CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL RHETORIC FOR A PLURALIST AGE

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Pathways to the Public Square
Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism
International Academy of Practical Theology,
Manchester 2003

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Abstract

The new situation of pluralism transforms the other into an ultimate question for one's identity. Liberal, political and conservative theological responses centre on Christianity's ambiguous relationship with the European Enlightenment. At the practical and public levels, Christian identity is confused; its missionary effectiveness compromised. This is shown with reference to the Australian context. The argument is made that Christianity needs to develop a new rhetoric which focuses on the images, metaphors, symbols, gestures and partial logics associated with the communication of beliefs. In contrast to classical rhetoric which focussed on the speaker's powers of persuasion, the new rhetoric is inherently dialogical, emphasising the mutuality of speaker and audience in their common search for authentic values, saving truth and liberating action. Metaphor and other tropes of discourse are identified as a means of constructing a more effective Christian theological rhetoric for a pluralist age. Such rhetoric highlights the importance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

The Pluralistic Challenge

Public theology is confronted with the task of articulating the Christian message in the "new situation of pluralism" (Panikkar, 1979b; Panikkar, 1995). Pluralism in the sense of religious and cultural diversity is not new. What is new is awareness of the situation of radical diversity as it impinges on issues of human solidarity and even, many a tradition will say, cosmic harmony. Modernity's historical crisis of meaning – "Who am I?" – is replaced by the postmodern crisis of otherness – "Who are you?" in which the "other qua other" becomes an ultimate question.¹ Politically, this is

¹ Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas develops the notion of "being-for-other" as the essential human reality. Theological implications are developed by Veling (1999).
recognizable in the increasingly audible voices of the marginalized including migrants, children, women, indigenous peoples, victims of power politics and sexual abuse. Difference can no longer be explained away with reference to the eschatological happy day when God, the gods, fate, destiny or development will arrive on the historical scene to pronounce an end to chaos and multiplicity. Those days of naive optimism in the history of progress are behind us.

The ultimacy of pluralism is evident in the clash of religious, cultural and political systems that harbour a not-so-hidden desire to claim the whole earth for their heritage. While many interpretations may be complementary, the real issue of pluralism arises when we are forced to decide between mutually exclusive, contradictory and irreconcilable views of reality. Here, there is no middle ground or room for negotiation: either God does or does not exist; war, racism or abortion are justifiable or indefensible; either state communism, liberal capitalism, military dictatorship or the theocratic state. Tolerance is well and good but "the real problem of tolerance begins with why and how to tolerate the intolerant" (Panikkar, 1979a: 20). Learning to love the neighbour who espouses an opposing worldview to our own may be admirable yet, we must say, not easily put into practice.

Liberal democracies face a situation in which any public discussion of ultimacy is reduced to the political level. All voices are welcome at the conversation-table for deciding what is humanly desirable, politically feasible or economically viable. Freedom of speech and voting rights are
afforded to all, even those who are considered ill-informed, too idealistic, a little mad or just politically incorrect. However, majority rules. Experience shows that democracies do not deal well with minorities who do not accept the dominant myths of the nation-state, universal dominion of technology, modern scientific cosmology or the capitalistic global system.

The postmodern dissolution of such western totalizing systems in favour of unearthing repressed voices of otherness and difference marks a welcome shift to accommodating minority viewpoints. However, too often the postmodern critique languishes into the slippery slide towards ethical relativism and moral indifference. Nothing can be determined at the ultimate level of truth and goodness; no interpretation of what is right and just is to be privileged. In an age where absolutes are out of fashion, an easy tolerance of the other can be a mask for intellectual lethargy and ethical failure. How successful has been the Christian theological response?

Christian Responses

Mainline Christianity has responded to the contemporary challenge of pluralism with a variety of strategies. Official ecclesial rhetoric and praxis have become more tolerant of otherness. Internally, a new appreciation of diversity has resulted in accommodation to local churches and commitment to enculturation. There is even acknowledgement that the Eurocentric model of Church needs to be replaced by a model more sensitive to the multicultural reality of most Christian denominations. Externally, Christian churches have generally replaced a conflict model with
a dialogical approach to other traditions. Yet, we must also acknowledge a neo-conservative reaction to all these trends.

At stake are a number of issues centred around Christianity’s ambiguous relationship with the European Enlightenment. Idealist theologies promoted an openness to enlightenment culture and its secular expressions that liberal Christianity celebrated. Rather than seeing the world and church in conflict, Christians and secular humanists could work together for peace, justice and human rights. Freedom was the prime value espoused by all. The enlightenment and Christian projects were essentially one and the same. Here was a model where difference need not be divisive. Unsurprisingly, critics emerged from right and left.

Conservatives accused liberal theologies of reducing Christian faith to the level of a mere humanism. Political theologies espoused a more nuanced critique. These masters of suspicion introduced Christian theology to postmodern awareness of the other. In particular, idealist Christianity needed to become aware of its pretensions of innocence. The mystical-poetic bias of theological idealism needed to be balanced with an appreciation of the Church's own role in the history of guilt. Liberation, feminist and ecological theologies continue the thrust of unearthing Christianity's repressed prophetic-apocalyptic strain.

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2 This was essentially the perspective of Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* (1964).

3 The importance of "mystical prophetic resistance and hope" is a repeated theme of Tracy (1994). On the continuing importance of liberation theologies, see Phan (2000a).

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*5 Gerard Hall, Christian Theological Rhetoric for a Pluralist Age*
conservatives, in their rejection of enlightenment culture, dismiss agendas of both liberal and political theologies.

**The Australian Context**

In the Australian context, mainline Christian churches have learnt from each of these theological movements while continuing to be unsure of what their precise relationship to enlightenment-secular culture should be. Most Christians live happily enough with a mitigated acceptance of the values of pluralism. Never a people prone to metaphysical speculation, Australians feel happier in an ecumenical age where tolerance of otherness is not pushed to its ultimate conclusions. Unlike their European and American counterparts, Australians embrace the values of secular culture with little focus on the religious roots of that culture. They also espouse the dominant myths of the nation-state, universal technology and world capitalism with little attention to the impact of the "western universalizing thrust" on the underclass. And this despite one of the nation's founding myths of a "fair go" for all.

The churches have not been altogether silent in raising the prophetic call of resistance and hope. Social justice issues have recently focused on the country's responsibility towards Aboriginal Australia. A conservative people, many Australians find it difficult to understand why special consideration needs to be given to Australia's indigenous population despite a disreputable colonial history in which Aboriginal people were

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4 Panikkar (1995: 148) states: "the power of the West is linked to this thrust toward universalization".
non-citizens. It was only in 1967 that Aboriginal people were afforded citizenship on par with other Australians. The Prime Minister of the day refuses to make an official apology for the historical wrongs done to Australia's indigenous people. In the midst of such official resistance, leaders of Christian churches are prominent among those calling for reconciliation. They have also sided with voices of resistance to current government policies on refugees, asylum seekers and the recent war in Iraq.

While the churches may be at the forefront of calls for justice, they find themselves in a compromised situation. To begin, their moral power to speak is weakened by the scandals that have beset a small but very public number of their ministers and institutions. Second, as beneficiaries of government monies in health, education and welfare, there is natural reluctance to challenge official policies. Third, with few exceptions, the churches remain European in their structures and bourgeois in their attitudes. Fourth, the mainline churches are losing numbers without, it seems, the will, commitment or imagination to meet this challenge. Fifth, as Australia itself remains uncertain of its identity and place in the world, the churches are often at a

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5 John Winston Howard (PM 1996-2007) refused to embrace the "black arm-band view of history" espousing instead a "forward vision that includes all Australians". Conservative forces in Australia believe it is un-Australian and non-egalitarian to privilege specific cultural groups.
loss in developing a genuinely enculturated theology that speaks in a convincing way of Christian identity and mission.  

The Rhetorical Challenge

The challenge for religious rhetoric today is to articulate transcendent values in the context of the postmodern, pluralistic world. This challenge is profound because it no longer assumes that the truth-claims of religious speech can be divorced from their power to enhance transformative social praxis. In the wake of historical consciousness, which highlights the dynamic and ever-changing reality of religious belief and praxis, the question of Christian rhetoric becomes acute. In particular, the churches need to develop a discerning rhetoric of engagement with post-enlightenment, secular cultures. Evidently, many of the values espoused by these cultures stem from their Jewish and Christian roots; others appear at variance. Since, in the West at least, voices that speak loudest are those based on humanist and secular philosophies, Christianity needs to uncover what it believes to be genuine and false within those philosophies. At the same time, it must allow itself to be critiqued on the basis of its own truth-claims.

