Inside communities, outside conventions: What is at stake in doing theology?

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Summary: When the way to proceed is uncertain and vision is hampered, we need to make a new compass to provide orientation and direction for assessment and renewal of theological enterprise. After sketching key challenges of the postmodern global terrain for theological work and community, I offer four “points” (practices) that have power to locate and guide Christian theologies and ethics toward 21st-century negotiations of “a new global commons,” shared public spaces dedicated to a less violent and more mutual common life. I contend that what is at stake for those doing theology and ethics is relating to the crises of postmodern context in ways that express and practice the bearing of God’s love in the world by shaping justice in communities where domination is resisted and religious practice can be both positive and subversive.

Résumé: Lorsque la façon de procéder est incertaine et que l’horizon est bouché, il s’avère nécessaire de faire à nouveau le point pour s’orienter et de se diriger dans l’évaluation et le renouvellement de l’entreprise théologique. Après avoir esquissé les principaux défis posés par la situation postmoderne au travail et à la communauté théologique, je présente quatre points (pratiques) qui peuvent situer et guider les théologies et les éthiques chrétiennes à négocier pour le 21^e siècle un «nouveau peuple global», partageant des espaces publics consacrés à une vie moins violente et à une vie plus communautaire. Je prétends que ce qui est en jeu pour ceux qui font de la théologie et de l’éthique est lié avec les crises du contexte postmoderne de telle sorte que cela exprime et mette en pratique l’amour porteur de Dieu dans le

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monde en construisant la justice dans les communautés où on résiste à la domination et où la pratique religieuse peut-être à la fois positive et subversive.

Introduction

What is theology? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to tell the story that when God gets up in the morning, the Holy One gathers the angels of heaven around and asks this simple question: "Where does my creation need mending?" And the story would continue, "theology consists of worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning." A more formal definition of theology states its task as interpreting Scripture and tradition in a particular historical situation of believers. While a wide range of interpretations and practices result from various interpretations, I am rooted as a Christian in faith-and-justice traditions. This approach to theology is grounded in struggles for change that begin with attention to creation's variegated suffering and its myriad sources and it aims to regenerate incarnational activity, practices that renew hope for creation's survival and flourishing. This sort of theological work is geared to respond to what people on this planet so deeply long for today—meaningful community and the mending of creation.

When the way to proceed is uncertain and vision is hampered, we need to make a new compass to provide orientation and direction for assessment and renewal of theological enterprise. After sketching the postmodern global terrain of theological work, I will offer four "points"—practices—that are energizing a renewed search for faith and justice that have power to locate and guide Christian theologies and ethics toward 21st-century negotiations of "a new global commons," shared public spaces dedicated to a less violent and more mutual common life (Parks et al. 1996: 2-4, 15-16, 107, 145-46, 213, 241).

To reflect on the state of the art of doing and teaching theology and ethics, I pose the dilemma, "Inside communities, outside conventions: What is at stake in doing theology?" If we are to discover the spirit and practices of life afresh, the title suggests that situatedness and unconventionality may be marks not only of a repositioned, but of a reconfigured theological enterprise. "Inside communities" refers to the locatedness of theology, its incarnational, communal and contestable nature. Community refers to groups that have mutual ties and ongoing commitments within a shared if diverse history and purpose. "Outside conventions" breaks with abstract, mono-systematic models whose conventions distort divine-human-cosmic relationships; it suggests the necessity of confounding categorical thinking which does not admit many contexts, for example, the mutual implications of religion, gender, race, class and *eros*.

Hence I approach the task of theology as both disruptive and constructive as we move into "a new global commons." I will contend that what is

at stake for those doing theology and ethics is relating to the crisis of the postmodern present in ways that express and practice the bearing of God's love in the world by shaping justice in communities where domination is resisted and religious identities can be both positive and subversive.

Postmodernity and challenges to community and theology

That we are living on a theological terrain that is fractured and marginal is common knowledge. An initial exploration of the current postmodern context of theology will highlight especially the loss of a sure and certain sense of community. Today our worries are shaped under the world historical condition of postmodernity, a term about which there is little consensus. Nonetheless, in contrast to modernity's optimism and sense of progress through worldly mastery, postmodernity erupts from the massive evils of this century that threaten existence and make fragile the human project. Issues press heavily upon us: massive global suffering, poverty, greed, unprecedented ecological destruction and heartfelt spiritual crises and searches. Postmodern awareness is poised on pluralism, limits and ambiguity, local knowledges and marginalized particularities as well as on the ever-unifying globalization of the world order, with its oppression of peoples, communities and nature.

