

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECUMENICAL UNITY AND THE NECESSARY CONTRIBUTION OF PASIFIKA HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

The revolution of ecumenical discourse currently underway throughout Pasifika offers both a critical de-privileging of histories that retained the West as the focus, and a constructive revisioning concerned with local social systems, structures and ethics. As a project, it relies on the hermeneutical method. However, the continued liberation of local theological work requires a de-Empiring of mission along with ecumenism and hermeneutics due to how the ecumenical movement approaches unity: unity is achieved through the elimination of difference. This essay examines the absence of difference within contemporary ecumenical discourse, the origins of that approach in the earliest ecumenical councils, and the attempt to overcome the distinction of the theological and the non-theological through the application of hermeneutical methods. Here the questions and approaches underway in Pasifika offer significant leadership. But more remains. Against the temptation to close history, to focus on the local context alone, a de-Empired account of mission sets the gospel within an eschatological framework, one which makes proclamatory pluriformity basic to Christian unity.

Keywords

non-theological, Empire, ecumenical movement, hermeneutics, mission

Introduction

At a 2017 Pacific Church Leaders Meeting, to cite Upolu Vaai, the Pacific churches ‘committed to renewal by moving away from the “unity in Christ” narrative, that has dominated Western Christianity and mainstream ecumenism, to the “household of God”’ (2019, 3). On the one hand, this constitutes a critical resistance against ‘the European and North American churches’ territorial definition, grounded in their ‘Eurocentric worldview’ (Vaai and Jathanna 2020, 11), including a rewriting of ‘ecumenical histories’ within the Pacific which privileged the West (Casimira 2020). On the other hand, as a ‘radical response that is inclusive and holistic’, treating everything as a ‘living relational household’ (Vaai 2019, 3), it is a constructive move to incorporate shared Pasifika values and themes of significance through the region and develop greater solidarity at the religious and governance levels.

This re-constituted ecumenical process shifts away from a monolithic application of the one oikumeme and towards a concern with negotiation among multiple traditions. This includes a necessary critical dialogue ‘between Western and Pacific epistemologies in research and praxis’, and the support of ‘traditional social systems, structures and ethics that act as the key sources for developing Pacific hermeneutical approaches to ecumenism’ (Anisi and Casimira 2017, 28). This link forged between the ecumenical project and hermeneutics is the concern of what follows.

This article examines the relationship between mission, hermeneutics, and ecumenism. Specifically, while ecumenism and hermeneutics have been identified as historic tools of Empire, today they are being treated as constructive locations for overcoming Empire. However, and while good local constructive work has been done to reframe what constitutes mission (“The Mission Call” 2010), mission remains the sacrificial scapegoat in relation to the Christian gospel’s alignment with colonisation. And when mission is related to the imaginary of Empire, any local constructive development remains grounded within and continues the ecumenical vision associated with Empire: mission is treated first as a matter of geographical movement, with a priority attached to histories which ‘had’ the gospel before ‘us’. This implicit point of agreement needs to be dismantled. To distance the ecumenical project from Empire, it is necessary to de-Empire mission, to understand mission as an eschatological disruption of history’s premature closure. This sets constructive ecumenical concerns and hermeneutical approaches on a different foundation: the proclamatory, the witnessing embodiment of the gospel in context, is basic to the Christian plurality out of which unity is formed.

The argument begins by observing that the contemporary ecumenical movement has not developed a theological account of difference, relying instead on a dichotomy of

the ‘theological’ and the ‘non-theological’. This governing binary echoes the processes for unity evident at the earliest ecumenical councils: unity is found in the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference. This is the approach of Empire. To move beyond the categorisation of ‘tradition’ and ‘context’, Konrad Raiser (1991) proposed applying hermeneutical method as a way of establishing difference as the basis of unity. Though this approach found some traction, the default approach soon reasserted itself, with tradition and context remaining the operative framework. Given this ecumenical impasse, the approach to ecumenism and hermeneutics through the Pacific provides significant leadership for the world Christian ecumenical project—but it must include the de-Empiring of mission as part of that project.

