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*“Fire Cast on the Earth – Kindling”:
Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century*

Enkindling Mercy in a Multicultural Context: Focus on Jamaica

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Introduction

In a 2005 MAST article entitled, “The Development of Caribbean Theology: Implication for Mercy Re-Imagining/Reconfiguring Project”,¹ I identified four of the key issues that can be said to characterize the postmodern world context and to have significant impact on the Caribbean region. They are: Globalization, fragmentation, cultural and religions pluralism and increased vulnerability. Elizabeth Davis’ social analysis paper on the present world context² certainly testifies to the continued imperative of considering these and other issues in order to understand our present world reality and to point the way towards a Mercy response more in keeping with the authentic living of the Christian message towards the creation of an alternative vision in service of the coming Kingdom of God.

Within the limits prescribed for this paper, I will discuss the issue of cultural and religious pluralism specifically in relationship to the multicultural reality of the Caribbean region with a special focus on Jamaica. Given Mercy’s commitment to embrace our multicultural/international reality, it seems a fitting topic to discuss the challenge of “Enkindling Mercy in the Twenty-first Century.” Moreover, multiculturalism is, indeed, a significant postmodern issue that speaks directly to the necessity of seeking truth as it is revealed, though always partially, in particular contexts.

I will proceed by considering firstly, the formation of the Caribbean multicultural society with special focus on Jamaica and the Mercy community experience in Jamaica as typifying that reality. Secondly, I will consider briefly the development of Caribbean Theology as a postcolonial, liberationist enterprise with an almost exclusive emphasis on the African experience. Thirdly, I will suggest the lineaments of a more adequate multicultural theological response. And finally, I will identify some specific challenges for Mercy as we endeavour to own and live our multicultural reality as a very significant aspect of our effort to “Enkindle the Fire of Mercy in the Twenty-first Century.”

The Caribbean Context: Focus on Jamaica

Formation of a multicultural society

Colonialism, beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing for more than five hundred years in the Caribbean, initiated the migration of persons of numerous nationalities and ethnic origins into the region, thus creating a distinct multicultural society. Europeans from Spain, Portugal, Holland and Britain, and subsequently from North America vied for control of the various

¹ Theresa Lowe Ching, R.S.M., “The Development of Caribbean Theology: Implications for Mercy Re-Imagining/Reconfiguring Project”, *MAST*, Vol. 15, no. 2.

² Elizabeth Davis, “How Can We Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of Our Realities?” Paper delivered at Mercy International Research Conference, November 9-13, 2007.

islands and territories in order to gain access to the natural resources and to develop a lucrative transatlantic trade.³ This would eventually result in the “persistent poverty”⁴ and continued underdevelopment of most of those countries in tandem the increasing wealth and development of the colonizing powers of Europe and North America.

With the establishment of the plantation economy in the Caribbean, African slaves whose presence had already been well known in Iberia, were bought mainly from the West Coast of Africa and transported, under the most heinous conditions, to Jamaica and other Caribbean countries. They were brought to provide the necessary labour force to replace the native Indians who all but disappeared due to diseases caught from the European colonizers and the horrendous conditions to which they were subjected. However, there still exists a sizeable minority of indigenous persons, particularly the Amerindians in Guyana who are often forgotten but cannot be ignored.⁵

The story of the slave trade and the inhumanity of plantation life to which the African slaves were subjected need not be repeated here. With our limited focus on the formation of the multicultural society in the Caribbean and particularly in Jamaica, we need only note the vast numbers that were forced to make the “Middle Passage”. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century it is estimated that twenty million African slaves were transported to the Americas, two million of whom landed in Jamaica.⁶

