

# Intercultural global theology

Hyung Jin Kim Sun

The adjective *global* shows up often these days. We use it in phrases such as global warming, global leaders, global market, global village. Christians talk about global Christianity and global church. Frequent use of this adjective indicates that we are aware that we are living in a globalized society and that Christianity has become a global religion. Still, it surprises many Western Christians to learn that the majority of Christians do not live in Western countries but in Asia, South America, and Africa. The same is true of the Anabaptist-Mennonite branch of Christianity in particular. In 2015, Mennonite World Conference published statistics showing that only 35 percent of people in its member bodies live in the Global North, whereas 65 percent reside in the Global South.<sup>1</sup> The

**It is crucial that we undertake the work of examining and revising our theological tradition, because Mennonite theologies in North America, particularly theologies taught in academic settings, have been predominately Western and male-centric.**

fact is, Mennonite faith is no longer a Euro-American reality. And while the proportions doubtless differ by region, conference, and country in North America, people from other cultural backgrounds and faith traditions are joining our traditional churches, and immigrant churches are emerging and flourishing within Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

## **Our theology needs to change**

As a result of these changes, Mennonite churches in North America are making efforts on a local and a national level to

include sisters and brothers from other cultural backgrounds. Having a potluck, organizing a joint worship service, supporting immigrant churches, and developing a new song and worship collection: these are a few examples of efforts to welcome and include people not raised in traditional Mennonite contexts. And in addition to these endeavors, I would argue

---

1 MWC World Directory 2015 Statistics, accessed May 10, 2017, [https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website\\_files/mwc\\_world\\_directory\\_2015\\_statistics.pdf](https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_2015_statistics.pdf).

that it is crucial that we undertake the work of examining and revising our theological tradition, because Mennonite theologies in North America, particularly theologies taught in academic settings, have been predominately Western and male-centric.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians become aware that Christianity has become a global religion, we begin to realize that every theology is shaped in profound ways by its context and that we need to engage with theologies we had not been exposed to before. Swiss Pentecostal theologian Walter Hollenweger asserts:

*All theologies—including the biblical ones—are contextually conditioned. There is no pure gospel. The gospel appears to us per definitionem in an incarnate form. We have no access to a gospel outside its incarnation in culture, language, thought patterns, etc. That is why there is nothing wrong with theology being contextually conditioned. But to call a gospel which is heavily dependent on a capitalist society and on Aristotelian philosophy the “pure gospel” or even “the full gospel” is a grave overstatement. It usually takes others to show us how conditioned, parochial and ideologically captive our own theology is. Even if once we could ignore such voices, now we can no longer do so.*<sup>3</sup>

To assert that all theologies are contextual is not to say that all theology is relative. Rather, it is to acknowledge that every theological perspective has emerged in a particular time and space, in engagement with specific cultures, issues, and events. Theologians—from the authors of the books of the Bible to the early church fathers, from major Reformation figures of the sixteenth century to thinkers of our time—have all done theology in an effort to make sense of God to their communities which faced particular issues in specific situations. Missionaries have also endeavored to present the gospel in ways that communicated with and could be understood by the cultures who received their message. Although contextual theology may be seen as a new concept, the practice of contextualizing theology has existed throughout Christian history.

---

2 Mennonite feminist theologians such as Lydia Harder and Carol Penner have criticized the patriarchy still present in Mennonite theology and tradition. Taking a further step, I argue that Mennonite theology and tradition are also Western-centric.

3 Walter Hollenweger, “Intercultural Theology: Some Remarks on the Term,” in *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honor of J. A. B. Jongeneel*, edited by Martha Fredriks, Meindert Dijkstra, and Anton Hontepen (Zoetermer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2003), 90–91.

