

Intercultural Church: A Utopian Ideal or a Gospel of Hope?

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Abstract: An intercultural church, where people from different cultural backgrounds form one community and aims to create a new reality through mutually enriching and challenging interactions, is presented as one of the new ecclesiological alternatives in today's multicultural situation. However, the fact that this intercultural church is an "intentional" faith-based communal project may raise the question of whether it is a utopian endeavor to dream of an ideal community in this world. Is the intercultural church a utopian ideal or a gospel of hope? What is the motivation and basis for which it is pursued? While considering the ambiguity of the term 'utopian,' this paper attempts to find the answer to this questions. And as a conclusion, it argues that an intercultural church should be understood not as a utopian ideal, but as a gospel of hope.

Keywords: Intercultural Church; intentional; utopian; Christian hope; gospel; witness

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In today's migration context, the church is faced with the challenge of what it means to be a church in light of the ever-growing diversity of the population of a society. Christians may not only help migrants and refugees but also welcome them into their church space. But the question remains: what kind of relationship will the people who have been in the church have with the newcomers, that is, people from different cultural backgrounds? Will the migrants or refugees be expected to give up their culture, language, habits and customs and become part of the church in a way that assimilates into the mainstream culture? Questions can also be posed towards immigrant Christians. What kind of faith community will they form in the society to which they have migrated? What kind of relationship will they have with the churches that already exist there, or with the local Christians who have different cultural backgrounds? Will they isolate themselves from them and live in segregated communities?

An intercultural church is presented as an alternative today. As noted by Guzman and Brazal, "an intercultural church takes the multicultural situation a step further by promoting opportunities for meaningful interaction between various cultural groups toward mutual enrichment and positive

change in the perspective of the other.”¹ However, forming a community and pursuing interactions with people from a different cultural background than mine or with people who are not fully known to me involves risk. In an age of “terror,” where the stranger on one’s threshold may be either the refugee seeking sanctuary or the suicide-bomber bringing unwanted gifts of death,² a church that pursues active interaction beyond coexistence among strangers might be perceived, in someone’s eyes, as a community of idealists pursuing unrealistic delusions, one of the many “utopian” attempts that have appeared in history. Then, what is the motivation and basis for pursuing an intercultural church? Is it a utopian ideal? Or is it an expression of Christian hope? If it is the latter, what is the basis for viewing it that way? To answer these questions, it would be good to start by first examining what an intercultural church is.

Intercultural Church

‘Inter-cultural’ is different from ‘multi-cultural,’ ‘cross-cultural,’ and ‘trans-cultural.’³ The term ‘intercultural’ describes the interactions between cultures, aiming to go beyond cultural pluralism. In that sense, an intercultural community is different from a ‘multicultural’ community. Intercultural includes movement across cultural boundaries, but it focuses more on what happens in-between space rather than on crossing itself. In that sense, an intercultural movement is different from ‘cross-cultural’ movement. Intercultural aims for something that transcends cultural differences, but it focuses first on the reality of differences. In that sense, interculturality is different from ‘transculturality.’

Intercultural relationship assumes porous borders between cultures and pursues mutual interactions in the space of in-between.⁴ Beyond mere “peaceful” coexistence between various cultures, it seeks “a mutually enriching and challenging interactions, implying a two-way or multi-directional exchange

1 Agnes M. Brazal and Emmanuel S. de Guzman, *Intercultural Church: Bridge of Solidarity in the Migration context* (San Jose, CA: Borderless Press, 2015), 126.

2 Andrew Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 82.

3 See, Volker Küster, “The Project of an Intercultural Theology,” *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 93/3 (2005), 417.

4 Anthony Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 22.

among different cultural orientations.”⁵ In this intercultural framework, the lines between cultures remain, but they are porous. Each person or culture is open to be affected by the presence of cultural others. Also, in this intercultural relationship, individuals who remain “at home” in a familiar cultural framework are not assumed. Everyone is indeed “out of place.” That is, all are challenged to live outside each comfort zone, and thus no one culture will be allowed to dominate the relationship.⁶

This mutually enriching and challenging two-way exchange cannot be accomplished by coercion. It cannot be imposed by creating an artificial unity which suffocates all differences. It can only be fulfilled by voluntary dedications of every members. Therefore, Anthony Gittins argues that this intercultural project is a communal task based on a common conviction and purpose.⁷ That is, an intercultural community shares “intentional” commitment to the common life. Members of different cultural backgrounds in this intercultural community are challenged to create a new culture in which all can live fruitfully.

