

Theory and Practice: The Role of Theology in Addressing Societal Needs

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Abstract

Human society has swiftly transformed from the Industrial Revolution 1.0 to the Industrial Revolution 5.0. In this environment, the role of Christian theology appears to be removed from realities in society. It has led to liberal theologies seeking to address prevalent societal needs. This article aims to examine the role of Christian theology in addressing prevalent needs in society. How can theology help to solve the world's problems amid pressing societal needs? What should be the theological attitude toward human suffering? The results of this library research highlight three concepts of points: God as the primary actor in his work, humans as a complement to God's work, and theology as a discipline. The writer critiques scholarly views on the role of theology in societal transformation. It demonstrates that the emergence of several liberal theologies in different contexts happened because Christian theology failed to address felt needs among the people.

Keywords: Role of Theology, Societal Transformation, Christian Theology, Liberal Theology

Introduction

The function and relevance of theology is determined by looking at its role to the human situation, its role in alleviating suffering, and whether it is just limited to the performance of

ritual worship.¹ Since the Industrial Revolution 1.0 in England, human life has been transformed in many ways. James Watt devised the Steam Engine and Mass Production, then continued to develop the steam engine into long-distance trains, ships, and production equipment, eventually replacing human power.² The Industrial Revolution's Changes in Automation, Data Exchange, and Physical Cyber started in Germany in 2011 and have revolutionized life and work.³ In addition, the recent past has been the rise in the Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data, 3D printing, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), autonomous vehicles, the internet, genetic engineering, robotics, and smart devices. In a fast-paced world, Civilization Revolution Changes continue to occur. On January 21, 2019, the Prime Minister's Office of Japan introduced version 5.0. Artificial intelligence (A.I.) converts huge amounts of data in all parts of life through Society 5.0 and the Internet of Things. It will hopefully become new wisdom dedicated to increasing human skills. These changes have happened in a context with other catastrophic occurrences. In 2004 a Tsunami spread over the Indian Ocean, bringing a lot of devastation, and was recently followed by the Coronavirus outbreak, which began in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019 and spread to various parts of the world. Human resistance to change is futile, and changes disrupt the order of health, economy, education, politics, and all facets of human life to the point where everyone prefers to work from home rather than meet face-to-face with others.

Method of Research

The library research method used in this study explores relevant literature on the subject. For example, for the discussion on the role of theology in addressing needs in society, the study utilized the following materials: books, journals, magazines, and online materials.⁴

Discussions

Understanding "Theology"

The term "theology" is derived from two Greek words *Theos* (God) and *Logos* (study). The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas explained that theology is God's mind, the

¹ Ade Octaviany, Rini, Winda Sihotang, Petrus Sanjaya Simarmata, Arif Rahman, and Agustina Muliati. "Human Resource Development Strategy As Preparation For The Industrial Revolution Era 5.0." *International Journal of Educational Research & Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (June 25, 2022): 1157–1164. Accessed October 5, 2022. <https://ijersc.org/index.php/go/article/view/376>.

² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: News York University, 2006), 40.

³ Ibid, 41.

⁴ Smith, K. G. *Writing and Research: A Guide for Theological Students*. (UK: Langham Global Library), 16.

teaching of God, and leading to God.⁵ Vern defines theology as the study of problems related to God and the world of reality.⁶ Brandon argues that theology is a discourse about God. It is a discussion that translates into a systematic and scientific study of a religion, such as dogmatic theology, biblical theology, moral theology, ascetical theology, mystical, symbolic, sacramental, apologetical, pastoral, philosophical, liturgical, and natural theology.⁷ Contrastingly, natural theology postulates that humans can know God without revelation but through a priori reasoning or observation of aposteriori natural phenomena.⁴ Steenbrink points at two significant focuses of theology: first, it is about God, and second, it is about the relationship between God and all realities, including humans, which will give birth to ethical values because they are more in the form of practical life.

In summary, theology is related to God as the main actor in his work; it is simply discoursing about God. In addition, theology deals with the relationship between God and all realities, which gives birth to ethical values. Finally, human beings continue God's creative work, which includes meeting needs in society and ensuring human flourishing.

Theology and World Problems

Horton describes theology as the grammar of the Christian faith, and it is through that grammar Christian faith is expressed, discussed, taught, and used as a lens through which believers interpret life. Thus, every Christian actually does theology in his daily life.⁸ This life cannot be separated from problems of poverty, natural disasters, disease, and even death that occurs to himself. Furthermore, Appasamy is a theologian who tries to formulate a theology for the indigenous people of India to expound how Christianity is connected with Hindu religious thoughts so that Christianity is more easily understood and understood by Hindus. He intended to structure Indian theology so that Christianity would not feel foreign to India. Appasamy says Christians should emphasize the mystical side of the Bible because Hindus place a lot of emphasis on mystics.

⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *ENDT: "Theology"* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1988), 680-681.

⁶ David Stewart, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 64-67.

⁷ S.G.E Brandon, *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 610.

⁸ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 67-68.

Nevertheless, he remains critical of mystical aspects of Hinduism that are incompatible with the Christian faith.⁹ Further, according to Appasamy, the uniqueness of Christianity must be maintained in theology in order to solve the real problems of human life on earth. The following section shows how various theologies and formulations have sought to address various societal needs, although not in a manner that the authority of Scripture is upheld.

Theology for Answering Food Solutions

The theologian Kosuke Koyama argues that theology should be able to answer fundamental issues within the pagan cosmology, like giving food, water, clothing, care, and hospitality.¹⁰ He formulated the “Waterbuffalo Theology,” arguing that theology must be able to become a reality for humans. Theology must touch on aspects of everyday life experienced by society. In this context, Koyama examines the lives of farmers in Thailand; there is the reality of rice fields, farmers, buffalo, and so on. Departing from that situation, he continued the theological model by bringing God into it. Thus, theology must address the life of a community and participate in responding to the real needs of the local people because theology is about God and people. Theology is like a balm that heals and saves Asian souls theologically.¹¹ Waterbuffalo Theology centers on the act of rooting theology in cultural (Muangthai), religious (Buddhist and Christian), and historical contexts. Christian theology thus solves problems of the rich and poor, disease, tribal (animist) religion, spirituality, and the issues facing humanity.

The aims of Waterbuffalo theology are: (1) To convey Jesus Christ in words that are culturally appropriate but are also critically considered. This involves improving the culture itself if deemed necessary in the theological formulation (2) To be interpersonal rather than inter-doctrinal in the process of dialogue and mutual enrichment. (3) To pursue ecumenical theology undertaken for ecological health and justice.¹² The center of theology is Christ’s crucified and the mission of believers in the world. It is because of the cross that Jesus Christ draws everyone to him. Participating in the history of salvation, Christians serve God and the world. Both praise and criticism of men hinder the exaltation of God. Identification with Christ is revealed when the

⁹ F.D. Wellem, *Riwayat Hidup Singkat Tokoh-Tokoh dalam Sejarah Gereja* (Jakarta:PT BPK Gunung Mulia, 1993), 15-17. Buku-buku yang ditulis oleh Appasamy adalah: *The Gospel and India's Heritage (Injil dan Warisan India)* dan *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*.

¹⁰ Bryant Meyers, “Theological Reflections on the Christian Humanitarian Response”, Laussane World Pulse (2014), <http://lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/62/10-2005>; Kosuke Koyama, “Extending Hospitality to Strangers: A Missiology of Theologia Crucis.” *International Review of Mission*, No. 321, Oct. (1993), 82.

¹¹ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffaloes Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 48.

¹² Jhon C. England, dkk (ed.), *Asian Christian Theologies*. Vol. 3 (Delhi: ISPCK, 2004), 411.

Christian is involved in a world of suffering. In this sense, Christians are attached to God's table and free from secularization, technocracy, and communism.

Theology for Kindness and Solidarity

The *Populorum Progressio* encyclical by the Roman Catholic illustrates that theology should make humans have kindness and change a person to have an attitude of solidarity. Not only humans but even developed countries must be able to do this in the following three: (1) Mutual solidarity in the form of assistance from a rich country to developing countries. (2) Social justice in the form of improving trade relations between strong countries and weak countries. (3) Strive for universal charity in order to build a more humane community in which each party gives and receives.¹³ The spirit of kindness and communal solidarity is seen in Acts 4:34; in the apostolic church, no one lacks because members share with one another.

Theology for True Humanitarian Action

Theology should change a person to have the habit of acting humanely. Bloesch reminded us of the temptations that try to reduce Christian theology by rejecting humanitarian action for a modern and secular understanding. He says that the purpose of humanitarian action (in its secular sense) is not the practice of James 1:27 nor to bring the gospel into the world but to reshape it according to the human image. A secular humanitarian action is a liberal form of religion that emphasizes service to humanity above all else. Its ultimate goal is human welfare, not God's glory.¹⁴ Bloesch reminds us that we should fight evils like slavery, child labor, piracy, poverty, and others with the right theological foundation.¹⁵

Populorum Progressio affirms that true Christian humanism is always "God-centered" and that "Man is not the standard for other human beings. Man can become fully human by transcending himself."¹⁶ Human life has not reached the right level if human actions have not made others seek God. Bloesch describes the events of the Good Samaritan ministry as an example of the message of peace and redemption.

¹³Roger Cardinal Etchegaray dan Archbishop Giovanni Chelli, "Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity," a paper presented for Pastoral Care of Refugees at the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrant and Itinerant People (1983), 4.

¹⁴Ibid, 47-48.

¹⁵Ibid. 47.

¹⁶ Paul VI, "Populorum Progression," 58.

Theology Must safeguard Humanity's Hope against Disasters of Suffering

Theology is a hope for something better. Therefore, it must bring someone to have human hope against the catastrophe of suffering in his time. These hopes are: (1) Helping people understand God's presence, who strengthens their lives amid disaster problems. (2) Believers become "light" to greet others, make friends, and become a nation together in solving various crises experienced by the world. This hope contains the values of tolerance and recognition of togetherness because the substance of theology does not mean that all religions are seen as equal. However, this tolerant attitude and recognition is only an attempt to find the meeting point of all religious teachings. Baum argues that the truth of religion can be seen from the commitment to emancipation (from the shackles of the times, oppression, and ignorance, among others) and the solidarity of humanity.¹⁷

Armstrong observes that the humanitarian mission is a sacred role recognized by all religions. The mission of religion is a humanitarian mission and a divine mission. If religion cannot make it happen, its adherents will abandon it.¹⁸ Habermas opines that it was time for religiosity to side with humanity to quell injustice and promote peace for humanity.¹⁹ Christian theology promotes humanitarian missions, which ought to be done for God's glory.

Jesus as the Deliverer from the Suffering in the World

Choan-Seng Song is an Asian theologian who sought to apply biblical values in an Asian context; and argued that Jesus is the answer to the crisis of life in the world that affects all aspects of life, including the stark difference between the rich and the poor. Not Jesus, but life in this world is full of problems, and Jesus makes human existence come alive (physically and spiritually).²⁰ Here, theology begins with God's heart. The suffering experienced by humans touches God's heart so that to overcome that suffering, God offered Jesus Christ to suffer²¹ so that He can guide human existence to escape the world crisis. Here Jesus was destined to bear man's sin.²² Jesus, as the center of the mission, gives meaning and a basis for the church's

¹⁷ Gregory Baum, *Agama dalam Bayang-Bayang Relativisme: Sebuah Analisis Sosiologi Pengetahuan* Karl Mannheim tentang Sintesa Kebenaran Historis-Normatif (Jakarta: Tiara Wacana, 1999), 46-49.