Following upon the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean, beginning with Haiti in 1804 and ending with Brazil in 1888 and specifically in Jamaica in 1834, new challenges, both political and economic, arose regarding the insufficiency and unpredictability of the labour supply. A solution was sought by encouraging a new wave of migration, starting with Europe and gradually more so from India and China, the countries that were under imperial rule at that time. According to Look Lai, it was an “age of unprecedented economic expansion in the Americas and elsewhere, and correspondingly unprecedented movements of peoples.”⁷ Thus “Europeans, Maltese, Portuguese-speakers from Madeira, Cape Verde and the Azores, Africans “liberated” from slave ships of foreign countries, African-Americans, Chinese and East Indians” were imported into the Caribbean and particularly into the countries most depleted of their regular labour force, viz., British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica. Eventually, British India became the main source of immigrants for the

³ See Verene Shepherd & Hilary McD. Beckles, editors, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston: Ian Raddle Publishers/ Oxford: James Curry Publishers/ Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2000).

⁴ See George L Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (Jamaica/Barbados/Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 1972). This is the classic Caribbean publication re this phenomenon.

⁵ Mary Noel Menezes, R.S.M., “Mercy Fire Kindled in Guyana – April 1894 Still Burning – 2007”. Paper delivered at Mercy International Research Conference, November 9 –13, 2007.

⁶ Hilary Beckles, “Reparations: Taking Forward the Caribbean’s Case”, paper delivered at Mona Research Conference, August 31 – September 2, 2007, Kingston, Jamaica.

⁷ Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies 1806-1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University Press of the West Indies, 1998), 2. Cf. Shepherd & Beckles, *Transatlantic Trade*.

plantations and this lasted until 1918 when the indentured labour experiment ended. The numbers and distribution of these immigrants are succinctly reported by Look Lai:

Between 1838 and 1918, just over half a million new immigrant labourers (536,310) had entered the British West Indian plantation system, 80 percent from India alone, 7.5 percent from Madeira, and 3.5 percent from China. British Guiana received 56 percent of the total immigration, 55.6 percent of the 430,000 Indians, and 76 percent of the approximately 18,000 Chinese. Trinidad received 29.4 percent of the total migration, 33.3 percent of the Indians, and 15 percent of the Chinese. Jamaica received 10 percent of the total migration, 8.5 percent of the Indians, and 6.4 percent of the Chinese.⁸

Besides, during this time the lucrative exploitation of Caribbean resources and new trade opportunities also brought other settlers from the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Syria and Lebanon, and Jews from Italy and elsewhere. All came to swell and diversify even more the immigrant population of the Caribbean region. Thus the multicultural/multi-racial society of the Caribbean with all its plurality and diversity was established and continues to exist up to the present, only becoming more plural and diverse with the influx of other immigrants from other parts of the world, with all the attendant problems that such cultural dislocation would naturally engender.⁹

The complexities of the region and of the Jamaican society understandably defy description and full understanding. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored and perhaps even more, it offers fertile and privileged soil for analysis of many of contemporary issues and postmodern concerns including “multiculturalism”, the specific focus of this paper.

The Multicultural Community of Mercy in Jamaica

The story of Mercy’s arrival and development in Jamaica is presumably well known in our international community of Mercy. Hence, a summary glance will suffice to highlight, in particular, the multicultural nature of the community throughout its long history of more than one hundred and twenty-seven years.

The origins of Mercy in the island date back to December 12, 1890 when at the request of Bishop Charles Gordon, then Bishop of Jamaica, seven Sisters of Mercy arrived from Berrymore, England. They had been recruited for the purpose of bringing stability and sustainability to the works of Mercy that had been initiated ten years previously, in 1880, by a native Jamaican, Jessie Ripoll and two co-workers. These three creole¹⁰ women subsequently joined the order and became the first Jamaican born Sisters of Mercy.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4f.

⁹ See Brinda Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Jamaica/Barbados/Trinidad & Tobago, 2004).

¹⁰ “Creole” refers to persons of mixed ethnic heritage. For a discussion of the creolization process and the issue of Caribbean identity see Carolyn Allen, “A Mi: Revisiting Caribbean (Cultural) Identity”, *Groundings*, Issue 11 (July 2003), 4-14.

