Reforming the Reformation

Essays in honour of
Principal Peter Matheson

Edited by
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In Praise of Exile

Clive Pearson

"Where are you from?"

"Where are you from?" This question is deceptive and Hugh Kerr, writing his editorial for Theology Today some years ago now, knew only too well that this was the case.² Its apparent innocence is occasioned by the way in which these four words are casually inserted into a getting-to-know you style of conversation. It is the kind of exchange to be found in a "chit-chat" genre of conversation that "can be mostly superficial, casual, and even accidental". Its ready employment in filling up a gap that might otherwise descend into an awkward silence masks its deeper intent as a "positioning question". This string of words beginning with a preposition of place belongs inside a family of locational markers to do with who you are, what's your name, have you been here before, what do you do, and, Kerr reminds us, "how you doing".

Their intention is coloured by the setting in which they are put and the surrounding tone, temper and mood. This family of questions often constitute the first section of a bureaucratic form designed to see whether you are worthy of admission to some course or club, not to mention the privilege of a credit card upgrade. They can act like a passport. It is also possible for these simple, getting-to-know you inquiries, to take on more of a function of detection. They can be posed in a harsh interrogatory manner designed to make you talk, dob someone in, or determine where you were on the night or day under consideration. Who does the asking, why and where matters. The most common practice, though, is rather removed from these value-laden exercises. "Where are you from?", "who are you?", "what do you do?" are more usually relational questions that must be negotiated for the sake of a meaningful conversation and the meeting of persons. They are an essential feature of the give and take that must exist for the sake of establishing a network of "thin relationships" upon which Eva Cox has argued a healthy social capital depends.²

From a subjective point of view such casual inquiries query the past each one of us possess. They help us define what Jürgen Moltmann has
identified as a companion experience for life. Here the reference is to those perceptions of a sensory kind which overpower us to such a degree that we are not master of them. They mould us, and become our companions. There are events in the past which never become 'past', but are continually present to us.

Moltmann is thinking more in terms of "limit situations" and "elemental experiences of life, love and death" rather than casual encounters. In his case he is still "shaken", even now, by the shock of his surviving the fire-storm that accompanied the Allied bombing of Hamburg in 1943. On another occasion he cites his imprisonment at the end of the war and his exposure at the time to the horrors of the Holocaust. Moltmann is well-aware that these events occurred in the past; the activity of his reason can date them but their power is such that they never become the "past" in some completed sense. They have the capacity to make a mockery of the false Job-like words of dis/comfort that 'time heals everything' or 'you should be over that by now'. Such counsel is diminishing and lacks authenticity. Moltmann knows that these kind of experiences can "still plunge" him into the same terror and that they can take him by surprise, "for I can still feel myself back into them". That they have this potential to do is not a peculiarity of a particular vulnerable being; it is in the very nature of the experience that has now become part of who one is. They can, in fact, be signals of integration and a refusal to deny that which has happened. They become testimony and an act of witness. Moltmann wisely observes of such companions that

We repress them, we work on them, we puzzle over them and interpret them, for we have to live with them. Our biographies are moulded by experiences like this, experiences which affect us in this elemental way.

For this way of thinking "where are you from?" is no longer merely a geographical allusion to a pinprick on a map. It is experiential and is concerned with what we bring with us from the past to this moment and every subsequent moment. In the almost accidental encounter between two strangers it is hardly likely either one would now pour out their selection of companion experiences in response to this seemingly low-level style of question. And yet, when Moltmann was asked to speak on what is a theologian to a Princeton conference on youth ministry, he illustrated the nature of this vocation with frequent reference back to these active/passive experiences that "never become the past" and are "present with me still". Reflecting on who he is, where he is from and what does he do led Moltmann to weave together a handful of companion experiences with markers of time and place. These "dimensions" were just as important as any formal definition of the subject of the discipline and its content. It is arguably the case that these limit situations have even moulded the emphases of his theology, whether he is conscious of this or not. In comparison with other contemporary theologians Moltmann has been more inclined to make use of the symbol of 'life' as a threading principle for much of his later work. Few theologians have ever demonstrated more concern for a messianic Christology that has striven to do justice to the covenantal people of Israel being an elect nation in the salvific purposes of God.

These idle questions Kerr poses can become probes into who we are, sifting and scanning our roots and sense of personal and psychological identity. Their task is not simply self-reflexive, though. Their situation in life in the art of conversation requires an exchange, the face of an/other in whose presence we are defined or re-membered, even evoked into being. They presuppose the transcendent nature of the stranger, the alien, the newcomer whom we do not know. That other lies beyond us and we are not yet familiar with her story. To imagine that we do is sheer presumption. It is to sell the other short and exercise a false constraining authority. They become more one of Marin Buber's "You" than his "Thou". We end up preventing the ones who encounter us sharing their subjectivity and their capacity to surprise us and be not like what we think.

The reason why Kerr felt the need to write an editorial on this relatively common question of where you are from had little to do with the daily business of striking up a conversation through "small talk". His primary interest was in how location informs our understanding of the Christian faith and how we do theology now. The critical link between these two discrete concerns lay in another fairly self-evident observation that "where we have come from is not where we are today". From the relative stability of his Princeton study Kerr did not sense the imperative to define more closely his repeated invocation of 'we'. For
those of us who do not bear the stamp 'Made in America' his use of the first person plural pronoun is likely to be problematic. Kerr's tendency was to cite the contemporary theology of a range of domestic theologians and name the city or institution with which they were most associated. The impression created was that this 'we' was a generic 'we' and the theological task facing 'us' today was comprehended in much the same way wherever we happen to be. The role "geographical derivation" plays was seemingly more one of nuance and illustration. The positioning markers Kerr was laying down were probably weighted more in favour of the temporal than that spatial. The present reference point was "today". For Kerr and his readers to get their bearings in this much-changed context they would need to consult a calendar or some other time piece rather than an atlas.

That this should be so is entirely in keeping with the drift of modern theology. Ever since the eighteenth century a "responsible Christian theology" has been coming to terms with an historical consciousness. Lessing's "ugly ditch of history" forever separates us from the biblical and subsequent creedral and confessional worlds of the past. In the lecture/speak of Peter Matheson of days gone by we cannot become mini-Pauls, mini-Luthers, mini-Calvins, no matter how hard we might want to try. Even though many Christians might deport themselves as if all the biblical scholarship of the past century and more has happened on another planet, the hermeneutical distance between then and now remains. It is simply 'there' and is forever consigned to widen. There is no escape because the biblical view of history is not cyclical but linear.

For Douglas John Hall this "time dimension" constitutes one of the "two primary aspects of contextual thinking". The other is the "function of place". The interest here is not just confined to location or a "certain geographical area". For Hall place can also designate a state or condition, as in the phrase 'knowing one's place' or 'the place of something or someone'. In this way of reading place may refer to where you have come from in terms of a home or a recent residence. It can also be a site for perspectives arising out of gender, sexual orientation, class, age and [dis]ability.

For Hall this concern for place is critically established in a reading of a theology of the cross. This "thin tradition" most usually associated with Martin Luther, he acknowledges, has never been much loved in the English-speaking world of the Christian faith. Writing out of his North American setting Hall reckons the preference has been for a theology of glory and a strong tendency towards triumphalism. The latter, a theology of glory, is a style of faith that has been well suited to the needs of sixteen centuries of an established Christendom and an ideology of certitude. The problem Hall discerns in this tradition is its failure to follow through on the logic of the cross which is, in Moltmann's opinion, faith's "key signature".

The pivot upon which Hall's argument turns in this instance, is the doctrine of the Incarnation. The very idea presupposes, of course, an embodiment in a particular time and place. Incarnation is always contextual. The dilemma Hall identifies is the extent to which the characteristic expression of the doctrine is confined to the birth of Christ – and perhaps, one could add, by way of extension, a generic humanity. It is almost as if the Incarnation is like an episode, a point in time, in the divinity of Christ. The metaphysical demands are such that there is little or no interest in the surrounding socio-cultural, political milieu other than to furnish a stage and a cast of supporting characters whose role is to deflect attention away from themselves onto the infant Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Such a Christmas-bound reading of the Incarnation might be adequate if the problem of the human condition was merely the fact that we are flesh, blood and bone. The anthropologism Luther stumbled upon was rather different, though. It is grounded in a "deep sympathy with human weakness and wretchedness". The Incarnation is about life and death, as well as birth. How Jesus of Nazareth 'used' this time and space matters, for the life itself discloses something of the purposes of God. The cross can never then be just an historical sign of execution and the particular momentum which led to a violent death that gives way to a chorus of alleluias three days later. It possesses a representative aspect. This "Friday event must [also] be seen as the culmination of the movement from the Creator toward the creation". It signifies nothing less than the "divine decision to be Emmanuel" in life and death. The cross demonstrates the extent to which the Incarnation will go for the sake of a lost humanity.

At face value the case Hall makes for a theology of the cross may seem to have little to do with Kerr's positioning question. There is no explicit desire to discuss issues of who are you, where are you from, what do you do. In the nature of such a theology these considerations are hidden, embedded in the script, lying beneath the surface. One of
the reasons why Hall puts such an emphasis on a theology of the cross is because its opposite, a theology of glory, has aspired after a supramundane, heavenly redemption in the after-life. It has been less concerned with life in the here and now. The comparison is with this alternative tradition of the cross which is “bound to this world in all of its materiality, ambiguity and incompleteness”. It is a theology that is more inclined to adopt a “minor key” that allows itself to be tested in vulnerability of “real life”.

The theological preference Hall appropriates is necessarily committed to both dimensions of contextual thinking. That commitment to “real life” means that he notices those who have been excluded, shut out, denied a voice. It means that he will take issue – for Christ’s sake on the cross - with the general practice of a systematic or dogmatic theology to look upon the contextual imperative as a “capitulation to relativity, or allowing the world, … to set the Christian agenda”. Hall is sensitive to how the very names of these two qualifying adjectives, systematic and dogmatic, seemingly betray a predilection towards permanency, a theologia aeterna and a “desire to see the thing whole, to integrate, to describe connections, to honor the unity of truth”. The very character of the enterprise encourages a “conspicuous resistance” to the prospect of a self-conscious contextuality. The risk Hall discerns is a faith that runs the risk of failing to become little more than a powerful, persuasive ideology. It then ceases to address the specificity of the human condition. The actuality of “God’s beloved world” is sacrificed for a “mere idea”. The gospel is converted into “a fixed and sterile formula – a frozen waterfall”. For such a theology it does not really matter where you are from. We are all human beings wherever we are located and subject to the same universalising tendency this kind of theology exhibits. There is at least some concession made to time insofar as it is realised that key ideas and words undergo change and history situates us differently.

The relative neglect of Hall’s “place-component” can help explain an irony in Kerr’s editorial that must be redressed. The focus of his argument falls upon the passage of time. And yet the biblical texts he isolates for the sake of demonstrating the “inner necessity for theology and church to keep ever moving beyond” have to do with place. Abraham was told to “go from your country” [Genesis 12:1]; Moses went on exodus; Ruth “set out from the place where she was” [Ruth 1:7]; the itinerant Jesus had nowhere to lay his head [Matthew 8:20]; and, best of all, following his conversion Paul was all over the place. The two dimensions of contextuality that Hall isolates have effectively been collapsed into one another. The distinction between time and place has not been drawn sharply enough. Kerr has made use of biblical narratives to do with place for the sake of a contemporary interest in time.

Out of place

The sneaking suspicion that Kerr creates through his description of the positioning question is that he inhabits a relatively stable world. One geographical site could almost be exchanged for another. The primary dislocation for theology in his schema is essentially temporal and has to do with the vexed debate over the lines of relationship between modernity and postmodernity. It differs in this respect from Hall whose call for a theology of the cross for the sake of the whole of creaturely existence is read through more confessional and ecclesial lenses. The language of living in a postmodern world is retained but the shift in setting that most interests him is the demise of European Christendom and its western satellites. The “nearly monopolistic hold of the Christian faith” on that world has been gradually whittled away over several centuries. Hall reckons that the occasional impression that emerges in some enclaves that “the Christian establishment has never been so firmly in place” – or that is possible to “reinstate some facsimile” of such – is misleading. The process of its “winding down is … irreversible”.10

For Hall, the “now” dimension of contextuality, then, is not merely about “where are you from?” in any conventional sense. The present is a time of finding faith at a cross-roads. It is a time of rupture and metamorphosis. For the “serious Christian” who knows the cost of discipleship Hall concedes this self-conscious space can be a lonely place. The popular temptation is to yearn for the convivial banter of the coffee-hour after the service in a “friendly church” where critical and deepening discussion on the praxis of faith in a “strange new world” is shunned. For Hall this cosy arrangement runs the risk of becoming a parable of Christendom and, in terms of what is now required, a cul-de-sac. The terrain has altered. The topographical sign is no longer the “broad thoroughfare” of a past Christendom but a road that is more like a “narrow country lane” or a “footpath”.
These metaphors of being on a journey suggest a more destabilized response to Kerr's sequence of positioning questions. They stand as such inside Hall's basic conviction that the overarching location for the Christian faith is now one of diaspora. The tendency of a faith relatively at home in a cultural establishment was for Christianity to be identified with the "dominant cultural and moral values of society at large". The dynamics of diaspora are of a different order. The etymology points towards the practice of being scattered, dispersed, maybe isolated, and pushed to the margins. It gathers around itself a cluster of related experiences to do with being an alien, a stranger, vulnerable, and a sojourner. They belong inside dialectics of exclusion and embrace, of continuity and discontinuity. These markers of diaspora inhabit an excellent biblical and theological pedigree. The eschatological nature of the Christian faith has always meant that this is a life best expressed in categories of being at home and not at home in this present world. This theme could indeed be viewed in terms of being one of a number of archetypal models similar to covenant and hospitality enlivening the tradition as a whole.

Recently its place in history has been mapped by Barry Harvey in his search for "an ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world". The mode selected for addressing this rich theme is the metaphor of the city. The very idea conjures up notions of identity, foundations, households, belonging, citizenship, fellowship, politics (polis), and welfare. Each one of these aspects possesses a character that binds a people together and to a particular place. For faith this line of adherence can only ever be necessarily partial despite its all too evident allure. Harvey invokes accordingly the rhetoric of the body of Christ being an altera civitas, another city, an "outpost of heaven", and also Augustine's commitment to a "heavenly city that is on pilgrimage in this world, calling out citizens from all nations and so collecting a society of aliens speaking all languages." 11

Such reference points stand inside a biblical history that experienced the "shockwaves" of Israel's exile and which then continued to release "eschatological tremors" of judgement and redemption into "the distinctive vocation of this people". Being dislocated in diaspora effectively initiated what Harvey names as a "poieticising memory" that subverts too close an identification with the power of this present age. It inspires an eschatology that is prone to the apocalyptic and yearns for a messianic "end of the ages". 12 The translation of this exilic radical otherness into a Christian typology is made possible through the autobasileia of Jesus. This term is used to describe the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus' own person. Its messianic character is manifested initially in the subversive nature of the earthly ministry which would lead, through resurrection, into an alternative "type of fellowship" who lived in the expectation of the parousia and "a homeland, a better country". The sociality of this body, then, is proleptic: it is determined by its members "looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). These early Christians saw themselves as the "ek-klesia, a people 'called out' of the world so that they might be sent back into it as the provisional assembly (ekklestia) of this other city." 13