The Absence of Difference

Multiple definitions of and approaches to Christian unity exist within the contemporary ecumenical movement (Chapman 2015). The same cannot be said of theological definitions of ‘difference’—because none exist. The problem should be obvious: to unite, it is necessary to understand what divides. And, without giving a theological account of difference, all difference becomes divisive.

In terms of ecumenical discourse, division between ecclesial bodies tends to be associated with identifiable historical moments of disagreement concerning doctrine. Attention focuses on the ‘great schism’ of 1054 CE between the Greek East and Latin West, and on the Reformation. These are key moments of breach and upon which ecumenical concern focuses. Such categorisation assumes that the primary division lies in institutional distinction, and that the mechanisms for repair lie in doctrinal agreement concerning the theological positions that fostered schism. This establishes the conditions of ecumenical unity: it seeks a form of institutional unity and identifies the processes by which that unity might be achieved.

In this approach, ‘theology’ takes centre stage. But what is theology? According to a 1937 statement, theology is the ‘direct reflection upon immediate spiritual experience, and the formulation of these reflections as a system of thought, which interprets the prior experience and which elicits from the particular forms of that experience its universal truths’ (Commission 1937, 9). Note here the language of ‘immediate’ (or, unmediated) ‘spiritual experience’, a ‘system of thought’, and ‘universal truths’. The same statement develops an opposite: the ‘non-theological’. The non-theological is the mediate, the lived, and the local, a conglomerate of ‘factors which have their origin in the envioning culture rather than within the direct Christian tradition’ (Commission 1937, 11). These factors have something to do with the ‘interpretation’ of church’s proper ‘spiritual life’, via the

‘use of analogies, mental apparatus’ for the purposes of missionary communication of ‘the Gospel to non-Christians’ (Commission 1937, 10). The non-theological indicates ‘ideas and modes of thought originating in the first instance outside the direct Christian tradition, but eventually employed in the formal elaboration of Christian thought’ (Commission 1937, 10). In specific terms, the non-theological encompasses race, language, class, ethics, gender, economics, and is deemed to ‘operate in the milieu of disunity far more powerfully than theology proper’ (Clark 1951, 349). These elements, it is so argued, constitute the barriers to unity even when theological agreement exists.

Given all the insights developed through the twentieth century concerning human rationality, the importance of culture and language, hermeneutics, etc., a definition of theology from 1937 cannot not be taken as normative today. Yet, whatever complexification might be attributed to theology ‘proper’, it has not been likewise attributed to the idea of the non-theological. This has remained consistent—and operative—through ecumenical discourse.

Enter Chung Kyung-Hyung. Her dance on the final day of the Seventh Assembly of the WCC held in Canberra (1991) prompted a frenzied discussion regarding ‘paganism’, ‘syncretism’ and a sudden need to address proper ‘diversity’. This appeared in the official report of the Assembly, and remains today the singular definition of ‘diversity’ within the ecumenical movement: ‘Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic, or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8)’ (Kinnamon 1991, 173). (As a small digression, it is not without some irony that Heb 13:8 speaks to the experience of Gentile Christians and against the imposition of ‘strange teachings’ linked to food regulations. In other words, the passage speaks to the fidelity of Jesus Christ in the embodiment of cultural and religious difference—the exact opposite to how it appears in this pseudo-definition.) Note that this ‘definition’ does not actually define ‘diversity’, or even explore the relative merits of the term diversity: divergent from a norm. It, rather, locates diversity: first, by maintaining the distinction between the theological and the non-theological, and second, by identifying the non-theological with ‘context’. Though it affirms diversity as ‘integral’ to communion, it does not describe how it is basic to communion. Rather, this ‘definition’ is wholly concerned with imposing necessary ‘limits’ on, and the ‘illegitimacy’ of, diversity. This is because when diversity ‘goes beyond acceptable limits it can be destructive of the gift of unity’ (“The Church” 2013, 17). Diversity and unity appear as a zero-sum game: the more diversity, the less unity. The only theological supports given to this position relate to the idea of the ‘common’, and is set within a diachronic framework: the same yesterday, today

and forever. In the context of World Christianity, to claim the common and the shared yesterday is to claim that the forms developed through the western tradition remain the singular normative ‘theological’ forms.