The effects of this shift from modern to postmodern on religious life is far-reaching. Theologically, community is matrix and form of faith. A community of faith develops around its generative story shaping a distinctive identity through its worship and practices over time in complex and diverse contexts. Today faith communities in Canada and beyond are deeply shaped by postmodern dynamics. Theologians and ethicists are therefore trying to engage the key features of our current postmodern condition.¹

1. The loss of western cultural dominance is experienced as a legitimization crisis; liberal Protestantism has been the form of Christianity hardest hit because it accommodated most fully to modernism with its emphasis on individualism and notions of progress and mastery.

2. The undeniable reality of pluralism is recognized, for example, in the fact of global cultures and the historical construction of all knowledge. Pluralism has meant a sense of fragmentation and the rise in prominence of subordinated groups.

3. The most significant feature of postmodernism is the profound shifts in 20th-century capitalism that shape our foundational institutions and overarching social consensus. The globalization of capital and the re-structuring of the Canadian economy within this framework have had a variety of effects on land, resources and community (Lind 1995). For white middle-class Christians, postmodernity means the passing of Western bourgeois culture, with its ideals of individualism, white patriarchy, private rights, historical progress and the absoluteness of Christianity. Unlike the postmodernists of reaction, who call themselves neoconservatives or postliberal, I

stand with those of resistance (Hodgson 1994: 55) who shape a critical postmodernism that is suspicious of all hegemonic discourses without abandoning attention to the material conditions of people's lives. In this politics of resistance, focus on collective action for freedom, complex subjectivity and moral agency, human rights and dialogue, norms of adequacy and the historical embeddedness of communities, including religious and academic, is considered crucial for theological work in a postmodern age.

In short, postmodernity signals ambiguity, diversity, plurality and especially the system of global capitalism which for the majority world impoverishes cultures and destroys communities. More and more these signs indicate the fundamental structural shifts which are propelling the poor, the elderly, aboriginal people and others of colour, and always more women and children, into a spiral of social neglect. All of us are construed as consumers and are bombarded with an endless assortment of tempting goods. Major sectors of wealth and decision making have decided to value short-term accumulation of profit and capital at the expense of permanently writing off many depressed communities. Just look around Canada to find evidence, but especially note the Atlantic provinces, the prairies, the urban cores and many aboriginal communities. The shift to wealth accumulation in service and computerized technologies means that many Canadians lack the requisite skills for this paradigm shift, and gender, class, and racial discrimination will block avenues for retooling to meet new industries' demands. (For example, when computers are not available to working class or underclass kids they enter school with a new kind of disadvantage.) In short, globalization destroys peoples and environments—we have an *oikumene* (world household) of competition, domination and possessions at the expense of an *oikumene* of sharing, co-operation and solidarity.

The initial sketch of key aspects of the dominant theological and global situation leads us to consider how this context makes community a desired yet problematic category.² In her important book, *Coming Together, Coming Apart: Religion, Modernity and Community* (1997), Elizabeth Bounds explores this ambiguous heritage regarding community, particularly in modern Protestant tradition. She observes that on the one hand Christian tradition has strongly affirmed community. For example, values and teachings of radical inclusion are found in early Christian ideas of egalitarian discipleship in which women and men, slaves and free, Jew and Greek are to be included, where violence is eschewed and forgiveness is to be the ethic of community. Yet on the other hand, this language which functions in many liberal congregations today is often taken to mean privatized, "just for those who believe and act the same as we do."

Bounds points out that transformative possibilities are lost when the language of inclusion is applicable only to the life of the internal community and to the life of the individual within it. This yearning to belong is understandable given how stressed many individuals feel as their own material and emotional well-being seem increasingly insecure. Ironically, as Chris-

tians withdraw to find hope and wisdom, so the blessings of connection with a wider world wither, losing the ties to stories and struggles that illuminate the nature and causes of so much suffering as well as ways of courage and invitations to resist. Therefore, many Christian communities are equipped for seeking global justice only in limited ways. They appear more interested in maintaining secure spaces which can sustain them in their attempts to cope with the problems of daily living rather than with connecting with grassroots and global efforts to survive.