The purpose for which Harvey is writing in this vein about diaspora is closely related to Hall's reading of the present position. This thesis of another city is intended to put the case for an understanding of the church that is no longer captive to the dictates of Christendom. The theological time has passed for an established church providing 'holy service' to an empire or being content with nurturing the interior spirit of an otherwise seemingly secular ordinary life. It is no longer appropriate to "live within the lie" of being "simply another vendor of goods and services" in cultures that have become organized along the lines of "means rather than ends" and the proliferation of individual rights "without due regard for the goods that constitute the common welfare". 14 For Harvey, the analogy of the city exercises a similar function to Hall's call for disestablishment. The polis is not just about statecraft. It is concerned with being in fellowship and responding to the actuality and possibility of human life. For the early church living in diaspora, this image of the city posits an alternative way of being in an imperial order that would have allowed its faith to have been expressed in a "cultus privatus dedicated to the pursuit of personal piety and otherworldly salvation", subject, of course, to declarations of loyalty to Caesar. The idea of an altera civitas is a recognition of the body of Christ inhabiting a place not of its own making but able to draw upon elements of the host culture for the sake of a common life shaped by the "interruption" of Christ. It is, in effect, making room for its expression of being to be formed by the logic of its own structures of belief.

The hermeneutical leap Harvey makes is to link this reading of where the church has come from to this here and now. The positioning question Kerr identifies is no longer merely personal to the meeting of
individual theologians. It has to do with a paradigm shift that involves the relationship of the church to Christ and culture. The preferred template for the way ahead in this new environment is the dispersion of the Jews following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Hall agrees. The benefit of this model of "sanctified subversion" lies in its "tactical mobility" and attention to matters of identity and common memory. The politics of this diaspora is to prepare "the pilgrim people of God to be the bearer of habits and relations that locate all of life within the context of a promised but as yet unfulfilled future".

Where Hall differs from Harvey in his interpretation of what is required for today is in his rigorous insistence on a theology of the cross. This difference is best exemplified in the way in which Harvey concentrates upon the "empty self" of the postmodern world while Hall counsels the "lonely Christian" and looks toward the construction of an appropriate doctrine of the Christian life. Harvey warns against a "premature triumphalism", ecclesiastical "phantasy", and reminds his readers of faith's dubious "track record". It would almost seem as if his emphasis on practising the "art of weakness" is the equivalent of Hall's basic theological motif. The telltale give-away signs that this might not exactly be the case are hidden away in the accompanying rhetoric. Harvey is much more likely to use the language of conflict, opposition and being in enemy territory. There is less evident need for theology itself to be critiqued. The problem of the altera civitas is not essentially one of faith seeking understanding but has to do, rather, with altering the lines of relationship between church and culture. The rhetoric Hall employs is one of waiting that is the very opposite of the contemporary desire for "instant gratification" which can so quickly infect popular forms of faith.

This difference in emphasis between Hall and Harvey is a good index of how complex is the present territory. In seeking to answer Kerr's positioning question, "where are you from?", they would be in substantial agreement. The demise of Christendom is providential and diaspora is the preferred template. It is now time for the church to be a vigilant and "prophetic irritant". How easy it is to fulfill that role is another matter. This is where Hall is more reserved and perhaps more sensitive to how open-ended, ambiguous and demanding living in a diaspora actually is. It is like practicing the theological equivalent of Alain de Botton's art of travel. The metaphors of journey inhabit a world of being at times in a state of limbo, in liminal spaces, caught

between anticipation and curiosity, on the one hand, and the reality of spatial dislocation, boredom, and discomfort, on the other. For all the benefits of the exotic and the act of discovery the art of travel is hard work.

Representations of exile

This analogy with de Botton is rather helpful in situating Hall. This referent of travel is not uncommon in describing the search for theological relevance in a time of postmodern displacement. It seems to capture the mood of transition where, it seems, the emphasis lies on the praxis and process of faith rather than its destination. The present is a time when so many men and women of faith are 'on the way', a 'pilgrim people', or busy huffing and puffing along spiritual workouts answering to the name of Emmaus walks or the like. Those who prefer their doctrines more settled must share this time and place with those who have been designated "paperback pilgrims". In the midst of all this traffic, now and then a typology is proposed.

One innovative example of such is the work of Michael Grimshaw who makes particular use of Carel Kaplan's Questions of Travel. Here the distinction is made between the tourist, the traveler, the explorer and the exile. The subjective experience and expectation of each differs markedly. The tourist embarks on a journey within confined and constructed boundaries. There is an itinerary, a diary, photos to be taken, souvenirs to be bought, a guide [book], a night out on the town, and maybe a foreign phrase book – parlez-vous anglais? This is a trip to the manageably different. The tourist is informed of "where to go, what to see, what to expect, and what to souvenir". Those concerned take time out to visit a new place, then return home. The traveler is more of an explorer. The package deal is surrendered for the sake of "venturing to and encountering the other". The rite of passage is not just to another geographical or historical landscape; it is inward as well and embraces an act of interpretation. The visit can be re-visited in a genre of travel "faction". The familiar destination is re-noted in ways deemed to be novel and interesting. Where the exile belongs to a different category lies in the element of choice. Both the tourist and the traveler / explorer "choose to leave and can return whenever they so desire". The exile has been compelled to leave and is dependent upon a favourable
change of circumstances for the possibility of return. The irony of this state is its reliance on the presence of no-presence. To be in exile is to be uprooted, absent, and in a liminal space. From this location there is no simple journey home. Grimshaw rightly observes that “the location to which [the exiles] return has not stood still”. Too much time has passed; too much has changed and altered and the exile is “not the [same] person who left, having been influenced and culturally ‘infected’ by the location of exile”.

