

Some Reflections on the Theology of Bishop I Wayan Mastra

When Wayan Mastra, long-term bishop in the GKPB [Protestant Christian Church of Bali], confesses his faith, that confession is clear, crisp and Christocentric. His favorite way is to echo the words from John's Gospel, Jesus own claim, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.

When Mastra articulates his theology—in his English-language essays that he gave me to read, including his doctoral dissertation from the early 70s at Aquinas Institute in Dubuque IA—that theology also is clear and crisp, but finding its center is more difficult. It's not that Jesus' claim is denied, but it is more difficult to see that Christocentricity functioning as the center. He takes pains to keep his theology Biblically based. Even with his drumbeat for Balinese local theology, contextualized into Balinese culture—the Gospel planted in Balinese soil producing a Mango Tree Church—Mastra does not try to borrow from the Hindu theology at the center of that culture. That Hinduism he knows well. It was the family faith of Mastra's childhood home. Not until he was an adult did he move to the Christ-confession mentioned above. As a Christ-confessor he wants to ground his theology, all of it, in the Bible.

So all of the major pieces of his theology have Biblical passages as their foundation. But that is precisely where the question arises about the center. What is it that holds these diverse passages from Old and New Testaments together? What keeps them from being a random selection, Mastra's personal random selection, based on some interior antenna that picks up

just these Biblical signals for concentrated listening, and bypasses others? He wants to commend them to his people and to us his readers, so there must be more than just his personal preference at work.

It cannot simply be they are in the Bible. For there are many big themes in the Bible which do not appear in Mastras theology in any foundational way—Pauls drumbeat for justification by faith alone, or Johns fundamental claim that Christs Cross is the trademark of Christs glory, and thus also of our own, to name just two.

The best Ive come up with for understanding his theology is Mastras own Mango Tree image. Ulrich Beyer suggests in in his 1998 book, Bali – Morgen der Welt, that Mastra has a Mango Tree theology. But with that Beyer only points to the inculturation aspect, Mastras insistence that the Gospel be planted in Balinese soil. I want to expand the image to suggest two things:

1. that Mastra uses a Mango Tree hermeneutic
2. that the theology he formulates is not merely planted in Balinese soil, but is itself a basket of mangoes.

This is my attempted analysis that I presented to him before we left Bali:

Brother Wayan,

Your theology resembles a basket of mangoes picked from the tree that is the Bible. The common element in all of them is that they come from the Biblical tree. But these are not just ordinary mangoes. As you frequently remind us, pointing to the end of the Book of Revelation at the very end of the New Testament, these fruits and even the leaves from this Biblical mango tree are for the feeding of people and the healing of the nations. It is not clear just how you go about picking the mangoes, deciding which ones are ripe for you to take. But once

they are picked from the tree—or from the ground where they have fallen and you find them—each piece has its own completeness. You put them in your basket. They do touch each other, but they have no necessary connection with the fruit they are touching. Nor do they have any connection with the tree any more—although that is where they come from. They come from the Word of God, as Christians of all ages and cultures have said, and that is important.

You then take these mangoes and digest them by feeding them into the Balinese world. Call it contextualization, call it inculturation. You yourself are a major representative of that world, a major spokesman for what it really is. So when you feed these Biblical mangoes into your own life experience, your own thinking, your own Balinese Weltanschauung, the process of feeding and digesting takes place. What comes from the process, the end product, is therefore a genuinely Mango Tree Christian Theology.

Here are some examples—and some observations:

1. One of your prize mangoes is Gods promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. The key term you find there is Blessing. As you often do, you find three elements in that text, perhaps echoing the three-ness of so many elements of your Balinese heritage. The three are:

1. Land,
2. descendents,
3. and a great name.

You move directly to Bali with those three items and see them fulfilled in:

- a. economic success (the land promise),
- b. the calling Christians have for Bali (descendents),
- c. and knowledge, prestige, competence for Balinese

people through education (the great name).

Observation: the first time this text of Gods promise is mentioned in the New Testament, I think, comes in the book of Acts at the end of the third chapter. There Peter, making his second sermon in Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit, preaches about the Abrahamic promise. He claims that God fulfilled that promise When God raised up his servant Jesus, and sent him to you [people of Israel] to bless you by turning each of your from your wicked ways.

Seems to me that here Peter is claiming that the non-blessedness of the Israelites (and people throughout the world, the Balinese too) is their God-problem, their wicked ways. To stay opposed to what God intends, even when it comes from Gods chosen people, puts you into unbledness, even under a curse. And whats needed to get to blessedness is to have this God-problem healed. That healing came, Christians claim, and continues to come, when Christ brings Gods mercy to people addicted to wicked ways. Isnt that the constant pattern of all NT usages of OT passages? The apostles do not take an OT passage straight across to the local situation, but first connect it to Christs cross and resurrection, and then on the rebound, you might say, they link it to local people in their local cultures. Thats true for both the Gospel indicatives of NT proclamation, and the Gospel imperatives for NT ethics.