Adapting to the demands of modernity, the Protestant churches thus lost their critical and prophetic voice, failing energetically and effectively to take the individual beyond privatized faith into connection with concrete, social and historical contexts. People are left overwhelmed in the midst of relationships in need of healing and hope: the dominance-dependence relationships between the powerful and the powerless, the growing gap between rich and poor, the collapse of the nonhuman as well as the human environment, the structural and physical violence towards people of colour and women and children, and widespread injustice toward gay and lesbian people. Hence, as Dorothee Soelle (1990: 17ff.) underlines, within theological frameworks of both orthodox and liberal paradigms, the kingdom of God (God's community of right relations) is regularly suppressed in favour of the redemption of the individual.

When conventions of greed and exploitation isolate the interests of the individual from those of the community a deep desire for connection is provoked. In the history of theology and ethics, community has often been a rallying cry, rather than a critical concept, since it invokes connection, safety, familiarity, belonging—all experiences we crave in our bewildering, fragmented and exploitative society. Desires for an instant place to call home can overwhelm our more critical reflections if we fail to consider how community may mean exclusion as easily as it means inclusion. Hence, in this account adequate theological work factors in power dynamics, which are given. For example, take the concept of home. I may long for a home where my many selves (advocate, Christian, family member, feminist, friend, gardener, professor, spouse, etc.) can reside—yet the metaphor of home conjures up in me conflicting images. On the one hand, I hold on to promises of a harmonious and intimate, safe place and yet at the same time I know the heavy price paid by girls and women in abuse, oppression, exclusion and regulation (Delhi 1991: 63). Thus the assumption of the sanctity of the private individual and the home in, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr's "moral man and immoral society," is disrupted and hence open to transformation.

Similar to the construct of "home" in the history of theology and ethics, community has been a presupposed category, since it resided in the area of "what everyone knows." Yet in times of social change when community no longer can be assumed, community becomes both more prominent and contested—such as in earliest Christianity, during the Protestant Reforma-

tion, and in our contemporary Canada with its sense of deep alienation, despair and uncertainty in the loss of the sure footing as modern existence erodes. What is increasingly being eroded is a conception of community as a place where diverse parts of the commons could come together and cooperate for shared purposes such as good education and affordable health care. Concerned Christians are thus ambivalent inhabitants of a globalized commons, seeking to discern ways to subvert conventions of greed, apathy, competition and domination in order to build networks of solidarity and compassion where the capacity to be present to one another and to work tenaciously for mutual well-being is normative. Therefore, precisely because we live in a postmodern world-historical context in which one geopolitical economy controls all people and our interactions with the rest of nature, a global horizon and yearning for a new commons are today the appropriately universal perspective of any Christian theology.

To explore a way forward, to commit to a livable future, let us be in dialogue with Mary Jo Leddy's theopoetics in her "Meditation on a threadbare moment" (1990: 167-72, excerpts).

We face the empty loom.
It looms large before us
revealing a threadbare moment,
what has come apart at the seams.

Given that the foundations of the modern world are unravelling so any simple reknitting is impossible, what sort of postmodernism will we follow, that of reaction or of resistance? How will we name our travail, awaken to the exigencies of our moment, and reimagine community in a world "where the social fabric is frayed / where only small threads / of human mercy remain?" Leddy replies:

We must place ourselves together
in prayer, on the periphery,
on pilgrimage...
Let us nourish this prayer
with the symbols and stories of our outrageous faith.
Being outrageous enough to risk:
We position ourselves for the future
by taking our place
with those on the periphery of the empire ...
Outside the periphery of power
we will feel the hunger and thirst
for a different future ...

Leddy raises the deepest spiritual questions: Where do we go to find God? Where and how are there signs of justice and peace? This God-walk underscores what is at stake under postmodern conditions—faithfulness not modelled around a uniform homogeneity of unchanging tradition but

around discovering God in the midst of those who struggle to release their thwarted power, who have been denied participation which right relations (justice, in religious contexts) and a new global commons of participation and inclusion demand.