The purpose of Grimshaw’s fascination with travel is theological. Kaplan’s distinctions are duly given a faithful makeover. The tourist, for instance, becomes the type for popular piety along the lines described by the fictional priest, Bernard Walsh, now turned agnostic theologian on holiday in Hawaii, in David Lodge’s Paradise News: “For my parishioners I was a kind of travel agent, issuing tickets, insurance, brochures, guaranteeing them ultimate happiness”. The conventional pattern of organised Christian piety is like a repeatable, manageable excursion for a “tour party” in search of the divinized experience. What to look at and for has been determined in advance by the Bible which serves as a religious Baedeker – or, if you prefer, a Fodor’s guide to “the strange customs and natives” of a holy time and place, “where the authentic is primarily located.” For Grimshaw, Kaplan’s traveler is the ‘orthodox theologian’ and the explorer is the ‘modernist’. How helpful is this latter designation is admittedly rather doubtful given its history of being associated with particular schools of scholarship in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions in the early twentieth century. It attracts a well-defined sense of belonging to a specific period. Grimshaw’s somewhat idiosyncratic use of the label is occasioned by his desire to draw out a more general contrast between theologies performed in conditions of modernity and postmodernity. In this instance the critical difference is made between theologies that are realist and those that are non-realist in nature. The realist believes that there is something ‘out there’. The language we use in theology signifies a subject/object. Now, Grimshaw is well aware, of course, that the basic theological outlook of orthodox and modernist theologians are not the same. Karl Barth’s “barking nein” to a natural theology and a theology that engages with the present cultural turn in the discipline is never far from the surface. These two types of theology often find it difficult to keep company with each other – and yet there are some common assumptions. For the sake of his schema Grimshaw makes a necessary distinction: the traveler sets out to discover what is already there; the explorer sets out in pursuit of what he/she believes to be there. It is assumed that they will both be able to return to their starting point land of origin. The comparison is with the postmodern theologian who inhabits a ‘liminal state of exile’ on the other side of “the great realist divide”. It is not possible for the individual concerned to return to the conditions of modernity. That would involve “a recanting of belief and a denial of themselves”.

In terms of Kerr’s positioning question it is evident that Grimshaw is coming from somewhere else. The postmodern world that has nurtured him, and for which he writes, is at least one generation removed from Kerr, Hall and Harvey. Grimshaw takes for granted the breakdown of Christendom. There is no need to explain or justify. There is scarcely a hint of nostalgia. The present is actually thought of in categories of intellectual exile rather than in those of diaspora. The two are closely related but do differ. The latter can be voluntary, a feature of migration, and is not always the result of coercion. There is often a harder edge to exile. In this particular instance Grimshaw demonstrates no desire to imitate those who believe that the future requires a template based on the Jewish dispersion. For him, that would involve a return to confessionism and effectively compromise an alternative he believes necessary. The present imperative is for this discipline to “encompass the insights and articulations of other disciplines”. Failure to do so will confirm theology’s loss of its potency. It has become “very in-house, jargon-filled, and infatuated” with itself. In highly secular societies it is losing ground to the “[hi]p/gnosis” of so much contemporary writing on spirituality. Its future relevance lies not so much in a confessional diaspora but rather the willingness to make use of other disciplines as they have already embraced a turn to theology.

The exilic option Grimshaw prefers is like a foil for the diasporic understandings of Hall, Harvey and others wrestling with post-Christendom. On a spectrum of opinion, Hall’s understanding of the necessity of a theology of the cross and a discipleship of the ‘waiting’ sojourner / stranger is about as far as a realist position can take, without falling over the edge of the divide Grimshaw has identified. Looking towards the future Hall advocates a Christian faith that is vulnerable, deeply “serious” in its thinking, and, in an echo of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, responsible for its life in history. It is one that is self-aware of the cost of
discipleship and yet, at the same time, Hall counsels the diasporic Christian to "live joyfully" in negotiating the anxieties of exile. Reading Harvey the same self becomes the citizen of "another country". There is fellowship and engagement; there are shifts of thinking in how gospel and culture relate but there is not the same attention to the personal need for imagining again how the theological details of the personal Christian life should be constructed. Reading Hall, there is more of an echo of Grimshaw's intellectual exile. The implied heroic figure in Halls' recent writings is often at odds with the beliefs and practices of the "successful" Christian who is well able to fit in, maybe even able to lay claim to providence and declare that "this is where God wants me to be". Living in that kind of diaspora does not mean much in the way of personal disruption and dislocation at all.

