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NATURAL THEOLOGY AND THE DIFFERENT BODIES OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL*

Part 2: History, the Resurrected Jesus Christ, and the Living Spirit

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Abstract
One key question evident through world Christianity concerns the continuity of the Christian faith with pre-Christian cultural and religious heritage. This concern is not benign: the failure of the faith to become local means that it remains foreign, that in becoming Christian we become detached from our histories and cultures. Where the previous essay addressed the proposed solution in natural theology, this essay looks at Christological and pneumatological proposals. Some argue that reference to "the Christ" or "the Spirit" as detached from the person Jesus enables a proper acknowledgment of God acting in local culture prior to western colonial expansion. But this grants too much: it grants that the history of Jesus Christ follows that of western civilisation. Though insufficient, these proposals do help a better diagnosis of the problem. The problem of continuity is a problem of history. The history of Jesus Christ is not bound with the history of the western church. The history of Jesus Christ is the history of the resurrection from the dead. This means the redemption of our own histories as basic to God's promised salvation.

Key Words
Resurrection, history, continuity, heritage, ancestors, contextualisation

A common lament evident within world Christianity concerns the erasure of cultural memories, the destabilisation of local social institutions, customs, and laws, and the anthropological poverty that follows as part of this. None of this speaks to a regret in becoming Christian. It speaks to a disconnect between being Christian and being who we are as children of this place. It speaks to the salvation of the whole person in Christ. One potential way to address this experience of fracture lies in "natural theology," in the idea of being able to demonstrate the existence of God in nature and apart from any particular act of God revealing Godself. Natural theology, because it grants

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that the different peoples of the world also have some experience of the divine, is understood to create space for some validation of the pre-Christian cultural and religious heritage.

Basic to this argument is the assertion of a universal experience that is true across times and across cultures. It is on this point that natural theology as a project of Christian apologetics falls down. The expected universal is itself culturally located, and its assertion in other cultures succeeds only in suppressing cultural difference, ignoring cultural practices and spiritualities that do not confirm to the expected universal. There exists no unmediated "nature." Nature is an interpreted reality, one built upon the particular languages, aesthetics, religions, spiritualities, accounts of history and places that constitute local culture. Reference to "nature" often serves as a canvas upon which a culture projects its own identity onto other cultures. To affirm the universals of a natural theology located within a western discourse is to affirm this western way of reading the world. Though natural theology claims to be interested in local accounts of the divine, it determines and polishes those local histories to conform to this prior "universal" expectation.

To deny the traditional project of natural theology is not to deny the evident wisdom that exists within the pre-Christian cultural and religious heritage. It is to deny that an account aimed at healing the experience of "anthropological poverty" begins on ground external to the Christian tradition. This essay does not think of local cultural heritage apart from God's acting in Jesus Christ; it considers how we might think of our past in terms of *the acting of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit*.

To begin, the essay addresses two approaches within christology and pneumatology which attempt to address this question of continuity but do so, in my opinion, by denying the agency of the acting Jesus Christ. They help, however, in reframing the concern by calling into question the binding of the history and person of Jesus Christ to European history and culture. This point to the need of "deterritorialisation," undoing the idea and practice that the Christian faith is a territorial religion, undoing the idea that to be Christian is to be western. Deterritorialisation allows us to affirm that the gospel can be and is to be properly localised in every language and culture. This is not a contested theological assertion: the gospel can and must be spoken in and through every tribe, tongue, and nation. But the significance of the position is not well drawn out: to speak in the language of every tribe, tongue, and nation is to speak though different histories. This means drawing multiple

histories into the history of Jesus Christ. The disconnect experienced between a Christian and a local identity is an issue of the embodiment of the faith; it is a question of what it means to be the body of Christ in this place. To be a body is to have a history. Talk of our cultural past, in other words, requires also talking about the nature of Christian history.

The Attempt to Validate Pre-Christian Culture by Departicularising the Christ and Universalising the Spirit

Of course, this question of the status of our pre-Christian past is an old one and so is the attempt to find solutions within christology.[1] The two positions outlined below are contemporary strategies developing amongst non-western theologians to create space for their local cultural traditions. Both of them, in my opinion, are problematic in that they create space for cultural traditions by separating the historical person Jesus Christ from a now abstracted notion of "the Christ" or "the Spirit." They appear here because they succeed in framing the problem in terms of history. The nature of this history is the key concern.

