

Jesus Is the Saviour of the World – What If It Is Not My World?

MIKA VÄHÄKANGAS

Mika Vähäkangas is the director of the Polin Institute at Åbo Akademi University, extraordinary professor of Missiology at Stellenbosch University, and extraordinary professor at the University of the Western Cape.

mika.vahakangas@abo.fi

The Problem with Universality and Particularity

Thirteen years ago, my inaugural lecture at Lund University was personal, confessional, and constructive theological. I would like to finish here in the same key, being an old school theologian. Let me introduce my problem through a personal experience from my early career.

The first ever full course I taught in theology was on Christian dogma. There, the development of classical Nicene-Constantinopolitan-Chalcedonian Christological dogma needed to be covered. Fair enough, but the trick was that the course was in Kiswahili, a language lacking a verb for being and expressions for existence, subsistence, person, nature, and generally anything related to Hellenistic ontology behind the doctrinal formulations.¹ Luckily enough, the students were very well versed in their faith and when I would want to say, for example, “God is person” and lacking the word, they would tell me that the only way of meaningfully expressing it in Kiswahili would be to say that God is a human being. When I protested that you

This essay is a revised version of the farewell lecture given by the author at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University in June 2022.

1. “Ni” is the word used for “being”. That is not a verb; Kiswahili verbs are declined according to person, tense, and so on. “Ni” has no declinations. It resembles rather a conjunction.

could say this only regarding the incarnation, they told me that they knew that – good Christians that they were. Yet, there was no other way of expressing it, according to them. Ever since, I have wondered whether the only way of being Christian for my Tanzanian sisters and brethren is either to be alienated from their cultures or to commute between the two parallel cosmoses – the white man’s Christian and the African one.

Christianity in the form we know it in Europe, and which the churches that have their roots in the former Roman Empire propagate, is based on Hellenistic ontology. It is cultural imperialist and routinely exercises symbolic violence upon the others.² This is my problem: the religion and theology that presents itself as liberation and salvation is a tool of ontological oppression.

One of the counter arguments would be that Christianity has a certain tradition integral to its identity and one is free to join or remain out. It is basically about freedom of religion. As neat as this argument may sound – any country club has the right to choose its membership – it seems that Christians are playing here with two decks of cards. On the one hand, we have this culturally limited doctrinal orthodoxy, and on the other hand, there is the claim of simultaneous universality and contextuality. One is both keeping the eggs and having the omelette. While subscribing to cultural limitedness, one is yet audacious enough to speculate whether extraterrestrial humanoids should be included in the salvation as perceived in Christianity or not.³ Let me illustrate this point with an example.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is regarded as the beacon of open-minded, progressive, and decolonializing approach towards World Christianity. However, the case of the Kimbanguist church – officially *Eglise de Jésus Christ sur terre par l’envoyé special Simon Kimbangu* – witnesses of a different reality. To make a long story short, the Kimbanguists were accepted in the WCC as the first African Instituted Church in 1969 and rejected from membership as the first church ever in 2021.

The Kimbanguist case revealed that, in fact, Nicean-Constantinopolitan orthodoxy is the implicit and often also explicit global ecumenical yardstick of Christianity. The problem with the Kimbanguists was namely the number of incarnations. They had created in their church a hegemonic teaching

2. Note that this rather harsh sentence does not refer to Christianity in toto.

3. Professor Ted Peters is the most prominent theologian who has introduced the questions of extraterrestrial life in theological debate in his astrotheology project. See, for example, Ted Peters, “Astrotheology”, in Chad Meister & James Beilby (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, London 2013, 838–853, especially 839, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203387856>. While Peters was open to questions of human cultural limitedness, I am afraid that the full communicational and thereafter doctrinal consequences of astrotheology are yet to be discovered.

that the founding figure Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951) and his three sons were, beside Jesus, God incarnate. This is obviously something that most probably all WCC member churches find impossible to tolerate. Therefore, this result should not come as a surprise. However, what is more telling is that this process did not contain any principial discussion on what kind of theological premises the decision builds on nor what would be the global theological consequences of the (for the time being implicit) doctrinal criteria.

Summarizing the above, one could maintain that despite the massive demographical shift of Christianity towards the global South, or the majority world, both academic theology and ecclesial structures are dominated by the Hellenistic-based theological heritage, often coined as classical Christianity. (When doing so, one tends to ignore those non-Chalcedonian traditions that have as long prevalence as any Christian tradition, albeit with roots outside the Roman Empire.) This so-called “classical Christianity” has a tendency of presenting itself as *the* Christian tradition representing the universal church of Christ. This “classical Christianity” is usually defined through doctrinal formulations that are often interpreted propositionally. The result is a culturally limited reductionistic interpretation of Christianity that often tilts towards general conservatism.