Nowhere in ecumenical discourse is ‘difference’ subject to theological definition. Instead, it develops in relation to accounts of ‘context’, as a non-theological element derived from culture but deemed necessary to the embodiment of the faith (without specifying how or what this might look like). The idea appears also in lamentations concerning the loss of difference via colonisation and as demanded by missionaries. ‘At times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations’ (“The Church” 2013, 7). Apart from observing how this statement from 2013 (!) continues the neo-colonial line of denying the possibility of resistance from local peoples against the ‘power of the West’, note the absence of the institution of the church in this account. Indeed, through ecumenical documentation, while missions and missionaries stand at fault for cultural denigration, the church as institution and ecumenical unity are presented as the proper locations of healing and reconciliation. However, due to the absence of any theological definition of difference, let us intrude at exactly at this point, the point at which the logic appears its strongest: What if ‘blaming the missionaries’ is the basic first step in denying difference any theological merit?

Unity as Cultural and Linguistic Sameness

To question the category of the ‘non-theological’, to examine the function of ‘context’, and to question the scapegoating of ‘missionaries’ within contemporary ecumenical discourse, intends not to dismiss the ongoing harm of the colonial period. It is to suggest that the confident identification of these three elements continues colonial approaches to difference.

Listening to judgments issued by World Christian voices regarding the ecumenical movement, one hears complaints concerning: knowledge production ‘rooted in Eurocentric nativism’; a claim to ‘universal normativity achievable independent of place, time, context, or people group’ (De La Torre 2022, 59); a premature closing of history in which the identity of the ‘body of Christ’ and its continuity through time resides with institutions of western civilisation (Míguez Bonino 1982, 122–24); and a failure to entertain within its conception of unity, the concerns and values of the global South (Barreto 2022, 84). Or, in sum, the contemporary ecumenical movement is a legacy of the imperial era, seeking a form of unity and associated processes corresponding to

the Christendom project: unity which is ‘culturally and epistemologically exclusionary’ (Barreto 2020, 224; Vaai and Jathanna 2020, 8–9).

The ecumenical movement owes its ‘exclusionary’ nature to what Lamin Sanneh has termed the ‘mental habits of Christendom’, the predisposition ‘to look for one essence of the faith, with a corresponding global political structure as safeguard’ (2003, 35). This is an extended historical project, one which defines the faith in essentialist terms (without reference to the non-theological) and promotes its truth through imperial political structures. Far from ideological, this observation is based in the primordial and defining schism in the history of the Christian church: the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

Of course, the formal schism which occurred at Chalcedon was itself a logical endpoint of the exclusionary practices already at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) with its exclusion of the Jews and the absence of Persian bishops (Grayzel 1970). But this possibility of othering and exclusion at ecumenical councils soon became the norm. Without developing a detailed account of the contest between those who affirmed the christology of Chalcedon against those pejoratively labelled ‘monophysites’, Chalcedon embodied a political, economic, and socio-cultural conflict. Specifically, it represented the attempt by the Roman Emperor Marcian (396–457) to assert Graeco-Roman culture through the empire (Mar Gregorios 1988). This colonialist agenda succeeded in severing Western Christianity from Asian and African Christianity and resulted in the centuries long murderous persecution of those now deemed ‘heretical’ (Davis 2004).

For the positioning of the non-theological and difference in relation to unity, this history and its continuation through the Christendom era, is of decisive significance. For the western theological tradition, the early ecumenical councils constitute moments where the church codified, through the instruments of creed, canon, and hierarchy, its proper order and so its structures for governing difference. These councils are the constitutive movements of the church itself, and so definitive of Christian unity. This is true—they did indeed define the nature of unity and the processes by which it is to be achieved: unity through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference and the identification with imperial structures. To cite Andrew Walls (2022, 166–67), this ‘permanent’ division included two clear consequences: Christians in Europe became cut off from (murdered) Christians in Asia and Africa; and, dividing the church along linguistic and cultural lines became the default mode.

In terms of our wider argument, three further observations might be made. First, to treat this moment as primarily a ‘theological’ discourse, one dealing with complex christological concerns, is to pretend that it was not also a conflict (and theological solution) informed by non-theological factors. It secures the possibility that the theological is properly abstracted from the non-theological. Second, even as a key moment of schism

in the Christian church, Chalcedon is often not viewed as such because the event itself created the conditions for unity—unity through the elimination of difference. Third, though a colonial move with all the attendant violence, it establishes a historical narrative which eliminates the ‘other’ and establishes the ‘tradition’ according to a certain set of terms and continuous through time only in reference to these terms (Spickard 1999). This constitutes the ‘Christendom pattern of exclusion’ informing contemporary ecumenical accounts of unity and the concordant absence of difference.

As evidenced by the colonial era, mission is one of Christianity’s most powerful and consequent theological constructs. In the earliest church, mission had something to do with the encounter between communities of difference and curated theological processes which supported the emergence of a multicultural body. The possibility of eliminating difference, therefore, relies on the co-opting of mission, on eliminating the eschatological opening of histories and identifying the movement of the gospel through time in a single history. Mission came to align with the imperial assertion of an established (universal) centre and its othering of the margins so that they relate to the centre only as commodities, and an account of history conceived in terms of the geographical movement from the ‘centre’ (Rome) and to the ‘periphery’ (Asia/ Africa). A one-way process of transference results. The movement of the gospel to the margin is based on ‘reception’ and this, to cite Enrique Dussel, is ‘simultaneous with the act of enforced domination based on political, economic, technological, military, or ideological superiority’ (1985, 112). According to this schema, the imagined border between church and mission maps precisely onto the border between centre and colony. The result is the translocating of established ecclesial artefacts as the necessary form for the “universalization” of Christendom in the entire world... a spurious and fetichized universality’ (Dussel 2019, 34). Mission defined as (coerced) reception is the mission of Empire, and the form of unity based in the elimination of difference.

The (Im)Possibility of Intercultural Hermeneutics

To return to the contemporary ecumenical discourse, within the movement it became clear that even factors adjudged to be non-theological could not simply be dismissed; they needed to be set in a relative position. The Faith and Order conference held in Montreal (1963) accomplished this by distinguishing between Tradition with a capital ‘T’ (referring to the revelation of God in Scripture and passed on in other ways), and traditions (cultural and conditioned forms of Christian embodiment). The resulting operative binary of ‘Tradition’ against ‘context’, however, continued to view difference as an inherent threat to Tradition. Even with the language of ‘translation’, as it appeared in the 1977 WCC paper *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (World Council

of Churches 1979), the dominant concern was one of ‘danger’: translation ‘may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life’ (§27). The stance towards difference remained concerned with imposing limits.

In response, Konrad Raiser (1991) published an article titled *Beyond Tradition and Context: In Search of an Ecumenical Framework of Hermeneutics*. This begins by retelling the ambiguous history of ‘contextualisation’ and of missionary translation within ecumenical discourse. As part of this history, Raiser too returns to the earliest ecumenical councils, noting how the ‘flexible rule of faith of a missionary community’ mutated due to ‘the political concern for the unity of the empire’ into ‘doctrinal definitions, which were the fruit of a successful inculturation of the Christian faith in the cultural, religious and philosophical world of Hellenism’ (1991, 351–52). The now instituted ‘doctrinal definition of the limits to diversity’ promoted murderous violence against the churches of Asia and Africa in service to the Empire, or, to use more sanitised ecumenical language, prompted ‘the first schism in the ancient church’ (Raiser 1991, 352).

Raiser does not stop here. He notes that the following two major schisms in the church in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries embody a ‘similar dynamic’, meaning that the flexibility of mutual missionary encounter hardens to the point of fracture when the ‘hitherto dominant or sending community’ insists ‘on the privilege of defining the criteria for mutual recognition’ (Raiser 1991, 352). A simple related conclusion follows: in the contemporary era of World Christianity, the rule of missionary flexibility is being rejected in favour of a privileged account of the norms of Tradition over-against the non-theological merits of context. In other words, contemporary ecumenical discourse embodies an identical dynamic evident through the three great schisms in the life of the Christian Church. And not just this: this dynamic has been exacerbated by the rise of different forms of Christian embodiment in the global South and the decline or consolidation of traditional bodies. This, for the ‘historic churches’, resulted in an existential concern of ‘disintegration’ (Raiser 1994, 170) and a corresponding ‘retreat back into their tradition’ as a way of preserving ‘continuity with their roots’ (Raiser 1994, 171). With pressure for institutional survival manifesting as tribal conservatism, ecumenical discourse had failed to include ‘the Evangelical or Pentecostal communities with strong indigenous ties, which predominates in the churches of the South’ (Raiser 1994, 171).

Raiser’s own response consists of reasserting the nature of Christian mission as it appeared prior to the establishment of set criteria and the prosecution of their limits. That is, ‘the history of doctrine up to the modern era can be analysed in missionary perspective as a succession of processes of inculturation responding to different and culturally-conditioned soteriological predicaments. The message of salvation in Christ does not represent a timeless truth; it needs to become incarnate in the life situation of particular

people and communities' (Raiser 1991, 353). To so position the missionary dimension of the Christian faith in relation to an ecumenical hermeneutic, communication between communions would take form as 'an open-ended process that will be consummated only in God's own future' (Raiser 1991, 354).

As General Secretary of the WCC, Raiser was able to sponsor a wider formal discussion of hermeneutics, leading, in 1995, to a WCC held consultation "On Intercultural Hermeneutics". Its focus concerned the reality of the Christian message crossing cultural boundaries in a way which 'elicits new cultural forms of appropriation', that is, ways in which the gospel becomes new, and the diversity of the faith's embodiment itself witnesses to 'God's reconciling work through the cosmos' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 245). The beginning point is properly that of missionary exchange, and the ambiguities attendant to that exchange. For example, when 'the Christian story was told to [those in the South] by dominant cultures, the effect has often been a *suppression* rather than a *transformation* and *renewal* of their own stories' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 245). This is to be countered as pernicious error which runs against the revelatory diversity of the faith. In terms of 'integration', or the authenticity of Christian embodiment in difference, the text notes how '[i]n the West the church integrated into itself Jewish, Hellenistic, Roman and Germanic elements. Elsewhere, older Christian traditions integrated Indian, Ethiopian, Syrian and Chaldean elements' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 251). The report then laments that this same latitude was not given to Christians in the South. Although these communities are undergoing identical processes to those experienced in the West, this has become a 'controversial issue' for those communions who view their forms of integration as normative.

This 1995 consultation is to be commended as a fundamental summary of theological encounter with difference as proper to discovering the fullness of Christ, and so the fullness of Christian communion. However—it was not the last statement. In 1999, the finalised WCC 'instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics' was published as "A Treasure in Earthen Vessels". This document repealed much of the significant work accomplished during the early 1990s, reasserting a similar pattern to that affirmed at Montreal: the 'one Tradition' constituted the singular measure for discerning 'the authenticity of faith in a situation of conflicting cultural perspectives, frameworks or hermeneutical principles' ("A Treasure" 1999, 15). By contrast, the 'alien and alienating' nature of Christianity in various places is due to the 'potential ambiguity about the way in which the gospel is proclaimed' especially given that 'many missionaries were bound up with imperialist impulses and consequently became colonialist' ("A Treasure" 1999, 27). In other words, Christianity already has a received measure for judging the authenticity of the faith, and the experience of alienation lies not in this measure, but in the manner of

its communication. As to the deployment of a ‘hermeneutic’, this is used to reinforce the prevailing forms of theological authority and the denigration of whatever it deemed to be ‘non-theological’ (Körtner 2012; Neelankavil 1999).

Proclamation as the Necessary Ground of Difference

The introduction of hermeneutics in ecumenical discourse is a case of one step forward and two steps back. Indeed, since the 1999 publication of “A Treasure in Earthen Vessels”, the hermeneutical method envisioned by Raiser has not played any great role within formal developments (Andersen 2006; Houtepen 2001). Recognising this is exactly where the major ecumenical potential of the contemporary theological work undertaken within the Pacific lies.

Upolu Vaai’s idea of *oneification* begins with a unique, but appropriate, etymology for the term colonisation: ‘The real meaning of colonisation... comes from the word *colon* meaning *to digest*. Theology in the Pacific has been a slave to this *colon narrative* where only one culture, one way, one dance, or one destination digests all others in the name of an ultimate truth’ (Vaai 2020, 43). *Oneification* is ‘the control of truth’ (Vaai 2020, 43), the ‘reduction of everything into *one*’ and the production of theologies which ‘support the idea of *oneness* engineered by the fixed notion of truth’ (Vaai 2016, 51). Nor is this concern simply one which comes from ‘outside’: the Pacific has not been immune to empire building using similar means. Empire and the closing of history (the advancing of our own history as the norm) is a temptation always on our shoulders.

Theological discussions of Empire often express two concerns. The first focuses on forms of projection, on the way Empire perceives, names, and constructs a reality and the resulting behaviours (Vaka’uta 2020). The second concerns the barriers to participation in the Empire and the negation of local voice (Vaka’uta 2015). These concerns describe the real and ongoing effects—in historiography, ecology, economics, epistemology, culture, social relations—of Empire on the local.

Vaai’s (2016, 2020) definition, however, includes a third component: the local continues to feed Empire. Colonial theft, the mining of local resources and their export to centres of power, is the obvious basis and goal of colonisation itself. But to transpose this position into the ecumenical project, *oneification*—as an ongoing process—grants both the export of local voice and its return as the expression of one truth. This prompts a question: what is the local product being fed upon, digested, and returned as the monolithic defecation of Empire?

Before addressing that question, one might indicate a general theological response within Pasifika theologies to this problem of a totalising truth—diversity belongs to Oceania, first, in the resplendent cultural difference characterising the region, and second,

in the shared forms of reciprocity at the heart of these cultures, a ‘reciprocity’ (Tongan, *tauhi vā*; Samoan, *teu le vā*) [which] elevates distribution above consumption, sharing above accumulation, peaceful coexistence above domination, communal well-being above individualistic interests’ (Vaka’uta 2015, 60). This is in evident contrast to the basic posture of western modernity, within which, according to Walter Mignolo, ‘[i]nclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right’ (Mignolo 2011, xv).

Reciprocity finds expression in *talanoa* as itself a model of theological hermeneutics. To give an example, Vaai refers to the process of *faafaletui* (sharing, retelling, reconstructing stories), as ‘a hermeneutical approach’ which recognises that ‘[m]eanings are not rigid’, that a single story always has multiple and new meanings, and the retelling ‘contributes to the *ongoing reception* of the same story from generation to generation’ (2016, 53–54). Such reciprocity indicates that ‘truth is always relational. It is relative to the context and perspective of the receiver of the story. It is not something abstractive or universal’ (Vaai 2016, 5). Necessary to this process is the sense of community, extended family and solidarity that is at the heart of the Pasifika Household of God, and includes what Vaai has termed the ‘de-heavening of God’: ‘In this household, God is no longer that remote monarchical figure who controls the world from afar to maintain divine power, but rather a companion who is part of multiple relationships through the Spirit, and through the Spirit suffers alongside the grieved members of the household’ (2019, 4). In short, if one might summarise the stated theological commitment within Pasifika theologies over the past generation, it is to a shared diversity of voice and the invitation to develop theologies through an array of local lenses and the processes (institutions/structures/methodologies) which support this invitation. The direction and production are constructive and fabulous.

