CHAPTER 12

Christian Social Engagement in a Globalising Age

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Introduction

This chapter discusses Christian social engagement at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which, I refer to as a globalising age. This calls for explanation. To suggest globalisation to be a defining characteristic is open to contestation. The globalisation discourse however can helpfully focus for us fresh ways for interpreting Christian social engagement and indeed Christian self-understanding amid global transformations that are taking place in the beginning of the third millennium. Several interpretative typologies have dominated the discussion, among which are the southward-shift and the various post-template, for example, post-colonial, post-denominational, post-missionary, and post Christendom. While these may be useful to describe the transformation in Christianity in the 1940s and 1950s, they are no longer useful for understanding the state of Christianity sixty years since then, when boundaries and concepts are fused, re-mapped, contested and transformed. In fact, these models can deter us from exploring the longer-term legacy of Western Christianity in the plural situations in a globalising era.

A discussion on social engagement offers a fresh approach toward understanding global Christianity. ‘Christian’, ‘social engagement’, and ‘globalising’ are all connecting and orienting concepts. Christianity professes a universal faith that transcends temporal, spatial, and political boundaries, and therefore conceptually stands at a critical relationship against any this-worldly ordering of human society. To be Christian is both socially unitive and subversive. Social engagement puts in focus the different ways in which Christians resource their faith in their particular situation and bring it to bear on the public life. This opens ways we see Christianity on the ground, not merely in terms of familiar categories and interfaces such as official statistics and statements, institutional presence, and Church-state relation. More importantly, it gives us a more nuanced reading of Christian life at the grassroots that cannot be codified in binary terms, for example, global-South/global-North, Christian/Muslim, global/local and suchlike. Globalising refers to ‘the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of interregional flows and patterns of social interaction’, as two sociologists put it (Held and McGrew 2003: 4). Communication makes social life possible; and in fact the ways a society
communicates its goods, spiritual and material, reveals its character. As such, globalisation promotes social life and at the same time reconfigures what it is to be social. What it is to be Christian too can be remapped, projected, contested, transformed and constructed in virtual and/or public space. Accordingly, an exploration on Christian social engagement in a globalising age sheds light on the complex interplay between orthodoxy and orthopraxis; faith and society; public and private; social and political; Church, religions and state; local, regional and global; and other clusters of ideas in the making of global Christianity.

In what follows, I begin by setting the discussion against the backdrop of the post-World War II years from the 1940s to the 1960s. This provides a convenient reference point of our present exploration. Section 2 discusses the shifts in the structure and process of Christian social engagement in late twentieth century. Section 3 goes on to place Christian social engagement within two sets of conversations between powerful movements that are shaping the ways humans define society and make social life possible. This study is neither theoretical nor historical. It does not seek to give a tidy and exhaustive account. Some readers would be puzzled by the striking silence on issues that seem to have been significant, for instance, on Christian participation in rights campaign; Christian-Muslim dialogue; public policy debate on nuclear, ethical, economic, and ecological crisis, and so on. Clearly, these issues are important. At the same time, there has already been considerable literature on such debates. This essay attempts to do a more modest task: to sensitise readers to realities that may have been forgotten or remained inarticulate amid large issues that have attracted public attention. I shall draw on examples from the Asian Pacific in the discussion. My aim is not to present the ‘Asian’ situation. Instead, Asian Pacific experiences in social engagement may well shed light on the deeper perils and challenges of global Christianity.

Optimism from the 1940s to the 1960s

Decolonisation and nation building in the two decades that followed the end of World War II redrew the political and ecclesiastical maps of the world. Revolution was in the air. With it, there was raised expectation for political freedom, economic justice and social equality among the diverse peoples and societies in newly independent countries. The experience of decolonisation and national independence varied from place to place, which was often accompanied by violent ethnic conflict between and within newly independent nations. This took place against the backdrop of the Cold War and the