

CHURCH/ECUMENISM—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Church/Ecumenism
Convener: Amanda Osheim, Loras College
Moderator: Amanda Osheim, Loras College
Presenters: Mark Gornik, City Seminary of New York
Edmund Chia, Australian Catholic University

In his presentation, “Leading in an Ephesian Movement,” Mark Gornik drew upon Andrew F. Walls’ *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* to describe the ecumenical and contextual formation of ministers at City Seminary of New York. Walls finds in Ephesians’ two metaphors for the church (a temple and the body of Christ) recognition of both the Jewish and Hellenist cultures present in Ephesus. He also viewed Acts 15 and the decision of the Council of Jerusalem as an affirmation and reception of inculturation. These scriptural examples point to Christianity’s vitality not only through cultural diversity, but more foundationally through cultural exchange. This intercultural reception is how Christians come more completely to represent and imitate Christ.

Gornik proceeded to describe intercultural exchange and practices of attentiveness to urban context as central to City Seminary of New York’s ecumenical formation of ministers. The city’s large percentage of foreign-born and second-generation immigrants makes it a multicultural site for discovering the body of Christ through the exchange of diverse Christian traditions. Embodied spiritual engagement with the city itself becomes a means for ministers to discern God’s presence and call, as well as their own response. Spiritual practices promoted by the seminary are intended to become ministerial habits of listening, learning, and encounter. These practices encourage questions such as “How does God dwell in us while acting through us to bless the city?” “How can we sense God mediated by the city?” “How is Christianity part of an urban way of life which integrates church communities, family, and places of work?”

In living with these questions—and learning to respond to them—City Seminary is guided by three metaphors. First, the metaphor of good ground. Like seeds, seminarians are nurtured from the ground up and so ministry formation integrates tradition and experience with cultural and ecumenical exchange. The second metaphor is a brick: the seminary is an institution continually under construction in order to support ministerial practices within the diverse cultures of the church’s urban environment. The final guiding metaphor is a dish towel. The seminary forms ministers who learn to imitate Christ through service. These images of formation reflect core principles of City Seminary: offering one’s talents to God for the good of the church; humble recognition that one’s response to God’s call will include mistakes and that listening and learning must be ongoing; and joining together across denominations and cultures in order to shape one another in the practices of ministry.

Edmund Chia’s “Asian Movement for Christian Unity” examined the “triple dialogue” as an ecumenical path. This dialogue developed in response to the particular context of Christianity in Asia. Chia argues that formal, or official, ecumenical dialogue is not prevalent in Asia in part due to two contextual factors. First, Christians generally make up about 3–4 percent of the population in Asian countries, with some countries having a Christian population of under 1 percent. The practical result is that marriages and friendships which cross denominational lines are quite prevalent, as are

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interfaith relationships. The second and related contextual factor is colonialism's legacy in Asia, referred to by Protestant theologians in Asian theological schools as "the critical Asian principle." When Europeans brought Christianity to Asia they imported forms of Christianity which were deeply reflective of European cultures and accompanied by physical, social, cultural, and economic domination. The intertwining of Christianity and colonialism continues to deeply influence many Asian Christians' experience of church, and Christianity is still frequently viewed as a foreign religion whose doctrines, structures, rituals, and spiritualities are alien to Asian cultures.

Chia illustrated how the triple dialogue responds to this context. While the three aspects of the dialogue may be distinguished notionally, they are contextual corollaries which must guide the practices and theological reflection of Christian churches. The first aspect is dialogue with culture, predicated upon a transformative conversion of Christian churches away from dominance and Western paradigms and towards authentic and integrative expression through Asian cultures. This dialogue's purpose is to inculturate the church within Asia so that "Christianity would then be known not merely as a religion *in* Asia, but also a religion *of* Asia." The second aspect of the triple dialogue is that Christian churches' immersion in the life of Asian peoples requires continual dialogue with the poor and suffering whose hunger for liberation and salvation ought to be the motivation for evangelization. This form of dialogue has been the foremost and most welcome encounter with Christianity for many Asians since, despite the low population of Christians, more than 25 percent of healthcare and education is provided by Christian institutions. Finally, the other religious traditions present in Asia have their own understandings of liberation and salvation, and thus interreligious exchange is the third aspect of the triple dialogue. Similar to dialogue with culture and the poor, dialogue with religions requires Christians' openness to transformation through encounter with other traditions in order to more clearly hear the gospel themselves and so share it with the people of Asia.

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