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Theology's New Turn

A survey of contemporary movements

BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH

The words had a vaguely alien sound: postcolonial, mujerista, queer, eco-theological. But as I sat on our theology department's hiring committee and read applicants' dossiers, it was clear that the thinking behind these labels is shaping the work of many who are finishing doctoral studies in theology today and are moving into the schools. Disciplines once considered marginal now dominate the academy.

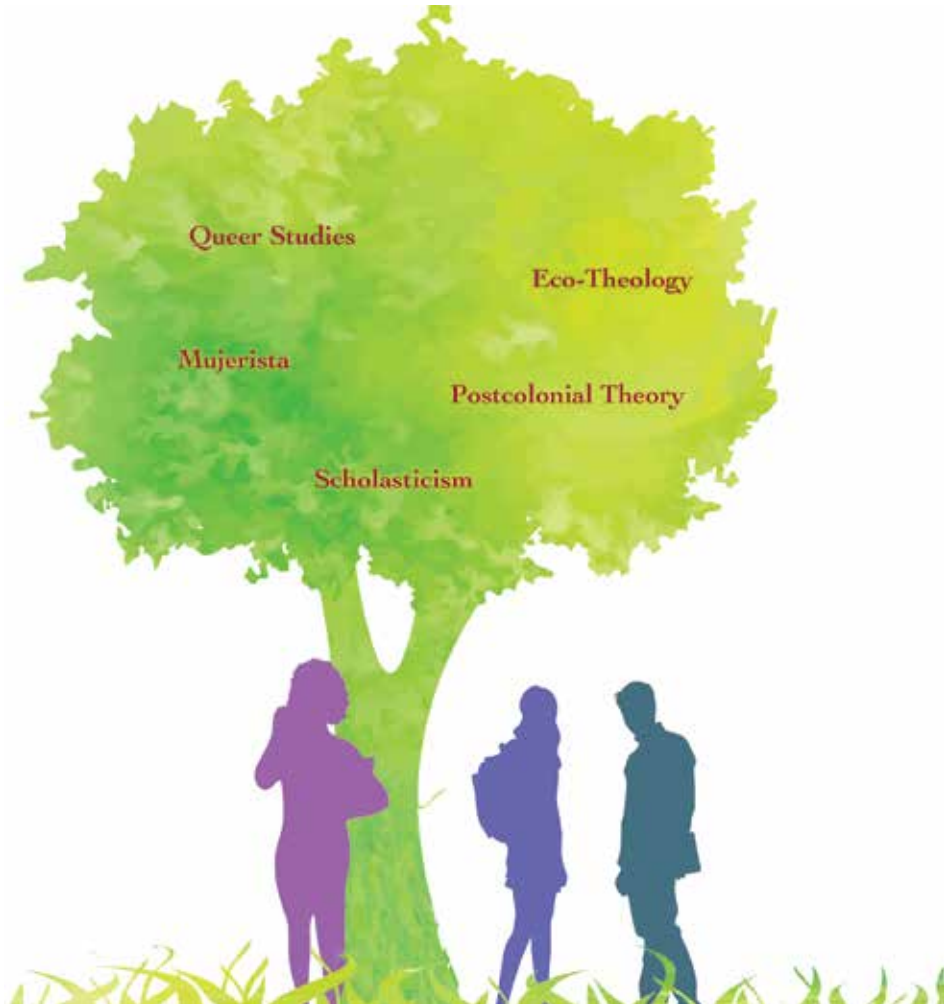
When I began my own theological studies after the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theology was moving out of the seminaries and into the universities and graduate schools. The church's traditional emphasis on neo-Scholasticism, a method once described by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as "far removed from the real world," had already given way to the work of theologians whose work had so enriched the council. Among them were Karl Rahner, S.J., Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Küng, Karl Barth and especially the French *ressourcement* theologians Yves Congar, O.P., Henri de Lubac, S.J., Jean Daniélou, S.J., and Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., who sought to recover the formative biblical, patristic and liturgical sources of the Catholic tradition.

If these theologies were different from the abstract, non-historical arguments of the neo-Scholastics, they were still largely European works, universal in conception, focused on the church and its tradition as understood in the West. But already the theological horizon was changing. Influenced by the postmodernist ethos, theology was becoming increasingly pluralistic, contextual and postcolonial. With the postcon-

ciliar ferment in Latin America, the new practitioners of the theology of liberation were already emphasizing a radically contextual theology, rooted in the social *realidad* of their often oppressive societies and based on praxis.

