
I. Postcolonial Criticism of Christian Systematic Theology - Sugirtharajah

A. Hesitancy to critically evaluate the impact of empire among systematic theologians (Sug 22). Two early approaches to the role of empire in Christian mission – Max Warren and Reinhold Niebuhr.

B. Warren – sanitizes colonialism:

1. Imperialism has a place and purpose in God’s providence (cf. justifications for American slavery of Africans) (Sug 23)
2. Empires benefit subject peoples – bring peace and progress. (Sug 24)
3. Empires advance vocational consciousness and vocational feeling – serving others (e.g. Peace Corps). Pt.: If Empire is accompanied by service, then the good actions justify a nation’s imperialism.
4. Grateful natives – justifying empire on basis of positive feedback from individual members of the colonized minority. (Sug 25)
5. Says atrocities performed in name of imperialism are result of human failure or sin (e.g. failure is not inherent as a component of an imperialistic system, like systemic racism).

C. Niebuhr - the neutral or beneficial motives of colonialism.

1. Missionary motive – desire to spread benefits of strong nations based on conviction that empires are trustees of civilization (e.g. concept of American exceptionalism – unique character of America makes it a providential instrument to shape other/lesser nations) (Sug 25).

2. Imperialism motivated by economic factors which were less devastating than ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance (Sug 26)

3. Political motive – security, power, prestige which must be used responsibly. (U.S. doctrine of national self-interest used as justification for interfering in other nations suggests lack of awareness about self-interest which motivates & justifies actions).

D. These two early theologians present empire as morally neutral and both failed to acknowledge the fundamental premise of empire – assumption of the empire’s superiority and ignorance of the rich heritage of other peoples’ traditions. This leads to assumption that western values should prevail (Sug 26).
II. “The Gospel, Language, and Culture” – Sanneh

A. Thesis: Intertwined nature of gospel and culture must avoid dualistic extremities – Gospel without culture becomes a vague abstraction, but powerless gospel is nothing more than cultural ideology, exemplified by good manners, a kind of respectable liberalism (Sanneh 47). Pure platonic Christianity becomes religion of the elite. Gospel has its own integrity and speaks to every cultural and personal situation.

B. The paradoxical characteristics of Christianity as a force of cultural integration:

1. No single geographic center – no single center of faith to exclusion of other places (cf. Mecca in Islam) (Sanneh 47).

2. Christianity is based on popular/vernacular language – translatability and cross-cultural implications of the faith built into makeup of Christianity (47).

3. Christianity rejects elitist gnostic discourse emphasizing that religious language belongs to the people. Christianity emphasizes the indigenous particularities of a given culture (Sanneh 48).

4. Christianity allows the adopting of different names for Christians allowing it to be adopted across cultures – this is seen especially in the positive attitude toward denominational affiliations.

5. Central point in the relationship between gospel and culture – All Christianity is inculcatured Christianity (48). However, major criticism of western Christian missions – they bring combination of gospel & the host culture into 1/3 world while suppressing indigenous expressions of the faith.

C. The significance of culture to the practice of Christianity:

1. Danger of reducing religion to its cultural forms can reduce God to a point of reference in a human cultural encounter (Sanneh 49). Instead, cultural markers give substance to religious reality.

2. Opposing danger – ideological materialism – the material can become the essential element in faith and God becomes nothing more than a symbol or metaphor to reveal the material (49). In this instance, the material shapes reality resulting in fetishism. Instead, material objects acquire symbolic meaning in relation to specific religious ideas and ritual actions (e.g. the bread and wine of Eucharist gain their meaning from the soteriological triumph of Christ).
3. Metaphorical language is derived from cultural understandings but it can obscure the original concrete experience to which it refers (e.g., metaphors used to describe the church such as the Body pointed to specific characteristics of the nature of the church) (Sanneh 50).

4. Cultural formulations of God are only possible with the understanding of God as the prior category, i.e., God precedes and exists prior to any language or explanations used about him (Sanneh 51).

5. This rejects the idea of God as a human creation in response to our necessity.

6. Pt.: Religious people employ culture to represent God as transcendent being, but the God represented may not be identified with one cultural representation to the exclusion of others (51). At the same time, the truth of God is destroyed if it becomes synonymous with cultural forms (52).

7. Two consequences of the religious status of culture: a) relativization of culture; b) destigmatizing of cultural taboos (Sanneh 53).

8. Examples of cultural pluralism in the church:
   a) Vernacular translation of the Bible began with adopting of indigenous terms, concepts, & customs (Sanneh 54).
   b) Vernacular criteria determined success of translations.
   c) Use of vernacular led to proliferation of languages into which scriptures were translated.
   d) Translation of the gospel into vernacular led to development of vernacular alphabets, grammars having impact on the local culture including leading to nationalism.

III. **Anthropological Reflections** by Hiebert

A. Selection examines how anthropological insights (how we see humans), theology (our understanding of God and the Christian faith), and missions (our approaches to sharing the faith) come together effectively (Hiebert 10).

B. Biblical worldview as basis of approach: belief that God has revealed himself in scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the church and the world (Hiebert 11).

C. Worldview also shaped by particular culture and we need to recognize how cultural worldviews shape our theologies.

D. Systematic theology – based on study of Bible but answers questions of origin and nature of the created order through theories and methods based in philosophy (Hiebert 11).
E. Biblical theology – draws categories from scripture using a historical perspective to answer questions about God’s purpose, design, and intention (Hiebert 11).

F. Biblical anthropological theology – observations about humans and societies illumine how we understand scripture (Hiebert 12).

G. Theologies are based on way our culture looks at reality, so different approaches to scripture make us aware of our cultural assumptions.

H. Insights gained from the three spheres of theology:

1. Systematic theology shows that people are created in image of God, fallen, but redeemable, the focus of God’s love (Hiebert 13)
2. Biblical theology shows God’s presence in human history, preparing the way for the gospel;
3. Anthropological theology – shows how people’s social and cultural systems expedite or impedes their understanding of the Bible’s message.

I. Etic analysis – an outsider’s view; emic analysis – the insider’s view.

For Further Reading:


