The First Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1976

By Stephen R. Di Trolio Coakley | August 20, 2020

The first conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976, was a decisive catalyst for shifting the larger theological conversation towards the Global South. This meeting brought together theologians, ministers, and activists from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, seeking to establish a theology separate from its "western moorings" (Fabella 2000, 70). Thinkers such as Julius Nyerere, Enrique Dussel, and Gustavo Gutiérrez played vital roles at this conference. This inaugural meeting of EATWOT promoted a new brand of contextualized liberationist theology (opens in a new tab). This view defied privileged Western interlocutors' power, welcoming the participation of those from the Global South to take center stage. The conference's impact was so foundational that the French theologian Marie Dominique Chenu called this meeting the "Bandung of theology" (Elizondo and Greinacher 1981, 20).

The Historical Context of the Formation of EATWOT, 1950-1970

EATWOT emerged as the new phase in a series of related events between the 1950s and 1970s. Events in Bandung, Detroit, and Geneva would be, in many ways, precursors to the formation of EATWOT. The Indian historian M.P. Joseph points to the Asian-African Conference, which took place in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 as a forerunner to the intellectual formation of EATWOT. The Bandung conference was a turning point in modern history, at which the "Third World" entered the discourse of global politics and culture (Joseph 2015, 5). As Christopher J. Lee recounts, "Bandung was pivotal in bringing the 'Third World' into being a self-conscious category of actors in world politics, and instrumental in laying the foundations for the Non-Aligned Movement" (Lee 2009, 88). This conference would further stir Pan-Arab and Pan-African sentiment within the larger blossoming of independence movements across the globe (Phillips 2016, 333).

Alongside the meeting in Bandung, the World Council of Churches (WCC), formed in 1948, would be central to the formation of EATWOT in bringing together ministers and theologians from the Global South to its various conferences (Stanley 2018, 131). The 1966 "Church and Society" meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, highlighted the "theology of revolution" and its role in Christianity's future, a topic with which EATWOT would continue to grapple over its history (Odoyuye 2007, 66). Eight years later, in Bangkok, the Commission on World Missions and Evangelism would highlight salvation in the struggle for economic and political justice (Joseph 2015, 19). This shift towards accounting for various nations' economic and political realities by the WCC in their evangelistic efforts of local churches was the start of a more

comprehensive theological framework. The WCC not only wanted to proselytize but effectively work to solving problems of injustice. These meetings stoked a new Christian imagination across many ecumenically-minded Christians to be more attentive to the political, economic, and social situations of the church in the world.

A third critical precursor in the development of the ethos and mission of EATWOT was the *Theology in the Americas* conference that took place in Detroit, Michigan, in 1975 (See Torres and Eagleson 1976). This gathering brought together theologians from Latin America, the United States, and Canada to discuss topics of American imperialism and military intervention in Latin America through a theological lens. The participants promoted a new brand of theological engagement with a political reading of the Bible, namely liberation theology (Ferm 1986, 3). The meeting in Detroit sought to continue to work on the proceedings of the 1968 Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, where questions of liberation theology and peace activism were discussed. A group of the Detroit meeting participants, including Enrique Dussel, Sergio Torres, Hugo Assmann, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Beatriz Melano Couch, would be present the next year at the first EATWOT meeting in Tanzania. EATWOT's first meeting in Dar es Salaam can be interpreted as a continuation of the momentum of the Bandung, Geneva, Bangkok, and Detroit conferences.

The First EATWOT Conference: Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1976

EATWOT began as the idea of a Congolese student, Oscar Bimwenyi, at the University of Louvain in Belgium. Bimwenyi had the desire to organize a conference with broad ecumenical participation from Latin America, Asia, and Africa to discuss theology away from European oversight. Bimwenyi shared this vision with his professor Francis Houtart and visiting professor Enrique Dussel in 1975 (Joseph 2015, 31). Later established in its constitution, the conference aimed to propose "new models of theology which would interpret the gospel in a more meaningful way to the peoples of the Third World and promote their liberation struggle" ("Foundation & History" n.d.). After the Vatican II meetings, there seemed to be a new dawn in which there was a renewed focus on "Third World" Christianity, especially since the "peripheral" churches of the Global South were uniting under a new sentiment that focused on facets of liberation in their contexts (Witvliet 1985, 25).