Postcolonial Theory

The postmodern ethos also found expression in the work of the postcolonial theorists. Concerned about the negative impact of Western colonialism on literature, history, politics, cultures and their peoples, they seek to "decolonize" or "deconstruct" Western ways of knowing as well as the restrictive identities constructed on mutually exclusive "binaries," male/female, white/black, first world/third world, heterosexual/homosexual and so on. But postcolonial theory is not



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easy to grasp. It employs an abstract, postmodern language and a lexicon of bewildering terms. Its practitioners speak of difference, agency, whiteness, hybridity, homogenization, recoding, social location, heteronormativity and hegemony, and they employ strategies like deconstruction, dispossession of the self and border crossings. They have moved beyond the identity politics of the 1980s and early '90s to a focus on culture, which for them involves more than geography, politics, religion and ethnicity. They see it as a complex web of relationships shaped by race, class, gender and sexuality that influences our thinking and results in privilege and marginalization.

Thus postcolonial theorists challenge Western, universalist ways of thinking that ignore social location, the effects of colonialism and its new form of globalizing capitalism, which displaces women, people of color and others who are different, creating modern diasporas. Their method is deconstruction, not to destroy but to reveal the exclusionary character of imperialism and privilege and the constructed character of much that is considered normative, making room for the disadvantaged other.

Many of them are determinedly secular, ignoring the power religion still holds for people in the Southern Hemisphere, although, as Susan Abraham ironically observes, their work reflects a "neocolonial" secular culture in its efforts to eliminate the religious. As postcolonial theory became increasingly popular in the academy, its methods soon began moving into the church. Two areas of theological concern particularly influenced by postcolonial theory are feminist studies and queer studies.

Feminist Studies

While biblical scholarship was long dominated by the universalist approach of the historical-critical method, in the 1980s a new feminist hermeneutic emerged, developed to uncover the suppressed presence of women in New Testament texts. At the same time, others began to elaborate a feminist spirituality, raising consciousness by sharing personal stories, particularly about their experience of disempowerment, and taking women's embodied existence seriously, including aspects of female sexuality often ignored by religion, for example childbirth and menstruation. They also emphasize the goodness of the material and the bodily, including nonhuman nature, and thus ecology—what is often called eco-feminism.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, postcolonial theorists, many of them women of color, began to challenge these early feminists. They noted the liberal and secular framework of their work, that it was largely a Western phenomenon. It assumed a universalist posture, embracing all women, not recognizing the privileged position the theologians enjoyed by reason of their whiteness. Early efforts included womanist

and *mujerista* theologies, for black and Hispanic women respectively. A second generation of postcolonial critics, among them Kwok Pui-lan, Tina Beattie, Gale Yee and Musa Dube, highlighted new concerns like hybridity, deterritorialization, hyphenated or multiple identities and the relations between race, colonialism and patriarchy. They saw the biblical story of Rahab the prostitute, for example, in the second chapter of the Book of Joshua, as a story of the sexual and territorial dispossession of native women.

More radical secular feminists argue that not just gender but our understanding of nature itself is socially constructed. Concerned to reject the claim that anatomy is destiny, they end up failing to acknowledge the significance of the body, denying any real meaning to nature. These feminists, including some Christians, show a resistance to theology more characteristic of the Enlightenment, even to the extent of silencing the voices of women of faith.

Not all feminists are allergic to theology. Tina Beattie argues that the feminist theological body is neither the disembodied body of the gender theorists nor the essentialized body of some Catholic feminists. Rather it is a sacramental body whose true meaning, notwithstanding its questioning of the patriarchal and clerical dynamics of exclusion and control, is to be found through its incorporation into the Christian story in prayer, worship and daily life. She cites, though in a critical way, Pope John Paul II's theology of the bodily self as gift precisely in our creation as male and female.

Queer Studies

Another movement, queer studies—which developed in the early 1990s out of feminist studies, with its argument that gender and sexual identities are socially constructed—sought to deconstruct conventional notions of "heteronormativity." Reclaiming the term *queer* as a term for studies on homosexuality is deliberately provocative, and some of its practitioners are clearly hostile to Christianity. But many are practicing Catholics who are also homosexual. They represent a community that in spite of a number of positive statements from the U.S. bishops—"Always Our Children," for example (1997)—are often marginalized in the church. Their language is frequently off-putting, speaking of "queering theology" or even "queering Christ." They see homosexuality as a socially constructed category of exclusion. Their intention is neither to attack the church nor to reject all sexual norms but to make room for those whose gendered and sexual identities make them "other" by finding resources within the tradition that may have been overlooked.