This is not an appeal for a rhetoric of the lowest common denominator nor a call for some kind of vaguely Christian ecumenical esperanto. The

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6 For two recent discussions of Australian theologies and theologians, see Malone (1999) and Goosen (2000).

7 David Walsh (1999) argues that western culture remains profoundly Christian even in the wake of the attempts of modernity and postmodernity to deny its Christian roots.

8 The notion of an artificially-created universal language or ecumenical esperanto is promoted by Leonard Swidler (1987).
dialogue between Christianity and enlightenment culture is bound by these same rigours of discourse that govern interfaith encounters: there should be no attempt to minimize differences in origin, experience and understanding among traditions. Liberal Christianity is rightly critiqued on the score of its tendency to brush aside divergences and even contradictions between Christian faith and secular humanism. Equally, there is need to implore conservative Christians to recognise that sin, guilt and error are not confined to the other camp. More poignantly, there are grounds for dialogue precisely because there are shared experiences and understandings. Indeed, a shared rhetoric.⁹

The New Rhetoric

In this context, rhetoric is defined as "discourse on the margins of thought and action" (Hariman, 1986: 51). It does not focus on the doctrinal formulation of beliefs but on the images, metaphors, gestures and partial logics associated with the communication of those beliefs (Happel, 1987: 194ff.). Theology is often critiqued for being too dry, intellectual, even sterile; spirituality is said to be more accessible to people. Good Christian rhetoric, aware of the dangers of separating the two, brings theology and spirituality together. The doctrinal expressions of Christian faith are not ignored, but their formulation takes care to address the hearers according to their cultural and spiritual worlds. Good rhetoric means effective communication.

⁹ Phan (2000b: 724f.) states the cultural heritage of the West provides a "shared language with which ideological opponents can at least make themselves understood to one another." This is contrasted to the situation of dialogue between Christianity and Eastern cultures.
A rhetorical approach to Christian discourse challenges us to move beyond the valuable yet narrow field of reason and argument. Religions and cultures are something more than rational thought-systems. They are total ways of life that include symbols, stories, rituals, hymns and multiple other forms of human expression. Kierkegaard's critique of "poor little chatty Christianity" enunciates an over-valuation of the logos to the detriment of these other significant attributes of Christian faith. Rhetoric recognizes the role of the mythos as well as the logos in authentic dialogue. Here we acknowledge the value of the other even when we disagree on purely rational grounds.

In contrast to classical rhetoric which focussed on the speaker's powers of persuasion, the new rhetoric is inherently dialogical. It emphasises the mutuality of speaker and audience in their common search for authentic values, saving truth and liberating action. In Happel's words:

A new rhetoric will redescribe the interaction of speaker and audience as mutual, rather than as the conviction of the masses by a single orator. It will note the transformative character of language for the establishment of the grounds, values, and bases of community. Rather than focusing simply upon the eloquent tropes of style, it will recognize the intrinsic relationship between truth-claims and metaphors, between the authenticity of the speaker and the values preached. It will offer a critique of the biases of speaker and audience so that a transforming social praxis might be appropriated. (1987: 195).

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10 Panikkar highlights this distinction between mythos and logos. He states that pluralism belongs to the level of myth rather than ideology: "pluralism does not stem from the logos but from the mythos" (1979a: 102).
Such a rhetoric is well disposed to a pluralistic, postmodern world in which the values and praxis of multiple traditions need to be brought together in mutual respect and critique. According to scholars of the new rhetoric, there are four major tropes of discourse: metaphor; metonymy; synecdoche; irony (Klemm, 1987: 446; White, 1978: 1-26). These are reviewed with an eye to their utilization in Christian theological discourse. In view of the pluralistic challenge of our age, the major focus will be on the postmodern metaphor of otherness. Some insight into the three other major tropes of discourse will also be discussed.

**Metaphor**

Metaphor arises in response to a new experience we cannot comprehend. Klemm suggests the historical crisis of meaning captured the imagination of the post-war world: the crisis-metaphor. In contrast, postmodern discourse is confronted by the new challenge of otherness that asks us "to uncover what is questionable and what is genuine in self and other, while opening self to other and allowing other to remain other" (1987: 456). It follows that the postmodern metaphor of otherness also assumes human, cultural and religious connectedness as well as acknowledging radical difference. Otherness is ultimate, but it may not be debilitating.