There are attempts at softening this iron grip. One may search resources for renewal and change in the existing traditions like *nouvelle théologie* did, or, as my *Doktorvater* Miikka Ruokanen does regarding Luther’s theology, by distancing it from ontological interpretations with the help of patristic sources.⁴ Additionally, Gustaf Aulén’s (1879–1977) emphasis on *Christus victor* serves as a case in point.⁵ It is not a coincidence that when Lund theologians were setting up cooperation with the South African University of the Western Cape theologians about a decade ago, the South Africans wished that the very first common workshop should concentrate on Aulén’s book *Christus Victor*.⁶ Contextualization and inculturation also open possibilities of local expressions of faith, albeit within the existing structure. In this sense contextualization or inculturation could be seen as finding creative ways of playing football, without allowing changing the game to cricket, for example. Deeper renewal is needed if one wants to substantiate Christian universal claims without being cultural imperialist.

4. Miikka Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace in Martin Luther’s The Bondage of the Will*, Oxford 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192895837.001.0001>.

5. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, London 1931.

6. See the special issue on the reception of Gustaf Aulén in South Africa: *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 95:2 (2019).

On Helicopters and Translation

Let me introduce a couple of theological theories as the starting point of my argumentation.

Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris proposes that basically, there are two types of religions, cosmic and metacosmic. Cosmic religions are such that provide the whole package: not only what is considered religion in the Enlightenment-drenched West, but an explanation of everything in the worlds seen and unseen. Metacosmic religions, in turn, would not contain an explanation of everything, but concentrate only on their central religious message. Lacking the total cosmology, they need a cosmic religion to build upon. They are like helicopters that need a helipad to land.⁷ Following from this, in Pieris's view, religions' coverage is large either locally or globally, but not both. It is a matter between the whole cosmos in a limited cultural sphere or a universal message. Regarding Christianity, people are thus saved within their cultures (and thereby within their cosmic religions), not from them. While Pieris's theory looks like a contribution towards religious studies, it actually is a theological statement. He points out in a subtle manner that the western Christian universalizing tendencies sacralize specific cosmic religions like Neo-Platonism as part of Christian faith. When cosmology is made an inherent part of the Christian message, the helipad becomes a part of the helicopter.

If Pieris wants us to pay attention primarily to the Christian message, Gambian Protestant theologian Lamin Sanneh (1942–2019) did exactly that. In his book *Translating the Message*, Sanneh proposes that translatability is the specific feature of Christianity in comparison to Islam. While the Qur'an is original only in Arabic and not possible to translate, only to interpret in different languages, for Sanneh, Christianity is different in the sense that it by nature is expected to be translated.⁸ While I am not entirely convinced about the translatability and untranslatability being such a basic difference between Christianity and Islam, I take this theory more as a theological argumentation. For me, it reads that Christianity should be translated. What makes the use of Sanneh's theory difficult to use as a theological argument is that he does not define clearly what he means by translation. One can read his book as oscillating between actual translation and a more covering interpretational work that could be labelled as inculturation.

7. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY 1988, 71–74; Aloysius Pieris, "Cosmic/Metacosmic Religions", in Virginia Fabella & Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah (eds.), *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY 2000, 59–60.

8. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, NY 1989.

However, every message is transmitted in a language and a culture. This also applies to the biblical texts. Moreover, the biblical texts are not a production of an insular culture, you would rather find a mixture of cultures behind the texts, which adds difficulty in the interpretation of those texts. Additionally, you cannot isolate the impact of the cultural background of the interpreter – every reading happens in a cultural context which, in itself is, again, not insular, but a hybrid of several cultures. Finally, there is a point in the idea of a text’s untranslatability, because no message can be completely isolated from its linguistic-cultural expression. Therefore, each translation is basically rather an interpretation than a translation. This is because there is no alchemy to distil the message purified from its cultural expression. Therefore, Sanneh’s theory cannot be taken as an empirical religious studies theory, but rather as a theological prescriptive expression.

May the Force Be with You

It is a historical fact that early Christian thought was largely expressed in Hellenistic thought.⁹ Even the Christian-produced holy scriptures, usually called the New Testament in a rather replacement theology fashion, have been written in Greek. Thus, it is no wonder that many Christians, theologians included, imagine themselves a clearer and more unified past than the historical realities would allow. However, Semitic thought is present and mixed with the Hellenistic in the Christian scripture. Additionally, early Christian thought was expressed also in non-Hellenistic cultures like Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Ge’ez, Armenian, Arabic, and so on. Most of these expressions never landed into the Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Their present minor size makes them convenient to forget.

From the historical perspective, we have reason to ask whether Hellenistic thought really is the common ground. If not, then Nicaean-Constantinopolitan-Chalcedonian orthodoxy is only one of the possible Christian orthodoxies. In that case, Hellenistic thought is not the common ground for all humanity. (And you should not consider me anti-Hellenic – even these thoughts were jotted down in the beautiful bosom of the Greek spring.) So, in that case, for someone not sharing the Euro-Hellenistic heritage, Christianity would not necessarily mean alienation from one’s native culture if

9. Purporting this, I do not maintain that Christian theologizing would have accommodated itself completely to the Hellenistic traditions. The formulation of the Christological and Trinitarian dogma challenged the existing philosophical notions and led to the development of new terminology or shifting the meaning of existing terminology. In this manner, Christianity functioned as renewal of the culture and language. This renewal does not mean that such cultural-linguistic expressions, while inevitable, implicate limitation.

one were not expected to buy the cosmological package with the Christian message. But what would that mean in practice?

Of course, this might mean a complete overhaul of Christian thinking, as is the case with Kimbanguism. So far, I have not seen any deep theological-cultural analysis of Kimbanguist thought that would convincingly explain the cultural-theological processes behind the evolution of their *de facto* doctrine. Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot, Joshua Broggi, and Benjamin Simon have arguably got furthest in this.¹⁰ There is a huge theological field that remains to be explored, namely the cultural-theological metamorphosis of Christianity from one form into another in the modern world. This would presuppose extensive knowledge of the languages and cultures involved on all sides of the process as well as good command of Christian theological traditions. The high demands and low academic prestige within theology probably contribute to this research gap, despite the pressing practical need to fill it.

However, two cases of academic Roman Catholic philosophical theology can cast some light on the challenges ahead even if these cases are far more conventional than the massive grass roots developments around the world. Rwandan Alexis Kagame (1912–1981) wrote his philosophical doctoral dissertation already in the 1950s, *La Philosophie bāntu-rwandaise de l'Être*.¹¹ The form of the dissertation draws heavily from both Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE). It is written in the form of dialogue, in proper Platonic manner. The argumentation, in turn, takes its cue from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* where the thought form about the construction of reality is drawn from the form and logic of language – Greek in the case of Aristotle and Kinyarwanda in that of Kagame. Kinyarwanda shares largely the same logic as Kiswahili, Bantu languages as they both are. The analytical gaze towards the reality does not go via ontology but rather via the so-called noun classes (that extend well beyond nouns to modality, time, place, and so on). The outcome is that the name of Kagame's dissertation could even be considered a misnomer – *l'Être* or being in the Hellenistic sense is not the point at all.

Rather, the focal point in Bantu thought would be force, according to *La Philosophie bantoue*, written by the Belgian missionary Placide

10. Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot, *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible*, University Park, PN 2017; Joshua D. Broggi, *Diversity in the Structure of Christian Reasoning: Interpretation, Disagreement, and World Christianity*, Leiden 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004298057>; Benjamin Simon, *Genese einer Religion: Der Kimbanguismus und seine Abschied von der Ökumene*, Leipzig 2022.

11. Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie bāntu-rwandaise de l'Être: Excerpta ex dissertatione ad Lauream in Facultate Philosophica Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana*, Brusells 1956.

Tempels (1906–1977) in the Congo.¹² Cameroonian Urbaniana-professor Martin Nkafu Nkemkia defines life as the focal point, not landing very far from Tempels.¹³ Therefore, the foundational philosophical thought would be *vitalogia* instead of ontology. This kind of philosophical foundation for theology and consequently doctrine would depart from the conventional doctrinal ontologically geared formulations, while simultaneously adhering to the academic forms of expression, unlike the grassroots developments in, for example, African Instituted Churches. This adherence to the format of academic theology makes academic dialogue easier because the content has already been translated into a western idiom. However, this translation before grassroots application makes these proposals merely academic curiosities with no popular backing.