An ‘intercultural church’ can be said to be a concept of the church that has emerged in an attempt to reflect this intercultural relationship. Safwat Marzouk defines the intercultural church as “a church that fosters a just diversity, integrates different cultural articulations of faith and worship, and embodies in the world an alternative to the politics of assimilation and segregation.”⁸ For Marzouk, intercultural church is “a covenantal community that cultivate a *decentralizing unity* and fosters a *just diversity*.”⁹ What he means by ‘decentralizing unity’ is that church members realize there are common beliefs and practices that unify them beyond their specific cultures; and by ‘just diversity’ he denotes the equal representation of the different cultural and theological heritages that are present in a given congregation.

It is clear that this kind of intercultural living is not possible without common commitments from members of the community. In that sense, it is not unreasonable for Gittins to argue that this intercultural project must be not only a communal task with intentionality, but also “a faith-based Christian

5 Roger P. Schroeder, “Engaging our Diversity through Interculturally,” *New Theology Review* 30/2 (2018), 65.

6 Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, 22–23.

7 Ibid., 22.

8 Safwat Marzouk, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 3.

9 Marzouk, *Intercultural Church*, 16.

practice" toward a new reality grounded in a biblical vision.¹⁰ If the intercultural church is thus an intentional faith-based communal project that pursues such a decentralized unity and a just diversity through mutually challenging and enriching interactions among members of different cultural orientations, it can be questioned whether it is or not a "utopian" endeavor to dream of an ideal community in this world. But in this case, what does "utopian" mean? What does this term mean in relation to Christian practice, including the pursue of intercultural church?

Ambiguity of the Term 'Utopian'

The word *utopia* or *outopia* simply means *no* or *not place*. Thomas More, inventor of the word, punned on *eutopia* or *good place*, and the term *dystopia* or *bad place*, which has the opposite meaning, was added later. Joyce Hertzler understands the essence of utopia as "the delineation of the means whereby the writer's vision of social perfection is to be realized."¹¹ Darko Suvin defines *utopia* as "the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community."¹² While many past explanations of utopia include expressions such as 'perfect' or 'perfection' like this, Lyman Tower Sargent objects to this. Understanding *utopianism* simply as "social dreaming," he defines *utopia* as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space."¹³ Depending on whether the non-existent society that the author *intended* a contemporaneous reader to view is considerably *better* or *worse* than the society in which the reader lived, the utopia takes the form of *eutopia* (positive utopia) or *dystopia* (negative utopia).

When utopianism is understood as *social dreaming* following Sargent's definition, Christianity simultaneously accepts and rejects utopianism. For the Christian, utopia is a basic theological problem. Eden was eutopia, a typical earthly paradise, but with the Fall and the expulsion from Eden, the restoration of Eden is now looked forward to. In that sense, Christian eschatology

10 Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, 4.

11 Joyce O. Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (NY: Macmillan, 1923), 268.

12 Darko Suvin, "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6 (Fall 1973), 132.

13 Lyman T. Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5/1 (1994), 9.

appears to be a type of utopianism. But on the other hand, both Eden's past and Eden's future are beyond human control. As a result of the Fall, the human race is incapable of serious improvement in this life. From this perception, for many Christians, utopianism is considered heretical.¹⁴ Part of the basis for labelling utopianism heretical is the insistence that utopians expect perfection – something godlike. Therefore, by many Christian theologians utopias have been dismissed as weak, cheap, desperate, diseased, and delusional pretenders to hope.¹⁵

In the twentieth century utopian social theory became more systematic and the differences between proponents and opponents of utopianism became at times central to political debates. Karl Mannheim used the concept of utopia together with that of ideology.¹⁶ Mannheim regarded both ideology and utopia as incongruous with reality. However, whereas ideologies are oriented to the past and serve to legitimate the status quo, utopias are oriented to the future, and are those ideas which transform reality in their own image.¹⁷ His stance on ideology is wholly negative, but his position about utopia is ambivalent: Utopia is essential for social change; still, utopia is not oriented to reality but to a vision of a better life.¹⁸

