The Changing Topography of Church History

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When I was invited to deliver this lecture, I was asked to bring you something that is at the cutting edge of my discipline, as well as something that also has to do with the practice of ministry. That is a tall order! First of all, where is the cutting edge of church history? Secondly, how is that cutting edge related to ministry?

Then I realized that I was looking at the question with a microscope, when perhaps it would be best to look at it with a wide-angle lens. The cutting edge of church history is not in some detailed study of a particular moment of church history. That may well be part of the cutting edge. But the cutting edge is much larger than that. The cutting edge is really in the cataclysmic changes that have taken place since I first began working in the field, and which are still taking place at an ever-increasing speed. In a word, the entire topography of church history is changing to the point that church history today is no longer what it was thirty years ago, and we only have an inkling of what it will be thirty years from now.

At this point, someone may ask, how is it possible for the past to change? Obviously, it is not possible. But history is not the same as the past. The past is never directly accessible to us. The past comes to us through the mediation of interpretation. And that interpreted past is history.

Perhaps a good way to put it is using the image of a dialogue. In a dialogue, the other is not directly accessible to me. All that I have are words, gestures, tones, by which the other person attempts to communicate with me but which I receive and interpret according to my own experiences and presuppositions. In a genuine dialogue, I must respect the otherness of my interlocutor, I must not interpret the other's words according to my own whims. There is a givenness to those words. On the other hand, no matter how hard I try, the only way in which I can hear and interpret those words is from my own perspective. When you stop to think about it, dialogue is impossible. And yet, despite its impossibility, it happens! Pure, unhindered communication is but an elusive dream. And yet, communication is the basis of all social life. I know that as I speak here today not one of you will hear my words exactly as I mean them—in fact, no two of you will hear them in exactly the same way. And yet, I persist in speaking to you. That is the miracle of communication, which, although impossible, is still the fabric of all social life.

Now, think about history as a dialogue. It is a dialogue in which it is not only the past that addresses us but also, we who address the past. As an historian, I am not a passive observer of past events but an interlocutor who speaks with the past, who poses questions to the past. And the answers that the past gives me depend to a large measure on the questions I ask of it.

What all of this means is that the cataclysmic changes that are taking place in church history are the counterpart of the cataclysmic changes that are taking place in the church today. (And

here I have a hint as to how this lecture may fill that tall order, to deal at once with the cutting edge of the field and with the practice of ministry, for the reasons why the topography of church history is changing are by and large the same reasons why the practice of ministry is changing.)

These changes have to do mostly with who it is that does the history of the church—or in other words, who are the interlocutors who speak with the past and report on their conversation. It is on that score that the changes have been nothing short of cataclysmic.

Let me illustrate that first of all with a personal note and then make some more general comments. When I first studied church history, in a seminary in Latin America, all our textbooks were either in English or Spanish translations of books originally written in English. Our main textbook was Kenneth Scott Latourette's *A History of Christianity*. At that point, there was no Spanish translation of that book. It was also the time before computers and even xerox machines. So, every evening the entire class would gather. There were 17 of us in the class. I would translate the book out loud, while four typists wrote down what I said, making four copies each, and the rest of the class would proofread and collate what was being produced. I remember after one of those sessions telling one of my professors, "someone should write a textbook on church history in Spanish, one that deals more with our issues and concerns." He had some experience in the publishing world, and said, "That will never be possible. The market is not large enough."

In less than forty years, things have changed drastically. The book I spoke of has been written. The church in Latin America has grown enough so that the market can now support it. But even more, it has been translated into English. And now every year in the United States, and not only in Latin America, there are thousands of theological students whose first readings in church history are from a book written from a Latino perspective!

That small personal experience, multiplied a hundredfold, illustrates the first point at which the topography of church history, and the topography of the church itself, are changing. More and more, voices previously unheard are being heard. This includes people of color in the white-dominated North Atlantic, women both in the North Atlantic and elsewhere, and people in what we used to call the Third World, or the "younger churches."

All of these people, me included, are asking of the past different questions than most church historians were asking fifty years ago. Because for some of them the past includes elements that traditional, normative history did not include, they are also asking questions of a wider past. And the result is a cataclysmic change in the topography of church history.