Hence, I concur that the theological task today is simultaneously to analyze the twin threats of utter destruction of creation and the constant loss of social and personal well-being *and* also to respond with a double movement: of disruption, denouncement, critique *and* vision, construction, proclamation (Chopp and Taylor 1994). This theo-ethics requires investigation of power relations—as ideas, values, persons, communities and institutions; as the deepening and honing of complex capacities to respond, influence and shape one's reality in community (Schweiker and Welker 1997: 5). Here power is understood in terms of “the ability to act on and effectually shape the world around us, particularly through collective action and institutional policy” (Harrison 1985: 290, n. 5). Adequate theological practice, therefore, involves a complex engagement in the messiness of struggles for justice and community in the multiple forums we inhabit or connect with. Then “denouncement” emerges as lamentation, careful analysis of the sources of suffering, and opposition to structures and practices deemed sinful. “Announcement” envisions grace, naming sources of sustenance and hope, especially for those most deprived.

Compass for charting a theological way in the new commons

In postmodern times of uncertainty, disorientation and fragmentation, we need guidance towards horizons that open spaces for communities to contribute to a new global commons. Let us take a traditional tool—a compass—and put four directions or points to orient ourselves towards these horizons. The first point of the compass directs us to shaping theologies that encourage inclusive communities that practise love, justice and mercy with respectful connections with Otherness. The second compass point directs us to the resources and power of language and symbol, story and image in the constructive work of living and thinking about life in relation to God. The third compass point directs us to revisioning community not only as among people but necessarily grounded in the wider *oikumene* of the planet earth. The fourth and final point touches on theological vocation and its sustenance as persons in communities of local congregations and theological education.

Compass point 1: Shaping communities—constructive engagement of otherness

The challenge today is to develop notions of community which attend to the different features of postmodernism—diversity, plurality and globalization. Given the fact that there is no longer a common story that binds people into community, a key postmodern question is “how do we talk across particularities?” We can orient ourselves to practices of shaping communi-

ties with those who may not share the same theological or theoretical frame with the help of Adrienne Rich's poem "Natural resources" in her collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978: 67):

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
 so much has been destroyed
 I have to cast my lot with those
 who age after age, perversely
 with no extraordinary power,
 reconstitute the world.

Rich's lucid poem alerts us to the need for taking a stance that makes connections for the sake of "reconstituting the world" which here refers us to a new global commons. If the mainline churches in Canada can bear the truth of their marginalization and if Christians are to share in constructing a shared future, we must reverse a regular perception of "us" as givers to those needy/deficient "them." Indeed, the deep spiritual wisdom, practise of goodness and undoubted devotion of people who follow other ways, religious traditions or spiritual practices, show my co-religionists that while in Jesus Christians have a decisive encounter with the ways of the divine in the world, Christians do not have a monopoly on either truth or virtue. In short, while the dominant churches in North America have been comfortable in their relationship with empires, we cannot continue to follow this path and remain as church.

What blocks white middle-class people from shaping diverse, inclusive communities is an ideology of uniformity that tries to control all aspects of life and to repress all differences to ensure security. The difficulty of constructive engagement with Otherness, which I believe is a prerequisite for community, is well explained by Gloria Albrecht when she writes about "the two sources of discomfort, two challenges to our epistemological and moral equilibrium" (1995: 140). There are, she says, two kinds of knowledge: the erudite knowledge of those who enjoy some privilege and the disqualified or "naive" knowledge of those who do not. The danger for most of our liberal congregations and intellectuals is that we attend to the one source—of privileged, erudite knowledge—which is often the one we existentially comprehend the most deeply; we then neglect the related source: the disqualified knowledge of the Other. We need simultaneous attention to both sources of knowledge, erudite and disqualified, for shaping communities that serve a common good (Legge 1992). Thus, for some of us the challenge is to risk participating in communities that offer support to engage difference and Otherness constructively and with compassion. (Examples of such struggles for transformative justice include those engaged in by AIDS support networks, community economic development projects, the global movement to end violence against women and children, L'Arche communities, organizing for affordable day care and the 1995 Women's March Against Poverty—For Bread and Roses, Justice and Jobs. All these engage otherness constructively and imagine communities of respectful, engaged pluralism.)