This century's tendency to seek social change through utopian thinking has been to equate utopia with force, violence, and totalitarianism.¹⁹ A utopia is a blueprint of what the author believes to be a perfect society. But there is no such thing as a perfect society, and even if there were, it could not be constructed since it would require perfect people, and we know there are no perfect people. When a convinced utopian tries to build a eutopia, conflict arises because, failing to achieve eutopia, he or she will use force to achieve it. Therefore, Karl R. Popper criticizes that the utopian enterprise of creating an ideal state cannot go forward without a strong, centralized government of the few, which will likely become a dictatorship.²⁰

14 Sargent, "Three Faces," 21–22.

15 Darren Webb, "Christian Hope and Politics of Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 19/1 (2008), 121.

16 See, Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. Trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge, 1991).

17 Ruth Levitas, "Educated Utopia: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 1/2 (1990), 18.

18 Sargent, "Three Faces," 23–24.

19 Ibid., 24.

20 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 1: 159.

Probably no one today would deny the danger that utopianism could lead to totalitarianism. However, it would be difficult for everyone to agree with the argument that the conclusion of this is the abolition of utopianism. From the position that the image of the future affects the actual future, Frederik L. Polak argues that utopian thinking encourages efforts toward the development of human dignity as well as of the civilization.²¹ This is a neat contrast to the Popperian argument that utopia limits human dignity.

For Ernst Bloch, utopia is a standard by which to judge existing practice. The pursuit of utopia is not a loss of freedom but an expression of freedom. For him, freedom means that we are able to perceive alternatives and act to realize preferences.²² The world is in a constant state of process, of becoming. The future is 'not yet' and is a realm of possibility. Human activity plays a central role here in choosing which possible future may become actual.²³ Utopia embodies both the act of wishing and what is wished for.²⁴ It caters to our ability to dream, to recognize that things are not quite what they should be, and to assert that improvement is possible. In that sense, far from being the road to totalitarianism, it is the road away from totalitarianism.²⁵

For Bloch, utopia is an expression of hope as well as of freedom. But that hope is to be understood "not [...] only as emotion [...] more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind."²⁶ Yet because the function of utopia is not just express desire, but to reach forward and be the catalyst of a better future, he is also critical of the content of these wishes. He makes distinction between abstract utopia (wishful thinking which is compensatory) and concrete utopia (will-full thinking which is anticipatory). According to Bloch, while abstract utopia may express desire, only concrete utopia carries hope. For Mannheim, those forms of wishful thinking which do not serve to effect the future are not utopian at all. For Bloch, however, they are utopian, but largely comprise abstract utopia. Concrete utopia contains abstract elements. The task is to recover the core of concrete utopia from the dross

21 Frederik L. Polak, *The Image of the Future: Enlightening the Past, Orientating the Present, Forecasting the Future* (NY: Oceana, 1961), 1: 53, 445.

22 Sargent, "Three Faces," 26.

23 Levitas, "Educated Utopia," 14.

24 Ibid.

25 Sargent, "Three Faces," 26.

26 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1: 12.

of the abstract elements in which it is embedded. Mannheim's ideology is anti-utopian in function; Bloch's abstract utopia is not.²⁷

As such, in the history of utopian social theory there are two incompatible arguments about utopia. In one, utopia is seen as leading inevitably to force, violence, and totalitarianism. In the other, utopia is seen as an essential ingredient of freedom, civilization, and even of being human. Instead of saying that it is possible to reconcile these extremes, Sargent suggests to admit that "there is a basic ambiguity in utopianism that permits the possibility of both positions containing significant truth."²⁸ Utopia can serve as a mirror to contemporary society, showing flaws in the present by picturing a more desirable alternative. He recognizes this as the most important function of utopia.

In a similar vein, Paul Ricoeur proposes to move beyond the thematic contents of utopia to its functional structure.²⁹ According to him, positive change in a specific context can be described with the help of the concept 'utopia' – which literally refers to 'no place'. Focusing on the benefit of this extraterritoriality, he argues that from this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. It is 'here' where the 'imaginary power of utopia' can open up new vistas for thinking new and differently about society, power, and religion – basically in the sense of a 'fantasy of the alternative.'³⁰ In Ricoeur's view, this development of new perspectives for alternative way of living defines Utopia's most basic function.