Over the ensuing years, the works of the Sisters of Mercy continued to focus on the service of the poor and underprivileged in the society, specifically in child care homes, first for boys and then for girls, and in educational institutions. The rapid spread of these works of Mercy to various parts of the island bears witness to the critical needs that were being met by the Sisters. Membership in the community also grew, at first mainly through the recruiting of missionaries from England, Ireland and Malta. During those early years, in accord with the missionary mentality that prevailed at that time, native Jamaicans, especially those of African and Asian descent, were not considered fit candidates. Gradually, however, Jamaicans of various ethnic and cultural heritages were accepted into the community. Among these were creole women of mixed heritage, European and otherwise, second generation Chinese and women of African and East Indian descent. Missionaries from the United States, Canada, Cuba and Belize also came to swell the ranks of the Sisters of Mercy. Thus a multicultural/international community was established and continues as such to this day, albeit with no further addition of life-long missionaries from Europe or elsewhere. However, in more recent years missionaries from the United States and one Sister from New Zealand have been serving for specific periods of time in Jamaica.

Presently, a new wave of missionaries, mostly from Africa, India, the Philippines and other Pacific islands, are coming to the island to serve the Church in various parts of the island. It is, therefore, not unlikely that the Mercy community in Jamaica will again be welcoming persons from one or another of these countries. Thus the multicultural/international nature of the community will likely continue into the future.

The Development of Caribbean Theology¹¹

The origins of Caribbean theology can be traced back to the seminal publication in 1973 of *Troubling of the Waters*,¹² a collection of papers delivered at two theological conferences in Trinidad, edited by Idris Hamid. Similar to other liberation theologies, it can be characterised, as Matthew Lamb suggests, as the “religious correlate” of the other liberation movements that erupted in the 1960s in the post-Enlightenment turn to the victims of society.¹³ It had become apparent by then that the liberal quest for freedom and equality for all, to be achieved through the primacy of reason and the reliance on science and technology, had eluded the majority of peoples, especially those in the underdeveloped countries. The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest nations continued to widen and the extent and degree of the dehumanizing poverty that existed among the marginalized persons and countries became an affront to the Christian sensibilities of many.

¹¹ See Theresa Lowe Ching, R.S.M., “The Development of Caribbean Theology: Implications for Mercy Re-Imagining Project” for a more thorough treatment of this topic.

¹² Idris Hamid, ed., *Troubling of the Waters* (San Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printers, Ltd., 1973).

¹³ Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity With Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 28-60.

Like their Latin American counterparts, Caribbean theologians subsequently employed the praxis-centred method of doing theology to first of all identify the causes of the socio-economic, cultural, political and above all, religious forces of oppression that accounted for the persistent poverty, inhuman conditions and denigration that created persons lacking a real sense of identity and self worth. The colonial experience was thus judged to be the primary source of the problem. As Hamid puts it:

Imperialism of the spirit is the most final subjection that any people could experience. This imperialism has done and is still doing its work among us. Yet it has not completely conquered. The human spirit in the quest for wholeness bounces back in myriad ways. In the Caribbean, the search of the human spirit for freedom, wholeness and authenticity has expressed itself in various ways.¹⁴

Strident critique of the Church's complicity with the colonial masters in equating civilizing with Christianizing called into question the adequacy of the missionary activities, and specifically the use of Scripture, in communicating the message of Jesus of Nazareth. The need to reinterpret Scripture from the perspective of the oppressed within the Caribbean societies became an urgent imperative. Even more, the oppression of Africans and people of African descent under slavery became a focal point of theological reflection, in view of the devastating effects that still lingered in the region, affecting the majority black population in particular. Hence, the redemption that was sought would be intimately linked with liberation from all that still held the black population in bondage, in body, mind and spirit. The Exodus was interpreted as the paradigm of God's liberation and Jesus Christ became imaged as a black Messiah.¹⁵

Authentic interpretation and living of the Christian faith was thus to be sought in reaching back into the depths of African traditional religious experiences in order to retrieve the lost riches of that heritage. It was deemed that many of its values still persisted in the society and could contribute to the fashioning of a more meaningful and authentic Caribbean religious response. Even a cursory look at the various religious practices in the Caribbean, will, indeed, reveal the tenacity of many African traditional beliefs and ritual practices that slaves from Africa no doubt brought with them. These, even to the present, coexist and are lived, oftentimes in tension with Christian beliefs and practices.¹⁶ An exploration of some of these values could, therefore, be instructive.

