

Copyright @ 2015 by Christian Conference of Asia

Published in Hong Kong by the Christian Conference of Asia

Email: cca@cca.org.hk

Website: www.cca.org.hk

ISBN 978-962-7439-61-5

Cover Design & Layout by MJA Nashir

Printed in Indonesia

the ecumenism (oikoumene/ the earth, the whole world) should become a community united according to the order ordained by divine creation, which inevitably means taking account of the issues which include gender, race, class, tribal minorities, the differently abled and, of course, war and peace in all sorts of confrontations. My argument here is that a healthy and peaceful household can only be sustained when "justice" is prevailing in all aspects that sustain the house, i.e. economic justice (justice of resources distribution), ecological justice (justice of life system) and ecumenical justice (justice of relationships – relationship between different human communities and between human species and other species in the midst of the ecosystem). Is not this the promise of "the covenant of the rainbow" that God made with Noah that symbolizes the household of the new creation after the destruction of the flood?

Interfaith relations put against this background, thus have something new to say. The traditional purposes ascribed to interfaith dialogues or interfaith relations which include mutual understanding, conflict resolution and cooperation, are nevertheless, human-centered, and thus fragmented and deficient. If, as previously mentioned, religion is a way, and the most intimate way, for human beings to connect themselves with the cosmos, providing ways to manage their lives in response to the order of creation as understood within the household of God, different faith traditions are not to be viewed as opponents but complementary partners. By the concept of "complementary" here I mean "mutual enrichment through fraternal critiques". Interfaith relations in the household of God, are therefore, neither an adversary competition and strategy of proselytism nor just a diplomatic fellowship between different religious communities, but an important and critical common effort from the human side to build together a household of justice, peace and integral creation with the creator God.



From the World House to an Oikopoetic Interreligious Imagination

Dr. Joas Adiprasetya¹

Global Vision : Milk's World House

Prior to his assassination in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. published *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* that includes a chapter titled "The World House." He begins the chapter by maintaining vibrantly,

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. (King 1968, 167)

Such a beautiful statement demonstrates King's mature idea as the result of a shift from his earlier passion for the freedom of his

¹ Dr. Joas Adiprasetya is the President of Jakarta Theological Seminary, where he also teaches Systematic Theology and Theology of Religions.

African-American fellows into a wider vision of global solidarity. The shift is obviously demonstrated in the next sentence, when he maintains, "However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers ... All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors" (King 1968, 167). King also argues that the shift requires "a genuine revolution of values," in which "our loyalties must become *ecumenical* rather than sectional" (King 1968, 190; italic mine).

King introduces here an idea that the scope of ecumenism should be widened beyond the Christian community. In other words, the true ecumenism must also embrace people from other faiths. To be sure, King's imagines the "world house" as a creative product of his Christian perspective after being enriched by his deep encounter and friendship with non-Christians, such as the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Jewish rabbis Abraham J. Heschel (Baldwin, Dekar, and Crawford 2013, 18; Heckman and Neiss 2008, 117).

However, I have some reservations against King's imagination. The first one is more theoretical. King's global vision of the "world house" seems to come closer to the pluralistic model that assumes the necessity of a single ultimate reality and a single unifying value applicable to all particular religious traditions. He argues,

This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. This often misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as *the supreme unifying principle of life*. Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to *ultimate reality*. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about *ultimate reality* is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John. (King 1968, 190; italics mine)

By combining theocentric pluralism ("ultimate reality") with a more ethical pluralism ("the supreme unifying principle of life") and applying both to all religions, King is confident that the once closed

"world house" is now unlocked, using the universal key, to welcome all people. The key, however, is found in the Christian tradition that is later claimed to be universal and applicable for others as well.

