full well
That not until I share their bitter cry-
Earth's pain and hell-
Can God within my spirit dwell
To bring the Kingdom nigh⁶

⁶ Nancy Telfer, "The Journey" quoted in Iben Gjerding and Katherine Kinnamon, ed., *No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship* (Milwaukee: Luthern Human Relations), 49