If this be the way forward, communities can be created only by concrete involvement and struggles with actual dilemmas, suffering, and joys in particular historical locations. If God is active and present in mending the world, such theological commitment is expressed in practices of sharing in divine healing, liberative and reconciling work which is messy and incomplete, never perfect or incontestable. Hence, church communities, like theologies, should not be modelled around a unified, unchanging appropriation of a set format or Christian tradition but around a notion of engaging tradition as a rich and diverse heritage, and around compassionate and liberative solidarity which opens both tradition and community to a variety of contesting models, appropriations and transformations. Gregory Baum presses the point eloquently: "It is precisely the task of liberation theology to criticize collective identities that legitimate oppression and to redefine them in accordance with collective stories that (1) bind persons together in the struggle for justice and (2) reveal the nature of the liberated society" (Baum 1989: 223). In short, it is simply impossible to separate theology from an ethics of community.

The challenge for Christian theologies, therefore, is to maintain particular identities and liberative practices within dynamic, kaleidoscopic communities. There is no either/or here but *both* community and diversity. Indeed, the goal of a liberatory theology is to forge new and concrete bonds of community. Can we hear in the calls for justice then not just concern but solidarity with and accountability to those made other? Such community begins with telling our/their own stories, especially the painful parts, which also opens the possibility to formation of new narratives. Such generativity holds those engaged to accountability—of learning the limits of any interpretation, of being open to being changed by the insight offered by the narratives and analyses of those who suffer often in very different contexts, and of using well collective power. For example, religious communities can practise hospitality to encourage constructive encounters with otherness; such engagement can foster compassion, insight and the courage to move beyond conventions of exclusion (Bass 1997). This brings us to the second compass point of orientation: language, symbol and story that mediate this complex engagement.

Compass point 2: Religious grammar—articulating God in relation

Theology in this construal is no longer primarily about interpreting "the tradition" as if one transparent trajectory existed; rather theology is about interpreting particular experiences and practices in specific contexts, engaging others' interpretations, and also being illuminated and transformed into renewed interaction. Theology in this mode faces the world and social life as a human construction within limits of power and resources. That is, human beings are "world-makers" who aim to meet the necessities of life and to create meanings and cultures and theologies that func-

tion to the destruction or continuation of the world. Recall that the Greek term *symbollein* from which we derive our current English word symbol, suggests putting things together, like a mosaic. Theology's task, through symbol and doctrine, becomes the simultaneous patchwork creation of both identities and spaces of Christian practice. This work brings together critical contextual analysis, biblical interpretations, fashioning of new meanings, practices and forms of spirituality and community.

What I would call a creative theological practice allied with a postmodern resistance, therefore, goes beyond any narrow confessionalism, Christian imperialism, or dogmatism; it is deeply committed to the insights and advances of critically constructive theologies born of struggles against official conventions and cultures. Given the pressing awareness of social and political oppression, human interrelatedness with the natural world, and the realities of religious pluralism, the idea of God must be thoroughly revisioned. As Rebecca Chopp explains, a new symbolics will mean living and proclaiming the gospel as "perfectly open sign that blesses specificity, difference, solidarity, embodiment, anticipation, and transformation" (Chopp 1989: 116).

Religious symbolic grammar can orient people to God and the cosmos. However, it is filled with both treasure and treachery. As noted, religious traditions are ambiguous. We have only to recall the litany of abuse, for example, of women, people of colour and gays and lesbians throughout biblical traditions, to know that some have experienced both good news and oppression in the name of God. As we live into a new commons, we must cultivate images, symbols, stories and songs that build up appropriate identities and inclusive communities. To do so we need to choose discerningly how and what we employ of them. Different voices in theology and culture are guides to attend to the strengths and limits of language and symbols, stories and songs. Artists and writers are often our best teachers.

One example will suffice: Joy Kogawa's *The Rain Ascends* (1995). It is about a church family in southern Alberta where the character Millicent, daughter of an eminent pastor, discovers in her middle age that the elderly father she adores has abused young boys throughout his life. The protagonist struggles towards the truth of her life in light of this knowledge of her father. Millicent struggles to face evil and its denial, discovering mercy mixed into the process. Kogawa's theo-poetics of the dense and ambiguous intertwining of evil and salvation is prefaced in the following extended passage:

In the beginning is the fog, the thick impenetrable fog. The lie is the source of the fog and the lie is the fog. In the beginning there is also an unquenchable light. Everything in the house is touched by fog and by light.