The other person, culture, religion or society is a revelation waiting to occur, to unsettle, to call into new ways of thinking and acting. Jesus is confronted by such a situation with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30). His initial reaction is one of discomfort: "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". The woman
captures Jesus unawares: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers". Jesus' entire attitude changes. He commends the woman, heals her daughter and commends her great faith (Matthew 15:28). Jesus does not enter into doctrinal implications of the encounter although, no doubt, these are significant. The new Christian rhetoric needs to articulate its own discomfort, enter into dialogue with other cultures and religions, and be prepared to think and act differently as a result of these encounters.

Who Are We?

Whereas traditional Christian rhetoric relied on the authority of the Scriptures and/or Church to persuade its audience, postmodern rhetoric faces the other as a potential source of truth. "Who are You"? "Who are We"? In a predominantly secular culture, it is important to acknowledge the values we share in our differences. For example, secular justice and freedom may be interpreted in terms of the biblical God of grace and liberation. Christian love and forgiveness are not without meaning among socialist, egalitarian and humanistic philosophies. Equally, we need to express our concerns and challenges. Christians express alarm at a materialist philosophy that effectively denies self-transcendence. Secular culture challenges the discrepancy between the values preached and the lives lived by Christians. Both need to be open to the challenge of the other – and to change as a result of the encounter.

At the level of theological discourse, concepts such as salvation, sin and grace, may be a barrier to effective communication not only with secular society but with Christians as well. The rhetorical challenge is not
to bypass the language of Scripture and tradition but to express these realities at the level of symbol and ritual – for example, through the expressive and visual arts – in ways that correlate with contemporary secular experience. The sense of the sacred is not absent in the world of theatre, film, youth culture nor in the acknowledged need for ethical principles in business and politics. This is not to glorify secular culture, but to state that the churches do not have the monopoly on transcendent values. Church and State have much to learn from each other in a dialogical relationship that allows room for authentic resistance and the cry of the prophet – from either camp.

Otherness may also be a metaphor for the apparent silence of God in a time, culture and people who may be largely unaware of their call to be something other than a cog in the capitalistic machine. Otherness is also represented in the outraged voices, passive victims and sometimes profoundly wounded members of both Church and society. The otherness metaphor challenges Christian discourse to retrieve the dangerous memories of its own tradition as a catalyst for engagement with the profound inequalities of our world. The doctrine of the triune God is a metaphor for the dignity and equality of all human persons. Certainly, the Christian West needs to uncover its largely

11 Coles (1999) argues that the shift from the 'religious' to the 'scientific' mindset retains a sense of connection to the sacred.

12 Political theologians articulate this challenge in various ways. In his memoria passionis thesis, Metz (1980) highlights the 'dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus Christ'.

13 Gerard Hall, Christian Theological Rhetoric for a Pluralist Age
repressed mystical tradition if it is to speak to the increasing numbers who no longer find the transforming presence of Christ and the Spirit in the churches.

**Metonymy, Synecdoche, Irony**

Metonymy represents the movement from the universal to the particular. According to Klemm, the metonymic elements of the postmodern metaphor of otherness are dispersed according to self, other, the encompassing world and time (1987: 457). As I have argued elsewhere (Hall, 2002a: 45-49), Jacques Dupuis' Christian theology of religious pluralism (Dupuis 1997; Dupuis 2002) is an expression of metonymy according to these various elements: for Christians, saving truth is uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ (self); in other religions, the mystery of divine truth may be mediated in ways that Christians cannot know or experience (other); beyond particular religions, the universal power of the Logos and the unbound action of the Spirit mediate God's saving love in historically specific ways (encompassing world). Finally, for Dupuis, otherness remains ultimate since he does not presume convergence of the various traditions either in this world or at the eschaton (time).

Synecdoche is likened to a "second metaphor" which arises from dissatisfaction with former experience and language. It appears as the inbreaking of new consciousness or a "new revelatory experience" (Panikkar, 1979b, 195). Jesus uses synecdoche when he speaks of the "reign of God". Although the concept existed in the Jewish tradition, Jesus'
Abba-experience transforms the concept into something more immediate and powerful. In terms of religious experience, synecdoche is less a concept than a symbol disclosing the divine mystery in a new way. A contemporary example of synecdoche is what Panikkar calls the "cosmotheandric" vision: everything that is encapsulates the divine (freedom), human (consciousness) and cosmic (matter, space, time, energy). These are not three different aspects of universal reality, but an expression of the intrinsic, threefold relationship constituting everything that is (Panikkar, 1993: 54-77). Existence is to be in relationship whether we speak of God, the world, ourselves. This enables Panikkar to speak of secular humanism's insight into the ultimacy of the world in terms of "sacred secularity". He also stresses that the new revelatory experience comes as the fruit of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