Contextualization happens not only when Christians go to a new region but also whenever a community experiences a major shift or a new challenge emerges. Thus, theologian and philosopher LeRon Shults argues that “in every generation Christian theology is faced with the task of articulating the intuitions of the biblical tradition about the significance of Jesus Christ in a way that engages its own cultural context.”<sup>4</sup> From the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, Mennonites have sought to be faithful disciples of Jesus, but as Mennonites have faced new challenges, their understandings of what discipleship means and how it is to be practiced have changed. While the core commitment to being a disciple of Jesus has not changed, how discipleship is interpreted, lived, and practiced has changed with changes in time and place. Mennonite churches in North America are in a context different from that of sixteenth-century Europe and from that of the first wave of Mennonite emigration to North America. For this reason, our theology has changed across generations and geography. And it needs to continue to change as we seek theological perspectives that resonate with the new reality of a church that has become more global and more diverse than ever.

### **Global multicultural and intercultural theological frameworks: A crucial difference**

How should our theology change for this time and place? Since Anabaptist-Mennonite reality has become global, our theological framework has to become global too. But in my view, we need to distinguish between two kinds of global theological framework: a global multicultural framework and a global intercultural framework. According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, the word *multicultural* is defined as “designating or pertaining to a society consisting of many culturally distinct groups,” and *intercultural* means “taking place between cultures; belonging to or derived from different cultures.” A multicultural community would be one that acknowledges the existence of different cultural groups in its midst and tries to learn how to tolerate the differences in order to coexist. It acknowledges the differences and celebrates them but does not foster genuine interaction among them. In contrast, in an intercultural community there is a genuine engagement among cultures, and each culture influences the others, with the result that there is mutual transformation. This mutual transformation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process.

---

4 LeRon Shults, *Christology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1.

In a context where Anabaptist-Mennonite faith has become a global reality, we cannot deny the diversity that exists in our global church. But faced with this reality, we can choose between these two patterns of engagement among people of different cultural groups. We can opt for the multicultural approach: we can acknowledge and celebrate differences. The method leads us to tolerate one another but limits our interaction with others; our differences remain too great to allow genuine engagement. In this approach, the key concept is tolerance. The second option is to move toward the intercultural approach, to engage deeply, with an attitude that our perspective is limited and we can learn from others. For this approach, mutuality is the key.

In my view, it is not enough to adopt a global multicultural theological framework, because this approach does not aspire to deep engagement. A global multicultural theological framework acknowledges various theologies that exist globally: liberation theologies, Minjung theologies,

**We can opt for the multicultural approach, acknowledging and celebrating differences. This approach leads us to tolerate one another but limits our interaction. Or we can move toward the intercultural approach, engaging deeply. Here mutuality is key.**

Dalit theologies, postcolonial theologies, and more. While recognizing these diverse theological views, a multicultural theological framework still focuses mostly on one's own traditional perspective. Most of the North American theological work being done by Mennonites is by Euro-American scholars, and they are mostly males. While this theological framework does not exclude theological perspectives from the Global South per se, it holds on to a belief that theologies originating in North America and in Europe are the most authoritative and advanced. And the theological engagement that does exist is designed to encourage

Anabaptist-Mennonite brothers and sisters in the Global South to contextualize theologies from the Global North into their own context. Where this kind of engagement moves in both directions, it is an authentically intercultural theological endeavor. But in fact this contextualizing often happens just in the Global South, and the theologies that are being contextualized are Western- and male-centric.

The problem with a global multicultural theological framework is not that it is unaware of diverse theological views but rather that it does not

engage other theological perspectives deeply, from within their own traditions and circles. Where a kind of engagement is present, it is often a matter of exporting Western theologies to the Global South and teaching how Western theological works are relevant and applicable to those regions. Where theologies from the Global South are valued and respected, they are often seen as contextual theologies, and Western theologies are seen as universal. Western theologians would no longer explicitly articulate this perspective, but as a person from the Global South who has been studying in Western theological seminaries for ten years, I would say that implicitly this view predominates in some Western seminaries.<sup>5</sup> While Western theological institutions are becoming more and more diverse, Western theologians still do not engage enough with theologies originating outside Western cultures and even with the diverse theological perspectives that exist in their own contexts, including Aboriginal theologies, feminist theologies, black theologies, Latina/o theologies.

### **Toward a global and intercultural theological framework**

For all the reasons I have just stated, I am arguing for the adoption of a global intercultural Mennonite theological framework. Where one is situated will affect how this theological framework looks. For readers in North America and Europe, it will not only encourage the acknowledgment of diverse theological perspectives but also engage other perspectives in ways that lead to re-examination of our theological understandings and to integration of insights from the Global South. North American theologians have long expected our brothers and sisters in the Global South to contextualize Western theologies; now there should be efforts among Western theologians to contextualize theologies from the Global South, to see how Mennonite theology can be expressed differently.

Viewed from the position of the Global South, this intercultural framework may look like an act of resistance. Because many theologians

---

5 Kwok Pui-lan, an Asian feminist scholar, reviewed syllabi of twelve courses in theology uploaded to the website of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. The majority of the required books were written by European and Euro-American male theologians. Only one (and often none) of the required texts was by a theologian outside North America. See Kwok Pui-lan, "Teaching Theology from a Global Perspective," in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, edited by Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia González-Andrieu, and Dwight N. Hopkins (Waco: Baylor Univ. Press, 2015), 15. This is the main point William Dyrness and Oscar Garcia-Johnson make in *Theology without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).


in the Global South were educated in Western countries, they may default to a full embrace of Western theologies. Even those who were educated in their own countries are likely to have been formed in schools that adopted Western theological education. Theologians from the Global South need to resist uncritically accepting Western perspectives and become intentional about doing theology that is rooted in their particular experiences and sources.

### **Concrete practices for creating a global intercultural theological framework**

How can people of Anabaptist-Mennonite persuasion in North America work concretely toward creating a global intercultural theological framework? Several concrete steps can get this process started.

#### ***Increase awareness that our theology is profoundly contextual.***

An essential first step is to foster awareness in ourselves that our theolog-



**A global intercultural Mennonite theological framework would not only acknowledge diverse theological perspectives but also engage other perspectives in ways that lead to re-examination of our theological understandings and to integration of insights from the Global South.**

ical perspective is deeply contextual and therefore limited. Our understanding of faith and tradition and our interpretation of Scripture are profoundly contextual. The more aware we are of how contextual our theology is, the more we will be open to listening to and engaging with the theological perspectives of people coming from a different context. In contrast, the more we assume that our theology is universal, the more we will disregard theological voices from other parts of the world and focus only on our theological perspective. As Mennonites, we need to acknowledge that one of the limitations of much of our theological discourse is its Western- and male-

centric character. We need to maintain some continuity with Mennonite history and tradition, but in a context in which the Mennonite church has become a global church, we must also acknowledge that our perspective is limited and provide ample space for voices from the Global South.

***Support people from the Global South in their reinterpretation of sources of our theology.*** A second step is to encourage Mennonites from the Global South in reinterpreting the sources of our theologies.

A number of Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars have studied the work of sixteenth-century Anabaptist leaders in order to explain Anabaptist-Mennonite theologies and practices. These are important theological tasks, but most if not all of the people who have examined these sources and interpreted them are white men. The sources are not self-explanatory; someone has to do the work of interpreting them, a process that always is informed by the social location and intellectual outlook of the person doing the interpreting.

There would of course be other ways of interpreting the sources, informed by other social locations and intellectual perspectives. It is time for Anabaptist-Mennonite historians from the Global South to engage in interpreting these sources. Imagine how the early Anabaptist movement could be understood in a deeper, more diverse, and broader sense, if sisters and brothers from the Global South were to interpret them using their own lenses! And they could do this work of reinterpretation not only with sixteenth-century sources but also with the works of contemporary Mennonite theologians. When theologians of the Global South do this work, and theologians of the Global North listen to what they have to say, I am confident that the result will be enriching for Anabaptist-Mennonite theology.

***Reach out to new dialogue partners.*** A third step we need is to engage with new partners in theological dialogue, reflecting other contexts. If we have been reading mostly theologians from the Western world, we need to start reading the work of theologians from other cultures and theologians within our context who have been disregarded. There are Christian theologians from the Global South and theologians in North America whose work is not often read. A few of many such theologians are Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Kwok Pui-lan, Rita Nakashima Brock, Andrew Sung Park, Peter C. Phan, Kosuke Koyama, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Kwame Bediako, Musa W. Dube, Emmanuel Katongole, John S. Mbiti, and George E. Tinker. The more we expose ourselves to theological voices from other contexts, the more we will be able to theologize interculturally. Wilbert Shenk once said, “We can say theologically that the full meaning of the Body of Christ will be known only through the rich insights that each member of the Body can contribute.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, as we listen

---

6 Wilbert Shenk, “The Intercultural Learning Process as a New Model of Mission,” in *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honor of J. A. B. Jongeneel*, edited by Martha Frederiks, Meindert Dijkstra, and Anton Houtepen (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2003), 87.

to and converse with its varied members, we will get to know the body of Christ more fully. Expanding the range of our partnership in theological dialogue is crucial for understanding and knowing Christ.

**Name and value theological differences.** A fourth practice is to engage with global theological themes. Because all theologies are contextual, they are all in danger of becoming provincial and excluding other theologies. When that happens, connections with the global church are lost. In order to avoid this outcome, theologian and missiologist Robert Schreiter encourages each theology to make connections with these global theological themes: liberation, feminism, ecology, and human rights. These themes are currently being widely discussed by theologians around

**Mennonites in the Global South can contribute their particular perspective on peace and reconciliation and further develop the gospel of peace.**

the world.<sup>7</sup> Here I would like to add another theme that is being discussed globally: peace/reconciliation. Focusing on peace/reconciliation, but not being limited to it, we as a global church can bring different understandings to this theme and thus expand our understanding of it. Not all Anabaptist-Mennonites in the world have done extensive constructive work on peace theology, as European

and Euro-American Anabaptist-Mennonites have. But Mennonites in the Global South can contribute their particular perspective on peace and reconciliation and further develop the gospel of peace. For example, for Chinese and Korean people, the idea of peace contains the implicit meaning that it comes as a result of rice being given fairly to all people. The South African concept of Ubuntu can contribute a new perspective on peace. This kind of engagement and constructive dialogue can lead to a more global and intercultural Mennonite theology.

What if we had only one Gospel in the New Testament? Probably we would have less discussion about Jesus, because we would have less biblical material about him to deal with. Since we have four Gospels, scholars and nonscholars alike debate which of them offers a more accurate portrayal of his life and teaching. The multiplicity of perspectives makes it difficult to isolate a single clear-cut and accurate picture of Jesus and his teaching. But although some might see the fact of different Gospels as a

7 Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 15–16.



problem, to others it is a blessing. No one person and no single story can adequately convey everything about the life of Jesus and his teaching. The more stories of Jesus we have, the more diverse views of Jesus will exist, with the paradoxical result that we can know Jesus better.

In the same way, as the Mennonite church becomes more global, it is becoming much more complicated and diverse. In consequence, different theological views of Mennonite faith, practice, and theology will develop. One day, on the list of Mennonite food there will be kimchi and asado. One day, among the most used Mennonite last names there will be Kim Sun and González. The Mennonite game will not be limited to making connections among people in Europe and North America. This future is not that far from the present day, and this reality is bringing changes in Mennonite communities and theologies. Since this will be the future of the global Mennonite church, we Mennonites in North America must work toward a more global intercultural theological framework. It is not an easy task, but it is an essential one.

And if we Mennonites from the Global North have been doing most of the talking and leading most of the discussion, we should now provide more opportunity and space for Anabaptist-Mennonites from the Global South to speak and lead. This does not mean that we will or should agree with everything they say, but we at least need to listen carefully and with genuine curiosity, until they feel that they have been given ample opportunity to offer their perspectives. Then we should engage in a constructive dialogue. Through this intercultural dialogue, our theology, our church, and our life will be enriched. This dialogue will help us discern how to follow Jesus together with brothers and sisters from different cultural backgrounds. We will no longer follow white European Jesus but Jesus who is all and in all.

### **About the author**

Hyung Jin Kim Sun is a Korean-Paraguayan Mennonite in the third year of a doctoral program in theological ethics at Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology. His primary research interests are Mennonite ecclesiology and praxis, becoming intercultural and decolonializing communities, and public witnessing in post-secular and multicultural society. He works as the administrative assistant at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and also serves as an instructor with the Anabaptist Learning Workshop, a program offered by Mennonite Church Eastern Canada in cooperation with Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.