From within the density, this much is known: the way out of the lie is through mercy, the name of the path is mercy, the one who stoops to help is Mercy. Mercy's light is stronger than deception and betrayal, brighter than the most unspeakable abominations. Mercy will guide. She will circle the darkness and overcome it.

She came to me that spring in a dream and touched me in her evanescent way, saying that she, the Goddess of Mercy, was the Goddess of Abundance. Mercy and Abundance. One and the same. The statement shone in my mind with the luminosity of an altogether new moon.

What I am trusting, this pen-holding moment, is that it is she, the abundant and merciful one, who is both guide and transport for the journey. She is map, road and companion, moving through light and shadow, dancing the direction. And what I realize just now for the first time is that it is not I on my own who seek her, but she who seeks me. It is she who in the act of flinging stones onto the forest floor—white stones, stepping stones, word stones—it is she who weaves the way towards herself. She draws me through the miasma of the day-by-heavy-day sad morning awakenings to her as yet unknown glad tidings. (Kogawa 1995: 2)

Kogawa offers a new symbolics of evil and grace wrenched from an all too widespread situation of child abuse. In the manner of liberation theologies, she names the excesses of suffering and in the valley of the shadow of death discovers an Other, the power of life to heal all violation, who accompanies the abused and the abuser, providing stepping stones of mercy and abundance. Kogawa poetically gives voice to a saving experience of God/ess, that mystery of divine-human-cosmic relation which has power to renew the gift of life and the desire to create right relations.

Compass point 3: Theology in ecological connections

To embrace responsibly such vision, new practices and identities as religious communities are in order. The third compass point directs us to revisioning community among persons and peoples that integrally includes the forest-floor and stones of the earth as shared context of life. This urgent question arises: "What have we done to our neighbours, including the earth?" (Sobrino 1994). Listening to a different voice, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Nigerian poet recently martyred for his political activism, we hear one response in a poem entitled "Ogoni":

Ogoni! Ogoni!
 Ogoni is the land
 The people, Ogoni
 The agony of trees dying
 In ancestral farmlands
 Streams polluted weeping
 Filth into murky rivers
 It is the poisoned air
 Coursing the luckless lungs
 Of dying children
 Ogoni is the dream
 Breaking the looping chain
 Around the drooping neck
 Of a shell-shocked land.³

"Ogoni" helpfully frames a discussion of ecological community. Saro-Wiwa names Shell Oil's role in the destruction of both people and land that are typical of the collusion of states and global capital. Resistance to both modernity's and postmodernity's imperialisms that violate Ogoni, earth and people, entails denouncement of Christian collusion in constructing "nature" and those not of the tribes of Europe or non-Christian peoples as degraded others. Suspicious of all non-dialogical truths, a theology that walks through forest floors with divine stones of mercy and abundance will reimagine community in terms of ecological metaphors where everything is interdependent and in flux, as quantum physics and chaos theory indicate. Rather than drawing up a blueprint for the universe, is God more like a choreographer who begins to chart a dance only to let the dancers take over and create the next steps (Johnson 1994: 26-27; 1992: 220-23)?

Similarly, in the living tradition of the Christian narrative, an ecologically-oriented church will want a creative relation to its immediate and wider communities. It will understand that all relations with other groups are constantly changing and that the life of the church cannot be separated from the health of others. The task of ministry in this ecology is to celebrate and support alternative lifestyles and to make common cause with particular movements that connect with wider publics and the environment, in order to help a congregation sort out who they are and what relationships they want to sustain.

In this theo-ecological mode Larry Rasmussen offers these challenges: Does Christianity dare to be a community of those who refuse to countenance simultaneously violence against the earth and violence against people; those who share burdens and grace; those who find nurture and sustenance, warmth and intellectual energy in churches and its centres of theological education? Is it community in which we can give fully of ourselves for a common good defined with the Other present (1992: 87; 1993, 1996)? In short, can my co-religionists shift from the seductive power of a dominating, mono-systematic Christianity to a "polycentric oikoumene" (Mendieta 1997), a project shaped also by the hunger, desires, tears and joys of the most dispossessed? To answer yes, we will commit ourselves to becoming a humble but tenacious part of the negotiating process to shape a polycentric global commons.