All of the above may sound exotic and strange in Europe. In European academia, one may agree about the global relevance of this question in Africa and the Orient. However, even our continent is undergoing a major cultural shift. Former (imagined) cultural unities are dissolving, and plurality seeps increasingly deep inside our thought. For younger European generations, Christianity and Hellenistic ontology are not automatically the “factory setting”. Many other influences mix in.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has previously relied on female loyalty no matter how patriarchal and homophobic the church hierarchy may be. Therefore, it came as an unpleasant surprise in a recent study that the group of people distancing themselves fastest from the church were millennial women. Let us listen to one of them, an ordained priest of that church: “When talking about Christian yoga, the term yoga is the safe one, not Christian. The word Christian is mostly suspicious.”¹⁴ This safety of yoga is not related only to its being a nice way of stretching, but to its psycho-cosmological dimensions, it can be assumed. New spiritual practices seldom come only as practices, but draw a cosmological baggage with them, no matter how secular the marketing of these practices might seem. The majority world is here amidst us in Europe – not only in the shape of immigrants, but also within the hearts and souls of ethnic majorities. Therefore, the Hellenic world in which Jesus saves is not the world in which increasingly many people live – be they secularizing Europeans or majority world Christians and non-Christians. This has consequences for both

12. Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, Elisabethville 1945.

13. Martin Nkafu Nkemkia, *Il Pensare Africano come “vitalogia”*, Rome 1995.

14. Meri Toivanen, ”Patriarkalisuus karkottaa nuoria kirkosta – voidaanko siitä luopua, pohti kirkolliskokous”, *Kotimaa*, 4 November 2020, <https://www.kotimaa.fi/artikkeli/patriarkalisuus-karkottaa-nuoria-naisia-kirkosta-voidaanko-siita-luopua-pohti-kirkolliskokous/>, accessed 2022-12-30.

churches and academic theology. Given the nature of this setting, I will focus on academic theology.

For academic theology, this leaves three options: First, to go extinct, most usually through transforming into religious studies. Second, to degenerate into a backward-looking intellectual hobby, conversing mostly with conservative old men in cassocks. Third, to renew itself. The first option is viable, and rather popular around Europe. However, I still trust that theology has got societal relevance if providing a platform to study and be in dialogue with faith-related matters in a context free from meddling by religious hierarchies. Such theology, opening up towards all major faiths present in the societies, would be a contribution towards social stability and peaceful co-existence. The second option would not meet the criterion of societal relevance that I consider essential for public funding, which means that such in-house theologizing would have a place only in confessional church-run institutions. For me, the third way is the only viable option. And the aim of the third way needs to be equipping academic theology, and through that also the theology of religious communities, with the ability to communicate between the worlds – across the cultural barriers, be they between different linguistic-cultural units, religions, generations, or social classes. These people do not necessarily have a cosmology similar to the ecclesial elites.

On the Renewal of Theology

I propose that the renewal of academic theology needs to happen through the insights of three emerging theological perspectives that overlap, but are each distinct: World Christianity, intercultural theology, and interreligious theology. Instead of dwelling on the nuances of how to define them as fields, I focus on how the main insights of these fields would contribute towards the renewal of academic theology.

World Christianity is a rather new approach to the study of Christianity, in the crossroads of theology and religious studies. In addition to its inherent interdisciplinarity, World Christianity points to the plurality of expressions and the inevitably composite, hybrid, and layered reality of Christianity. The label World Christianity is inspired by the term World music, which is a branch of the music industry where local – often majority world – music traditions are combined with elements used in the global music industry. The outcome is “vamped up” locally rooted music palatable for international audiences. As a newly emerged academic tradition, World Christianity proposes that Christianity is something similar, albeit by default and not by commercial production teams as in the case of World music. While one keeps a keen eye on the local rootedness of the Christian expressions of faith

– as one has traditionally done in mission studies and contextual theology – one extends the view to global trends and connections. The resulting picture of the local expressions of faith and the global exchanges allows visibility to a plurality of expressions. Quite often attention is paid to Christianity in the majority world, that is outside of the western cultural sphere. This emphasis on plurality can be seen as a liberation from the dominant ecclesiastic narratives like that of the “Christian family tree” which has had some attraction even in academic circles.¹⁵ The World Christianity lenses can be used for any epoch of Christianity. In Lund, Samuel Rubenson has successfully driven that kind of culturally and linguistically pluralistic study of early Christianity, albeit without the banner of World Christianity.

Yet another dimension of World Christianity that is beneficial to the development of theology are empirical studies. Theology should not be regarded as a merely theoretical discipline. At the same time, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater, but also acknowledge the cognitive dimensions of faith. In empirical theology one could attempt to strike the balance between the ideas and rituals, structures, and grassroots in the lived religion manner. Discussions on lived theology is already emerging.¹⁶ Through this process, there is a possibility of democratizing theology with voices from outside of the top hierarchy. Here, theological does not stand for academic theology, but all expressions of faith that are or can be translated into theological language. In this manner, the World Christianity approach to theology can transcend the boundary between upper literary classes and social and cultural groups that are predominantly oral or image-based.