One of the most recent trends in theology of religions has shown dissatisfaction with such a pluralistic model. While I will not discuss the issue at length, suffice it to say that pluralistic theologies propounded by some contemporary theologians are in fact not pluralistic enough and are in need of serious revision in order to be even more pluralistic.²

What interests me more is actually King's scope of picturing the religious and cultural diversity. While I praise King's vision of the pluralistic "world house," I would argue that his global vision still needs to be exercised toward a more down-to-earth level of everyday life, in which interreligious encounter is tied with concrete pain, real struggle, and particular complexity.³ Any idea that bears the wiff of globality—such as the "world house"—must be placed under suspicion of building an empire by the subjugation of the others. Of course, such a critical stance pertains not only to King's "world house" but also many Christian slogans, including our workshop's central key themes: God's household, ecumenism, etc.

This criticism also resonates with the rejection against any *theo-logy* of religions by comparative theologians. The comparativists argue that theologians of religions always talk about non-Christian religions vaguely, theoretically, and "globally," without firstly having real encounter and relationship with their non-Christian fellows. They argue further that any theological *theoretization* of religious plurality must result from living encounter and interreligious *friendship*, not vice versa (Fredericks 1999, 173-177). For Christians, Fredericks argues, "interreligious friendship" is a skill "for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christians" (Fredericks 1999, 167). In short, friendship is the most basic value for living together with the religious others in daily life, in concrete encounter with them.

² For a deeper criticism of pluralism and a proposal for post-pluralistic theology of religions, see (Adiprasetya 2013)

³ I believe, that is the reason of why in the following chapter, titled "Appendix: Programs and Prospects," King applies his global vision to more practical programs for his African-American fellows: education, employment, rights, and housing (King 1968, 193-202).

Interreligious friendship is certainly offered as an ideal virtue that needs to be skillfully nurtured and exercised. However, we also have to deal with the fact that such an ideal friendship is not the only story in our concrete encounters with the religious others. In many parts of Asia and the rest of the planet, people from different religious backgrounds are also facing hurting competition or committing religious violence—often done in the name of God. For many, interreligious friendship has become too ideal a virtue, where in reality they live in interreligious enmity with one another. Based on this realism, what I offer in the following section is a loose and reflective re-reading of the story of Stephen in Acts 6-7, which happened as a very concrete and face-to-face experience.

Local Encounter: The Story of Stephen

A Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong argues that Luke and Acts together offer a continuous story of pneumatological hospitality applicable to the interreligious context (Yong 2008). Yong's perspective of interreligious hospitality makes an addition to the classical agreement that Luke and Acts, specially the latter, focuses on the mission of the early church to Gentiles. In such a larger context, I try to understand that the story of Stephen's speech and death serves two goals. First, it triggered the scattering of the believers but the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem. Soon after the death of Stephen, "... a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria ... Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word." (Acts 8:1, 4). Thus, the death of Stephen became the seed for missional activities of the early church outside Jerusalem. Secondly, Stephen's speech and death seem to justify the disconnection of the believers from the temple in Jerusalem. He was charged as having said "things against this holy place and the law" (6:13) and saying that Jesus "will destroy this place" as well (6:14).

In chapter 7, Stephen gave his lengthy defence, which has confused many modern interpreters as to what is the purpose of the speech in the context of the entire book (Gealy 1962, 442; Marshall 1980, 131, 137). I would not discuss the issue any further but to make

my point that Stephen's speech is the key to understanding the importance of God's cosmic household, which is unnecessarily related to the temple—God's ritualistic and political house—in Jerusalem. To do so, the author inserted the work *oikos* and its several paronyms thirteen times throughout the speech of the martyr.

Stephen began his speech by retelling the history of the Jews' ancestors, trying to make a connection with his accusers. He told the story of Abraham who was in Mesopotamia before living (*κατοικῆσαι; katoikēsai*) in Haran (7:2). He repeated the story of Abraham in a more detailed way,

Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled (*κατώκησεν; katōkēsen*) in Haran. After his father died, God had him move (*μετώκησεν; metōkisen*) from there to this country in which you are now living (*κατοικεῖτε; katoikeite*). (7:4)