However, as to what local theology feeds Empire, let us begin with the idea of theologising out of context. This should not be confused with ‘contextualisation’ because this speaks more to a theology of identification and evaluation by an agent external to the context using local language, symbol, and ritual to communicate a static message. As Jione Havea argues, such an approach trades upon ‘the illusion of essentialism’ (2011, 44). Essentialism is the tendency to ‘privilege and valorise unity, harmony, and totality and thereby to denigrate, suppress and marginalize multiplicity, contingency, and particularity’ (Duraisingh 2000, 680–81). Out of this comes the drive to absorb that which is different and to convert it in such a way that it confirms the original and the universal. Or, contextualisation performed in this way perpetuates the processes of imperialism with its end in dehumanisation (Halapua 1998, 22).

In opposition, Havea advocates taking ‘contexts seriously, not just as points of arrival and departure, but as that which is at the center of our attention’, to focus on ‘the local location rather than the global context’, and to appreciate the complexity and multilayered nature of location, along with the fluidity of borders (2011, 44, 49, 50). This interest in the local leads Havea to the following conclusion:

When we theologize *in the interest of the Christian mission*, many things become secular and pagan, including the memory of the ancestors. I am denied the joy of recalling the stories of my pre-contact aunties, for I have to live as if I am a descendant of Sarai (even though I prefer Hagar). If on the other hand we theologize *in the interest of the context*, it makes no sense to speak of something that is secular or profane. Everything is tapu (sacred, prohibited) ... Connecting with ancestors enables the barrier between the sacred and the secular to fall. (Havea 2011, 50)

Of course, Havea’s interest is not with contemporary ecumenism, and the definition of mission he is using here understands ‘conversion’ in terms of leaving one history for another, a mission which demands a binary ‘disruption’ with the non-Christian past. And, without question, his position is developed with the deliberate intention to serve the local and difference. The problem is: making this binary fundamental to local theological construction establishes the beginning point (the key problem), the form of solution (methodology), and an envisioned goal (what does our theologising seek to achieve). This purposely feeds and affirms empire because it maintains the basic assumption of empire—context is non-theological, and the experience of alienation lies in the missionary transmission of the gospel.

Let me explain. As previously stated, the elimination of difference is the approach to unity upon which contemporary ecumenical discourse trades: the consolidation of the Christian message into a ‘One Tradition’ which is itself deemed to be trans-historical and trans-cultural. This process of consolidation included: (1) reconfiguring mission from the processes of communication and theological construction due to the appropriation of the gospel within communities of difference; (2) aligning mission with the imperial assertion of an established non-theological (universal) centre, and the political, military, and economic movement from that ‘centre’ (Rome) and to the ‘periphery’ (Asia); and (3) linking the ‘body of Christ’ to a form of continuity identified with the trajectory of western civilisation. While this approach has undergone significant criticism in the postcolonial era, it remains intact precisely due to mission’s scapegoating. In other words, the ‘flexible rule of faith’ (mission) is blamed both (1) for introducing difference (the non-theological) into the limits of a fixed rule because of its translation of a culturally transcendent message

using local imaginaries, language, symbols, etc., and (2) for communicating the Christian gospel in such a way that it replicated western forms of the faith and so denigrated local cultures (colonisation).

Both points of blame hold significant truth, but to ground the production of local theologies within this framework affirms: (1) that the means by which Christianity grounds itself in and negotiates difference (the flexible rule of faith) is itself to be rejected in favour of fixed rules (a particular history of embodiment); (2) that developing theologies, overt in employing a local hermeneutical lens, depend upon the ‘non-theological’ and so develop as something to be celebrated within the ‘One Tradition’ but which fail to intrude upon it. Together these affirmations force difference into a binary which sets christology over against the local, portrays Jesus as someone who prevents engagement with pre-contact aunties, and distinguishes ‘unity in Christ’ from the ‘household of God’.

This is the problem of history, of identifying the body of Jesus Christ with the transmission/continuity of the gospel with the passage through time (and so the necessary preservation of embodied forms) and not in intercultural negotiation. To retain mission as singular scapegoat of Empire is to accept the identification of Jesus Christ with the contingent movement of the faith through western history and, with this, to accept the perpetual denigration of our own histories in relation to the faith. Or, positively stated, the reality of multiple cultures speaking the faith must include the reality of multiple histories embodying that faith.

