

**THE CHRISTIAN
UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD**

THEO 331 – week 8

20th CENTURY ISSUES

- **The 20th century, with its massive upheavals in Western (and global) civilization has seen new issues emerge related to the understanding of God**
- **We will look at:**
 - **Feminism**
 - **Personalism and communion**
 - **The suffering (or not) of God**
 - **Contextualisation of theology**
 - **Approaches to pluralism**
 - **Open theism**

FEMINISM

- **Christian feminism is immediately confronted by the fact that the Bible was written in (and therefore expresses) a patriarchal culture.**
 - Note the Women's Bible project of the 19th century
- **In particular, language regarding the Trinity uses at least two male images, Father and Son, with no feminine image**

Key issue: Is God “He”?

- **Is God male?**
 - The Father is not male, in the sense that the Father is pure spirit.
 - The Son, on the other hand, IS male since the Incarnation (i.e. Jesus was and still is male).
- **Is God masculine, as opposed to feminine?**
 - Most theologians agree that God transcends gender
 - Most feminist theologians argue that feminine imagery can also be applied to God, and that masculine language for God is a reflection of patriarchal cultural preferences
 - Those who argue in favour of exclusively feminine imagery tend to veer off into “goddess” worship
 - Other theologians argue that the masculine image is truly proper to God, as a symbolic reference to the duality between Creator and creation.

MASCULINE “GOD-TALK”

- **A key component of the feminist critique of the classical understanding of God is a critique of language**
- **Are the masculine terms for God metaphors, or analogies?**
 - If metaphors, that language can be replaced by equally-valid language deemed more appropriate for our circumstances
 - Ex: replacing “Father, Son and Spirit” with “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier”
 - If analogies, this implies that there is a core meaning to the words that cannot be abandoned.
- **There is also the question of the authority of the Bible as setting a normative standard for God-talk.**
 - Much feminist Biblical analysis focuses on finding feminine images for God in scripture to justify an expanded view.

PERSONALISM

- **Personalism is the study of what it means to be a “person”. While a branch of philosophy, it is very important for Christian theology.**
- **Metropolitan Jean Zizioulas renewed the application of personalism to the understanding of the Trinity**
- **Pope John Paul II applied personalism to the study of gender and sexuality.**

THE CONCEPT OF “PERSON”

- The concept of “person” owes its origins to the debates raging around the Trinity. Prior to the concept of “person”, we used the concepts of “individual” as a self-contained nature, and “collective” and the blending of individuals (such that continuing individuality threatens the collectivity).
- A person is in-between: it implies a self-contained individual who is nevertheless open to giving and receiving from other persons.
 - It is this relationship of “communion” that allows the person to transcend the isolation that is part of raw individuality while at the same time not losing one’s individuality to a collectivity.
 - The supreme exchange that permits communion, is Love.

TRINITY OF PERSONS

- **The classic Greek formulation is “one essence (ousia) in three individuals (hypostases)”. How can this avoid becoming understood as three gods?**
- **Answer: because each divine “individual” is a Person, whose nature is supremely manifested in a communion of loving relationship.**
- **And so we also say: One God in three Persons.**

GOD AND SUFFERING

- **Classical theism, based on Greek philosophy, held that God could not suffer.**
- **On the other hand, the Son definitely suffered on the cross.**
 - **One could argue that he suffered in his human nature only, not his divine; but this risks falling into Nestorianism by not respecting that Jesus is a DIVINE person with a human nature. It therefore was a DIVINE person who suffered on the cross.**

SUFFERING AND THE TRINITY

- **Following certain intuition of Martin Luther, some theologians (such as Kazoh Mitamori) have proposed that God's loving nature opens Him up to the experience of pain as a rejection of that love, something that has co-existed within God from all eternity (as God knew the rejection of that love by his creation from all eternity).**
- **The cross, therefore, is not something DONE TO God so much as an expression of an element of God's inner life.**
- **An extrapolation: Heaven is "God as love". Hell is "God as pain".**

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

- **The experience of decolonization across the world brought with it a desire to re-examine Christianity from a less Western, more contextual perspective.**
- **New theological approaches have emerged, drawing from Latin American, African and Asian experiences. Some key themes include:**
 - **Poverty and injustice (Latin American liberation theologies)**
 - **Use of Asian philosophies (especially Chinese and Indian) as an alternative to Greek as a foundational basis**
 - **Importance of family and community (particularly in African approaches)**
- **One can argue that a dramatic new phase in the “incarnation of the word” is occurring in non-Western Christian societies.**

STEPS TO INCULTURATION

Inculturation generally follows the following stages:

- 1. Linguistic translation of the Bible + ceremonies in the recipient language.**
- 2. Adaptation of the ceremonies and practices according to similar cultural concepts.**
- 3. Formation of bi-cultural leadership.**
- 4. Creation of Christian education systems in the recipient culture.**
- 5. Development of a truly local church structure and theology, which in turn “gives back” to the wider Church.**

APPROACHES TO PLURALISM

- **The reality of the global village means that the experience of cultural pluralism is much more of a common occurrence. Our cultural categories can be enriched by this, but they can also come under intense pressure.**
- **The theological question: How does Christianity see itself in the context of religious pluralism?**

APPROACH #1: CHRISTOCENTRISM

- In this approach, Jesus Christ's status as the pre-existent Logos is emphasized.
- As the world was created by God through his Logos, creation is stamped with "seeds of the logos" (*logos spermatikos*) and therefore the simple question for truth already constitutes a path to the Logos, even without knowing it.
- Karl Rahner called those who sincerely try to live by the truth + their conscience "anonymous Christians", because they are already seeking the Logos (later incarnate as Christ) without even realizing it.
- The challenge to this approach: to explain why the Incarnation was necessary in the first place, and why faith in Christ was the Word made flesh is necessary.

APPROACH #2: THEOCENTRISM

- **The core intuition behind this approach is the idea that God is the focus of every religion, and that God wants to be found.**
- **Therefore, God will let himself be found no matter what religion an individual actually follows.**
- **This relativises the importance and claims of each religion. The impulse to seek converts also diminishes to virtually zero.**
- **This approach depends on taking a mythological approach to understanding religious texts and tenets.**
- **A modified version of theocentrism tries to reconcile with Christocentrism by proposing that the Logos has incurred multiple incarnations.**
 - **However, given that no spontaneous claims have been made in this regard by potential alternate incarnations, this can only remain mere speculation to justify a particular religious opinion after-the-fact.**

OPEN THEISM

- **Open theism is a critique of classical theism which takes issue with the idea that God never changes, and in particular, that God never changes his mind.**
- **It is also a critique of notions of God's providence which see everything as part of a plan that was determined, down to the last detail, prior to acts of human free will.**
- **Open theism proposes that God sovereignly chooses to make some of his actions contingent upon ours, thereby granting us true freedom and responsibility. His providence is therefore exercised in a general, rather than a meticulous, way.**
- **Open theism began as a theological movement within Evangelicalism, but is highly controversial.**

OPEN THEISM AND THE BIBLE

- **Open theism offers a critique of the classical theism ideas of the eternity and immutability of God.**
 - While God is everlasting, God is not eternal in the sense of being outside of time.
 - God's knowledge is subject to change as the objects of knowledge themselves change.
 - God can (and does) change his mind.
- **Open theists argue that Scripture portrays God engaging in true dialogue with humans, and who makes his choices contingent upon ours (even to the point of "changing his mind"). Some examples:**
 - Abraham negotiating with God over Sodom (Genesis 18)
 - God choosing to spare Nineveh after the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3)
- **Open theists generally contend that eternity and immutability are philosophical, not Biblical, ideas.**