The first approach refers to "the Christ." As a transcendent entity detached from every particular time and culture, "the Christ" is able to appear within every time and culture. The benefit of this approach seems to lie in the validation of cultural histories prior to an explicit encounter with the person of Jesus. By way of example, Edmund Tang maintains that the development of a contextual Chinese theology needs first to overcome an identification between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the West. To do this,

[1] Take, for example, Justin Martyr and his idea of the *Logos spermatikos* or the "seed-bearing word." Through the use of reason, Christ the Logos is already at work in human beings, with or without an explicit faith in Jesus Christ the person. Christ, as the first-born of God, as Justin Martyr, *1 Apologia* 46 states: "… He is the logos of whom every race of men and women were partakers" English trans. Leslie William Barnard, *The First and Second Apologies* (ACW 56; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997). In *2 Apologia* 13, he further held that with this seed-bearing word, all peoples can "see realities darkly" As a consequence, all people who lived according to this word of reason "are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists ..." (Justin, *1 Apologia* 46). In this way, Justin seeks to redeem the wisdom of the Greek philosophers. For further on his position, see Eric F. Osborn, "Justin Martyr and the Logos Spermatikos," *Studia Missionalia* 42 (1993): 143–59; Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Justin Martyr and the 'Logos': An Apologetical Strategy," *Philosophia Reformata* 67 (2002): 128–47; and Patrick Mwania, "The Justin Martyr's Concept of Logos Spermaticos and its Relevance to Theological Conversation in Africa Today," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 64 (2017): 189–204.

he suggests, one must clear the ground occupied by western history. By implication, he regards the person Jesus of Nazareth as bound to western forms of embodying the faith. Tang, drawing on Chao, relocates the "universality of Christianity" so that it is not attached to Jesus but to "the cosmic universality of God who has revealed himself in nature and in the various cultures through their sages and prophets."[2] The person Jesus intrudes upon an appreciation of the pre-Christian cultural heritage. Attention to "the Christ" turns attention to the wisdom contained within local cultures.[3]

The purpose of distinguishing Jesus from the Christ is to safeguard a cultural past, and this as a way of developing local embodiments of the gospel over-against a western form of embodiment associated with the person Jesus. There is an implied connection between the emphasis on the person Jesus Christ, the western theological tradition, and the processes of colonisation. But a couple of concerns attach to this position. First, this seems to inhibit the possibility that local wisdom might contribute to the wider Christian knowledge, not of a creator God, but that of the living Jesus Christ. Second, it seems to grant that the western church properly owns the embodied form of Jesus. Third, insofar as this is true, it retains the mode of the gospel's transmission championed by the West by locating the truth of

[2] Edmond Tang, "The Cosmic Christ: The Search for a Chinese Theology," *Studies in World Christianity* 1 (1995): 131–42, at 134. For further examples, see Philip J. Hughes, "The Use of Actual Beliefs in Contextualizing Theology," *EAJT* 2/2 (1984): 26–42; William Thompson-Uberuaga, "Cosmic Christ in a Transcultural Perspective," *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 21 (1977): 179–225.

[3] One sees the same sort of division of Jesus and Christ in the account of developing a Pacific theology in Horst Rzepkowski, "Stepping Stones to a Pacific Theology: A Report," *MS* 9 (1992): 40–61, at 46: "Several positive elements in the different island cultures such as the practice of hospitality, and corporate responsibility for one another, the principle of sharing and caring, the tradition of resolving conflict situations through processes of reconciliation have suggested the possibility of discerning the presence of Christ even before the missionaries had brought the Gospel. The missionaries did not bring Christ to the Pacific. They came to bear witness to Christ and brought the knowledge of Christ as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth." Two concerns may be suggested with this position. First, there appears little need for Jesus in this scenario. If human practices were able to achieve the gospel in practical living terms without reference to the acting of God in Jesus Christ, what does Jesus bring? Does his significance simply lie in naming traditional practices as belonging to life in Christ? Second and related, by virtue of this acting in creation, the Christ is the God of power. This opens the possibility that Christ is an unrevealed God behind the person Jesus, or even a God revealed in a number of "Jesuses" (Buddha, Gandhi, Mohammad).

the gospel in an essentialised and static culture. In other words, the contemporary embodiment of the gospel requires a certain type of validation of pre-Christian culture, one that rivals the assumed identity of western culture and the person Jesus of Nazareth.