¹⁴ Idris Hamid, *Troubling of the Waters*, 6. Cf. Brian L. Moore & Michele A. Johnson, *Neither Led nor Driven: Contesting British Cultural Imperialism in Jamaica, 1865 – 1920* (Jamaica/Barbados/Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2004).

¹⁵ See Kortright Davis, *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990); Lewin Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (New York/Washington, D.C./ San Francisco: Peter Lang, 1994); Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections of the Caribbean Church* (Mandeville, Jamaica: Mandeville Publishers, 1984); Noel Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981).

¹⁶ See Leonnard E. Barrett, *Soul Force: African Heritage in Afro-America* (1974); George E. Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Maureen Warner Lewis, "The Ancestral Factor in Jamaican African Religions," in Kortright Davis and Elias Faraje-

*Aspects of African religious heritage*¹⁷

It is to be noted here that undergirding these values are various aspects of a worldview that correlate in key instances with certain liberationist theological assumptions. Thus, firstly, the affirmation of the religious nature of the universe and hence the religious significance of the entirety of human existence sees no dichotomy between the material and the spiritual but instead the integration of both in one integral, earthly existence. A basic liberationist theological assumption affirms the unity of the history and rejects the separation of spheres that often marks traditional theology.¹⁸

Secondly, there is a decidedly this worldly focus in African traditional religions in the emphasis on life in the here and now. In this regard, the liberationist concern is to give due recognition to the value of life on earth and to be engaged in the transformation of persons and structures of society in the construction of the Kingdom of God, beginning here on earth and tending towards its fullness at the Eschaton.

Thirdly, traditional African religions' practical approach to God and the spiritual world again correlates with Liberation theology's emphasis on action rather than on theory, orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy.

Finally, the social, communal focus of African religions highlights the social view of the person, a cardinal point in African anthropology. As Mbiti expresses it, "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am."¹⁹ Again, Liberation theology's shift of focus from the individual to the social dovetails with this communal, corporate African stress.

Regarding particular elements of traditional African religions, it is generally agreed that many persist in various countries of the Caribbean. These can be seen specifically in certain present day Jamaican cults, namely, Kumina and Revival with its variants, Zion and Pukumina, all having roots in Myalism, a distinctive African retention.²⁰ In general these cults are marked by intense physical and psychic engagement, expressed in rhythmic ritual dancing and singing, and in communication with the world of spirits, both ancestral and otherwise. This experience of spirit possession that often occurs is deemed to

Jones, eds., *African Creative Expressions of the Divine* (Washington D.C: Howard School of Divinity, 1991), 68 – 80.

¹⁷ The following is drawn from a research project that I started in 1999 while on the Dorothy Cadbury Fellowship at the Selley Oaks Colleges, Birmingham, United Kingdom. See Theresa Lowe Ching, "A Liberationist Spirituality in the Caribbean Context" in Philip L. Wickeri, ed., *The People of God Among All God's Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission: Report from a Theological Roundtable Sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia and the Council for World Mission, November 11-17, 1999* (Hong Kong: Clear-Cut Publishing Company, 2000).

¹⁸ See Theresa Lowe Ching, *Efficacious Love: Its Meaning and Function in the Theology of Juan Luis Segundo*, (Lanham, MD: Univesity Press of America, 1989), esp. 66-75; 129-134 for the liberationist assumptions and perspective referred to here and in the following paragraphs.

¹⁹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108.