Israelites, todays Jews, might be able to take Abraham 12 straight across to their situation today, but we Christians cannot, can we? We have no claim, no access, no right, to those promises on our own, since we are not blood-line descendents of Abraham. The only way we can get in on the Blessing of Abraham, as Paul says (Gal. 3),

is via Christ. Christ redeemed us from curse of the law [the dilemma of all sinners] when on the cross he became a curse for us. Then first do we get access to the Abrahamic promise: in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to [us] Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Granted, that is a detour from what I hear you proposing, namely, that we go straight across from Genesis 12 to Balinese culture and history. But apart from Christ, who is our bridge to Genesis 12, the blessing to Abraham does not include any of us outsiders.

- 2. It seems to me that the other precious texts (fruits) which you find on the Biblical mango tree need to be digested in the same way. They need to be connected to Christs work of Good Friday and Easter first of all, and then on the rebound they become distinctively Christian good news—for Balinese people and for all of us. Im thinking of your favored mango-fruit texts, the ones that Beyer discusses in some detail in his book on pp.71-80, his section 7.2 Wayan Mastras Theologie. Those texts are Luke 2:52, John 15:16 and Matthew 5:3.*

As Beyer summarizes your application of these texts, the same pattern appears. We are taken straight from the text to the Bali situation. The Christo-centric focus—so central in your confessed faith—is hard to fine, if not simply absent as you digest these mangoes and feed them to your readers. My point is that in keeping with your faith-confession all these texts need to be paraded in front of Christs cross and resurrection and be digested there in order to become Good News food to nourish Balinese people—and finally all of us.

- 3. Beyer does some evaluation of your hermeneutic in his*

book, but he does not discuss the need for a Christo-centric hermeneutic to accompany your clear, crisp Christo-centric confession of faith. There is always a correlation between ones confession of faith and how one interprets the Bible. That has been true throughout the history of the church. It was also true in the era of the Protestant Reformation. With the new (or rediscovered) understanding of justification by faith, there came a new hermeneutic, that the Reformers developed for how to read the Bible. My comments above are recommending that you reorganize your hermeneutic to make it conform more to your confession of faith.

- 4. It is on this point that I wish we had had time to discuss your fascination with Karl Rahners theology, spelled out in detail in your doctoral dissertation. Hendrik Kraemer or Rahner are not the only alternatives available for a Christian theology of missions. I know that you know that. Yet at the time of your dissertation in the early 70s you see the two of them as the only serious choices. And since you find Kraemer to be deficient, you choose Rahner.*
- 5. My argument with Rahner is not focused on the anonymous Christian idea he proposes, an idea that has gotten lots of support and lots of criticism. Instead it is Rahners Biblical hermeneutic, his way of interpreting the Bible that underlies his theology, that is the point I think no Protestant theologian should pick from his theological tree. Rahner does not depart from the medieval scholastic hermeneutic of doing theology in terms of nature and grace. When the Protestant Reformers protested against scholastic theology, they protested both against the semi-Pelagianism of scholastic nature/grace theology and the Biblical hermeneutic that went along with it.*

6. *I dont have time here to develop that and still get this finished to hand to you this evening. But that Reformation hermeneutic and its theology may even be coming into your family via another route. Im thinking of your son Agus at Valparaiso University. Valpo is a consciously Lutheran university, and in the required theology courses that Agus will have during his time there, hell be exposed to the Reformation hermeneutics Im talking about. If it should happen that he learns Reformation theology—and likes it—you may hear more of it when he comes home.*
7. *It could even be that Agus will have as one of his assigned readings an essay I published when I was a member of the theology faculty at Valpo about the same time that you were in Dubuque. Its title: Is there a Lutheran [i.e., Reformation Protestant] hermeneutic? I gave the answer yes, and then tried to show what it was, how it worked and what the results were when Bible interpreters consciously used it.*
8. *If you and I do have any continuing exchange after our departure tomorrow, I would like that. And if you ever get to the USA—to visit Agus or for some other purpose—Ill try to get to wherever you are so we might continue the conversation. One idea Im bouncing around in my mind is to stick with your image of Mango tree theology, and then apply the Reformation hermeneutic to that theology and see what comes out at the end. I would consider this to be a continuation of what I said at the beginning of this essay: to re-word your Mango tree theology into the same clear crisp Christo-centricity that your faith-confession proclaims.*

Thank you for inviting us to Bali.

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