A second approach inserts some distance between the Spirit and the person Jesus Christ. The Spirit becomes a universal present in creation, which morphs to mean present in cultures. For example, the 2013 World Council of Churches' mission statement *Together Towards Life* is intentional in developing a pneumatological approach and this in direct contrast to a Christological one. According to Jooseop Keum, former director of the CWME and drafter of the statement, "a Christocentric approach to mission" is "old fashioned."[4] The basis of this judgement is unclear from the statement, but perhaps a clue appears in §16 where a strong link between the Spirit and Jesus Christ produces a "missiology focused on sending out and going forth."[5] While no overt connection is made between this and colonial missions, later in the context of affirming the Spirit as the Spirit of Wisdom, *Together Towards Life* laments the way in which "mission activity linked with colonization has often denigrated cultures and failed to recognize the wisdom of local people."[6] The Spirit, by contrast, "inspires human cultures and creativity, so it is part of our mission to acknowledge, respect, and cooperate with life-giving wisdoms in every culture and context."[7] In contrast to this earlier period, the task today is to "lift up testimonies of peoples whose traditions have been scorned and mocked by theologians and scientists, yet whose wisdom offers us the vital and sometimes new orientation that can connect us again with the life of the Spirit in creation, which helps us to consider the ways in which God is revealed in creation."[8] The Spirit is contrasted with Jesus, on the one hand, and the Spirit brings out local wisdom in a way not true in previous eras, on the other.

Together Towards Life seeks to do justice to the experience of world Christianity, and to address questions such as social marginality, unjust

[4] Jooseop Keum, "Together Towards Life: An Introduction to the New WCC Mission Statement," *Svensk missionstidskrift* 101 (2013): 291–300, at 292.
[5] *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, 2013), §16.
[6] *Together Towards Life*, §27.
[7] *Together Towards Life*, §27.
[8] *Together Towards Life,* §27.

economic systems, religious and cultural pluralism, and ecology.[9] It accomplishes this, not by denying christology,[10] but by demanding a certain distance from Jesus Christ as the active agent through an implied nexus of christology, missionary method, and colonisation. The Spirit is portrayed as more interested in local wisdom and spirituality, due to a connection with creation.[11] Again, the gain is the validation of cultural heritage, but we should also consider the potential flow on consequences.

Indian theologian Michael Amaladoss provides a good summary of the logic to this point. In discussing how Christianity sought to relate to Indian tradition, Amaladoss notes the attempt to find "an adequate vocabulary to translate Christian philosophy and theology into a language intelligible to our compatriots."[12] This occurred via an acknowledgment of the value of Indian cultural traditions, while presenting Christianity as the fulfilment of this search for truth:

> We recognized Indian religions, as belonging to a cosmic covenant that preceded the Mosaic and Christian covenants. We searched for the "stepping stones" and the "seeds of the Word". The focus was really on points of encounter that could serve as springboards for the proclamation of the truth.[13]

All this should, by now, be familiar. But in Amaladoss' opinion it was insufficient when seeking an inculturated theology. Inculturation required recognising within Indian religious life "God-given riches, which are not merely imperfect and preparatory, but good and multiform, which we need to integrate into our Christian life and reflection."[14]

The reason Amaladoss gives for this lies precisely in the problem of deracination. A remedy to the conscious alienation within Christians from their cultural roots can only be found in a rediscovery of these roots, leading to a "new personal cultural integration."[15] This includes other religions

[9] *Together Towards Life,* §§5–9.
[10] See, for example, *Together Towards Life,* §27: "a pneumatological focus on Christian mission recognizes that mission is essentially christologically based and relates the work of the Holy Spirit to the salvation through Jesus Christ."
[11] *Together Towards Life*, §22.
[12] Michael Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation of Indian and African Christianity," *AFER* 32, no. 3 (1990): 157–6, at 157.
[13] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 157.
[14] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 157.
[15] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 159.

because "[t]hey manifest some aspects of our religious patrimony: God's self revelation and offer of salvation to our forefathers. That patrimony is part of our historical being and experience."[16] With this link between cultural value, identity, and religious truth, Amaladoss notes how other religions "contain some elements of God's plan of salvation for the world."[17] Accepting this premiss, leads Amaladoss to ask a number of rhetorical questions: "How do we understand Christ as the unique and universal mediator of salvation? Can there be many incarnations? Can we distinguish between the cosmic and the historical Christ? Can we distinguish between Christocentrism and Theocentrism, or between the Holy Spirit and Jesus?"[18] His own answer is that orthodox Christianity has to change; that, in order to make space for our cultural heritage and so to bring about mature Christians, it is necessary to detach Jesus from the Christ, or Jesus from the Spirit.