Compass point 4: Theological vocation and sustenance

Such commitment requires ongoing conversion to the Other. Hearts and minds are opened and reborn in a special place of grace which Frederick Buechner describes as the discovery of vocation, "the point where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need" (Buechner 1993, cited by Palmer 1995: 327). How do we encounter afresh God's call to hallow this life? Theological vocation and its sustenance, the final compass point, are

crucial to encounter new and renewing energies for shaping persons in communities outside conventions.

To return to the opening question "what is theology?" a remapping has been in order which at its heart is a matter of conversion. As Dorothee Soelle (1990: 176) puts it, the most urgent theological question is not do you believe in God but rather do you live out God. Phrasing the question this way has deep implications for theological education, for personal practices, and churches. Theological education has been defined as the task to motivate, equip, and enable the people of God to develop their gifts and give their lives in meaningful service (Ortega 1996). To sustain this work in liberative ways, theological education, at the very least, will be ecumenical and contextual, relevant to the community's faith, cultures and traditions as well as to the pluralistic situation in which that community is immersed; it will question the dominant epistemological foundations of theology; and it will aim to integrate theology and everyday life. Mary Jo Leddy has offered three key practices consistent with these goals—placing ourselves together in prayer, on the periphery, on pilgrimage. These practices are ways of "living out God." They are guides to staying connected, reorienting and refreshing at vocational wells.

Consider also these three ingredients for sustaining vocational commitment: personal groundedness, discernment and responsibility within communities of solidarity and compassion. First, we need to stay literally in touch with our body-selves; second, we need to be in communities to discern the way and to test our direction; and third, we need to hold ourselves accountable for how we "dance the direction" in the hope of healed and abundant life. Theologically, we are sought out by God and sustained with divine-human love that calls us to act our way into meeting basic needs with gladness in this postmodern terrain.

In keeping with Joy Kogawa's vision of "She [who] is map, road and travelling companion, moving through light and shadow, dancing the direction," such dancing can mean rediscovery of basic Christian communities which, as Johannes Metz has noted, is not a movement within the church, but the church in movement. Here church is on the road, a way not an end. That is, the churches exist for the world as an agent of what Jesus preached as the *basileia tou theou*, the reign of God. In this view, local congregations and institutions of theological education can be understood as communities that make claims for the power of God in the midst of the world and they mobilize resources for the sake of the wider community or public spheres.

Academies and churches are part of a communal web of infrastructure and living networks of meaning and activity; they are not static or preordained; they have histories that can and do change and are constructed by individuals and collective agents (such as official bodies, documents or committees) who inhabit and sustain them. For example, marginalized people are choosing churches and academies as spaces where their lives and ways of reflecting on religious life are to be taken seriously, giving

opportunities for conversion to work for right relations in multidimensional and engaged ways. Churches, colleges and universities, can serve the public good not as the sole institution but by being part of wider public conversation, disputes and action.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I join those co-religionists who insist that theological work goes far beyond a critical passing on of scholarly and church tradition. The exigencies of the world God so loves invite us to risk, to be less rigid and to experiment as we interpret divine-human-cosmic relation in historical context, in dialogue, with imagination and politics and poetry. Theologies and ethics can orient us to what the struggles are and keep us connected as persons in communities of mercy and compassion.

I am hopeful that Christian theologies and ethics can contribute to a new global commons—as a multivocal and polycentric, practical and moral, inherently evaluative and interdisciplinary practice. May we embrace this character of our work. To move beyond conventions that stifle and thwart full life, there are not and can never be any final, once-and-for-all adequate theological formulations. So the task of theology is subversive—and as Emma Goldmann said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” May we make dancing a significant part of belonging in communities that disrupt destructive conventions.

Notes

- 1 For this characterization I rely on Bounds (1997) and Adams (1996).
- 2 In the development of this section I am indebted to conversations with Elizabeth Bounds (1997).
- 3 Poem given to me by Garth Legge; source unknown.

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