In this sense, Richard Saage makes a distinction (in German) between *utopia* ('*Utopie*') and the *utopian* ('*das Utopische*').³¹ The first one refers to plans and/or ideas to bring about an emancipation from the misery of reality. The second one refers to how an 'Utopist' sees the future realised in the present. This however demands utopia criticism. Utopia criticism is not anti-utopian – rather it is dystopian, which paradoxically envisions the realisation of an utopian dimension, while exposing false utopias; that is,

27 Levitas, "Educated Utopia," 18.

28 Sargent, "Three Faces," 26.

29 See, Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on ideology and utopia* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986).

30 Ricoeur, *Lectures*, 16.

31 See, Richard Saage, *Utopieforschung: Eine Bilanz* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1977). Recited from Tanya van Wyk, "Church as heterotopia," *HTS Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014), 4.

being critical towards utopias.³² This utopia criticism is also present in the 'heterotopian' thinking, endorsed by Michel Foucault.³³ *Heterotopias* are not fantasy islands, but spaces, literally 'other places' that exist. Heterotopian space is not devoid of utopian ideal. It is not anti-utopian. It is a space of contrast; a space wherein utopia becomes visible and tangible, real and traceable.

As such, there is an ambiguity in utopianism. And there are various perspectives on the word 'utopia.' The term "utopian" is thus a complicated term that requires careful use. As we will see in the next chapter, even in theological statements about Christian hope, the terms 'utopia' or 'utopian' are not used with the same meaning and nuance.

Christian Hope and Utopian Ideal

What is the relation between utopia and hope? Some may think the two have an intrinsic and positive relationship with each other: Hope drives the utopian impulse, and utopianism inspires hope. However, the matter is not so simple. When Ruth Levitas defines utopia as "the expression of desire for a better way of being,"³⁴ she is implying that there is a utopia that is not motivated by hope. Distinguishing between 'utopia as system', which is will-full act of political transformation, and 'utopia as process', which is centered more around the wish-full act of imagining, she argues that only the former does embody and carry hope.³⁵ However, to complicate matters further, the procedural utopia, which Levitas regards as a *retreat* from transformative hope, is precisely the mode of utopian expression championed by Tom Moylan as the *locus* of radical hope.³⁶

Just as utopia is a highly contested concept as such, so is hope a highly contested category of experience. To focus on Christian hope, Thomas Aquinas says that there is 'hope as the theological virtues' that is distinct from 'hope as passions common to man and other animals'. According to him,

32 Tanya van Wyk, "Church as heterotopia," 4.

33 See, Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture* (1984), 46–49.

34 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Hemel Hempstead: Philip Allen, 1990), 8.

35 Ruth Levitas and Sargisson Lucy, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and Dystopian Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.

36 Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 157.

this hope as a theological virtue is infused in us by God so that our will may be directed toward a supernatural happiness that lies beyond our capacity to understand.³⁷ Afterwards, as mentioned earlier, by many Christian theologians utopia has tended to be perceived negatively, but even within Christian theologies, there are various perspectives on the relationship between hope and utopia. In an article titled “Christian Hope and the Politics of Utopia,” Darren Webb presents three theological perspectives on Christian hope in relation to utopia: *Anti-utopian* hope (Gabriel Marcel), *critical utopian* hope (Jürgen Moltmann), and *transformative utopian* hope (Gustavo Gutiérrez).³⁸ We cannot say that his taxonomy contains all theological perspectives on this subject, but it does provide three representative positions that can be used to analyze the theological implications of a particular Christian practice.