¹⁸ Karen Armstrong, *Berperan Demi Tuhan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2014), 80-20.

¹⁹ Juergen Hebermas, "Covid-19 Menggugah Teologi Kemanusiaan", (2020), <https://monitor.co.id/2020/04/14/covid-19-menggugah-teologi-kemanusiaan/>

²⁰ C. S. Song, "Jesus Christ – The Life of the World – an Asian Meditation" *East Asia Jurnal of Theology*, Vol.1 No. 1 (1983), 117.

²¹ C. S. Song, "The Cross and The Lotus", *Song's Third-Eye Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979) 101.

²² Ibid., 118.

involvement in world problems.²³

Song developed an understanding of the Christian faith (folk theology) that engages in a people's social and political life. Folk theology is the theology of the cross; it does not seek peace and does not analyze the faults of others but shares the thoughts of Jesus.²⁴ Folk theology places humans (people) as historical subjects, not objects. History is interpreted as “the socio-political biography” of the people.²⁵ The following section examines how liberal theologies, despite their limitations, seek to project themselves as relevant to the contextual issues that sometimes mainstream Christian theology neglect.

Indonesian Pluralism Theology Pays Attention to the Society Needs of Human Life

One of the major highlights of Indonesian pluralism theology is that it pays attention to the needs of human life. A pluralist in Indonesia, Tanja, emphasized that the need to solve humanitarian problems requires a way of togetherness, wholeness, and towards the creation of a global ethic.²⁶ There are at least three tasks in the cooperation movement between religious communities: (1) Repentance from the hostile and envious nature that has disrupted good relations between religions for centuries. (2) The adherents of religion should not be afraid to expose the abuse of religion in the quest for a global ethic.²⁷ Sumartana emphasizes the need to love and support one another.²⁸

Secular Theology

Banchoff, a secularization theologian, argued that secular theology determines human goals.²⁹ Furthermore, Lerner argues that secular theology must be implicated in the process of urbanization, industrialization, secularization, democratization, education, and media participation.³⁰ The purpose of secularization is to change the orientation of human thinking and acting. According to this persuasion, humans no longer see religion and its various

²³ C.S. Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977), 66.

²⁴ Ibid., 279.

²⁵ GP Harianto, “Mission in Suffering Context”, *Excelsis Deo* 4, 1 (Juli-Desember 2019), 78-79.

²⁶ GP Harianto, “Gagasan Pluralisme Agama: Tinjauan Sejarah dari Indonesia sampai kini dan Tawaran Dialog: Kebenaran Agaphe”, *Pelita Zaman* 16, 2(2001), 37-39.

²⁷ Victor I. Tanja, *Spiritualitas. Pluralitas dan Pembangunan di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1996), 17.

²⁸ Th. Sumartana dalam memberi pengantar tulisan Hans Kung dan Karl-Josef Kuschel berjudul *Etika Global* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1999) xxv; baca juga Th. Sumartana, “Beberapa Tema Dialog Antar-Agama Kontemporer,” *Agama dalam Dialog* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1999) 117-118.

²⁹ Thomas Banchoff, (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 271.

³⁰ M. Rusli Karim, *Agama, Modernisasi dan Sekularisasi* (Yogyakarta: PT. Tiara Wacana Yogya, 1997), 31.

teachings as strict guidelines for managing life. As a result, they wrongfully claim that religion is personal and should not be used as a key reference. This view disregards religion's critical and positive role in transforming individuals and society. On the contrary, religion plays its role in increasing the faith and morals of its adherents. Thus, this belief system, like the pluralist theologies, is devoid of divine motivation to help others. Humans claim to practice humanitarian actions, but the focus is always on the self.