The analogy that lies embedded in Grimshaw's thesis that may prove rather helpful in this respect is Edward Said's representation of exile. Those inward aspects of living in diaspora that Hall has named are similar in general character to Said's idea of a metaphorical outsidedness. The focus here falls upon the intellectual who is a lifelong member of a given society but is, at the same time, an outsider, a naysayer. The tenor of thought and basic perception do not allow the exilic mind to fall in readily with "the charry, familiar world inhabited by the natives". These latter intellects are Said's yeasayers who, by way of comparison, "flourish without any overwhelming sense of dissonance." They have prescribed career paths. The logic of convention and establishment favour them. These insiders demonstrate "the trappings of accommodation". They know little of the standard features of an "actual exile" - aimless wandering, banishment, becoming "a sort of permanent outcast", an intellectual equivalent of a "social and moral leper", the subject of distancing aside, and, in these days of the "normal traffic of everyday contemporary life", the ambivalent nostalgia of being in "constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place". Theirs is not a personal world of "half-involvements and half-detachments". The metaphorical exile lives inside this liminal, median world of margins. The geographical dislocation of actual exile has been translated into an alienation of the spirit and the intellect. For Said, the distinguishing marks of such a mind are its restlessness, an audacity of daring, and a capacity to look at things from several angles or places at one and the same time. It cannot help but compare "every scene or situation in a new country" with its counterpart in the old.25

Those who live in "betwixt and between" like this know well how demanding it is to negotiate the subjective side of exile. Those who combine the actual and the metaphorical in their person know it is no longer easy to answer Kerr's positioning question: "Where are you from?" So much depends upon which direction the diasporic gaze is cast. As for Moltmann's companion experiences, they are liable to include formative experiences of rupture, dislocation, maybe even a level of structural abuse, bungling and violation that cry out for a resolution that will probably not eventuate. Those for whom these alienating experiences are a mystery seldom see the need for such and fail, then, to take the initiative that lies within the limits of their power. A theology of the cross - and its attendant virtues of waiting, sometimes in silence, and viewing life and faith from the underside - is never that far away. There is no quiet escape into the otherworldliness of a heavenly altera civitas, or its this-worldly parody of an introverted ecclesiastical ghetto, maintaining its defence against Hall's "strange new world". Those who find themselves "betwixt and between" in this liminal space and embrace its ambiguity cannot avoid experiencing a form of Fumitaka Matsuoka's idea of "holy insecurity". The pressure is either to go back to the former, originating culture or worldview, or to let go the past altogether for the sake of the new and the yet-to-be. That 'accidental theologian' of the personal diaspora, Peter Phan, describes the need to remain in the tension between memory and hope. There is evidently an art to this business of living in "holy insecurity" that can elude the theological stay-at-home and those whom Leonardo Boff, once upon a time, dubbed the theobureaucrat. In this landscape, identity, in all its forms, is invented rather than received.

There is, then, a poetics of diaspora and exile. The breakdown of Christendom and the global flow of mass movements of people has spawned rafts of diasporic selves. The outward paradigm shift from one age to another is experienced necessarily within. It is that close. For faith to understand that space is a personal imperative - but, it is also more than that. Hall and Harvey both described the breakdown of Christendom and the emergence of the Christian diaspora as providential. If this is so, then this poetics of diaspora and exile needs to be released - for Christ's sake. A faith that has been nurtured and sustained in the last days of a cultural establishment does not automatically know how to live in these much changed conditions. In the circumstances, Rebecca Chopp's call for a poetics of testimony that
names and interprets what has happened to individuals and communities resonates. The personal, the subjective becomes public. This form of bearing witness establishes the frame of reference for faith in diaspora to "tell tales". It allows for "life-stories" and the autobiographical to become a vehicle for theology. It is, indeed, no accident that this is the standard practice of first- and second-generation migrants to a new land.

**Imagining a life in exile**

The way in which Kerr's positioning question is posed the focus falls upon the past. The tendency of research into the demise of Christendom and the gradual emergence of theories of disestablishment and displacement does the same, almost out of necessity. What life in diaspora might look like in this exilic condition of presence and absence is generally not as well explored. Now and then the emphasis is more inclined towards an eschatological optic. There can then be a sense of what Carl Braaten has described as eschatopraxis, doing the future ahead of time. It is arguably the case that the present imperative is for more subjective accounts of exile and the imaginative vision this liminal space releases. There is an urgent need for creativity and artistry rather than the theological equivalent of a never-ending radio replay of well-rehearsed doctrinal positions and creedal conventions. The temptation is for an ecclesia under threat to retreat into the relative comfort of merely telling its own stories, adopting policies designed to brand the denominational label, and becoming obsessed with the 'rightsizing' discourses of costs and structures.

One candidate for this exilic scrutiny is Peter Matheson. At first glance it might seem like an odd choice. Matheson's discipline is history with a particular predilection for the sixteenth century. His most preferred period is struggling to become modern, let alone post-modern. What has Cardinal Contarini's Venice, Thomas Münzer's Zwickau and Mühlhausen, Martin Luther's Wittenberg, and Argula von Grumbach's Ingolstadt to do with a Christian faith, the numerical strength of which lies increasingly in Africa, Latin America and Asia? Put most starkly, what has that 'silly bag of a woman', the "pious" Argula, to say to students from a Pacific island today? On the surface it might also appear as if this well-established, highly-respected academic is one of Said's "insiders'. And yet appearances can be deceptive.