Gabriel Marcel, a French Christian existentialist philosopher, speaks of hope as a mystery and a virtue offered to us by God.³⁹ He calls this “absolute hope” which takes the form of “I hope in thee for us” to distinguish it from the “limited hope” which takes the form of “I hope that.” The absolute hope is the driving force that enables humans on a journey toward themselves to reach their destination by overcoming life’s trials and the temptation to despair. For him, this absolute hope is of a different order from desire and its fulfilment lies beyond the realms of human imagination and representation. In that sense, for him, Christian hope is antithetical to utopia. Utopia, as both system and process, is understood to be incompatible with Christian hope due to its imaginative-desiderative nature. In Marcel’s view, the central function of hope is to instill patience.⁴⁰ Hope represents a “positive non-acceptance” not only of falling into despair in the face of life’s tragic dimension but also of offering a concrete solution to them. To hope is to appeal to the existence of a creative divine power operating in the world, and to make oneself available to this power in the spirit of trusting love. As such, for Marcel, the term “utopian” describes the tendency to respond to life’s difficulties encountered on the life journey through artificial solutions

37 Thomas Aquinas, *The “Suma Theologia”* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927), II: q.62 a.3.

38 Darren Webb, “Christian Hope and Politics of Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 19/1 (2008).

39 See, Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (NY: Harper & Low, 1962).

40 Gabriel Marcel, “Desire and Hope,” Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O’Connor (eds.), *Readings in Existential Phenomenology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 278.

derived from one's own desires rather than through the hope and power offered by God.

For German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann too, the objective of Christian hope is the radically new and unpredictable future promised by God which, by virtue of its astonishing newness, defies all attempts to depict it. However, unlike Marcel, Moltmann does not suggest that one can say nothing about the coming future. A glimmer of the glory can be discerned in the resurrection of Christ. "As the anticipation of the future of God, Christ becomes the ground of hope."⁴¹ Moltmann argues, echoing Bloch, that the coming future can be expressed as "the negation of the negative, the negation of hunger, oppression, and humiliation."⁴² "Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it [...] for the goal of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."⁴³

While making it clear that hope inspired by the promise of a coming future demands a passionate critical engagement with the unfulfilled present as such, Moltmann also emphasizes that such hope must avoid becoming fixed on dogmatic prescriptions of the positive awaiting humanity. Referring to the Promethean projects of nineteenth-century utopians, he argues, echoing Popper, that totalitarianism is the inevitable outcome of will-full utopian praxis, through which finite erring beings strive to control and complete an uncontrollable and uncompletable history.⁴⁴ In a crucial passage, he speaks of Christian hope as countering and subsuming such utopian hopes:

It [Christian hope] will destroy the presumption in these hopes of better human freedom, of successful life, of justice and dignity for our fellow men, of control of the possibilities of nature, because it does not find in these movements the salvation it waits, because it refuses to let the entertaining and realizing of utopian ideas of this kind reconcile it with existence. It will outstrip these future visions of a better, more humane, more peaceable world – because of its own 'better promises' (Heb. 8.6), because it knows that nothing can be 'very good' until 'all things are become new'.⁴⁵

41 Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and History," *Theology Today* 25/3 (1968), 381.

42 Jürgen Moltmann, "Religion, Revolution and the Future," Walter H. Capps (ed.), *The Future of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 114.

43 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1967), 21.

44 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1996), 189.

45 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 34.

Moltmann's criticism of utopia is directed toward its fixed goal, its impulse to seek to give direction to the history of mankind, and its tendency to lose its critical character to the status quo and eventually become part of it. For him, presumption is "a sign against hope." Christian hope, in contrast, will provide "inexhaustible resources" for the creative imagination of love in the light of the promised future. In this perspective, Christian hope is *critical* of utopia. The term "utopian" here describes the tendency to pursue a (totalitarian) fixed goal based on a human assumption about a better society or humanity in the ambition to control and complete the history that is ultimately opened to a new future in God.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Latin American liberation theologian, reveals a different perspective on Christian hope in relation to utopia. In his critique aimed at Moltmann, Gutiérrez argues that true, emancipatory, hope is not grounded in a Promise from the future, but arises instead through the praxis of the poor confronting and transforming their material conditions of existence.⁴⁶ He makes a key distinction between the "coming" of the kingdom understood as a divine gift, and the "growth" of the kingdom understood as a human project to be realized in history. And he argues that while humanity must never confuse any one particular societal order with the kingdom itself, the growth of the kingdom *requires* the creation of one particular social order, that is, utopia. Christian hope thus becomes a utopian endeavor by proxy:

Christian hope keeps us from any confusion of the kingdom with any one historical stage, from any idolatry toward unavoidably ambiguous human achievement, from any absolutizing of revolution. In this way, hope makes us radically free to commit ourselves to social praxis, motivated by a liberating utopia and with the means which the scientific analysis of reality provides for us. And our hope not only frees us for this commitment, it simultaneously demands and judges it.⁴⁷

The idea that Christian hope rejects the identification of the coming kingdom with one historical stage does not seem to differ from Moltmann's position. The difference lies in the perception of the term 'utopia'. In this quotation, Gutiérrez says that "hope makes us radically free to commit ourselves to social praxis," and the social praxis is "motivated by a liberating utopia." Here Christian hope and utopia are portrayed in a mutually supportive

46 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (1971) (London: SCM, 2002), 201–3.