But there is a related problem: that of supersessionism. This depicts Christianity as a replacement of the covenant given to Israel. In essence, it colonises the history of Israel by absorbing that history into the Christian faith and has stimulated Christian violence against the Jewish people through history. One can see in the story of Abraham a learning from local indigenous cultures, which is an important resource for informing how we might develop a theology of our pre-Christian cultural traditions.[19] But simply to regard our local indigenous histories as "Old Testaments" threatens supersessionism in two ways. First, it disregards the particular history of God with Israel, including the election of Israel. This history speaks not simply to God's acting in relation to a people like any other people. It speaks to how God acts (and so who God is) in calling a particular people and how that particular call relates to the whole, the universal. Nor is this an abstract particular to universal, it speaks to how God in Jesus Christ acts, and to so how through the histories of this particular person all histories are drawn into the history of God's acting. Second, in relation to local pre-Christian cultures and traditions, supersession maintains that Christianity is a replacement for those traditions, that the gospel overtakes them and they become simply pre-history. Instead of valuing our pre-Christian traditions, this approach

[16] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 159.
[17] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 162.
[18] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 162.
[19] See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982).

accomplishes the opposite: it devalues those histories in relation to Christianity.

TIME, HISTORY, AND EMBODIMENT

Though a marked distinction of the Christ or the Spirit from the person Jesus of Nazareth creates space for the re-entry of a cultural past and its heritage, it runs into the problem of setting limits on Jesus of Nazareth and the possibility of his acting today. Or, in these accounts reference to Jesus is understood as limiting a proper valuation of pre-Christian cultural traditions. This is a revealing assumption basic to both positions: what is the basis of this identification between the person Jesus and the western form of embodying the faith? Amaladoss sets the issue as one where "the trend in Europe and America seems to focus upon a Christology based on the historical Jesus Christ, we in Asia underline … the cosmic Christ."[20] Though not expressly mentioned, this very emphasis on the person Jesus of Nazareth is somehow seen to close cultural space—to the discredit of pre-Christian cultural traditions, and so to encourage the processes of colonisation. In response to this assumption, the key issue becomes one of liberating the history of Jesus from this particular western embodiment.

One does not need to become western in order to become Christian. The western embodiment of the faith is not "the final standard of Christian identity and practice."[21] While this may seem an obvious statement, the experience is often quite different. The discussion to this point has focused on the hollowing out of local cultures in favour of western political, economic, and religious practices. As to why the West established itself as the one embodied form of the gospel, this owes much to the development of "Christendom." Christendom in binding the faith to European identity and history established Christianity as a territorial religion.[22] This arrangement of the Christian faith and European culture lasted until the modern missionary movement. Dale Irvin summarising Lamin Sanneh, states that "Christian missions deterritorialized the Christian faith by taking the religion

[20] Amaladoss, "Cross-inculturation," 165.

[21] For the general argument found in this paragraph, see Dale T. Irvin, "Ecumenical Dislodgings," *MS* 22 (2005): 187–205, at 199.

[22] See Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (The Making of Europe; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

abroad, and cutting it free from Western culture and territory."[23] Deterritorialisation is the destruction of the identity between the Christian faith and western culture. Christianity is not a western religion, but properly a religion local to Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.

While this deterritorialisation amounts to a more faithful realignment of the Christian tradition, it, nonetheless, creates a type of problem. A territorial faith includes not simply a story about God in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Godself, but a particular form of the faith, a vision of its embodiment. In undoing this territorial link, and so undoing the vision of the faith's embodiment, a fear emerges that the faith lacks form. The key question for Irvin is how Christianity might be seen as "a non-territorial religion which is not at the same time a non-material or a non-embodied form."[24] Irvin's observation offers us a significant clue moving forward because to be embodied is to be historical, and to be historical is to be contextual. To cite Robert McAfee Brown, "[t]here is no way in which a historical faith (one that has received embodiment in specific times and places) could be expressed other than through the cultural norms and patterns in which it is located. If it did not do so, it would fail to communicate … it would not be historical."[25] This concern with history points to an incomplete and ongoing part of the deterritorialisation process.

As Irvin elsewhere observes, while the diversity of the Christian communion is often celebrated, the same is not said of Christian history. "The history of Christianity remains captive to a grand narrative that situates Christianity during its first two millennia almost exclusively within a 'European' or 'western' historical context."[26] A picture develops whereby the faith follows a trajectory that begins in Jerusalem before moving to Rome, and then to Germany and England, and then to America, before spreading via the western missionary movement to become a world religion. "It is the master narrative that renders some churches 'younger' and makes them appear to have, instead of an immediate relationship to the sources of Christian faith, a relationship mediated by the missionary activity of modern

[23] Irvin, "Ecumenical Dislodgings," 198.
[24] Irvin, "Ecumenical Dislodgings," 199.
[25] Robert McAfee Brown, "The Rootedness of All Theology: Context Affects Content," *Christianity and Crisis* 3 (1977): 170–74, at 170.
[26] Dale T. Irvin, "From One Story to Many: An Ecumenical Reappraisal of Church History," *JES* 28 (1991): 537–54, at 537.