During the 1975 World Council of Churches conference in Nairobi, Kenya, various participants of the emerging EATWOT garnered financial support from several ecumenical agencies. After the Nairobi meeting, Sergio Torres, the secretary of the budding EATWOT, visited neighboring Tanzania to meet with Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere (opens in a new tab). Nyerere was a renowned anti-colonialist, Pan-Africanist, and devout catholic, eager to collaborate with like-minded thinkers due to his alignment with the Christian socialist leanings of EATWOT. His theorization of *ujamaa*, a political philosophy that desired to "construct a society based on just relationships and cooperation," influenced many of the theologians from EATWOT (Joseph 2015, 9). In the meeting with Torres, Nyerere offered to host the first meeting in Tanzania and guaranteed support for the EATWOT group the following year (Joseph 2015, 7).

The inaugural conference of EATWOT took place at the University of Tanzania in Dar-Es-Salaam from August 5-12, 1976. Some twenty-two participants representing sixteen nations from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa gathered at this first convocation to

discuss a wide-ranging field of theological topics. Present at the meetings were representatives from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions (Balasundaram 1993, 39). One of the individuals invited by the group was the American civil rights activist and minister, C.T. Vivian, who represented minorities in the United States. This idea to include C.T. Vivian was a desire to extend solidarity with Black and Latinx minorities in North America who suffered poverty and injustice like many people who lived in the Global South (Joseph 2015, 221). One of the areas in which the conference lacked was in its minimal representation of women (Joseph 2015, 61). There only was one female participant from Argentina, Beatriz Melano Couch. The organization would later correct this problem, shifting to have wide and ample participation of women across the organization. On a few occasions during the conference, Nyerere participated in discussions offering a "critical perspective on racism" and political insight (Joseph 2015, 179). The meetings began with each person sharing an "analysis of their reality, an evaluation of the church's presence, and a survey of alternative theological approaches" (Fabella 2000, 71). Sergio Torres, the EATWOT secretary, stated that "the voice of the 'damned of the earth,' the voice of defiance and hope, was being heard…The consumers of Western theology now dramatically challenging the old way of thinking and proposed a new way of doing theology" (Torres 1988, 108). Despite initial differences in opinions, in a spirit of mutual understanding, the assembly reached a consensus and finalized the charter for the organization (Torres and Fabella 1978, ix).

The agenda of the first meeting of EATWOT, as told by Sergio Torres, was fivefold. First, it provided a place for all the theologians present from the various continents to meet and become familiar with each other's work and projects. This goal purposefully sought to create a network of Third World theologians from around the globe. Second, the meeting focused on listening to the participants' "concerns and their theological reflections" (Joseph 2015, 38). Gustavo Gutiérrez highlighted that the "starting point" for theology was a vision that took into account the God of liberation, "revealed only in the concrete historical context of liberation of the poor and the oppressed" (Joseph 2015, 57). The third goal was to question the theological and epistemological connections with the West to determine how to break free from them. Fourth, the conference looked to "assist Christian communities in the third world to construct an indigenous understanding of revelation" (Joseph 2015, 38). This element was an essential development of the conference, which would seek to establish contextual theologies departing from the elite formulations of Western theological interpretation. Many of the theologians were educated in Europe, and in Tanzania aimed to continue to formulate a distinct theological project that incorporated their identity as "Third World theologians." Finally, the conference desired to "facilitate active dialogue among the third world Christian communities and critically evaluate the relationship of the indigenous churches with the missionaries" (Joseph 2015, 38). This was a critical development for the participants trying to construct an independent indigenous Christian identity in which the traditions, practices, and worldviews of indigenous people were taken into account. It represented a move in Christianity that would distinguish itself from the practice of attempted erasure of native identities in the European or North American formulations of Christianity.