Liberalism Theology

Liberal theology, Contextual Theology, Humanism Theology, Transformative Theology, and Rational Theology are closely related to secular theology. Sometimes most of these theologies are known as Third World Theology because they emerged and developed to dominate countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Gustavo Gutierrez originally raised the term liberation in theological thought from Latin America as *Lebaracion*.³¹ These theologies claim to offer a basis for political ideology and socio-cultural life by empowering the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. The liberation ideals were a continuation of the previous thoughts with the dimension of freedom over injustice. Intellectuals like Dussel had termed and conceptualized theology as characterized by a struggle for equality in political and social life.³²

Liberation thought initially focused on social personality and a conservative way of theology to speculative rationalistic theology through various social movements. Its development from Gustavo Gutierrez's Theology of Liberation until it spread as a third-world movement can be divided into three stages of development: (1) It lasted from 1962 until the conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin in 1968. This stage of liberation theology was still characterized by social movements, economic growth, and development. (2) It took place from 1968 to 1972. At this stage, liberation theology had become standardized in Africa and was born in aspects of life. This standardization was carried out through various international meetings and symposiums, and the climax was when Gustavo Gutierrez's Theology of Liberation was published. (3) The stage of development of liberation thought to Africa and the third world. At this stage, apart from the formation of the Third World Churches and their separation from the Western Church, Liberation Theology as an action-oriented also influenced other theologies. That stage, in Latin America itself, had an impact on security that

³¹ Karel A. Steenbrink, *Perkembangan Teologi Kristen Modern*, 138.

³² Francis Wahono, *Teologi Pembebasan: Sejarah, Metode, Praktis dan Isinya* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2000), 18.

was not conducive due to the development of this liberation thought. Liberation theology's birth has impacted the religious and political situation (Dogmatic Theology) and social life controlled by Colonialism and Dogmatic Theology based on the Western Orthodox Church.

The development of liberation theology in Latin America, Africa, and Asia has informed the trajectory of theological formulations. Any quality theology must be based on God's will and address socio-economic, political, and cultural issues. Moreover, liberation Theology demands from the community the form of commitment and involvement of actors or adherents of theology as a whole in fighting for the independence and life of the Third World community.³³

Indian Dalif Theology of Liberation Asia

Dalif means "Broken," trampled, or oppressed. Dalif theology is liberation or theological reflection on the Caste system.³⁴ Adherents of this theology are called "The Dalif." While in Latin America and Africa, the liberation is from Western Christian theology, in India, the action is oriented towards Hinduism. The Dalif consists of Christians, Hindus (low caste), and others. Dalif's theological figure is E.V. Ramoswaney Periyar and Bhimarao Ambedkar. The thoughts of the two theologians are more against religious theologies and procedures that tolerate social discrimination with their new credo. The Teak tribe (caste) is one religion and one God for humans. This idea was supported by Mahatma Gandhi (The System of Former Institutions of Hinduism). The rationale for Dalif Theology with its "Ashram Movement" is Theology that is characterized by "Pathos" and "Doxology." Pathos symbolizes the power of power and the shocking struggle for liberation wrapped around the Dalif. Doxology symbolizes power capable of the exodus (out) of the Dalif from Hinduism and Castaism to Christianity (liberation exodus). The God of Dalif theology is the "God of Dalif" who frees Dalifs from suffering and serves them.³⁵

Korean Minjung Theology

The term "Minjung" arises from the two characters of the word "Chinese," namely "Min," which means the community, and "Jung," which means the general public. This term first appeared in the "Yi" Dynasty in 1392-1960, which governed the class distinction between the

³³ Francis Wahono, *Teologi Pembebasan: Sejarah, Metode, Praktis dan Isinya*, 23.

³⁴ Micheal Awaladas, *Teologi Pembebasan Asia* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2001), 40.