²⁰ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse University Press, 1995).

be the highpoint of contact with the other world, according to Allan Anderson.²¹

The Rastafarian movement likewise can be traced back to having its roots in Revival although the emphasis on spirit-possession is generally absent. According to Chevannes, African retentions can be identified in the movement along with certain Christian elements. Barrett also, classifying Rastafarianism as a “militant revolutionary” movement sees a link with Revival in its struggle against black oppression.²² Its main objective is, indeed, to assert the dignity of the black person and to lay claim to the African heritage as self-defining in opposition to the imposed cultural values of the colonial legacy

In addition to the above, a brief look at the Pentecostal movement could also offer further insights, bearing as it does such significant aspects of the African religious cults in the Caribbean as, for example, the prominence of the experience and action of the spirit, highly emotional engagement and a certain resistance to mainline churches. It is to be noted, however, that Pentecostalism is unambiguously Christian in its identification of the “spirit” with the “Holy Spirit” of Christian tradition.

Pentecostalism:

In reflecting upon the rapid spread throughout the world of Pentecostalism, marked as it is by the experience and working of the Spirit, Margaret G. Kraft and others²³ claimed that the need for spiritual empowerment is a key factor. They contend that the movement, attracting as it does mostly the disadvantaged in many instances, seems to offer devotees a sense of dignity and self-worth and the communal support to cope with the harsh realities of life. Moreover, Harvey Cox goes even further to suggest that Pentecostalism reaches down into the primal depths of humanity indicating the perennial presence of the “*homo religious*.” His claim is that, “Pentecostalism is not an aberration. It is part of the larger history of human religiousness.”²⁴ Thus he maintains that Pentecostalism in rejecting both “scientism” and traditionalism” provides a third option in its return to the “raw inner core” of human spirituality capable of meeting the need of many for a different kind of “religious space.”²⁵ Cox’s question regarding the future direction of Pentecostalism (either towards “fundamentalism” and its emphasis on the “word” and doctrinal structures, or towards “experientialism” and the

²¹ Allan Anderson and Samuel Otwang, *Tumelo: The Faith of African Pentecostals in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of south Africa, 1993), 97.

²² Chevannes, 170. Cf. Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (Kingston: Sabgster’s Book Store, Ltd., 1977), 153.

²³ Margaret G. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-cultural Mission and Ministry* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995; Diane J. Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997).

²⁴ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Cassell, 1996), 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105. Cf. The postmodernist openness to the transcendent. The need for a balanced approach to the spiritual is obvious.

personal, subjective experience of the Spirit) still remains open and warrants further exploration.²⁶

In conclusion, it is clear that there are values and assumptions drawn from the African heritage that are still operative in the psyche of the majority black population of the Caribbean. These ought not to be ignored, especially those that coincide with the liberationist theological perspective and with the more positive aspirations of postmodernity.

This said, the spread of Rastafarianism throughout the Caribbean region and to other parts of the world is a case in point of a movement growing out of a particular cultural context that has been proven to possess global appeal and relevance especially through the music of Bob Marley and others of the Rastafarian persuasion, touching as it does the universal yearnings of oppressed peoples for respect, personal dignity, equality and freedom of spirit, mind and body. This is a clear indication of the significance of this religious movement and the promise that it holds for the creation of a world build on “peace and love”. It attests moreover to the imperative of recognizing and addressing the implications of cultural particularity such as are present in this specific religio/cultural experience even as we work towards the creation of a new world order, a new humanity..

