

## Teaching with God's Multicultural World in Mind. Dr. Alan Lai

**A Biblical Vision of Transformation.** From the Hebrew Scriptures, We learn a vision as described in Isaiah 11, where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.” Everyone gets their fair share, no intimidation, no discrimination, and no injustice. From the ancient prophets in the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, we learn of a God who cares about justice and the situations of disenfranchised people.

Christianity always insists that God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the God of the cosmos. God loves *all* people. God loves this world so much that through God's own dying and rising in Jesus, the Christ, God reconciles with God's creation. While the brutal forces of the empire erected a cross and put an innocent person to death as a way to silence the voices of justice and protest, God transformed that cross to a symbol of God's solidarity with suffering people everywhere who experience injustice. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God set up a banquet of love in the face of hatred. My Christology embraces the cross event as the intersection between the horror of injustice and the power of God's love. The cross calls for deep understanding of social situations and the practice of love. Jesus' relationship with me involves me in a way of the cross, a way to live out the Gospel that includes non-violence and proclaiming God's provision of forgiveness and love to all. God's love is unlimited to all God's creation. God has freed us to love and to serve. It is through the scandal of the Gospel that God's people rely on God's grace to live peacefully with respect for our diverse neighbors.

**A Theological Foundational on Teaching Diversity.** Even though Christianity insists that Jesus is God incarnate and that we “see” God clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, the church DOES NOT say that Jesus is the only revelation or that Christianity possesses the whole truth. The integrity of Christianity respects the sovereign God as the God of the cosmos. That to me means Christians cannot confine God in any nicely framed theology. The church needs to be willing to entertain strangers and unfamiliar voices as God's way of teaching Christians new things. For this reason, the church does not entertain “diversity for diversity sake” but for the Gospel's sake, for a God who still speaks, and for the ongoing lifelong seeking of truth. Essential to any affirmation of diversity is the recognition that we are limited in our very humanness. Embracing diversity emerges not from relativism, but from a deeply held and aptly humble monotheism.

Diversity is not the Gospel. But celebrating diversity gives the strangers among us voices to speak. First, the presence of unfamiliar others help the church to minimize the misrepresentation of others; and secondly, the presence of others help us to clarify the very things we believe in. Others will ask us questions insiders don't ask anymore. This idea works both ways: we are mutually enriched by each other's questions. Second, apostle Paul talks about the continuing renewal of our minds. As God's peoples we have a continuing need to revise and adjust our former understanding and being in the world. Christians must pay fundamental respect to the continual unfolding of God's promises as a condition for the very nature of the phenomena of revelation. Such unfolding of God's promises transforms known knowledge, ways of being in the world, and empowers us to live responsively as God's agents of reconciliation. Dr. Mary Boys talks about “textured particularism”, which means a keen sense of the beliefs and practices of one's own religious tradition as well as the finitude of that tradition. We need this spirit of understanding more than ever.

God continues to do new things among us that include calling us to listen/see. From this conviction, my passion in teaching is to educate people in ways that “make a space” for other, those who sing a different song, hear a different music, and tell a different story.

Another way of talking about the need to entertain diversity is that meaning is never neutral but always situated socially, culturally, and historically, and that meaning operates within the logic of differing ideologies that imply differing sets of social practices. Diversity is being human and teaching is political. We all come from specific locations with specific kinds of education that form our way of reasoning and knowing, that includes ways to read the Bible and do theology. Effective teaching demands sensitivity to people and the differing experiences and interpretive lenses they bring to the church/classroom. When the classroom/church is diverse, intentionally or unintentionally, effective teachers need to be aware of the relationships of dominance and subordination and to watch out for the potential development of unjust practices. Knowledge is power where some groups’ behaviors and ways of seeing are treated as norms. Knowing as well as providing forums for those who have different experiences from us is a basic necessity in diverse and global situations. We cannot claim to be effective and educated teachers of the church if we do not seek to understand the plurality of people and their experiences that make up the human community. Commitment to diversity is a commitment to a God who treasures the plurality of human existence and experiences. Commitment to diversity allows us to examine our possible hegemonic participation in the oppressive structures of the world in the name of Christ.

**Christianity After Colonialism.** Christianity is not always the source of life, but also of problems. The church cannot do mission as if colonialism did not happen! The church has two thousand years of Christian history from which to study and to learn. Based on this history, I say that I do theology and teaching with the multicultural world in mind.

The world is diverse and multicultural. It is not that the world has become multicultural. The world has ALWAYS been multicultural. But Christianity as it was further developed in Europe focused on European cultures, languages and thought patterns as the norms. A Japanese theologian once said that Christianity became the spiritual engine of western civilization. Earlier I described my understanding of Christianity as God’s free gift to humanity so that we can be free to love and to serve. When Christianity chooses other ways, theologians and teachers of the church have the obligation to call the church to repentance. Mission talks must begin with self-examination! During colonialism, a westernized expression of Christianity was preached as the only expression of truth to the rest of the world. The western church imposed its “universal system” on all humanity, universalizing Eurocentric specific theological traditions. Also, what got spread around was not just any Christianity, but a colonial Christianity that was deeply infected with supersessionism, anti-Judaism, racial segregation, male chauvinism, gender inequality, and exclusivity. That is the Christianity that the rest of the world learned. As I look at that history and as an Asian Christian, I always think that that history is a bittersweet reality.

God is the God of the cosmos. Dominance, religiously or otherwise, has no place in Christian mission. My tasks as a theologian include finding ways to speak faithfully to this God of the universe who desires people of the world to live in peace. Theologians always need to situate and root themselves in particular locations, yet faithfulness to the God who is the God of the cosmos demands theologians to be attentive and imaginative to do theology with the resources of the world. North America is one rare window of opportunity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for ordinary Christians to interact with the world without leaving their hometowns.

Multicultural societies such as the United States and Canada cannot ignore the richness of cultures which our neighbors bring.

The mindset of domination caused by colonialism continues to affect the behavior of many people, our belief systems, and how we relate to other minorities. The very languages of “mainstream” and “visible minorities” convey the reality of power imbalance. I do not say it lightly that western epistemology and systems of knowledge, including Christian theologies, have been integrated to the internal colonial domination suffered by indigenous and nonwhite people.

The church in mission cannot fail to recall a colonial past, and acknowledges its persistent present effects in our assumed ways of thinking. Empowering people to think critically and to critique one’s possible hegemonic participation in the oppressive regime are considered the heart of postcolonial Christian teachings and learning. Without such skills, Christian traditions become gods. Song says the fundamental weakness of theology during the imperialistic era was that it failed to distinguish between the brutal power of the Western States and the redeeming power of Jesus Christ.

**Teaching with Multiculturalism in Mind.** Understanding the damage colonial Christianity has done in the past and participating in God’s transformation in this present time represent core foundation of ministry the church calls Christian education. Multiculturalism is the buzzword of our times. But for the sake of the Gospel that intends to give life to all habitats, for the integrity of the proclamation of God’s realm, and for Christians’ genuine repentance from the colonial past, the church must take God’s multicultural world seriously. The Christian church always maintains that God loves all God’s creations--that includes diverse human communities.

Also, the talk of multiculturalism exposes a recent past when there was NO multiculturalism, but mono-cultural domination. My understanding of the term “multicultural education” incorporates the notion of justice. Multicultural education works toward justice and peaceful coexistence. Multicultural education is justice education. Because God so loves the world, let God’s children teach with God’s diverse planet and justice in mind.