47 Gutiérrez, *The Theology of Liberation*, 238.

relationship. Gutiérrez rescues the term “utopia” from its negative connotation and identifies its positive and necessary function as “mediation of the creative imagination.”⁴⁸ Just as the spiritual attitude of faith has the potential to inspire both political action and utopian anticipation to resist their tendencies to be frozen in historically bound ideologies, so too, in Gutiérrez’s view, utopian discourse has the potential to keep faith and politics from becoming limited to present power structures, whether religious or secular.⁴⁹ This may be why he put the modifier “liberating” before the word ‘utopia’ in the above quote.

Defining utopia as “a historical plan for a qualitatively different society,”⁵⁰ Gutiérrez argues, in terms borrowed from Paulo Freire, that utopia involves both denunciation (that is, the critical repudiation of the present) and annunciation (that is, the positive anticipation of the not-yet). And Christian hope inspires community members to commit to the social praxis motivated by the utopian vision. In this perspective, Christian hope and utopia are complementary. The term ‘utopian’ here describes the tendency to motivate members of a community to be free to commit to a social praxis for the transformation towards a qualitatively different society through the mediation of liberating imagination keeping their faith and lives from present power structures.

Intercultural Church: A Utopian Ideal or a Gospel of Hope?

As we have seen so far, within the field of Christian theology, the term ‘utopian’ is used with at least three connotations: First, from the perspective of Christian hope which is *antithetical* to utopia, the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to respond to life’s difficulties encountered on the life journey through artificial solutions derived from one’s own desires rather than through the hope and power offered by God. Second, from the perspective of Christian hope which is *critical* to utopia, the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to pursue a totalitarian fixed goal based on a human assumption about a better society or humanity in the ambition to control and complete the history that is ultimately opened to a new future in God. And third,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁹ Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 51.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *The Theology of Liberation*, 217.

from the perspective of Christian hope in a *complementary* relationship with utopia, the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to motivate members of a community to be free to commit to a social praxis for the transformation toward a qualitatively different society through the mediation of liberating imagination keeping their faith and lives from present power structures. Then, is an intercultural church “utopian” in these senses?

Can we say that an intercultural church is “utopian” in the first sense?

While an intercultural church may be a solution to the problems we encounter in our life journey, it is not an attempt to overcome them through solutions derived from our desires. In today’s pluralist societies, we are well aware that when people from different cultural backgrounds coexist in one region or space, it may cause tension, misunderstanding, confrontation, conflict and wounds. In this situation, the choice that is more faithful to our desires would be to block or minimize the possibility of that happenings; that is, an approach to “make them like us” (assimilation) or an approach to “separate us from them” (segregation). In contrast, an intercultural church goes beyond just “peaceful” coexistence between people of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and traditional differences and seeks mutually enriching and challenging interactions among them. Far from being an attempt to overcome life’s difficulties through solutions derived from individual desires, it even has the character of going against our desires.

Then, despite the many difficulties and problems expected when pursuing such a relationship, why do some Christians and churches attempt to form such an intercultural community? It is because they believe that in today’s multicultural situation it is a desirable way the church exists in line with the Bible and the Gospel. Our Lord Jesus Christ calls all people without discrimination to enter the kingdom of God. This inclusiveness of the Gospel implies that the church is a community that cannot help but include diversity and heterogeneity within it. The early church which was formed after Pentecost initially maintained a Jewish character, but gradually became multiracial and multicultural as the Gospel was spread across racial and cultural boundaries following the work of the Holy Spirit. This situation also caused tensions and conflicts between Jewish and Gentile Christians. However, as Rene C. Padilla says, early church leaders tried to solve the problems by encouraging them to achieve “unity in diversity” in the love of Christ, while rejecting both

