
Enabling the Majority World to Benefit from ‘Superior’ Western Theology

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A colleague once told me that “there is no justification to thinking that there is any inherent superiority in Western Christianity.”¹ Was he right? Is he right? This article explains the “failure” of Western-based theological education in the majority world.² It advocates for how such failure can be rectified.

Is Western theological knowledge superior?

If there is no inherent superiority in Western Christianity (over against majority world Christianity), then this is amazing given the ways in which Western theological education is promoted around the world.³ It is also amazing given ways in which Western Christians and Western churches use finance and related means to transport themselves and their teachings to majority world contexts. Can the belief of people who have been imbibing Christianity for up to a score of centuries (Europeans) be in no way “superior” to those who have known the Gospel for little more than 100 years (many majority world peoples)? Many historically Christian countries are today considered the most “developed” in the world. By contrast, the church in many newly Christianised countries has been built on high levels of dependency on foreign funds.⁴ Is that irrelevant to theology?

The colleague who told me that “there is no justification to thinking that there is any inherent superiority in Western Christianity” was advocating for *humility*. I like that for sure! Assuming one’s superiority to other people does not seem very humble. That raises the question: what is the appropriate humble way to behave if one actually has something that *is* superior? Would it not be good to share this superior thing with others? Would it be a travesty not to do so? Not to share something that is superior with someone who could make use of it would seem to be selfish. Perhaps there are two kinds of humility. One type is the humility that recognizes that one is inferior. Another kind of humility continues even if

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one is “superior.” Can one be humble while “superior”? What does this latter kind of humility look like?

Do Western people consider their own “brands” of Christianity to be superior to those of others in the majority world? It would seem to be the case. There is nothing extraordinary in considering one’s own people’s practices in some way superior to those of others. If Westerners did not consider them so, then presumably they would cease to practice and promote them and instead adopt Christian practices and beliefs arising from the majority world. Overtly denying one’s own superiority, while implicitly in one’s words and behavior reflecting it, could be seen as a kind of hypocrisy.

How Western knowledge is valued

Western theology and other Western knowledge always seems to travel to the majority world with some sort of subsidy: enormous provision of aid from the Western world to the majority world is almost invariably attached in one way or another with the promotion of Western languages, knowledge, and understanding. This should have us asking questions about its perceived valuation by majority world citizens. There is a danger that subsidized knowledge may be valued for the subsidy rather than for its content. Perhaps the problem with Western wisdom and theology is of this nature?

When Western people offer theology with a subsidy (and it always seems to be offered with a subsidy⁵) they find that it is

1. Personal conversation, original anonymous.

2. I use the term “majority world” in a general way, as if there is one unified majority world with one language. See for reference to such failure in Africa, Andre Karamaga, “Foreword,” in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, eds., *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*. (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), xviii.

3. I would assume that any superiority of one version of Christianity, theology, or educational approach over another would arise from its being more accurate in its representation of who God is.

4. Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*. (London: Hurst and Company, 2015), 93.

5. It has been my observation that very few Western people engage with the majority world without also engaging in a transfer of resources. Well-known figures insist that a transfer of resources should

welcomed. Should they, on the above basis, conclude that Western theology is “truly” valued for its own sake, they could be making an incorrect assumption. If something were truly valued, then why would it always have to be presented with a subsidy?⁶ Humility is here required. Because Western Christian education and training to the majority world is almost always heavily subsidized, the West cannot be certain that what they are offering is actually being valued in and of itself. One could even go further and suggest that the necessity of a subsidy *proves* that Western education is not valued in and of itself.

We could here consider contextualization. Could it be that Western knowledge is not of value to the majority world, unless it is contextualized (or enculturated) into the context of the latter? That is; is there an implicit content to Western knowledge which is valuable, but the value is somehow hidden through want of contextualization? Then we have a problem: *If majority world people value Western knowledge because of its subsidy, then their apparent valuation of what is not-contextualized can seem to do away with the need for contextualization.* Worse than this: should contextualized knowledge (including contextualized theology) not come with a subsidy but non-contextualized theology come with a subsidy, then contextualization can appear to lead to poverty, or at least contextualization can result in a reduction in revenue. Such could turn majority world people who are interested in money against contextualization. It could have people make less-than-honest claims that something is inherently valuable when it is not, so as to preserve the ongoing flow of subsidy that is attached to it.

I would like to suggest that “raw” knowledge from the West, including that of Christianity, will not be superior to majority world Christian knowledge unless or until it is contextualized into majority world contexts. Unfortunately, because the above mentioned mechanisms of subsidising non-contextualized knowledge interfere with the process of contextualization, non-contextualized education may be preferred to that which is contextualized. The apparent accolade for Western theology by the majority world could be a deception that arises from valuation of the subsidy to which it is commonly attached.

