

Honouring diversity, overcoming division

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Koreans living in Japan are called zainichi. Many use Japanese names to hide their ethnic identity. Otherwise, they might risk losing their jobs. Many younger Koreans face an identity crisis. For prudential reasons, they mask their Korean identity by pretending to be Japanese. But hiding their true identity leads to shame. Ethnic discrimination against the zainichi is increasing because of growing tensions between Japan and North Korea, on the one hand, and on the other, because the Japanese educational system is increasingly nationalistic as evidenced by the regular evaluation of students' patriotism. This ultra-nationalism is rooted in the ideology of an emperor system and a Shinto state, which was used in the 20th century to legitimate the invasion and colonial rule of other Asian countries. The ideology of the emperor system and national Shintoism leads to the denial of a peaceful diversity of ethnicity and religion. Many non-Japanese students and their parents are perplexed by this trend and fear a xenophobic assault on foreigners.

This is a global trend. The rise of globalization in the 20th century has intensified nationalism in many countries, evidenced by the rise of exclusive and xenophobic feelings towards migrants and refugees in many places. At the same time, the penetration by global capital into weaker and subordinate economies leaves many jobless or landless and prompts them to migrate in search of work. Conflicts around the world turn millions into refugees.

Many lands have long been ethnically diverse, but globalization has brought about a marked growth in ethnic minorities through the influx of economic migrants and political refugees into economically advanced societies. This rise in ethnic diversity is often accompanied by ethnic conflict.

Ethnic diversification is just one aspect of the sharp polarization of our world. Another is the disparity between rich and poor countries resulting from the global expansion of a "free-market" economy over many centuries. Colonialism and imperialism exploited many countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific by plundering resources and driving people to migrate to colonizing countries.¹ Ethnic diversification has been a painful history for ethnic minorities, who are marginalized and hardly understood by their host countries, and often hidden in the culture. Without understanding that historical background, and reflecting on it ethically and religiously, we will not be led to a right recognition and practice in honouring diversity.

Even after the second world war, when their home countries were freed from colonial rule, many migrants from the south could not help but to stay in

the “metropolitan” countries. They remained as ethnic minorities exposed to discrimination. They live in a “no man’s land” between their countries of origin and their countries of residence. For younger generations, in particular, it is almost impossible to return to their ancestral countries. They are not only estranged from their home countries, they live with a hybrid or “in-between” identity (Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 1994).

We cannot speak of diversity and division without also noticing the relations between faiths. In recent decades, the encounter between Judaism, Christianity and Islam has become more and more significant. Terrorist assaults and avenging wars in the name of infinite justice are driving a divided world into hatred and fear. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions of peace and justice rooted in a common faith in the one God, but each of these religions is exploited today to support fanatical violence. Peace between the religions is a condition necessary for world peace.

Exodus and oppression

In Christian history, the exodus theme has been repeatedly used in the service of liberation movements of the oppressed. But if we look at exodus theology in the light of the imperial expansion of the western world, we see another and less pleasing face. The exodus motif was used in colonial countries by western churches or missionaries to legitimate land occupation and the discriminatory control of indigenous cultures. The preamble to South Africa’s former apartheid constitution described the colonizers from Britain and the Netherlands as exodus people. Likewise in the USA, the pilgrim fathers and their successors from Europe identified themselves as exodus people. In either context, we might ask, who are the Canaanites who, according to the biblical narratives, ought to be exterminated?

In our own day, we have witnessed horrific “ethnic cleansing” in the triangular war in Bosnia between Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Two of these groups claim a Christian as well as an ethnic identity – the Serbs are predominantly Orthodox, the Croats are predominantly Roman Catholic.² Each of the two groups had its own exodus theology to legitimate its identity and occupation of its “own” land. Both were involved in unspeakable atrocities, and the war crimes trials in the Hague continue.

These observations lead us to a crucial question. Can an exodus theology avoid legitimating an ethnocentric view of salvation based on the idea of one God, one nation, one land and one temple that runs consistently through the Deuteronomic theology?