Western European churches."[27] One image for thinking of this approach to Christian history is as a great tree: its roots lie in the story of Jesus and the early church, its trunk as the growth of the church through European history, and the branches as the final blossoming into a diverse world communion. Whatever might be said of the branches, leaves, and blossoms, they all have to be nourished by the trunk because the trunk is the only link to the roots. With this image, in other words, whatever might be said of Christianity's cultural diversity it is always referred back to this western history with its direct and continuous connection to the life of Jesus. Or, to cite Irvin, "The dominant Western theological traditions have identified the religiocultural history of Europe as the continuation of biblical history."[28] Again, this time from Peter Brown, the "modern insistence on the 'Christian roots of Europe' has led to a subtle and dangerous slippage. Only too often, accounts of the Christianization of western Europe are written not as if Europe had 'Christian roots', but rather as if Christianity itself had only European roots'."[29] Because Jesus of Nazareth is subsumed into this history and its lineal course through western culture, Jesus is identified with the western form of embodying the gospel. The seeming need to separate Jesus from the Christ and the Spirit, in other words, is the result of this reading of Christian history.

In this schema, non-western churches are denied "the possibility of a history 'of their own'," and this "confines non-European contextual theologies to reshaping what is a European cultural religion."[30] Any diversity within the faith appears to "only be additions to or modifications of what is essentially a European or Western religious meta-narrative."[31] At this point, the very notion of a contextual theology becomes unhelpful, because it is reduced to an adjectival qualification, a filtering of a continuous and so a-historical and a-contextual tradition through local colour and metaphor. This approach, for Andrew Walls, is grounded in the "hidden assumption … that Christianity is essentially a religion of the West, and that the new theological task is to celebrate the achievements, insights and variant formulations of other cultures."[32] However, this notion of a lineal and continual path of the

[27] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 541.
[28] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 548.
[29] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvii.
[30] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 538.
[31] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 538.
[32] Andrew F. Walls, "Of Ivory Towers and Ashrams: Some Reflections on Theological

gospel aligned to the history of Europe is not a history at all. It is a "theology of history" and one which privileges the West and those outside the West "from reflecting upon the direct relationship of non-European histories to God's redemption."[33]

In response to this approach to Christian history, Irvin observes how history and culture, while they can be described differently, are not separable. "[C]ulture is the manifestation of history, and history is the manifestation of culture."[34] Because of this intimate relationship, even though ecumenical theology might admit and reject the link to colonisation, this history reterritorialises the faith, it recreates a necessary link between the faith and the historical course of European culture and so those contingent forms of the faith. "Claims regarding the cultural diversity of the Christian faith and theology are contradicted by a narrative that limits church history to the European cultural context."[35] The ongoing project of the faith's deterritorialisation, the incorporation of a diversity of cultural forms, equally requires historical diversity.[36]

The local embodiment of the faith means that local history belongs to the faith. Conversion means the conversion of the pre-Christian past. To cite Walls, "the past cannot be suppressed, nor can it be left untouched by Christ. The past, with its identity shaping cultural traditions, has to be converted, turned toward Christ."[37] Redemption includes this redemption of history; conversion means cultural continuity. Salvation is itself an historical process.

The Resurrection of the Dead—The Redemption of Our Histories

This redemption of our histories in Christ draws our attention to a theology of time. Kosuke Koyama, for example, affirms as central to the faith the "purposefulness of history." History has meaning and a telos, a goal. He rejects, however, limiting this notion of purpose to a "linear history."[38]

Scholarship in Africa," *JACT* 3 (2000): 1–5, at 3.

[33] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 548.

[34] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 538.

[35] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 539.

[36] Irvin, "From One Story to Many," 539.

[37] Andrew F. Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 19–34, at 26.

[38] Kosuke Koyama, "New World—New Creation: Mission in Power and Faith," *MS* 10

Linear history, in Koyama's opinion, underlies imperialism and "notions of manifest destiny." This is a singular history, one which incorporates everything into itself, driven by a triumphalism which drives empire and human pride. For him, "the image of straight line, the image of efficiency, and that of the Biblical *hesed*, steadfast love, cannot go together."[39] Based on the range of different experiences of time present in different cultures, Koyama argues that "[a]ll images, be it a straight line or circle or triangle or pendulum or zigzag or a point should be freely used to express the *shekhinah* of God in history."[40] Arguing along a similar line regarding a linear account of time, but in sterner terms, Johann Baptist Metz, rejects the claim that "the modern world, with its scientific-technological civilization" is "simply a rational universe." This is a universal grounded in the myth of "evolution," of development, of progress and civilisation. And underlying its claim to "rationality is the fiction of time as an empty, surprise-free continuum, in which everything and everyone is grace-lessly encompassed."[41] This account of time, I suggest, underlies the assumption of a dim knowledge of God which evolves to its fulfilment in its encounter with Christ, the approach basic to natural theology.

However, as Metz continues, with this account of time "[n]othing from the past can be saved from its graceless, indifferent continuity … God—the God of the living and of the dead, the God for whom even the past and the dead are not left to rest in peace—is absolutely unthinkable within this logic."[42] Here we reach the main point: the possibility of the redemption of our histories, the possibility of diverse Christian histories, lies with the God who raised Jesus from the dead. This is not a God who closes history, that limits our histories to the idea of pre- and post-, which gracelessly subjects creation to an empty continuum. This God overcomes death. The dead are those without a future and so without the possibility of a history. Their history is ended.

The resurrected Jesus Christ is the living God. The living God is a God who acts in history in creating, reconciling and redeeming. This God acts

(1993): 59–77, at 73.

[39] Koyama, "New World—New Creation," 73.

[40] Koyama, "New World—New Creation," 73.

[41] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (trans. J. Matthew Ashley; New York: Herder & Herder, 2007), 159.

[42] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 160.

now in our present, in our future—and in our past. God can act in this way because God in Godself is a history. This assertion, of course, takes us to the heart of trinitarian ontology, the being of God as Father, Son, and Spirit.[43] The redemption of history is possible only because of who God is. We do not secure our own histories by looking beyond this God to some ground in creation. The resurrection of the dead does not belong to nature; it is only ever an act of God. In raising the dead, in this acting of the living God, God brings the past into God's own presence. It is as a stone being thrown into a pool with the waves travelling in all directions: into the present and into the future, but also into the past. Or, the truth of our histories is only seen in the light of the promises of God concerning the redemption of the whole of creation in God. In this future which is true in the present we see the ongoing acting of God in our past.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is exactly where contextualisation begins. We, as people of this God, are called to live in that eschatological moment, in the promise of the resurrection.[44] It was in the resurrection that the ministry of Jesus Christ expanded to include all peoples. For the writer of Ephesians, the mystery of Jesus Christ is that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). In terms of the prior dichotomy of the person Jesus from the cosmic Christ: first, it is necessary to reject the history and so embodied form which links the story of Jesus of Nazareth to a narrative of European history. The mystery of the living Son of God, Jesus Christ, is that the Gentiles belong also to the people of God.[45] Second, the

[43] For more on this, see John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity,* Missio Dei, *Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 208–11.

[44] For more on this, see John G. Flett, "The Resurrection from the Dead as the Declaration of God's Eternal Being and the Christian Community's Eschatological Reality," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 31 (2011): 7–26.

[45] For this reason, locating the power of "translation" in the incarnation understood now as an historical pattern, as Andrew Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 27, does problematically when he writes that this "first divine act of translation into humanity…gives rise to a constant succession of new translations." It is too static and tied to cultural progress and so development narratives. For Walls, the incarnation does not appear unique. Rather, the incarnation is an ongoing work which translates divinity into humanity. In translation (27), "the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions." Walls, "The Translation Principle in

cosmic Christ is nothing other than the resurrected Jesus. He is the person Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was murdered, buried, and rose on the third day. It is not possible to separate the two. Anything that can be said of the cosmic Christ must be said of Jesus of Nazareth.

As the risen cosmic Jesus Christ, he is free to speak where, when, and how he wills. This changes the image of Christian history. No longer do we speak of a tree, but of a rhizome. A rhizome is a plant with roots underground that spread in every direction until a new shoot comes out of the ground and flowers on the surface. The roots are in the earth, nourished by the soil—every Christian body is immediately connected to Jesus Christ. The roots are interconnected and pass nutrients between each other—every Christian body feeds each other body. The flowers all belong to the root, and no one flower or root system is more important or more true than the other. Christian history is not lineal and singular and reducible to the course of a single cultural centre. It is a series of cross-cultural encounters, carried by strangers and locals, by refugees and travellers, which result in the local appropriation of the gospel. The faith is "polycentric," made up of many histories all of which contribute to the full stature of Christ. This applies also to Europe. Indeed, according to Brown, it was the "pre-Christian world, which pushed deep roots into the past and into the hearts of Christian believers, provided the populations of what we now call Europe with an invaluable 'structural reserve' … A Europe which grew only from 'Christian roots' would have been a sadly anemic Europe."[46] In other words, it is not simply that Christianity can appear in different soils, but that these soils themselves nurture the faith, contributing to its own life and well-being.

Christian History," While several comments might be made, this abstracts christology into an historical pattern and away from the acting of a living Jesus himself. Jesus becomes the "sense and meaning of God." Walls' intent is clear: he seeks a ground for Christian histories outside the Eurocentric accounts of the faith's continuity. However, with incarnation now an abstracted principle, it falls into the same problem of prioritising a western Christian tradition as having "had" the gospel for longer. Or, to cite Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 19: "Now the good news of Jesus Christ is not a dead commodity handed over to us so that we can 'have' it. Beware of this capitalistic conception of Christianity in any form, old or new!"

[46] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvii.

THE SPIRIT, THE LORD OF HISTORY

Pentecost is the foretaste of this promise of God. It fulfilled the words of the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28–32), and God's Spirit was poured out on all flesh. This is a new event in the history of God's relationship with humankind and consequent on what Jesus accomplished on the cross, the entrance into history of the new creation. The evidence of this "pouring out on all flesh" is that all present were able to hear and speak the word of God in their own language (Acts 2:1–12). Peter's fundamental lesson in the encounter with Cornelius the centurion, a servant of the hated empire, was that God had made Cornelius clean. "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God" (Acts 10:34–36).

Each language contains a history of thinking about the divine, of religious traditions and spiritualities. We do not take on another language or culture; we hear and speak of and to God through this cultural and spiritual heritage. Nor is language limited to words written and spoken. Ossie Fountain is quite correct: "God will speak to Melanesians in Melanesian ways. He speaks to us in our own cultural outlook."[47] God speaks in ways people can hear and recognise. This means that God speaks in dreams and visions, song and dance, testimony and story, Word and Spirit.[48] God called us—God calls us as we are—and no people exist without a history. God recognises our histories and saves also those histories. This includes the salvation of our ancestors because we are not who we are without our ancestors.[49] I am not saved without my ancestors because to ignore my ancestors is to ignore who I am. Kwame Bediako, for example, talks about the pre-Christian religious

[47] Ossie Fountain, "How God Speaks to Our Church and Nation Today," *MJT* 1 (1985): 126–37, at 130.

[48] See John D'Arcy May, "Editorial: Towards a Theology of Religious Experience for Melanesia," *MJT* 2 (1986): 5–8. For a summary article on dreams, see John M. Hitchen, "Dreams in Traditional Thought and in the Encounter with Christianity in Melanesia," *MJT* 27 (2011): 5–53.

[49] The difficult passage of 1 Cor 15:29 and the baptism for the dead might be read in these terms. According to Nicholas H. Taylor, "Baptism for the Dead (1 Cor 15:29)?" *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002): 111–20, at 116–17: "[t]he formation of communities of converts implies that members would have had deceased relatives who had not heard the Gospel proclaimed, and had not been initiated into the Church or into salvation as conceived in Christian terms. Kinship loyalties would have conflicted with the exclusive claims of the Church to salvation through Christ, and generated a dissonance which could potentially be resolved through contriving a vicarious and posthumous initiation ritual."

traditions as being part of "an 'ontological' past, which, together with the profession of the Christian faith, gives account of one and the same entity—namely, the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian."[50] In naming it an "ontological past," the *past of our being*, Bediako identifies this past as properly part of the present existence of an African. The past is not forgotten, not abandoned, not consigned to darkness, but present in who we are in Christ. This is not to return to the fulfilment theory, the evolutionary idea that you must become more than you are (must become civilised) to become and be Christian. This past shapes and informs the human response to God's work. It is fundamental to the local embodiment of the gospel. Our cultural and religious past contributes to the fullness of Christ because it contributes to who we are in Christ.