Matheson has frequently been out of place, living and teaching in diverse locations in both hemispheres. He has known what it is like to be pushed right off the margins, let alone centre stage, and be slandered in the most mischief-making manner, without much chance [or desire] of writing in reply. His corpus of historical writings is not confined in theme and time. An interest in the rhetoric and polemic of the radical reformation, coupled with a devotion to von Grumbach's letters and shopping lists is likely to give way, at a moment's notice, to surveys of theological history in the antipodes and the nineteenth century settlement of Scots at the very ends of the earth. Matheson's readers are invited to mind their language, be imaginative, subtly exchange one discipline for another, and be prepared to construct an alternative line of vision as they tour a range of issues to do with faith and culture. Now and then a reference to Maori or a South Island beach scene can pop up in the most unlikely of spaces – like an Edinburgh lecture on the Reformation, for instance. To be in this company we must be willing to cross time-zones and hemispheres.

The hermeneutical intention behind Matheson's recent work displays some of the same concerns to be found in Harvey and Hall. The language may not be that of diaspora and exile but its flow signifies a deep sense of dislocation. It seems as if the core beliefs of a Reformation Protestantism are no longer widely known, even by those who inhabit the "charmed" world of the church. The most urgent concerns of the Reformers – the authority of Scripture and justification by faith – have become a "closed book". Writing only on behalf of this tradition, Matheson poses that most awkward of questions: has Protestantism "reached its sell-by date and to be judged by the pronouncement of media pundits ...... [been] reduced to clear? Are we near the end of the line, and no amount of frenzied activity will divert this momentum? In the mode of a minor prophet Matheson poses this style of irritating question much more sharply. It will not simply disappear through an upsurge in professionalism or the setting up of relatively like-minded associations and alliances of renewal and affirmation. The paradigm has changed too much. These tactics do not delve deeply enough.

This is the point at which Matheson's reading of the rhetoric and imagination of the Reformation is especially helpful and adds a critical dimension to contemporary readings of diaspora and exile. The strategic practice of Hall is to recover what has, in effect, been a costly,
ministry tradition. Harvey's way ahead is to link an eschatological biblical and theological motif – the altera civitas – to missiology. Both have resisted the common but, at times, naïve model that claims that the present situation is the same one that faced the early apostolic church. The dilemma here is that Christendom has happened in the meantime. It is part of "where we are from"; it is a collective "companion experience", and both modernity and postmodernity represent very different epistemologies and perceptions of reality. Where Matheson has an edge is in his attention to symbols, clusters of images, and figures of speech embedded in the life of a community. These are to be found in both the private and public spaces of a society and have the capacity to "stir up" and shape a [re]new[ed] way of looking at the world and how to act. Rather than focus on change in social, moral and political structures and in doctrine Matheson breaks with this norm and considers how the original Reformation effected a shift in the very perception of reality. Its "iconoclastic splurge" was qualified by what he calls its "iconopoiac energies" that draw upon the creativity of "new allegories and metaphors for the divine and the human". What happened amounted to the "imaginative architecture" of a society being turned upside down and inside out.

The importance of Matheson's work for an exilic faith can scarcely be underestimated. In most western societies the imaginative tide is running against the Christian faith. Its reputation has been severely compromised through too many cases of clerical sexual abuse handled badly. There is widespread skepticism as to its public role and its capacity to address anything more than personal, lifestyle options. Its images and stories have often become the playthings of a quick-witted media. The dominant discourses are inclined to be those of economics, management theories and the social sciences. Even within the churches there is a tendency to imitate the business practices of the host societies and exclude theological reference points. Such is the nature of this captivity that Alasdair MacFadyen has described the institutional practice as often being one of little more than a "pragmatic atheism" to which the occasional theological reason is attached. In a nice turn of phrase MacFadyen has labeled this practice as a form of Post-It "theology. The biblical or theological idea can be stuck onto the ecclesiastical agenda and then easily removed, if required. Even theology itself is now often administered along the lines of its economic viability rather than the integrity of its disciplines. It can be difficult to posit the alternative because the institutions themselves have become complicit and theology's own "ecology of responsibility" is seldom respected enough. The topic becomes a difficult one to debate out in the open, partly because there is often no common understanding of the basic intention of the disciplines concerned and their purpose across diverse "stakeholders". The dilemma is compounded because those in responsible positions can be unfamiliar with the professional writing and praxis in this burgeoning field – and, perhaps, worse still, not know they do not know. The worry must be that faith itself in this "strange new world" can easily become colonized by images, symbols and models of societies that have effectively driven out the Christian narrative.

Living in diaspora is like living in exile. These descriptive categories are closely related. Even if the sofer option of diaspora is preferred, then it is still important for faith to read the cultures in which it finds itself and recognize how alien its own images and symbols have become. It is not enough simply to opt for "another city"; the invocation of a theology of the cross must be accompanied by a developing diasporic imagination in the life of the church at large. The interior witness of faith requires a poetics in keeping with the outward condition of a post-Christendom scattering. Matheson is one of a number of writers on the imagination whose work should be heeded. Those whose have been driven out or excluded and now inhabit the liminal spaces of exile have been compelled to live out the intellect and spirituality of this post-Christendom dispersion. Out of place, no longer on top, now is the time for a humiliated faith to praise living in exile and make room for its edgy voices. From Calvin to Knox, from Bucer to Münzer – not forgetting a host of others – there is an excellent reformation pedigree for doing exactly that.

