

Gyrid GUNNES

*In Defence of Dualisms:**In Search of a Theology of Political and Social Awareness*

This autumn, I have lived in South Africa, studying theology at the University of Natal in KwaZulu Natal, on the East coast of South Africa. One would guess that living in a country where apartheid is still vividly present would create an urgent need to literally “strip culture of black and white thinking” and “unveil the impact of dualistic thinking”. Politically, culturally and socially, I will always argue in defence of oneness and against any form of dualism, be it in terms of gender, ethnicity or nationality. But theologically? This is what I will explore here.

ESTABLISHED DUALISM

The long history of formalised segregation and separation of different ethnic groups in South Africa left scars that will take centuries to heal. If anywhere, this should be the place where transcendence of dualisms is needed. “Us-them way of thinking” nourished and made apartheid possible.

Indeed, living in South Africa taught me what can happen when human value and dignity is distributed along lines of colour. It showed me how apartheid was legalised for fifty years and how the colour code penetrated every aspect of life: the job market, the political arena, the educational system and the sexual relationships.

Believing in the universality of humanity (what the Universal Declaration on Human Rights is an example of) is a powerful way of overcoming and challenging dichotomies of white and black, human and subhuman. Human dignity, the right to education, the right to vote and the right to marry disregarding colour belong to everybody.

FROM PARTICULARITY TO UNIVERSALITY – OR THE OTHER WAY AROUND?

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights was a powerful way of ending centuries of dualistic thinking within the *political discourse*. It established the equality of all human beings. In theory, it makes imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, apartheid and the holocaust morally impossible to justify or defend. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is revolutionary because it is a move *from particularity to universality*. Normatively, there is no longer any dualism that separate people.

To promote transcendence and abolition of dualisms within the *theological discourse* is valid if the theological situation is parallel to the political situation. In other words, it is valid only if it implies the same movement *from particularity to universality*.

But is this the case? Is *lack of universality* really the problem in theology? Does promotion of a “universal” theology imply the same giant step as for the political discourse? Or is it the other way around? My argument goes as follows: theology does not need to be *trained* in transcending dualisms like “female and male, young and old, powerful and disempowered”. Christian theology has mostly been about *transcending* dualisms like these and pointing to oneness in Christ. It is not the *particularity* that is the

problem for theology, but rather its claim to speak *universally*.

The problem for theology is that theologians, church Fathers, popes and saints, starting from Paul, have universalised their own particular situation, need or tradition. *My context, my questions*, has been mistaken for *the context, the questions of everybody*. Their theology was not done in a vacuum of economic or political power.

It is not the domestic servants, the beggars and the lepers who had the power both to universalise their own contexts. The universalised contexts are the contexts of Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Ignatius Loyola, and Karl Barth. Many of the theology done until the middle of the twentieth century is what I would call self-claimed non-contextual, non-politically aware theology.

This theology was done within a framework that denied the political realities of “black and white, rich and poor, young and old, female and male, powerful and disempowered”. This way of doing theology that claimed to be not dominated by dualistic thinking. This theology was meant to be valid for everybody, at all times, in all places and situations.

Traditional Christian theology in its Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox clothes suffers from a chronic lack of will to consciously make the context theologically relevant. Western European missionaries thought they were bringing Christianity to Africa. Instead they brought Christianity as it was perceived in their own political and social context even though it was not recognised as such. The Orthodox tradition believes that God is revealed in the divine liturgical tradition, without recognising that this tradition is closely connected to a hierarchal and patriarchal perception of God. Moreover, how many non-Italian, non-white or non-male popes have we had in the universal Catholic Church in its two thousand years of existence?

POLITICAL REALITIES ARE THEOLOGICAL REALITIES

Living in South Africa taught me that, like it or not, our theology is firmly rooted in our social, political and economic context. There is no such thing as a universal non-contextual theology, liturgy or tradition. The dualisms that penetrate our life on every level are also *reflected on the theological level*. Even if I *want* to think, write and act non-contextually, it is impossible to transcend dualism. As soon as I open my mouth, write a letter, say a word, I am entangled in dualisms, in dichotomies and in hierarchies.

I can write this article because I know English. I have access to a computer. I have the time and the resources to sit down and think about these issues. Millions of people do not speak or write English, do not have access to a computer, and do not have the luxury of sitting down to write. The dualisms of access to language, access to material goods like computer, access to non-profitable time are dualisms that are political, economic and social realities. Therefore they are also theological realities.



Theology does not need in any way to be trained in transcending dualisms. We need to be trained in *acknowledging the dualisms* that exist in the world as *theologically relevant*.

Some of us are females and some of us are males. This is a theologically relevant dichotomy. As long as society constructs roles along the lines of the shape of our genitals, theology done by and for women will look different than theology done by and for men.

As long as there are people who claim that God cannot be liturgically addressed as mother, feminist and womanist theology is highly needed. Some of us are black or brown and some of us are white. As long as racism is a reality and as long as Christ is perceived and pictured almost exclusively in white terms, Black and Dalit (the untouchables in the Indian caste system) theology is of vital importance.

Some of us have Schengen passports. Some of us do not. As long as this is a political reality, theology done by someone who can freely travel in Western (and Central) Europe and have access to the labour market in the EU will look different than the theology done by someone who does not have access to these privileges.

The prayer "give us today our daily bread" has a different meaning to the community who is sick due to lack of bread compared to the community who is sick because of *too much bread*. Some of us are HIV+ and some are HIV-. As long as HIV+ are discriminated against (and as the blood of Christ is never explored as HIV+), there is indeed a need to point at the dualism of HIV status that segregates us.