“imperialistic uniformity” (assimilationist racism) and “segregated uniformity” (homogenizing grouping).⁵¹

This approach and effort, as described in Ephesian 2, reflects the theological awareness of early Christians that Christ is the peace breaking down the barriers of enmity between Jews and Gentiles, that is, between people of different races and cultures, and that the church is a community where people of diversity and heterogeneity are built together as a dwelling place for God in Christ. The story of Peter and Cornelius, recorded in Acts 10, impressively shows how intercultural encounters, conversions and fellowships between people of different races, cultures, and traditions are led by the Spirit of God. And the eschatological vision of the kingdom of God described in Revelation 7; that is, the heavenly worshiping community, which comes from all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages and offers praises of glory and honor to God and the Lamb, has been a challenge and hope for Christians of all ages who seek reconciliation and unity in the realities of conflict and division on earth.⁵²

As such, the formation of intercultural churches, not only in the early history of Christianity but also in today’s multicultural contexts, is not the result of seeking solutions based on individual desires and preferences in the direction of minimizing the occurrence of problems; rather, it comes from the deep theological understanding of the Gospel and the church, from the faithful missional life following the Spirit of God, and from the eschatological hope for the Biblical vision of the kingdom of God. In that sense, a church that aims for an intercultural community in today’s multicultural situation cannot be said to be “utopian” in the first sense. Rather, it can be said to be a community pursued with the hope for an ultimate solution by God in the journey of Christian missional life motivated by the Bible, the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit.

Can we then say that an intercultural church is “utopian” in the second sense?

While it is true that an intercultural church springs from a vision of a better social life, it is neither based on a dogmatic assumption of the positive awaiting humanity nor directed by a human ambition to control and complete

51 Rene C. Padilla, “Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” in Gallagher and Hertig (eds.), *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 83.

52 Marzouk, *Intercultural Church*.

history. Rather, in a situation where various cultural orientations coexist, the intercultural church is wary of any one of them being absolutized or totalitarian in the name of the majority. Intercultural encounters and fellowships require emptying oneself to make space for the other and taking a step towards the other. The place where intercultural encounters take place and where intercultural communities are formed is thus not the center of any one country or one culture. It is the periphery of all involved, the point where they meet. The in-between space is recognized by the intercultural church as a hot-spot where differences are negotiated and creativity flourishes.⁵³ As the expression “Mission from the margin” suggests, this “in-between space” is also recognized as the starting point of God’s mission in today’s ecumenical mission theology.⁵⁴

Seen from this point of view, an intercultural church where Christians from different cultural backgrounds form one community based on the common confession that Jesus Christ is the Lord and pursue together “decentralized unity” and “just diversity” is not “utopian” in the second sense. Rather, the church so formed is critical and subversive of all such “utopian” attempts in the world that pursue totalitarian fixed goals based on false assumptions about human freedom and world peace. Of course, the church is not perfect, and the people who make it up are weak. Moreover, when various people with many cultural differences are in one community in active interaction, the potential for problems and conflicts that can arise will be even greater. But as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, the mission of the Christian community is not to preach itself. It is to preach the lordship of Christ Jesus through our servanthood to others. In other words, the church does not witness to the gospel by revealing its splendid, neat, and perfect appearance, but by demonstrating the power of God at work in the weak and lacking people who make up the church. Apostle Paul expressed this hope of the Christian community as follows: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Cor. 4:7)

As such, an intercultural church is an attempt to witness to the gospel in the form of a treasure in an earthen vessel. The journey to an intercultural

53 See, Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, NY: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

54 Jooseop Keum (ed.), *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 15.

church is not a matter of following a vague “utopian” ideal, but a practice of Christian hope based on the gospel of Christ’s resurrection. The vision of the intercultural church is open to a new reality that will be achieved only by God’s intervention and power. In this hope, the intercultural church reveals itself as a channel of the gospel that humbly witnesses to the invisible treasure contained in an visible earthen vessel.

Then, can we say that the intercultural church is “utopian” in the third sense with positive meaning?