Notes

5 Moltmann, J., 'Praying and Watching', Princeton Lectures in Youth, Church and Culture, 1999; http://www.ptsem.edu/lym/research/lecture/index.htm


Hall, D.J., *The Cross in Our Context*, pp. 160–162. Hall does not believe that the death of Christendom has been occasioned primarily by the inroads made by secularism and the acids of modernity. There are a series of inner conditions that predispose faith not to rest content with Christendom and impel this faith to proceed along the way of what he calls establishment. It is his conviction that the Christian faith, expressed in the form of Christendom, "was not morally wounded by some enemy; it became terminally ill for intrinsic reasons". *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996; pp. 204–211.

Hall argues that we have been misled "by centuries of Christian domination and expansion to assume that the future would see more of the same and, in the end, achieve the global victory that the "Constantinian" reading of the newer Testament taught us to anticipate." See, *Confessing the Faith*, p. 201.

Hall is most critical of Philip Jenkins' language of "the next Christendom". This thesis takes seriously the shift in numerical strength of the Christian faith to the South. It is observed that by 2050 "50% of the Christian population will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17% will be in Asia." The accompanying assumption is that these statistics will bear witness to a "Counter-Reformation" that will virtually annull more liberal forms of faith. Hall raises deep-seated theological concerns about Jenkins' model for the future on the grounds of whether the triumphalism and the desire for certitude that characterised much of "the first Christendom" are both theologically and existentially desirable. With his eye firmly set, at this point, on the conservative right in the United States, Hall asks whether these future Christians "really wish to become an intolerant, authoritarian, violent religion, ready to go to war not only on Iraq but with Islam and many other religious alternatives that can now no longer be nicely confined to specific territories? Do they really want a bibilicism that is basically uninformed by historical and linguistic research and that dismisses not only complex modern scientific theories like evolution but even much of the ordinary science on which our daily lives are now based? Would they welcome a moral ethos in which not only gays and lesbians but also divorced people were consigned to hellfire, and the psychologically ill were considered demon-riders?" *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 164. For Jenkins' thesis, see: *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.


Harvey, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 48-55.

*ibid.*, pp. 56–62.

*ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

This idea of the exile and dispersion of the Jews serving as model for the church following the demise of Christendom has also been suggested by other writers. Clapp, R., *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian


Hall, D.J., *Confessing the Faith*, pp. 224–226. Hall is indebted to the work of Irving Greenberg.

Harvey, B., *op. cit.*, p. 159

Hall is under no illusions. The pluralistic cultural context in which the church finds itself encourages a spirit of tolerance that militates against the kind of decisiveness and certitude that many want in a time of paradigm change. Hall is conscious of how a large part of the demand that the religions are asked to supply in the age of "future shock" is precisely a demand for clear, unambiguous and simple expressions of conventional social verities. The difficulty, he discerns, is that the Protestant mainline is, on the whole, open, but is theologically "vague and quite forgetful". Its old structures have been thoroughly "invaded and captured by secularism"; contemporary communications technology readily lends itself to "slanguage and spectacle". In such a state of play, those whom Hall defines as the "technicians of growth" - who assume that Christianity is intended to be numerous - look appealing and are influential. The legitimate questions Hall poses are from comfortable: "will Christians come to acknowledge their effective displacement; learn to regard it as providential light, and in the spirit of the Reformation and seek to re-form themselves?" Will the hunger for numbers and finances drive the churches to adopt yet more desperate, market-oriented, gauche, and 'gimmicky' programs of church growth, 'packaging' the 'gospel-product' in increasingly sloganized and unthinking ways that will alienate thoughtful people even more conspicuously than at present? *Confessing the Faith*, p. 262.

There must be an echo of the rhetoric of Stanley Hauerwas' resident aliens in the position advocated by Harvey. Hauerwas argues that the church should be a "disciplined community", nurture a 'separate identity', and become an 'alternative community', a "contrast model". Its members should be 'ill at ease in the world" and "at odds with the world". See Hauerwas, S., and Willimon, W.H., *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1989; and *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. Damian Palmer has observed that Hauerwas employs "two connected images to communicate his understanding of church / world relationship". The metaphor of exile is combined with the language of battle. The combined force of these metaphors is such that Palmer concludes that Hauerwas' ecclesiology is dominated by too much talk of being alien and not about residence. See, 'Too Much Alien, Not Enough Resident: The Problems and Promise of Stanley Hauerwas' Ecclesiology after Christendom'. B Th Hons Dissertation, Charles Sturt University, 2002.

For all the strength of his conviction that Christendom was "not an appropriate expression of the Christian faith" and a "Babylonian captivity", Hall has no desire to
overlook the good that accrued to the West through this past relationship. See, The Cross in our Context pp. 165–166.
18 For an extended discussion on such, see Pearson, C., “Telling Tales”, Studies in World Christianity, 10:2; to be published in October 2004.
21 ibid., pp. 6–7.
22 For interpretive accounts of the effects of high profile cases of clerical sexual abuse in Australia, see Porter, M., Sex, Power and the Clergy, South Yarra, Hardie Grant Books, 2003; and “The Hollingworth Controversy”, St. Mark’s Review, Number 194, 2003. Philip Jenkins has explored the “anatomy of [aspects of this] contemporary crisis” in the United States in his Pedophiles and Priests, New York: