

Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

March 27, 2009

Dear Friends,

Back in the 1950s, a missionary came to Indonesia. Hoping to help people repent of their sins, the missionary brought along vivid illustrations of people burning in the fires of hell. But the first time he showed the illustrations, the local people responded quite unexpectedly. “We don’t need to repent, for we see from your pictures that only white people burn in hell!”



Becca teaching her systematic theology class to second year students, 27 March 2009, Jakarta Theological Seminary.

As a Presbyterian mission co-worker, I have been called to Indonesia to help people understand about God. A serious concern of mine is whether I am simply perpetuating myths about a white people’s god or truly helping them encounter the loving God of all people throughout this earth. Because I am here at the invitation of the seminary and as a guest of the Indonesian people, it’s not my task to impose a Western view of God on the students I teach, who are the future leaders of Indonesian churches.

Instead my task is to help them understand who God is for them in their particular context, and what that means in their daily lives. In teaching them about God, I strive to give them hope and courage to withstand the many challenges

they face as citizens of an impoverished country, battered by an onslaught of natural disasters as well as a corrupt government barely learning the meaning of democracy. The Indonesian people deserve to know God is on their side in this uphill struggle.

In other words, I’m a professor of systematic theology.

Okay, I know what just happened. You read that last sentence and thought, “There she goes again with that confusing jargon.”

Time and time again people ask me to explain the term “systematic theology.” In my mind it is the same as what I wrote above: helping people understand who God is for them in their context. In other words, I help people explore how God loves them and how God asks them to respond to that love in their time and place.

This kind of theology (i.e., discussion about God) is called “systematic” because it’s a way of organizing what we know and believe about God into an accessible “system” or framework that makes sense to us today. If instead of doing systematic theology, I was helping people understand how God loved a band of Hebrew slaves and how those slaves responded to God’s love in their context, I would be doing biblical theology. If I were helping people understand how God has expressed love for the Christian Church over the past 2,000 years and how the Church’s people have responded to that love, I would be doing historical theology.

In systematic theology I help people explore those two intertwined and endlessly fascinating stories of God’s love for the Jewish people (by studying Scripture) and God’s love for the Christian church (by studying church history and teachings) and then discuss how we are invited to experience that same

divine love here and now. God didn't write these two love stories and play the leading role only to romance Jews and Christians, but God meant through them to romance the whole world.

So if the phrase "professor of systematic theology" is too confusing, then let's say I'm a storyteller. I tell a great love story and invite my listeners to participate and become storytellers themselves as they describe their own romance with God.

To return to my original point, as a storyteller, i.e., as a systematic theologian, I must ensure I don't impose a Western way of telling God's love story. If the story has only white characters, my audience will feel it's not relevant. It's an Asian story in the first place: Palestine is in Asia, and Jesus was an Asian man, not to mention a captivating storyteller.

By choosing to teach systematic theology in Indonesia, I am literally bringing the story back home. I'm telling God's love story in Asia, where it began, and doing so among an oral culture and a nation of storytellers. The Bible began its formation being passed on orally from generation to generation until someone decided to put the stories on papyrus. I take the written version of the story as inherited from my ancestors and pass it on orally, in the Indonesian language, to a whole new generation of listeners and lovers who will also take part and share their experience with others.

But don't take my word for it. There's another systematic theologian, also acting seminary dean, Joas Adiprasetya, who has his own definition of systematic theology.

Dr. Adiprasetya bases his definition on a concept from the seventh-century theologian, John of Damascus, who described the Trinity as perichoresis: God is the ongoing dance between the three Persons of the Trinity. Theology is our participation in that dance.

"Theology is an activity of interpreting the beauty, goodness and meaning of life, writes Dr. Adiprasetya, "where we as God's creatures participate in the Triune dance. By participating in the divine dance we received the fullness of life. Theologians, both lay and professional, attempt to understand the dynamics of God's dance within and with the world and re-narrate the dance through the life of the church. Through the divine dance, creation's life is elevated, celebrated, and transformed."

Whereas I view theology as storytelling, Joas sees theology as us being God's partners in a dance. The two ideas aren't so far apart—what romance doesn't include a little dancing?

I like the idea of systematic theology as a dance for two reasons: first, it shows that it's an active process, not a set list of principles that Christians must believe. It's an exchange between God and creation that is new every morning, as we learn ever-new things about God and the ways God loves us. Second, we are God's partners in the dance. In theology, we join hands with God to experience God's love for us and God's way of expressing that love to creation.

So as a professor of systematic theology it's my privilege to help people fall in love and learn to dance. Spread the word! Everyone's invited to the dance.

Yours,

Rebecca Young



In the campus library: Dean Joas Adiprasetya (center) with students Stephen and Gustaf, 27 March 2009, Jakarta Theological Seminary.