The dialectic between settling or living and moving is introduced here. But then another paronym of *oikos* emerges as Stephen continued his story of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants "would be resident aliens (*πάροικον, pároikon*) in a country belonging to others" (7:6). The story of the faith ancestors continued with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It was Joseph who was marginalized and victimized by his brothers, but then he was appointed by Pharaoh to become the ruler over Egypt "and over all his household" (*καὶ ὅλον τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, kai holon oikon auton*) (7:10). Stephen carried on with the story of Moses in verse 20 forward. "For three months he was brought up in his father's house (*ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ, en tō oikō tou patros autou*)," before being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (7:20-21). Therefore, similar to Abraham, Moses also experienced living in his own house and being dehouse to live in the house of his people's enemy.

Other variations of *oikos* occurs in the fragment of Israel's disobedience when they became sojourners in the wilderness. Interestingly, Stephen employed the image of "church in the wilderness" (*τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, tē ekklesia en tē erēmō*) to describe the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who escaped from Egypt (7:38). Citing Amos 5:25-27, Stephen expressed God's disappoint-

ment toward “the house of Israel” (οἶκος Ἰσραὴλ, *oikos Israēl*) who have rebelled against God (7:42). Therefore, God removed (μετοικιῶ, *metoikiō*) them beyond Babylon (7:43). In verse 47, after telling the story of David, Stephen told his audience about Solomon who built a house (ὠκοδόμησεν αὐτῷ οἶκον, *ōikodomēsen autō oikon*) for God.

We have seen the usage of *oikos* and its paronyms throughout 47 verses. The climax of Stephen’s story, however, is his argument against any *oikos* built by human hands, as expressed in verses 48-50 (citing Isa. 66:1-2).

48 Yet the Most High does not dwell (κατοικεῖ, *katoikei*) in houses made with human hands;

as the prophet says,

49 ‘Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house (οἶκον, *oikon*) will you build (οικοδομήσετε, *ōikodomēsete*) for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?

50 Did not my hand make all these things?’

Interreligious Oikopoetics

The speech of Stephen to some extent reflects the interreligious conflict between Christians and Jews, although the disconnection or separation between both has not been settled completely. Unlike the ideal of interreligious friendship suggested by the comparative theologians, Stephen’s speech reveals the reality of interreligious conflict. Stephen strongly reacted to the charges that have been made against him, but at the same time he did it theologically, through an imaginative and constructive form or argument, especially through the re-imagining of *oikos* and its paronyms.

Now, what I would like to offer is a constructive reflection on Stephen’s interreligious oikopoetics. The oikopoetic reading of the text, as suggested by Nirmal Selvamony, informs us that there are three different images of *oikos*: integrative, hierarchic, and anarchic. To begin with, there is a strong impression that the author of Acts favors with homelessness as the true identity marker for those who believe in Christ, either as resident aliens or strangers in other land (v. 6; *par-*

oikon) or sojourners in the wilderness (v. 38). Stephen calls them “the church in the wilderness” (*tē ekklēsia en tē erēmō*). Each of the two images is related differently with the word *oikos* referring to national and religious identities. As resident aliens (v. 6), the descendants of Abraham received hospitality from Pharaoh, that is, when Joseph was entrusted to be the ruler over Egypt and over all Pharaoh’s household. As sojourners in the wilderness (v. 38), “the house of Israel” rebelled against God (v. 42).

If we employ the oikopoetic method,⁴ the encounter of Israel with other nations leads to the invitation for both nations to struggle for an *integrative oikos* (the first *oikos* in Selvamony’s oikopoetic model). The integration thus requires the encounter between two groups or houses who were once strangers to one another. On the contrary, we find the model of *hierarchic oikos* (the second *oikos*) in both the house of Pharaoh and the house of Israel itself. There is an obvious difference, however, between both houses. While integration of the house of Pharaoh is done through hierarchy, the house of Israel turns to be an *anarchic oikos* (the third *oikos*) through their rebellion. Thus, for Stephen, the house of Pharaoh is better than the house of Israel; but at the end, both use *oikos* in a more hierarchical sense.