Under Empire, mission became a condition of acceptance, conversion to a set form, rather than a process, a being converted in mutual exchange. De-Empiring mission serves the ecumenical discourse by rejecting the ‘premature closure of history’—the claim that the continuity of God’s acting in history is identified in the history of a singular culture. This is a repeated theological concern through world Christian discourse (Song 1976; Charleston 1998). With mission as the opening of history, to cite Raiser, ‘the emergence of plurality in the church can be understood as a process of differentiation taking place in the course of the transmission of the gospel and the missionary expansion of the church.... [T]he interruption of continuity, is constantly necessary to preserve the freedom of God’s action, God who creates the new and also seeks and makes possible new responses on the part of human beings’ (Raiser 1998, 123–24). To de-Empire mission is to affirm plurality as the necessary condition of continuity, the newness of the gospel in history through each generation and language, making claims (proclamation) in relation to local appropriations, encouraging integration by which the faith is embodied in authentic local form (Yettica-Paulson 2014).

As to the significance of mission's de-Empiring for hermeneutical method, as Damar Heller (1994, 32) observes, a hermeneutic serves a twofold function. First, it is a matter of hearing, understanding, and reception. This includes both listening to the complex fluid-border locale within which a community of interpretation is situated along with receiving voices beyond that locale. Second, it is a matter of expression, language, and proclamation. It is the telling of theological truths, not as abstract universals, but according to Halapua's definition of *fakakakato*, the inseparable relationship between the symbol and the experience (1998, 25). Such intercultural hermeneutics of plural traditions renders impossible the dichotomous formulation of the local and the universal basic to Empire and to the processes of *oneification*. Nor is it to reject the very idea of the 'universal'. Instead, the 'whole is not conceived prior to the parts, rather the one whole comes to be, is constituted by, in and out of the relations of its many constituents' (Komonchak 1981, 30). To define mission as the eschatological opening of history, interrupting continuity through retelling the gospel and its consequent newness, is to identify a 'universal' as necessarily contingent upon the plurifomity of local voices. This is the nature of ecumenical unity.

Conclusion

The very fact of world Christianity demands recognising that 'the interpretation of reality is plural, and that such plurality is true' (Vélez Caro 2007, 250). Vélez Caro asserts this position against norms which assume a universal 'empirical' mode of culture—a way of perceiving reality according to a vision of a 'universal human being', and a program of educating people toward this vision (civilising). To recognise plurality, to recognise difference as proper and basic to Christian unity, is not to assert a relativism which denies truth; it is to understand truth not as 'a condition or a situation, but as a process' (Caro 2007, 250). In terms of ecumenical methodology, intercultural hermeneutics offers a clear path forward—but not without significant contest due to the ongoing suspicion towards mission as a theological concern. Yes, it is necessary to deconstruct the received and experienced configuration of mission as bound to Empire. A de-Empired account of mission resides in the flexibility of the gospel. This both creates communities due to 'constant pressure of the "eschaton" upon history to keep "re-launching" it towards the kingdom', and ensures a critical edge as 'the prophetic-missionary impulse interacts with the historical forms of injustice, institutionalized in our churches, it produces conflict within the church' (Bonino 1982, 123). The church is not itself immune from mission because the 'questions of race, sex, class are thus no extraneous elements "ideologically" introduced in the discussion of unity, but the necessary disruption of our "premature" unities which have incorporated "the form of the world"' (Bonino 1982, 123). Mission is

the eschatological disruption of the closure of history. The gospel is only ever 'real' as it is embodied in communities, and to 'exclude or guard against doubtful or dangerous forms of church plurality, the church cuts itself off from the network of dynamic relationships which alone keep its identity alive... The more a church seeks to limit or even suppress plurality, the poorer it becomes' (Raiser 1988, 124). The missionary dynamic, by contrast, is this eschatological orientation to the embodied pluriformity of the faith and the corresponding hermeneutical concern draws the 'non-theological' into that future.

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