The final trope in our discussion is irony. Christian doctrines are nothing if not ironic: God is one and three; Christ is divine and human; Christ is the one-and-only universal saviour and God wills all to be saved; the reign of God is yet to come and already here among us. Revelation is ostensibly ironic insofar as the divine mystery is mediated symbolically or "through what is not itself but is other than itself" (Klemm, 1987: 463). Such ironic and symbolic awareness allows us to experience the divine mystery in terms of our own tradition without excluding other possible ways in which other traditions experience and name the sacred. Biblical or doctrinal fundamentalism is adjudged inappropriate from a rhetorical perspective on account of its absence of perceived irony. Theologically, it wants to limit the reality of God to the confines of human
thought processes. The parables of Jesus are saturated with irony as a means of shocking his followers into re-examining basic human prejudices, awakening possibilities of new religious experience and provoking the praxis of God's reign in the world.

The primary metaphor of otherness will dictate that non-western cultures and non-Christian traditions become central to authentic Christian self-understanding. The trope of metonymy will focus on specific and different experiences of Christian enculturation providing a genuinely pluralistic appreciation of Christian identity in the third millennium. The synecdochic inbreaking of the wholly other God will forge new expressions of the divine mystery that are consonant with Christian faith communities and other traditions. Finally, effective Christian rhetoric will be ironic and kenotic, speaking authentically of the mystery of God while being profoundly aware of the inadequacy of all human speech about God.

**Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue**

Today, in face of postmodern proclamations of the death of God, the end of the human subject and the extinction of planet earth, we need a new experience of the interconnectedness of all reality. No one religion or culture has all the answers or is "capable of rescuing humanity from its present predicament" (Panikkar, 1995: 175). However, together in relationship and eventually communion with the other, new possibilities emerge. What is needed is not some fresh theory or new doctrine, but authentic interfaith and
intercultural dialogue in which religious and cultural traditions define their identities in relationship with rather than in opposition to the other (Hall, 2011). Such dialogue needs to be rooted in the unique experiences and stories of each tradition (Panikkar, 1999).

This new approach to rhetoric cannot settle Christian theological claims. There is always a place for doctrinal dispute and argument. Nonetheless, Christians would do well to recall they are "primarily a remembering and storytelling community" rather than a "community interpreting and arguing" (Metz, 1980: 212). Jesus preached mainly through stories. In human encounter, when stories are told the threat of doctrinal dispute subsides and new understanding of the other emerges. Something of this is already occurring in cultures where indigenous peoples, the world's great story-tellers, are finally being heard. One example of the fruits of such dialogue is a renewed appreciation of the earth's sacredness leading Christian churches to re-examine the place of ecology in their own theological traditions. One hopes this will culminate in transformed ecological praxis on cultural-spiritual as well as environmental-political grounds.

We live in a pluralistic world in which no single cultural or religious perspective, neither Christianity nor the West, holds all the cards nor plays
all the tunes.\textsuperscript{13} Christians are called to live out their vocation in confident engagement with this world even as faith in their own institutional structures diminishes. Religious and cultural dialogue is a crucial need and urgent opportunity to redress postmodern fragmentation. It will also prove to be the source of imagination and vision for Christian identity and mission in the third millennium. This will go hand in hand with an emerging religious rhetoric which takes its distance from the authoritative manner of classical rhetoric since the voice of the other needs to be included in the ongoing, critical and mutual search for authenticity in religious belief and social praxis.

\textbf{REFERENCES}


HALL, Gerard (2011). “Raimon Panikkar's Intercultural and Interreligious Hermeneutics” in C. Mendonca & B. Hilberath, (eds.), \textit{Religion & \textsuperscript{13} "Pluralism tells us here that one should not assume for oneself (person or culture) the role of being conductor of the human and much less of the cosmic orchestra. It is enough with the music (divine), the musicians (the human) and their instruments (the cosmos)" (Panikkar, 1995: 180).


Source: This presentation by Gerard Hall was made at the International Academy of Practical Theology Conference, University of Manchester, United Kingdom, in April 2003. It is published by the same title in E. Graham & A. Rowlands (eds.), Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism. International Practical Theology, Vol. 1 (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 106-117. A few modifications have been made to that text.