An intercultural church can actually give fresh challenge and stimulus to the present church and society. It can also actually present and motivate social praxis to which its members can freely commit themselves in hope. In that sense, the intercultural church has to some extent a “utopian” character in such a positive sense. However, it seems difficult to say that the utopia defined by Gutiérrez is an accurate description of what the intercultural church aims for. His definition of utopia as “a historical plan for a qualitatively different society” seems to imply the possibility and danger that a certain fixed ideal and goal will be forced upon community members in the concrete implementing process to realize it. It is beneficial and necessary to have a communal vision and goal that can provide specific direction, imagination and passion so that members can freely commit themselves to it. However, when it is a closed goal or takes the character of one-sided coercion, the “utopian” practice in the positive meaning degenerates into another totalitarian ideology.

Along with the *missio Dei*, the Christian doctrine of the *Trinity* is referred to as one of the theological grounds for Christian intercultural practice.⁵⁵ In a sense, the vision of intercultural church can be understood as a journey to a qualitatively different community based on the Trinitarian relationship that names the reality which human communities ought to image. However, the fact that human beings are manifestly not divine and are inescapably marred by sin and saddled with transitoriness must also be taken into consideration. Therefore, rather than concentrating on the structure of social arrangements, Miroslav Volf suggests focusing on the character of social agents and their relations that reflect the social vision of the *Trinity*.

55 Schroeder, “Engaging our Diversity through Interculturally,” 66.

The boundaries of the self are porous and shifting. The self is itself only by being in a state of flux stemming from ‘incursions’ of the other into the self and of the self into the other. The self is shaped by making space for the other and by giving space to the other, by being enriched when it inhabits the other and by sharing of its plentitude when it is inhabited by the other, by re-examining itself when the other closes his or her doors and challenging the other by knocking at the doors.⁵⁶

This *perichoretic* relationship between the self and the other that Volf describes here shows the character of the community members and their relations that an intercultural church aims for. An intercultural church does not seek direct social transformation through the implementation of any specific social program. It rather aims for faithful witness to the transformative gospel through the distinctive social life of the community that embodies the vision of the *Trinity* and the *Missio Dei*. Such a church has the character of ‘heterotopia’ as ‘other places’ that exists. And seen from the missiological perspective that “evangelism is a matter of being present in the world in a distinctive way”,⁵⁷ such an intercultural church that is motivated by the Christian eschatological hope and embodies a distinctive social relationship has the potential to become a living gospel towards the world. In that sense, the intercultural church should be understood not as a utopian ideal that is merely cooperative with Christian hope, but as a potential gospel that originates directly from that hope.

Conclusion

While the fact that an intercultural church is an “intentional” faith-based communal project may lead to the question of whether it is or not a utopian endeavor to dream of an ideal community in this world, due to the ambiguity of the term “utopian,” its application requires great care. When the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to respond to life’s difficulties encountered on the life journey through artificial solutions derived from one’s own desires rather than through the hope and power offered by God, an intercultural church

56 Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity is Our Social Programme’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” in Alan J. Torrance and Michael Banner (eds.), *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 112.

57 Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2007), 21.

is not “utopian” in that it is not an attempt to overcome them through solutions derived from our desires but a communal vision pursued with the hope for an ultimate solution by God in the journey of Christian missional life motivated by the Bible, the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit. When the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to pursue a totalitarian fixed goal based on a human assumption about a better society or humanity in the ambition to control and complete the history that is ultimately opened to a new future in God, an intercultural church is not “utopian” in that it is wary of any one of the various cultural orientations within it being absolutized or totalitarian in the name of the majority, and also in that it does not seek to witness to the gospel by revealing its splendid and perfect appearance, but by demonstrating the power of God at work in the weak and lacking people who make it up. And when the term ‘utopian’ means the tendency to motivate members of a community to be free to commit to a social praxis for the transformation toward a qualitatively different society through the mediation of liberating imagination keeping their faith and lives from present power structures, an intercultural church has to some extent a “utopian” character in that it is a kind of communal vision that provides specific direction, imagination and passion so that its members can freely commit themselves to a social praxis. However, it is distinct from other utopian ideal in that it aims for faithful witness to the transformative gospel through the distinctive social life of the community that embodies the vision of the *Trinity* and the *Mis-sio Dei*, focusing more on the character of the community members and their relations than the structure of social arrangements. In that sense, the intercultural church should be understood not as a utopian ideal, but as a gospel of hope.

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