Allow me to illustrate this with a few examples:

1) First, although it is true that most of the people of color, and most women, who are engaged in the task of church history are not themselves poor, it is also true that for all sorts of reasons we have a closer acquaintance with poverty in our own communities. The result is that many of

us have begun to ask of the texts and archaeological remains of the past questions that most of our own professors would not have asked. When I was a student at Yale, under some of the best church historians of the time, I was taught to read Ignatius of Antioch, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and the rest of those whom we then called the "Fathers" of the Church, asking them "theological" questions. "Theological" questions were items such as the presence of Christ in communion or the doctrine of the Trinity. The question of why some are inordinately rich, while others starve to death, was not a theological question, and therefore one that most of us never thought to ask of the so-called "Fathers." And, because we never asked, they never told us!

Today, however, church historians are asking such questions. And they are asking them not simply as "ethical" questions, apart from theology, but as central theological questions. The result is that we are beginning to hear some of the most respected ancient Christian writers say things about wealth and its proper use and distribution that we would never have imagined. But even more, we are beginning to see that for them these matters were profoundly and urgently theological matters, deeply connected with their understandings of items such as the meaning of communion and the doctrine of the Trinity.

2) Second, although there were some women historians in earlier generations, their numbers were not such, nor their consciousness so raised, as to force all historians to look again at the historical record to see what it said about women. In general, except for passing references to

some of the early martyrs such as Perpetua and Felicitas or to founders of religious orders such as St. Claire, women remained absent from the pages of church history.

In a way, that was a true reading of much of the history of the church, for throughout the centuries all sorts of limitations have been imposed on women, who, therefore, have not been allowed to attain the visible positions of leadership usually reserved for men. But in another way, it ignored the fact that presumably all through the history of the church at least half of its members have been women. And it also tended to ignore those outstanding women who did attain positions of theological and ecclesiastical leaders despite all forces arrayed against them.

On this score, too, the topography of church history has changed radically. Much of what today's students take for granted is already a significant shift from what I studied. Examples abound. Just to mention one, my mentors at Yale taught me to admire and respect what they then called the "Three Great Cappadocians," Gregory of Nazianzen, his friend Basil of Caesarea, and Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa. They never mentioned the other great Cappadocian who stood behind both Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, namely their sister Macrina. Today, many in the new generation of students, at least in this country, have never heard of the "Three Great," but rather of the "Four Great" Cappadocians.

3) Third, the fact that the interlocutors have changed so as to include more people of color as well as more women has meant that church history is becoming much more interested in the

daily life of Christians. The shifts here have been enormous. Whereas in years past our most valued sources for the study of church history were the writings of ecclesiastical leaders and the archeological remains of churches and cathedrals, we are now making more use of other documents and sources that speak to us of everyday life. The discovery of an ever-increasing number of papyri dating from ancient times, the study of tax documents and population records from the Middle Ages, and an archeology much more interested in everyday life have all contributed to a changing topography in church history, in which we are increasingly able to speak, not only of bishops and cathedrals, but also of small village churches and of the daily life of common, everyday lay Christians.

4) Fourth, the participation of historians from the so-called younger churches, writing not only about the history of their own churches but also about the history of the entire church, has meant vast changes in the actual content and scope of church history.

Again, examples abound. Allow me once again to mention one from my own experience. All those textbooks of church history that I used when I was a student in seminary attached great significance to the sixteenth century. Several of them said that, jointly with the fourth and perhaps the nineteenth, the sixteenth century was among the most important in the entire history of the church.