Towards the Development of a Multicultural Caribbean Theological Response

According to John B. Cobb, Jr., basic values and attitudes are transmitted more through culture as a whole than through religious traditions. As he puts it, “[a]lthough the religious traditions play a large role in shaping basic attitudes and values, it is through the whole complex of patterns of beliefs, values, and practices that make up a culture that these are chiefly transmitted.”²⁷

Granted the truth of this statement, Caribbean theology needs to take more into account not only the various religious traditions that are present in the region but, perhaps even more directly, the contribution of the various cultures in which those traditions are embedded and which continue to influence, often unconsciously, Caribbean life and religious experience. Cobb rejects the option of allowing the imposition of the values of the majority to be imposed on minorities, decentralizing into smaller units and having their values inform

²⁶ In considering the above, it seems to me that a way forward might include a more thorough study of Spirit Christology that not only stresses the power of the Spirit as it filled and directed he life of Jesus of Nazareth but also the prophetic dimension of his actions as he confronted the structures of oppression operative in the concrete circumstances of his life and that of his people in Israel. This would hold both tendencies in creative tension and offset the dangers inherent in one extreme or the other.

²⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Postmodernism and Public Policy: Reforming Religion, Culture, Education, Sexuality, Class, Race, Politics and the Economy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 33.

corporate acts and seeking to discover common values as the basis of action. Rather he suggests working towards “a new formulation of values, including multiculturalism itself that can be affirmed by members of most of the cultures involved.”²⁸

It seems to me that the last approach would not only be able to identify values that are already effectively operative in the growth of Caribbean persons but would also allow for the creative, dialectical interplay of seemingly contrary values in true recognition of diversity, even as we strive for unity in Christ Jesus.

It follows from the above that Caribbean theology must go beyond the almost exclusive focus on the African religious heritage, despite all its richness and challenges, to include the possible contribution that other cultural groups and religious traditions in the region are well poised to make.²⁹ Work now in progress at St. Michael’s Theological College suggests that such an endeavour has the potential of pointing the direction towards a much more adequate inculturation of the Christian message in the Caribbean.³⁰ The praxis-centred approach of Caribbean Theology to date would enable such a theology to directly encourage the collaboration of all in the creation of the new Caribbean person.

The Enkindling of Mercy in a Multicultural Context

What then are the challenges to Mercy seeking to enkindle the fire of God’s compassion caring for all in Jamaica and, indeed, in the entire Caribbean multicultural context? Given the multicultural composition of the 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 respectful 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 cultural 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 we strive to

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64f.

²⁹ Cf. Mary Noel Menezes, “Mercy Fire Kindled in Guyana – April 1894 Still Burning –2007.

³⁰ The Centre for Caribbean Spirituality at St. Michael’s Theological College conducts a yearly seminar to highlight the multiple ethnic and religio-cultural heritages of Caribbean peoples with the objective of developing a more adequate living of the Christian faith in the region and to promote constructive dialogue among the various faith traditions. The proceedings of the seminars are published in the St. Michael’s Theological Journal, *Groundings*.

enflesh our expressed commitment to embrace our multicultural, international 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 on 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 comprehension, its system was obliged to *exclude* or *repress* that which lay outside it, thereby calling its universal and total comprehensiveness into question.”³¹

After all, this postmodern 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 us 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.”³²

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 suggested by Yeow Choo Lak in an article entitled, “Christianity in a Southeast-Asia Metropolis: Cross Cultural Hermeneutics.”³³ They are as follows:

- A “situational construct” that “indicates one area of responsibility and concern in the midst of the varieties and dynamics of 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 the 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.”

³¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ Yeow Choo Lak, “Christianity in a Southeast-Asia Metropolis: Cross Cultural Hermeneutics” in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology* (New York/Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2003), 13-37.

- An educational construct” that “gives shape, content, direction and guidelines to our theological education” aimed at providing leadership in the field.³⁴

Thus, he finally contends:

In modest ways, cross-cultural hermeneutics endeavours to uncover and be convicted by the truth of our Christian faith – not as a collection of abstract doctrines but as a living tradition and heritage that is capable of illuminating our contexts and also of supplying motivations and directions for transforming them.³⁵

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 with the truly “other”, the poor, the underprivileged and the excluded. 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 –
 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 nigh.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶ Nancy Telfer, “The Journey” quoted in Iben Gjerding and Katherine Kinnamon, ed., *No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship* (Milwaukee: Lutheran Human Relations), 49.