Especially in German-speaking areas, mission studies and contextual theology have been replaced by the term intercultural theology. In intercultural theology, the focus is on the complexity and layered nature of any expression of Christian faith. Christianity inevitably involves cultures long past, due to the role of the Bible, and additionally, even present cultures and expressions of faith are cultural mixtures. All contexts are hybrid and in constant change. In this, intercultural theology largely overlaps with World Christianity. However, intercultural theology has a rather strong normative-constructive dimension, which differentiates it from World Christianity

15. See, for example, the Association of Religion Data Archives, <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/family-trees?F=120>, accessed 2022-12-30.

16. See, for example, Charles Marsh, Peter Slade & Sarah Azaransky (eds.), *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, Oxford 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190630720.001.0001>; Ansley L. Quiros, *God with Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942–1976*, Chapel Hill, NC 2018; Mary McCartin Wearn (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century American Women Write Religion: Lived Theologies and Literature*, Burlington, VT 2014; Martina Björkander, *Worship, Ritual and Pentecostal Spirituality as Theology: A Rhythm That Connects My Heart with God*, Leiden forthcoming.

and makes it patently theological. Here, the cultural hybridity as well as the encounter and layered nature of theology are a desired state of affairs instead of the earlier theologies' emphasis on purity. Here, normativity typical for many theologies is tempered with the realization of cultural-religious complexity allowing more flexibility. This flexibility might facilitate the gradual decolonization of Christianity through the decentering of European cultures.

Finally, interreligious theology introduces yet another dimension of liberation that both academic and ecclesial theology need in order to serve the societies where they are located. One should not confuse interreligious theology with theology of religions or with comparative theology. In theology of religions, it is quite possible to create theological theories of other religions and how to relate to them in one's monoreligious bubble. Of course, this need not be the case. Likewise, in comparative theology, one can theologize in the monoreligious cage and compare one's theological constructs with the faith of the others. Again, there is the possibility of a very external relationship to the other. In interreligious theology, the theologian engages intrinsically with thinkers of other religious traditions. While interreligious theologizing often involves people with multiple or hybrid religious identities, this need necessarily not be the case. What makes theologizing interreligious is that people of different faiths are all engaged in the common task of finding the good, the true, and the beautiful. This leads to an intrinsic dialogue where the participants are not "we" and "them", but a pluralist "we" carrying out a common task.

Conclusion

The tension between Christian particularity and universality can probably never be completely solved. It may even be that it belongs to the DNA of Christianity. On the one hand, refusing to recognize this tension and imagining a common humanity that is defined by the European heritage dissolves this tension in an ethnocentric manner. In such case, Christian theology becomes veritably particularistic, while imagining universality. Anyone not feeling at home in that limited universe – be it on the basis of social class, culture, religion, or any other factor – is excluded from this universal humanity by default, unless converting into the image of the ecclesiastic and academic powers that be. On the other hand, immersion into a complete particularity with any universal claims appears as a betrayal of much of the central Christian message, such as creation of the worlds seen and unseen and redemption of the whole creation.

Above, I have attempted to sketch how to balance between universality and particularity in theology, proposing World Christianity, intercultural

theology, and interreligious theology as guides on the way. My hope is that the renewed academic theology will find counterparts in faith communities and beyond, extending sister- and brotherhood of all humans searching for meaning and truth in all its forms. ▲

SUMMARY

Christianity, as known in Europe, is culturally limited. When presented as universal, it takes on a cultural imperialist quality and exercises symbolic violence upon the others. Forms of Christianity originating in the former area of the Roman Empire (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism) are routinely treated as the measuring stick for true Christianity with the help of the so-called ecumenical creeds. A case of this is the rejection of the Kimbanguist Church from the World Council of Churches (WCC). While most non-western churches would probably agree with the exclusion of a church proposing additional incarnations, it is telling that no major reconsideration of the limitedness of cultural-doctrinal representation of the WCC has followed. While developing further the Hellenic thought, western doctrinal heritage builds primarily on its cosmology. Therefore, someone inhabiting a different cosmology needs to convert into western modes of thinking to become a proper Christian. To avoid this cultural imperialism, Christian theology requires renewal. Academic theology is the proper place to begin. This renewal is needed not only because of Christianity's demographic shift to the majority world, but also because the Hellenic-based modes of thinking are no longer the factory setting among the youth of the West.