So then let us say not that Western theology is superior to majority world theology, but that it may have the potential to be superior to majority world theology, if it were to be appropriately contextualized. To say that non-contextualized Western theology is superior to majority world theology or other majority world knowledge would seem to be to make a category error. It would be like telling a sheep farmer that certain methods of rearing *cattle* are superior to his *sheep* husbandry practices. Presumably,

accompany Gospel ministry. This is often known as integral or holistic mission. See Rene C. Padilla, “Holistic Mission,” in David Claydon, ed., *Holistic Mission. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 33 (Pattaya, Thailand, 2005). 11–23, http://community.gospel.net/lcwe/assets/LOP33_IG4.pdf

6. There is often a great deal of subsidy going into majority world theological education. This is certainly the case in Africa. See Karagama, “Foreword,” xiix.

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available methods of rearing cattle would need to be adapted (contextualized) to fit to sheep husbandry before they could be said to be superior to alternative forms of sheep husbandry. Once contextualized, Western knowledge may be superior. We might consider the old adage that “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Because the fat bird is not available to be consumed, it should be considered only *potentially* superior to the skinny bird one has in one’s hand. So also, non-contextualized Western theology must be considered at best to be only potentially superior to majority world alternatives.

Contextualization and translation

Contextualization is essentially a process of translation. Western knowledge that is written in English, including Christian knowledge, is clearly not of value to a community that does not understand English. Once translated, it may be valuable and may even be superior. The question becomes how to translate? Perhaps translation will not be possible (untranslatability), in which case the Western knowledge indeed cannot be of value to the majority world and could not be considered superior. Untranslatability is likely to be an issue. If we suppose that simple translation of a text from one community to another will only work insofar as the context presupposed by the text is common to both communities, then the problem we are up against is that majority world contexts differ from Western contexts.

We need to bear in mind that English used outside of the native English-speaking world may be very different from English spoken by native speakers. Clearly implicit references and categories of English will shift as a result of the language’s use by different communities. As is the case between English and other languages, translation may be required between different idioms of English.

The question regarding the superiority of Western Christianity could be compared to the claim that a car is a superior means of transport to a bicycle. Such a claim should only be considered legitimate in certain *contexts*. A bicycle can be transported in a train but a car cannot. A bicycle enables enjoying fresh air and gives one exercise, which car driving may not do. A bicycle can enable travel along paths between trees in a forest. Justification for the superiority of a car must be made with respect to a context. Appropriate contextualization that enables the acquisition of fresh air and travel through forests may take expression in a motorcycle that combines advantages of the engine of a car with the two-wheel flexibility of a bicycle. As with a car, so the superiority or otherwise

of Western Christianity must be evaluated in a context.

My fear is that we are at risk of discarding the baby with its bathwater. Evaluating Western theology and knowledge as being appropriate for the West means that it should be evaluated with respect to the context of the West and not that of the majority world. It will only become relevant to the majority world through a process of translation that enables contextualization, because such contextualization is rendered difficult by the subsidy that Western theology carries. *In order to render Western knowledge valuable to the majority world, the sharing of Western theology with the majority world should not be subsidized.*

Translation should be from unknown to known

Denial of the superiority of Western Christianity may well be motivated by a desire to encourage humility on the part of Western educators, Christians, and theologians. This kind of humility is admirable. The pride that my colleague is trying to counter, in telling us that Western Christianity is not superior to any other Christianity, is a false pride. I should boast in nothing but Christ crucified (Gal 6:14). Taking pride in Western theology would be like the pride of a car owner in a jungle where there are no roads! Were roads to be built, the car might enable faster travel. At the same time *rejecting the car on the basis that it is not "superior" could be denying the people concerned a potential option for their own development.* The same may apply to the thinking that there is no inherent superiority in Western Christianity. Not recognizing the *potential* value in Western theology, both Christian and other knowledge, could be condemning the majority world to the need for reinventing the wheel.

I make the case for the removal of foreign subsidy to the promotion of Western theology in the interest of providing helpful assistance to the development of majority world theologies. We will now consider the parallel situation regarding language. Western theological texts and discourses are frequently transported to the majority world. This constitutes transporting a means of thinking, which may function well in one context, into another context in which its successful functioning has yet to be proven. If we take the example of the car and bicycle, we recognize that a car will *not* function well in a forest full of narrow paths, whereas a bicycle just might. This does not mean that knowledge of cars has no value to people living in a forest. Instead it points to the need for contextualization. How can such contextualization occur?

Let us imagine a majority world person who has been born and raised in the majority world. This person is very familiar with the majority world context. Let us then imagine this person wants to communicate what they know to the West. Immediately there is a problem. This person does not know how what they desire to communicate will be *received* by the West. They will be trying to transport something that is known to them into a context that is not known to them. The same applies to a Western person who travels to the majority world. In their communication they too will be transporting something from a known context into a context

that is not known.