Exodus and inclusion

Let us respond by focusing on a single text: “You (singular) shall not oppress a resident alien (*ger*); you (singular) know the heart of an alien (*ger*), for you

(plural) were aliens (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt.” (Ex 23.9; cf Ex 22.20, Deut 10.24, etc.) In this text, Israel and the Israelites are told not to oppress ethnic minorities within the community. They are reminded of their historical experience as oppressed *gerim* in Egypt. Remembrance (*zakar*) of this experience and of their salvation at the hand of God provides the grounds for love and tolerance of the current *gerim* within the exodus community.

This biblical text is located in the book of the covenant (Ex 20.22-23.31) which is given through Moses to the Israelites to conclude the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Inclusion of the *gerim* within Israel is confirmed in the list of those who are included in the Moabite covenant that ends forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 29).

If we look back to the text describing those who were invited to the exodus from Egypt (Ex 12.37f), we find not only Hebrews or Israelites. A “mixed crowd” (*ereb rab*) are allowed to join the exodus. Nobody can identify this mixed crowd, but it is clear that the exodus people who left Egypt with Moses were an ethnically diverse, hybrid or heterogeneous community. The mixed crowd seem to be identified as *gerim* in Israel. Both the Sinai and Moab covenants provided space for their cohabitation with the Israelites.

New insights into the exodus story based on a theological view of the *gerim* challenge us to understand ethnic and cultural diversity in a single land as a blessing and a gift from God. From God’s viewpoint, “the land is mine; with me you are but aliens (*gerim*) and tenants (*toshabim*).” (Lev 25.23). The divine purpose in granting land is not to draw exclusive borders around an ethnically pure community, but to expand the space of tolerance, hospitality and solidarity with different peoples in the same land. Hospitality should be unconditional, as the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, notes. Hospitality is the most important ethic for a country’s citizens if they are to broaden and deepen solidarity in the diverse human family of God.

Honouring diversity

The question facing our churches is how profoundly we need to reinterpret exodus theology to lead us beyond ethnocentric and sectarian understandings of salvation towards honouring ethnic and religious diversity. We have to work on theological and hermeneutical questions about the one God who is revealed to the world in the recovery of (re)conciliatory relationships in a diverse human society. When we look at the Bible with new eyes, we find so many stories of the God who finds us through the lives, the voices and the histories of suffering of the other. It appears that those we regard as “other” are not other for God.

We know that Jesus responded to the scribe’s question, “Who is my neighbour?” by asking a counter-question, “Who became a neighbour to the already injured?” The Samaritans for centuries had been “other” to the Jews.

The scribe in his response could not bring himself to utter the offending name, and that is the whole point. Jesus Christ comes to us in the form of the other, challenges us to be more tolerant in hospitality, and calls for cohabitation. Who is the other? The other appears before us in many guises – people of different ethnic backgrounds, followers of different faiths, male and female, younger and older. Jesus Christ encounters us through many different “others”.

The church as the body of Christ is biblically grounded on a salvation history based on exodus theology. Christ, the reconciliatory mediator between God and humankind, is the head of a church called by grace to conciliation and reconciliation in an ethnically and religiously diverse world.

In societies where there is always politics between the haves and the have-nots; between majority communities and ethnic minorities; between citizens with civil rights and vulnerable aliens; between male and female; between older and younger generations; between different faiths, the church is given the task (*Aufgabe*) of expanding the contact zone between these diverse groups, each having its own unique cultural or religious gifts (*Gabe*) to offer.

Questions

1. What kinds of diversity do you experience in your daily life?
2. What does the Bible tell us about peaceful coexistence? How helpful is this in your setting?
3. What can an ethic of tolerance contribute to honouring diversity in your life?
4. When we dialogue with believers of other religions, where do we find our Lord?

Notes

1. I leave to one side the particular, and particularly scandalous, history of the slave trade, which is still a living history for Africans in the diaspora, and will have its own focus in the general council.
2. The Reformed churches in Croatia and in Serbia and Montenegro are predominantly Hungarian-minority churches.