The papers and ensuing conversations that emerged from this conference were significant in their attempt to reject "the dominant theology of the West as irrelevant to their contexts" (Fabella 2000, 71). The EATWOT conference would affirm contextual Christianity through

active rejection of a “universal Christianity,” which in effect was European or North American in origin. It highlighted the principle of contextualization to create frameworks of Christian theology attuned to each continent and region. The conference formulated a theological framework radically different from Western intellectual history in emphasizing discussion of the world’s poor and oppressed peoples. In doing so, the Dar es Salaam conference participants wanted to encourage a theology *for* the oppressed and speak to their lived experience. The group emphasized the centrality of praxis and trying to work collaboratively to address the reality of the poor and the oppressed peoples of the Global South. Poverty, systemic racism, classism, economic and political injustice were not theoretical problems but the reality of the participants of EATWOT. Enrique Dussel challenged political ideologies that promoted language of “development” in the Global South, describing it as a “demonic design of the myth of development, which rests with attempts of the bourgeoisie to avoid social change precipitated by the struggles of the poor” (Joseph 2015, 57). This move away and against Western academic theology in confronting prevailing capitalist ideology was informed by different streams of thought, such as Marxist theory, liberation theology, and feminist critique (Joseph 2015, 36). Throughout the conference, theologians aimed to dethrone dominant Western thought as a continuation of the colonial and imperial legacy of the North Atlantic nations, which aimed to silence and exclude the voices of those in the Third World.

Upon concluding the conference, the group confected the final declaration of Dar es Salaam, which highlighted their goals and aspirations in moving away from the West: “We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology, which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World” (Abraham 2005, 207). This epistemological break from the methodology of dominant theologies was an essential departure from the “universalities” and totalizing theological categories of the Western project.

Because EATWOT proposed to develop theology from the place of radical contextuality and on the ground practice, it had the effect of de-centering the established dominant theologies and giving a new ground form of liberationist theology. New fields would grow from these discussions such as Dalit theology in India, Minjung theology in Korea, and continued interaction with Liberation theology (opens in a new tab) in various facets (see Amalorpavadass and Chandran 1991). At this conference, there began to be a shift in accounting for each context as central to creating a theological language that would match its place of the original (Batumalai 1991). These efforts by EATWOT in creating an anti-colonial theological framework had been previously silenced by military, colonial, or missionary forces. Who occluded and prevented any contextual readings of the Bible and prioritizing the theology of colonial handlers. The move towards autochthonous Christian formulations was especially meaningful for Asian theologians, many of whom were from countries where Christianity was a minority and where the new contextual focus provided a language for inter-faith conversations, religious plurality, and mutual understanding with other faiths in the region. Previous models of Christianity had quashed conversations on religious pluralism as heretical, and now in effect, “pluralities were a reason for celebration rather than a cause of conflict.” (Joseph 2015, 80)

In his history of the early years of EATWOT, M.P. Joseph provides four ways in which we can

see the impact of the Dar es Salaam meeting. First, this new space made it possible for theologians and thinkers of the Global South who "refused to discuss programs given to them by the colonial leadership" to engage in theology outside the dominant currents of Western theology (Joseph 2015, 35). Second, this ecumenical gathering established a precedent that would bring different denominational backgrounds to work for marginalized and oppressed people's everyday struggles. In displacing the "traditional theology" of the West, it would show that "theology was not universal, but White, male, and European" (Joseph 2015, 36). Third, EATWOT would become the new nomenclature of resistance to Western theology, as it sought to do "theology from the perspective of the Third World and the political, social, economic, cultural, racial, and religious frameworks that define it" (Erhard Kamphausen, n.d., 1). Finally, this new epistemological orientation centered in the Global South promoted by EATWOT meant that now "theologians started to search for new analytical structures that would help them interpret the reasons for the pain and suffering of the poor and the dynamic nature of their struggles" (Joseph 2015, 36).

Conclusion

This first summit of EATWOT can be understood as a part of a long series of anti-colonial meetings, including those in Bandung and Detroit. It has been denominated as the "second reformation" for its problematization and denouncement of Western theology as a "theology of Affluence" (Balasundaram 1993, 39). In doing so, it critiqued capitalism's opulence and colonial expansionism leveraged by ecclesiastical supervisors. One such impact was its role in setting the stage for further exploration in the vein of future decolonial critique propelled by Dussel and others (see Barreto 2019). EATWOT continued to expand its membership as it hosted more critical meetings across the globe and developed an annual journal highlighting immigration, capitalism, ecological injustice, and other theological issues of the Global South (Joseph 2015, 35; "EATWOT's Theological Journal VOICES" 2018). The meeting in Dar es Salaam in 1976, therefore, serves as a milestone in the effort to reorient Christian theology away from the West towards the Global South.

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