I draw here on the insight about "incorporative movement" in translation provided by George Steiner: "The import, of meaning and form, the embodiment, is not made in or into a vacuum." Rather "the semantic field is already extant and crowded."⁷ As a result of the intense complexity of the unknown field into which a new addition enters through a process of translation, the ongoing impact of the new addition cannot in any theoretical way be predicted with any accuracy.

Which then is better: to take known to unknown or to take unknown to known? This question has a clear answer: it is better to take the unknown to the known. The latter preserves pre-existing knowledge while challenging it with what is new. It does not have to destroy what was already there so as to replace it. It seeks to challenge a pre-existing system with an outside input. The other alternative, taking something known to the unknown, fails to communicate clearly with the recipients of what is being transported. In effect, it aims to communicate with them on the basis of a false supposition: that they do not know what they do know and that they know what they do not know. For recipients to accept what they are offered "as it is" would in effect require them to ditch what they already knew.

Implications for translation

In contemporary times, Western theology is often taught in the majority world. This means what is known by Westerners (for example, Western theology) is taught to unknown contexts. It is passed on in the hope that it will be integrated into the lives of people of the majority world. The language of the former is used, so as to avoid the "complication" of having to translate, whereas this "complication" is actually unavoidable. People in the majority world are expected to learn English. For this to succeed requires majority world people, as they are being taught, to be able to imbibe contexts necessary for the correct understanding of the language being used to teach them. This is the wrong way around!

It would be far better for majority world people to utilize their own people to teach them about the Western contexts that their own people have experienced. The latter teaching must be in majority world languages. Not to use majority world languages means taking the known to the unknown.

In contemporary times, even when majority world people are instructing their own people, they almost certainly are required to pass on knowledge that has originally been designed by a Westerner. For example, majority world people are often given the responsibility of using texts written by Westerners to prepare fellow majority world students for exams set by Westerners using a Western language such as English. Majority world people are required to imitate the instructional practices of their Western colleagues. Success in this kind of instruction is, as a result, "known" (that is, known to the Western person who designed the education)

7. George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 316.

to “unknown” (that is, the person who designed the education did so while unfamiliar with the context of the recipient of the education). At best this is transmitting what is “little-known to unknown.” This is illegitimate.

The reverse also applies, although perhaps with less severity. Many efforts are currently being made to encourage majority world people to engage in Western scholarly circles. Westerners are seeking to learn about the majority world from majority world people in their own Western language, that is, English. Those majority world people who are communicating to the West are taking what is known to them, to what is (to them) unknown.

The other way around is “correct.” It is Westerners who have been exposed to the majority world who should be teaching Westerners about the majority world, whereas majority world people who have been exposed to the West should be instructing majority world populations about the West. This requires that people from the majority world who have acquired experience of Western theology and Christianity should be the ones designing curricula to be taught in their own languages to their own majority world students. It requires Westerners who are exposed to majority world theology to guide the West regarding what is happening in the majority world. Westerners learning majority world theologies requires them to use majority world languages without subsidizing what they do using outside resources. The latter is what we are loosely calling “vulnerable mission.”⁸

Failure to carry out this approach with integrity has caused many difficulties. Those difficulties have contributed to the tendency to question the superiority of Western theology. Healthy questioning, of course, should be taken seriously. Questioning of Western theology from a non-Western (majority world) perspective, however, is often *not* healthy questioning. Often such questioning of the superiority of Western theology is built on a category mistake. Due to the contextual foundations of language meaning, asking non-Westerners to critique Western theology (or Westerners to critique majority world theology) is to invite an illegitimate critique. Taking such critiques too seriously has resulted in Western critiques of non-Western theologies that have often caused an undermining of non-Western people’s ways of life, replacing it with content that is far from sufficient.

Theology first is demonstrated, taught second

To answer the original question: Westerners *are* in some ways justified in considering their theology to be superior. Not to consider it so could easily be a self-deception. To Westerners, clearly it is superior, which is why they are following it. Insofar as it is to be assessed by visible fruit, many people in the world today would consider the West to be “superior” to the majority world. Thus, African people often aspire to imitate Western ways of life and levels of success.⁹ Westerners who feel led to try to pass on their theology to people in the majority world should do so primarily

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The main way to pass on superior theology will be through demonstrating it, showing how particular theology enables a true relationship with God that works: “you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16, NKJV). People in the majority world could benefit through learning from such *example*. As they learn, their whole community may well benefit from passing on the means of what they are acquiring to their colleagues, using their own languages in relation to their own contexts.

It would be incorrect to conclude that contemporary disappointment regarding theological education in the majority world proves that Western theology is in no way superior. Instead, this article argues that the way Western theology is presented is illogical. Knowledge of God should be shared primarily by example. If transmitted orally or in written form cross-culturally, it needs to be presented using the languages and the contexts of the people being reached, not those of its originators.

8. For more information, see www.vulnerablemission.org.

9. Gifford, *Christianity*, 48.