Generally, I would still agree with that. Yet, what is significant about those books as I now look at them is they tended to reduce the significance of the sixteenth century to the Protestant Reformation and its Roman Catholic counterpart. That was understandable. These were mostly Protestant books, written at a time when there was still great alienation between Protestants and Catholics, and they were also books from the North Atlantic, written from a perspective in which the North-Atlantic was the new *mare nostrum* of the new imperial civilization. Significantly, even though I had studied the history of the conquest and colonization of the Western Hemisphere ever since I was in the second grade, as I read those books in seminary it did not occur to me that there was here a great omission. Today, I cannot speak of the history of the church in the sixteenth century without taking into account that on May 26, 1521, the same day that the imperial Diet of Worms issued is edict against Luther, Hernán Cortés was laying siege to the imperial city of Tenochtitlán. And today, after the Second Vatican Council and a number of developments in Latin America, many would agree that the jury is still out as to which of those two events will eventually prove to be more important for the history of the church at large.

And, since I mentioned the nineteenth century in passing, something similar is true of that century. When I was a student at Yale, there was much interest among historians in that particular century. For many of my professors, as well as of my classmates, the reason why this century was so important was that it was formative for modern Protestant theology. It was a century filled with German names: Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Wellhausen, Troeltsh, Harnack.

Today, many of us would argue that just as important was another phenomenon that was taking place at the same time: For the first time in its history, the church was truly becoming a worldwide community. Thus, today's historians of the nineteenth century must also deal with names such as Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Queen Ranavlona II, Ko Tha Byu, and Gregorio Aglipay.

5) Fifth, again because of the participation in the task of church history of people from the so-called younger churches as well as of people of color and of women, contemporary church history is having to look again at many of the practices of popular religiosity that a generation ago were easily dismissed as "syncretistic." Significantly, the integration of Greek philosophy into Christianity has always been considered a legitimate concern for church history, and the same is true of the assimilation of Germanic tribal customs and traditions. But things were different when it came to the integration of Aztec or African religions and customs into Christianity. These were "superstitions," not worthy of consideration.

Likewise, the churches that resulted from the adaptation of Christianity to the developing nationalism and capitalism of Northern Europe have always been a legitimate part of church history, But the churches that resulted from the adaptation of Christianity to the ancestral customs of Africa are not “real” churches and are not part of the subject matter of church history.

The struggle of the Netherlands for independence, fueled to a great measure by their conversion to Calvinism, has always been read as a great saga to be relished by Protestant church historians. But things were quite different for the T'ai Ping rebellion, when some of the downtrodden Chinese rebelled against their overlords and attempted to establish a "Kingdom of Heavenly Peace" in Nanjing. Although the rebels had derived much of their inspiration from what they had heard of Christian teachings, theirs was obviously a misunderstanding for which there was no place in the history of Christianity.

Today, much of this is changing. Historians from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as other historians from the North Atlantic who have listened to their colleagues from overseas, are beginning to widen the scope of church history. The resultant changes in topography are enormous. No longer can the "history of missions" be separated from the history of the church, as if the church were really the church only at the center and the periphery were some sort of quasi-church. No longer can church history be limited to what happened in the North Atlantic or among people of Caucasian stock, when today the majority of Christians are no longer white, nor do they live in the North Atlantic. It is for these reasons that I venture to suggest that the changes that we are witnessing now are no more than the first waves of cataclysmic convulsions that will change the entire topography of church history.

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Needless to say, I react rather positively to much of this change. Also needless to say, some of it also scares me, for it means among other things that I must constantly relearn much of my own

discipline. In general, however, I tend to see the emerging world-church, a church that is increasingly representative of wider and more diverse sectors of humanity, as a foretaste of the day when the great vision will be fulfilled: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands" (Rev. 7:9). I suspect that this is the attitude shared by most of my audience, and therefore I shall not dwell on it nor even try to defend it. Rather, I shall try to bring a dose of realism to it.

We often quote the phrase "out of every tribe and nation, and people and language" as the epitome of the unity in diversity that we seek. And indeed, we should do so. Yet it may be well to point out that the book of Revelation, from which these words are most often quoted, does not always use them in an entirely positive way. Just for the record, and for those of you who may wish to study the matter further, that phrase, or another very much like it, appears seven times in the book of Revelation. Of these, two have to do with the preaching of the gospel, and I shall not dwell on them here. (They are Rev. 10:11, and 14:6. They are also both fascinating passages, which I would very much like to discuss with any who are interested.) Two are very positive passages, dealing with the eschatological hope of the bringing together of the faithful from all corners of the earth and all tribes of humankind. (Again, for the record, they are the passages that I have just quoted, from Rev. 7:9 and Rev. 5:9, in which the phrase appears in the song of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders.)