³⁵ Ibid., 55.

elite class and the ordinary class (Minjung). Minjung theology is the theology of the oppressed, either because of political factors, social factors, and other factors. Historically, it has a long history of oppression, which later split into the North and the South.³⁶

The main characters of Minjung are Hyun Yong Hak and Suk Nan Dong. The foremost ideas based on social and political hermeneutics are (1) Liberating “Han,” which is a feeling of anger, difficulty, pressure, helplessness, irritation, and so on. This feeling hit the community due to pressure from the dictatorship of Park Chong Hee, who was supported by the military by imprisoning religious leaders. (2) The release of “Han” is carried out through “And” (Awareness). There are two levels of “And,” namely: personal and social. “And” on a personal level is the denial of dreams of a good life and various delusions. “And” at the social level goes through four stages: realizing God’s truth in the heart (Faith), maintaining awareness of the divine growing in the heart, practicing what God has commanded, and finally defeating various forms of injustice translated in worldly life.³⁷ (3) Thoughts on the Trinity, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are more directed at political and social liberation. His theological thinking was more influenced by Pantheism (convincing God with the forces of nature) and Shamanism (the power of the Spirit).³⁸

Filipino Struggle Theology

The theology of struggle is defined as “from” and “in the struggle,” not “about” the struggle. The Theology of Struggle is a reflection of Filipino Christians to liberate the oppressed poor people. This theology is also called “folk theology” (ummah) which is filled with “koreo,”³⁹ to liberate from the pressures of the Catholic-dominated Western Church and authoritarian political power.

Theologians of Struggle, like Fr. Louie Hechanova and Edicio de La Torre, were influenced by Latin American theology of thought during their participation in the Economic Association of Third World Theologians in the 1970s. The reflection of this thought gave birth to a movement called the “EDSA” (Celebration) Revolution, and through this revolution, the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, was overthrown in 1986.

The objectives of the theology of the struggle are: (1) a new spiritual, which dynamically

³⁶King Yong Bok, *Minjung Theology, People the Subjects of History* (Singapore: The Commission on Theology 1981), 17.

³⁷David Smith L.A. *Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Illinois: SP Publication, 1962), 260.

³⁸R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Wajah Yesus di Asia* (Jakarta: BPK. Gunung Mulia, 1994), 262.

³⁹Michel Awaladas, *Teologi Pembebasan Asia*, 26.

situations the theology of liberation in the struggle to liberate the people between the two poles, namely the suffering and hope of living in a new world for Christians, which is not just a dream but is a promise from God. (2) The new ekklesia frees people to be involved in politics because the church is a community consisting of various groups of people (ummah), (3) The new social analysis is based on Marxist theory and focused on the economic and political dimensions that have distinguished between the landlords and the poor. (4) The new social analysis is strengthened by “Practice Zen,” a collective movement toward liberation with a viable commitment to social change.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Etymologically the term theology is rooted in *theos* and *logos*, but the characteristics of theology emphasize three understandings: (1) God as the main actor, initiator, and his work. (2) Man as a complement to God’s work, who tries to live in His order. (3) Human beings become part of God’s work, which has a mutually constructive relationship between spiritual needs and physical needs to live and develop in this world as a door to eternity. The study explored several theologies characterized by liberal tendencies but focused on addressing societal needs. Christian theology should be alive to the realities that people go through. It should address the felt needs of the people.

Sound biblical theology can solve the problems of human suffering amid world crises. A healthy theology is a theology that can reflect the meaning of etymology in human life in the real world. Theology without application in the context of life on earth is useless theology, and it is not in accordance with the characteristics of the meaning of theology itself. However, theology can be misapplied if it’s not from God through the Bible. Therefore sound theology should be biblical, Christ-centered, and relevantly articulate contextual issues. It should have a foundation in the holy and authoritative Scriptures. The basis and motivation for solving world crises should be based on the nature of God and the Christian mission to the world. Faith that lives and grows can strengthen one’s self to face the changing era of the industrial revolution. Living faith will overcome change. Living faith conquers the changing world.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

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