Theologians working in this area, like Carter Heyward, Robert Gros and Gary David Comstock, seek to reconfigure the valuing of Christian relationality beyond reproductive difference, stressing the inability to set limits to the church's

inclusivity by setting boundaries that may be based on privileged notions of normativity. And they stress that human relationality reflects the relationality of our triune God. Graham Ward seeks to move to a broader understanding of relationality by reflecting on the “displacement” of the risen body of Jesus into the church, which in the process becomes multigendered—not just male and female, but embracing many expressions of being sexual. This is exemplified in the now ubiquitous use of the initials L.G.B.T.: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Thus Graham Ward argues that being male or female exceeds its anatomical reference; the malleability of the body opens up to a broader, eschatological sociality that signifies partnership, covenant, fellowship and helpmates. For him, same-sex relationships reveal a love that goes beyond biological reproduction on the way to the redemption represented by the coming of the kingdom. Thus he envisions the church as an erotic community: “Our desire for God is constituted by God’s desire for us such that redemption, which is our being transformed into the image of God, is an economy of desire.”

Eco-theology

Other theologians are focusing their concerns on the life of our fragile planet. Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., asks what has happened to our belief that the natural world is God’s cre-

ation, which means that God is its beginning, its continuing existence and its goal. Without God’s intentionality, creation would cease to exist, for God not only sustains it at every moment but in some mysterious way brings it to completion in the divine life.

Sister Johnson argues that Greek dualistic thinking led to the medieval distinction between the natural and the supernatural, with the result that nature was excluded from the realm of grace. The modern era transformed the biblical mandate from “dominion” over nature (Gen 1:26) to domination. Nature was to be used, not cared for; and as Europeans began to colonize other lands, they assumed the right to dominate their darker-skinned, indigenous peoples. Sister Johnson goes on to uncover the Spirit’s life-giving presence in the natural world, in a creation groaning like a woman in childbirth, longing to be set free (Rom 8:18-25). And she reminds us of Pope John Paul II’s words, “respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join humanity in praising God.” So dominion is not quite right; we are a community with creation, a complex, mutually dependent network of living beings, an ecosystem reflecting the glory of God.

Besides their concern for the protection of the planet, some eco-theologians have taken on the cause of animal welfare, appealing to the example of Mahatma Gandhi and

Albert Schweitzer. Gandhi's principle of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, embraced the animal kingdom as well as the human. Gandhi's principle influenced Schweitzer, the Protestant theologian who spent most of his life tending the sick in Africa. From his youth Schweitzer had shown concern for animals. Later he wrote, "There slowly grew up in me an unshakeable conviction that we have no right to inflict suffering and death on another living creature unless there is some unavoidable need for it." This conviction grew into reverence for all living things, from the amoeba to the human, and led him eventually, like Gandhi, to embrace vegetarianism.

A New Conversation

As the Catholic Church begins to function more and more as a world church, there will be new tensions between the postcolonial churches of the global South and those of the West, the periphery and the center, and with those who feel their inclusion is less than full. The church needs to embrace all God's children, women and men, gay and straight, the gifted, the wounded and hurting, and those on the margins.

There are signs that a new, broader and much needed conversation has begun under Pope Francis. He has spoken several times of the jurisdictional status of episcopal conferences. He mentioned this again in his apostolic exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel," saying that their status, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not been sufficiently elabo-

rated and citing at several points the concerns of the bishops of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Also unprecedented was the survey on contraception, same-sex unions, cohabitation, marriage and divorce sent by Rome to all the bishops of the world in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on the Family this October.

In July the International Theological Commission released a study, "The Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church." Reflecting on the "sense of the faith" both of the individual believer and of the whole church, the study called attention to "the role played by the laity with regard to the development of the moral teaching of the Church," commenting that the "magisterium needs means by which to consult the faithful" (Nos. 73-74). Even more remarkable, it responded affirmatively to the question of whether separated Christians should be understood as participating in and contributing to the *sensus fidelium* in some manner (No. 86), suggesting that the Catholic Church might learn something from other churches.

How is the *sensus fidei* formed? The study recognizes that it cannot be reduced to an expression of popular opinion. The study points to active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the church as fundamental, in addition to listening to the word of God, openness to reason and adherence to the magisterium. A deeper appreciation for the *sensus fidei* means that the church is becoming a true communion, not a structure of the teachers and the taught (No. 4). 