The promise and gift of God is healing and wholeness, Shalom. God is not a foreign God, God does not call us only to disregard the deepest questions of our cultures, of our families, of who we are as part of God's creation. It is a darkest lie to maintain in word or deed that to be truly Christian means not to be truly Melanesian. God is love. In God there is no darkness. God's shalom includes the redemption of history, the creation of an integral Christian identity. The language of baptism often appears at this point. It is appropriate because to be baptised is to go through the waters of death and to be raised to new life. In like manner, it is necessary for our histories and cultures to die and be reborn.[51] This is the conversion of history and it sits between a particular span. On the one hand, John Mbiti observes how a "good number of Christian rites were originally borrowed from either Hebrew or pagan sources."[52] By extension, he considers it possible for Christians to "baptise" many traditional African rites by giving them "a Christian content and blessing."[53] On the other hand, Aloysius Pieris warns against the instrumentalisation of local cultures, a way of extracting certain aspects of the local culture in a way that turns that culture against itself. "This species of theological vandalism has been euphemistically expressed by a

[50] Kwame Bediako, "The Roots of African Theology," *IBMR* 13 (1989): 58–62, at 59.
[51] For more on this, see Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 83–84.
[52] John S. Mbiti, "The Ways and Means of Communicating the Gospel," in *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Seventh International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965* (ed. Christian G. Baëta; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 329–47, at 344.
[53] Mbiti, "The Ways and Means of Communicating the Gospel," 344.

new Christian use of the word 'baptism' … In its scriptural usage, baptism expressed the most self-effacing act of Christ … Now the word has come to mean Christian triumphalism, which turns everything it touches to its own advantage, with no reverence for the wholeness of the religious experience of others."[54] The spectre of using local cultural traditions to reinforce a colonial Christianity is always present.

As such, this notion of baptism leads not to an uncritical affirmation of this past. The gospel is only ever embodied because it is the history of God with God's creation. But, just as creation is subordinate to the creator, so culture is subordinate to the gospel: culture holds no sacral power. Culture and the religious heritage become, in the words of Sanneh, "our possession instead of our determiner."[55] This liberation from our histories occurs, first, because those histories are grafted into the history of Israel (Rom 11:17–24). For Andrew Walls, adoption into Israel ensures a form of critical historical dislocation. It "becomes a 'universalizing' factor, bringing Christians of all cultures and ages together through a common inheritance, lest any of us make the Christian faith such a place to feel at home that no one else can live there; and bringing into everyone's society some sort of outside reference."[56] Walls even suggests that "the test between indigenization and syncretism is the capacity to incorporate the history of Israel and God's people and to treat it as one's own."[57] Being ingrafted into the history of Israel, in other words, both relativizes and affirms our cultures.

The liberation from our histories occurs, second, because the redemption of our past is a result of the in-breaking reign of God, a result of the presence of the new creation. Our identity in Christ is a missionary identity. The church is a reconciled community only insofar as it is a reconciling community. There is no static Christian identity because it consists of always being hospitable to those who pretend to be enemies of God. Identity in the Spirit is the following of Jesus Christ into the world and so the encounter of ever new histories in him. Christian identity cannot be possessed, it is an

[54] Aloysius Pieris, *Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 85.
[55] Lamin O. Sanneh, "The Gospel, Language and Culture: The Theological Method in Cultural Analysis," *IRM* 84 (1995): 47–64, at 54.
[56] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 9.
[57] Andrew F. Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," *Mission Focus* 6 (1978): 11–13, at 13.

identity directed to the reconciliation of the world. It means both a valuing of contexts as the location of God's acting and our own embodiment, and a moving beyond our own contexts in the mutuality of becoming the people of God. This "moving beyond," however, is not out of context, for this is again to render context an abstraction and to become susceptible to confusing the faith with our particular embodiment of it. "Moving beyond" is, instead, the movement in which contextualisation occurs, the movement in which the people of God become local, responding both to the word of God and to the need of the world.

Joy in the Spirit: The Point of Contact of the Gospel

Much constructive theological work needs to be done—local work using local images and local histories.[58] Yet, we know this: the Spirit calls, the Spirit teaches, and the Spirit is known by its fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). Such is the intelligibility of the gospel, a community living according to the truth of the new creation. It is a community that is local but is also somehow "unnatural," not living according to those natural rules of hate, violence, anger, malice, jealousy, and deception. It is an embodied faith structured by the surprise of the discovery of a pearl of great price, according to the joy that we ever discover anew. Such joy resides not in the loss of who we are, but in the knowledge that God first loved us and that God loves us as we are (1 John 4:19). God saves us. God saves all of us. God saves our histories because we are not who we are without our histories, without our ancestors. The point of contact between local culture and the Christian gospel lies not in some static past, a past destined to join a singular history which has European culture at its centre. The point of contact lies in the joy of the Spirit, in the abundance of the kingdom, in the redemption of our histories, in exposing all darkness to light, in the forgiveness that causes us to forgive, in the great love of God, in the eschatological promise of the new creation.

[58] As a suggestive example, see Steve Taylor, "Cultural Hybridity in Conversion: An Examination of Hapkas Christology as Resistance and Innovation in Drusilla Modjeska's *The Mountain*," *MS* 36 (2019): 416–41.