

Response to “In Hope of a Graceful Event”*

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As Prof. Davis’s article eloquently articulates, we live in a fast-changing world. It causes me amusement to realize how many oscillations in ways of life and thinking I have already experienced as a Filipino in my mid-thirties. So much has changed, including the philosophy of education, economic and socio-political opportunities, information sources, entertainment options, communication tools, relationship perspectives, and even home atmosphere. The list can go on and new changes are guaranteed to appear. As Peter Berger already predicted, frighteningly, we are living precariously because of changes, present and future.¹

Whether we dare to admit or not, we fulfill our mission as ministers-theologians in such a time as this. The ensuing admonition, therefore, is for us to be engaged with the trends. In a theological consultation, I attended with fellow Asians this year, the different presenters echoed the same voice: we have to be up-to-date in our knowledge of the current trends in order to be more integral in our theologizing. Although the proposal is noble in intention, I wondered—and still wonder—if the envisioned future of theological integration is mere hallucination. The simple challenge of keeping pace with new developments seems difficult to accomplish. Indeed, how can one man keep pace with all the new discoveries of the natural sciences, advances in technology and robotics, new theories of physics, pressing ethical issues in bioethics, emerging social and political conundrums, and increasing multifarious and often competing ideological voices? Depressingly, knowledge of these things only belongs to the preparation stage, because the real task is the actual integration of these inputs to the process and product of theologizing.

In the light of the relationship between biblical truths and changing trends, we need to avoid two equally appealing options. On the one hand, the

* This paper is a response to Dr. Phillip Davis’s installation address, “In Hope of a Graceful Event,” pages 19–26, above.

¹ Berger, *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1976).

Scylla of theological fundamentalism need to be circumvented. Although it is convenient to fall back to “traditional” modes of theological expressions and jargons, these symbols may not make sense in the light of contemporary vocabulary. People are not convinced by an argument just because someone said this and that in the past. On the other hand, the Charybdis of unbridled pluralism is equally disastrous to the Christian faith. In agreement with the author, the eclipse of tradition is truly lamentable. The new contemporary expressions of faith and spirituality may be so radically new that they appear alien to a majority of older believers. Our historical disconnectedness, as the author points out, uproots us from our previous communities and belongingness. This makes us like orphans in a chaotic world.

Indubitably, and because of the postmodern ethos, recent trends in theological reflection lean more towards pluralism. Like Dr. Phillip Davis, majority of theologians have bought the idea that dialogical-integral theology is the way forward. In an effort to have a distinct voice in the theological area, theologians pick their own dialogue partners. Some choose the natural sciences, some pick the humanities (including philosophy), and majority select culture. They then produce theological books and treatises highlighting their *new* theological proposals using the contributions of their dialogue partners. While there is great merit in this maneuver, we should question the entire dialogical procedure. The issue revolves around the question of who or what is in control. In short, who has the louder voice in the dialogue? Berger is right to assert that any dialogue involves a bargaining process where a sort of “mutual cognitive contamination” takes place.² The bargaining process contains a give-and-take relationship: one has to give up some in order to receive some. Berger’s warning is succinct: “The theologian who trades ideas with the modern world... is likely to come out with a poor bargain, that is, he will probably have to give far more than he will get.”³ While this may not be true in all cases of dialogical-integral theologies, the danger of Bible-pruning lurks. It is not hard for a theologian to let go of his previous doctrinal commitments in order to accommodate insights from science, philosophy, or culture. The wisdom of Berger needs to be heard: “The theologian who sups with *it* will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter—until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil, one may guess, will by

² Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 26–27.

³ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 27.

then have gone away to more interesting company."⁴

In addition to diluted theological content, another possible consequence of dialogical theology is a myriad of parochial theologies that neither have relations with each other nor agree with one another. With many theologies, one might wonder if we also have turned Christianity to several and conflicting Christianities.⁵ Because theologians are engaged in dialogue with many voices, their conclusions vary from one another. The irony is that in seeking to be relevant to a particular group, one might find one's proposals completely irrelevant to all other groups. A theologian dialoguing with and employing Filipino culture in his theological cogitation has little (or nothing) to say to a Korean. Moreover, because the *Zeitgeist* changes along with new discoveries in every field of study, seemingly important theological developments today will lose their significance quickly. Transient theologies do not possess lasting relevance. Carefully crafted marketable theologies today are inescapably obsolete tomorrow.

I teach my students that the more original one's doctrine is, the more wrong it probably is. Theology is not undisciplined creativity. It is a scientific process of imagination. One may dialogue with other fields of study but not at the expense of the gospel. Thus, using the importance of events, the theologian must remember that the Christ-event is the controlling center of our reflections. Of course, this goes against post-modernism, which is incredulous to metanarratives. The paradox is that although postmodernity (and modern historicism) is skeptical about a single grand narrative, it seems to admit that the single series of events called the Holocaust brought about such a massive change in the world's way of thinking about justice, social solidarity and consciousness, power, and even religion.⁶ This points to the fact that there are narratives or events in history that can have a "butterfly effect." Events are not as isolated as they appear. While it is true that there are events that are of lesser

⁴ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 28.

⁵ See, for instance, Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁶ This is actually one of the evidences that postmodernity actually is the hyper-extension of modern ideals. With the exemption of Hegel, proponents of historicism that goes back in the early 1800s argued for the abandonment of a universal history in favor of local histories. For modern historicists, local histories (or events) possess their own self-authenticating integrity and unrepeatable particularity. Events in nineteenth-century colonized Philippines had little or no bearing to the intellectual affairs of Europe.

significance, there are events that demand great attention and response. The world has chosen to respond to the Holocaust-event. In fact, to be neutral in relation to the Holocaust-event is considered a bad response. Being detached observers cannot be an option.

As a Christian theologian, the Christ-event is the important event that demands a response. It is the single event around which much of the past, present and future of the world hang. It is the event that permeates many other local events. It is the event that creates more events, transcending geographical situatedness, gender issues, socio-economic differences, and political opinions. This event, however, is still on-going. The role of the theologian is to engage this event in its non-completion while waiting for its climax when Jesus Christ returns. In the meantime, we Christians appreciate the already of the event, contemplate the present of the event, and wait in eager anticipation for the future consummation of the event. We are all “in hope of a graceful event,” but this event is much grander than we think it would be, because it involves the persons of the Triune God.