Another interesting note is that the true identity of Israel as resident aliens or sojourners occurs only after God moves them for their house. In verse 4, God de-housed or removed (*metoikizō*) Abraham from Haran; in verse 43, God de-housed or removed (*metoikizō*) the house of Israel and led them to Babylon. This is to say that God did not want Israel to reside as inhabitants of a static *oikos*. Stephen expressed the divine will to de-house Israel as rooted in God’s unwillingness to dwell in houses made with human hands (v. 49; here the word *metoikizō* occurs again). In this sense, Stephen justified his argument against the Jews by undermining the building (*ōikodomeō*) of a house for God by Solomon (v. 47; cf. v. 49). Verses 48-50 thus become Stephen’s basis for rejecting *katoikeō* (residing) and *ōikodomeō*

4 The oikopoetic method that I use here loosely is proposed by Nirmal Selvamony. He attempts to read specific texts through the lens of *oikos* that he understands as a nexus in which the sacred, the humans, natural, and cultural phenomena stand in an integrated relationship. Selvamony distinguishes three types of *oikos*: integrative, hierarchic, and anarchic. See (Selvamony n.d.)

(building), because the whole world is God's *oikos* for everyone, every nation, and every religion.

In conclusion, first, interreligious oiko-logy must begin with the global vision of God's inclusive *oikos*, which is non-hierarchical, yet still integrative. Any theology of religion that assumes the construction of *oikos*, dominated by a single religious entity, including the Christian one, must be rejected, because it always tends to become an empire for all with one single religion dominating the hierarchic *oikos*. Of course, the hierarchic *oikos* could be either generous (as in the Pharaoh's *oikos*) or anarchic (as in the *oikos* of Israel). But, either one is far from our vision of the non-hierarchical and integrative global *oikos* or "world house," which is rooted in the multiplicity of inhabitants. Secondly, the Christian oiko-logical theology of religions must function as a reminder for all Christians that they are sojourners in the wilderness and resident aliens in the strange land. We are always dehouseed from our comfortable Christian house, so much so that we are always invited to live in the wider "world house" with all other strangers. In such a way of life, we must favor a spirituality of wilderness over a spirituality of temple, hospitality over hostility, and friendship over hierarchy. Thirdly, from the oiko-logical perspective, the fluid identity of being sojourners is important in interreligious encounter, because it enables us to always question critically our own idea of truth, goodness, and beauty within our own *oikos*. Theology of religions in the context of God's household invites us to "denaturalize"—meaning, criticizing any socio-religious construction that we take for granted as "natural"—our fixed identity and our religious grandeur.⁵ The result would hopefully be comforting: the wilderness is our house, the journey is home!



⁵ It is important to see Susan S. Friedman's work on the issue of denaturalization of home and homeland; see (Friedman 1998)

SOURCES

- Adiprasetya, Joas. 2013. *An imaginative glimpse: The Trinity and multiple religious participations*, Princeton theological monograph series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick.
- Baldwin, Lewis V., Paul R. Dekar, and Vicki L. Crawford, eds. 2013. "In an inescapable network of mutuality": Martin Luther King, Jr. and the globalization of an ethical ideal. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.
- Fredericks, James L. 1999. *Faith among faiths : Christian theology and non-Christian religions*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. 1998. *Mappings: Feminism and the cultural geographies of encounter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gealy, F.D. 1962. "Steven." In *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. New York: Abingdon Press.
- Heckman, Bud, and Rori Picker Neiss. 2008. *InterActive faith: The essential interreligious community-building handbook*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1968. *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marshall, I. Howard. 1980. *The Acts of the Apostles: An introduction and commentary. 1st American ed, The Tyndale New Testament commentaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.
- Selvamony, Nirmal. *Oikopoetics and Tamil poetry* n.d. Available from <http://www.angelfire.com/nd/nirmaldasan/oikos.html>.
- Yong, Amos. 2008. *Hospitality and the other: Pentecost, Christian practices, and the neighbor*, Faith meets faith series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.