But the other three references to the many tribes, peoples, nations, and languages are not necessarily all that positive:

1) In Revelation 11, John offers us the vision of the two witnesses. It is not necessary for our purposes here to enter into the discussion as to whom these two witnesses might represent. What is important is that after the two witnesses have completed their testimony and are killed, "for three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth." In other words, if the glory of heaven is to be shared by a great multitude out of every tribe and nation and people and language, the Lamb and its witnesses will be opposed by others out of every people, and tribe, and language, and nation.

2) Revelation 13 makes that point even clearer. There John is speaking of the beast from the sea, which appears all-powerful, and is therefore worshiped by the whole earth, and he says: "It [the beast] was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered." Multiculturalism may be an important trait in the very nature of the church, but it is also an important trait in the powers of evil.

3) Thirdly, and finally among these negative texts, look at Revelation 17, the passage that was read this morning. This is the vision of the great harlot "who is seated on many waters." This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, in which the prophet is speaking against Babylon: "You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come." It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, in which a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long-distance transportation took place by water rather than by land. Thus, to depict the great harlot as "seated on many waters" was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

The angel explains the meaning of the vision to John: "The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15). In other words, the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

Why do I find this passage crucial for the issues we are discussing? Because this passage reminds us that culture and history always exist and move in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: "The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

If we accept the most common interpretation, that the great harlot is the city of Rome and its imperial power, it follows that John of Patmos had a very realistic understanding of the wealth of Rome. Rome was wealthy, not because it was particularly productive, and certainly not because its people worked harder than the many peoples, tribes, nations and languages Rome had subjected, but rather because Rome had devised a system whereby the wealth of all these nations flowed to it, as so many rivers.

The first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. Some celebrated this fact, and others bemoaned it. But it was John of Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages" who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, because the cultural encounters of our day do not take place in abstraction from economic and political systems. It is not just that world travel has become easier, and therefore people of different cultures meet more often than they used to. It is not just that Christians from all over the world are coming together in international meetings to discuss these matters. It is also that the world order—or rather, the world disorder—is such that people are forced to leave their traditional homes and move to new lands in search of safety, security, freedom, and work.

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by political and military might.

If today the topography of church history is shifting, it is also because, to a small degree, the topography of power in the church and in the world has also begun to shift. The growing participation of the so-called younger churches in the ecumenical dialogue, as well as in the interpretation of church history, is closely related to the demise of political colonialism and to the attempt to dismantle economic neocolonialism. The growing participation of women in the shaping and reshaping of history is also closely related to the partial gains that women throughout the world have made in the political, economic, and ecclesiastical spheres. The growing participation of people of color is likewise related to the American civil rights movement and to a number of similar movements here and throughout the world. If I may borrow from the language of Revelation 17, the many waters on which the harlot is sitting, "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages," have begun to shift. Once water starts shifting, it is very difficult to stop; and the same will be true of the "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages" on which the powers of the present age are sitting.

Again, the apparently great changes that are taking place in church history today are probably only the first shock waves of cataclysmic changes to come. Church history is changing because the church is changing. The church is changing, at least in part, because the world is changing.

Which brings us back full circle to the tall order with which I was presented in receiving this invitation: "That the lecture topic be some cutting-edge subject in church history, and one that clearly informs the practice of ministry today." It seems clear that, if the shifts that I have just described—and a number of others I could also have described—are to continue and to become even more pronounced into the coming century, the practice of ministry will have to be built around two poles: interpretation and solidarity. Interpretation, so that both those who gain with these changes and those who seem to lose may see God's designs being fulfilled: solidarity with those who are emerging out of oppression and oblivion, to accompany them in their struggle. And solidarity with those—probably the majority of us present here, who will have to learn how to relinquish privileges and presuppositions that we have taken for granted—and how to relinquish them gracefully and gratefully. *That* is a tall order! But, since thankfully I have run out of time, I leave it for another occasion!