The fact that all of these dualisms are not considered *theologically relevant* in mainstream theology shows that Christian theology does not need to move from *particularity to universality*, but from *universalism to particularity*. A credible, ethically responsible theology for the twenty-first century is a theology that seeks to highlight the political reality of the context theology is done in.

The curtail question is how Jesus Christ responded to people in the different political, social and economical realities that he encountered. And we all know the answers: the rich young man was met with a demand to sell his possessions (Luke 12,13–21; 16,19–31; 18,18–27) and the blind beggar was given unconditional healing (Mark 10,46–52).

DETECTING DUALISMS IN ONENESS

The tradition of self-claimed non-contextuality follows nicely the footsteps of Paul. "There is no longer Jew nor Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for you are one in Christ." (Galatians 3,28) But how was the *meaning* of oneness defined? And who had the power to define it?

Paul used his vision of oneness to transcend the cultural and social difference of circumcision. As a circumcised Jew, he recognised that the religious discourse of circumcision made it impossible to socially include uncircumcised as full members of the Christian community. Galatians 3,28 is a powerful way of making social reality a concern for theology.

Unfortunately, Paul did not manage to have the same bold analysis when it came to gender and economic hierarchies. How can one say that we are all one, but women cannot speak in the congregations (1Cor 11,4) and slaves must remain with their masters (1Cor 7,20)?

It is just not credible that a person, who as a man is a non-woman and as a free is a non-slave, claims that *we are all one*. Oneness in Christ must firstly imply a readiness to include women and slaves in the theological discourse. Women and slaves did not participate in the process of defining what this oneness was about.

Secondly, Paul did not see that *religious oneness must have a social and political counterpart*. Oneness in Christ must mean oneness in social status and equal political rights. Parallel to this situation, a theologian who has *never experienced hunger* cannot claim that Christianity does not have anything to do with *economical and political liberation*.

A *male* theologian cannot claim that God and theology *does not have a gender*. A *white* theologian cannot say that the *colour of God* is unimportant. Because our lives are entangled in colour, gender and social status, the colour, gender and social status of God is not unimportant. Only the people on the bottom of the hierarchies – the marginalized part of the dichotomies of gender, colour and economy – can define oneness.

DUALISMS THEOLOGICALLY RELEVANT – REDEFINING ECUMENISM

Ecumenism means dealing with and maybe overcome the divisions that separate Christians. To tell it with other words: ecumenism is an attempt to transcend the dichotomies that the two thousand year old tradition of theological debates has produced.

A theology that seeks to be critically, politically and socially aware, questions if these dichotomies are really the *dichotomies that we should be spending our time debating*. Why should the conflicts of the eleventh or the sixteenth centuries be the conflicts of the twenty-first century?

And more importantly: are we not giving in to and prolonging the legitimacy of a self-centred theological discourse that is blind to the political and economic realities of ordinary people, baptised and non-baptised?

Living in South Africa, where people beg for money or



work when I go to the shop, has made me question the relevance of coming to agreements on traditional theological differences. As long as there are people who come to the Eucharist table with hungry stomachs, do I really care if Christ is present *before, during and after* the celebration, or if he is only present during the celebration itself? As long as there are people dying of AIDS because medication is not available for either ideological or economical reasons, the true nature of the Holy Spirit is of lesser importance. As long as there are women who are enslaved and disempowered, I am not interested in whether we are justified by faith or by works.

If ecumenism is to have any moral credibility, it has to abandon the post-Auschwitz liberal democracies or the comfortable armchairs and clerical conferences as the theologically relevant contexts. It has to actively seek to make the Auschwitzes of this world, the violence of Soweto, the slum camps of São Paulo, the enslaving brothels of Amsterdam, the drug addicts living with HIV in Kaliningrad as the relevant theological contexts. This means a turn to ethical questions, not *away* from theology, but a return to assess ethics and social justice as the core and epitome of theology.

Ecumenism enhances a powerful vision to refuse to be segregated by the sins of our fathers, and redefine Christian unity as all people who are concerned with *making the world a better place* for the "least of my sisters and brothers" (Matt 25,40).

A CRITICALLY AWARE THEOLOGY

Living as a white, HIV-, Western European in a 'two-thirds world' country together with people who know very well what hunger is, has taught me that I cannot any longer deny that the privileges of being a citizen of a rich

Schengen county do not shape my theology and the way I read the Bible.

My structural privileges alienate me from the epistemological starting point of most people in this world, and from the context that Christ initially became incarnated into. My life is further away from him because of the political and economical realities of this world than the refugees, the sick and the politically persecuted.

As a consequence of this insight, I have argued in defence of a critically politically aware theology. This kind of theology, which I find expressed for example in Liberation theology, Feminist-Womanist theology, Black theology and Dalit theology, does not fall into the trap of a self-claimed *universal* tradition theology.

These theologies do not deny the dualisms that our lives are soaked in, but highlights them and makes them methodically important. I believe that only a critically aware theology is sensitive to the *particular* political realities that we are part of. Only by seeking to change the dualisms of the political and social world, is it morally justifiable to seek transcendence of the very same dualisms in the theological realm.

Suggested Reading

WEST Gerald, *The Academy of the Poor – towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*. Pietermaritzburg, 2005.

SOBRINO Jon, *Jesus the Liberator, Burns and Oates*. England, 1994.

TRIBLE Phyllis, *Texts of Terror*, SCM Press, London, 1992.

BOESAR Allen, *Black Theology – Black Power*. London, 1976.

Gyrid GUNNES (25) is a Norwegian Lutheran theology student. She presently studies theology at the University of Natal, in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. Her email address is gyridgunnes@hotmail.com.

