

Nozomu Miyahira's *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God*

A Review by Rev. Ralph Allan Smith

Introduction

I ran across Nozomu Miyahira's *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God* looking through a book catalogue from a relatively small, elite Ancient Near Eastern book dealer.¹ Having lived in Japan for 20 years and being seriously interested in the doctrine of the Trinity, I could not pass it up. Later, it came as no little surprise to me to discover that members of my own congregation in Tokyo and friends at the Kobe Theological Hall knew Dr. Miyahira well. This makes my job as a reviewer difficult, since I disagree with Dr. Miyahira's thesis. I wish to briefly explain why I disagree, with due respect to this promising young Japanese theologian, in the interest of deeper thought on the doctrine of the Trinity and the relationship between doctrine and culture. I also share Dr. Miyahira's concern with the condition of the Japanese church and will offer what I believe may be some of the reasons for its present stagnation.

General Comments

Let me begin with a few general comments about the book itself. *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God* is the published version of Miyahira's doctoral thesis for Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, which gives you some idea of the nature of work — a well-researched, scholarly treatise. Considering the genre, the book is written well and is generally clear, though it is not without examples of the kind of sentences that only appear in books written by scholars for scholars. I have been told that the Japanese version is more difficult to read than the English, though I have not compared them myself.

From the standpoint of the serious reader, the greatest defect in presentation was the decision — no doubt by Paternoster Press rather than the author — to place notes at the end of the chapter instead of the bottom of the page. Especially in a book that is filled with notes, most of which are more than mere source citations, footnotes ought to be “the law of the land,” so that the poor reader is not forced to continually turn back and forth. In the first chapter, for example, in a little over 15 pages, there are 66 endnotes, and in chapter two, a little over 20 pages, there are 145 endnotes taking about 11 pages of text. This makes for an unpleasant reading experience, to say the least: read three lines, turn to the back of the chapter, read three more words, turn to

¹ Nozomu Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God: A Japanese Perspective on the Trinity* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

the back of the chapter. This is not how scholarly books should be published. I suppose it may be easier for the publisher to do the page layout with endnotes. And perhaps they figure that anyone willing to read a difficult book ought to have a thoroughly tough experience.

To get to the substance of the work, Miyahira has obviously done his homework, though there seems to be a certain imbalance. On the one hand, the footnotes indicate the breadth of his reading. His discussions of Tertullian, Augustine, and Barth demonstrate his grasp of some of the greatest trinitarian theologians in the history of the Church. However, there are many who question whether Barth was really trinitarian. Cornelius Plantinga, to take only one prominent example, charges Barth along with Robert Jenson, Karl Rahner, and others, with being “reductionistic.” For, he claims, these theologians “reduce three divine persons to modes or roles of one person, thus robbing the doctrine of God of its rich communitarian overtones.”² It seems odd, then, that in spite of Miyahira’s interest in the “communitarian overtones” of the Trinity, he does not even include Plantinga’s famous essay in his bibliography, let alone offer significant interaction with Plantinga and others of the “social trinitarian” school who might have provided him with a very different sort of trinitarian model and one much closer to his own than Barth’s.³

The best part of the book is Miyahira’s discussions of the text of Scripture, in particular the Gospel of John. This is appropriate. Among the apostles, John is the trinitarian theologian and all serious trinitarian theology must devote mature reflection to the profound picture of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the fourth Gospel.

Vagueness

Unfortunately, Miyahira’s discussion of the Fourth Gospel, while thoughtful and thought-provoking, is marred. Even more unfortunately, it is marred by nothing other than his central thesis. For the invention of a new and remarkably awkward terminology for the doctrine of the Trinity obscures more than it facilitates the discussion. Although it is not altogether clear to me, especially in the light of the Japanese title of his book, whether Miyahira intends to add his “three betweenesses, one concord” to the traditional “three persons, one being” formula, or whether he offers it as an alternative, the formula does not seem to stand by itself. Nor does it, placed beside the traditional formula, offer much in the way of illumination. Rather than searching the annals of Japanese history and linguistics to discover terms that are supposed to communicate more effectively in the Japanese context, Miyahira could have offered a more helpful discussion of John’s Gospel by phrasing his insights in the language to which Japanese, no less than Western, Christians have become accustomed. Of course, that might not make a very interesting doctoral thesis!

² Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 23, no. 1 (April, 1988), p. 49.

³ The social trinitarian approach is briefly dealt with in footnotes, but not given full exposition in the body of the treatise. See, for example, footnote 12 on pp. 208-209.

The Thesis

Though we have referred to his thesis already, we need to offer a brief statement of the central points. Miyahira's proposal is that the second character of the Japanese word for humanity (ningen / 人間) — which is said to refer to the “betweenness” that characterizes humanity — and the Japanese word for concord (wa / 和) may be used to express the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that will better communicate the mystery of God to the Japanese people. The character for “betweenness” (間) communicates the fact that God is a relational God and “concord” the fact that Father, Son, and Spirit live in a perfect harmony of mutual understanding.

Two Major Problems

Whatever the merits of his proposal from the perspective of clarity in Biblical exposition, what about its value as a theological proposition? Again, I have to say that it seems to me less than successful. I should note in passing that I am not in principle against the notion of expressing the doctrine of the Trinity in terminology other than that which has become traditional. After all, there was plenty of diversity in the early Church itself, including disagreement over some of the most important theological terms.

But Miyahira's proposal is unsuccessful. To be specific, the thesis fails in two of its most important aspects, the linguistic foundations for the new formula and the notion of contextualization that supposedly throws light on past and recent discussions of the Trinity. In both of these areas Miyahira's treatise is remarkably naive. Where he has majored, the trinitarian theology of Tertullian, Augustine, and Barth, he has demonstrated scholarly judgment, done adequate research, and expounded positions with some nuance. However, in the two above-mentioned areas, his thesis is conspicuously flimsy.

Linguistics

With respect to the linguistic foundations of his thesis, for example, Miyahira's book progresses from an erudite discussion of Tertullian, Augustine, and Barth to a presentation of Japanese culture and language that must be judged relatively sophomoric. We are told about Japanese rice culture and agriculture. From there we jump to Japanese notions of “man” that are supposedly largely influenced by this rice culture. Even on a superficial reading, this blend of bygone Japanese culture and unsophisticated linguistics holds little promise for theology. In fact, the linguistic argument is not only naive, it is remarkably similar to the type of thinking about ancient Hebrew and Greek found in the theological discussions that James Barr put to rest in his well-known work, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.⁴

Words have meaning in a context. Historical and etymological considerations are interesting, but not only are they not essential to the definition of a modern Japanese word, they are usually not even particularly relevant. What is important is present day usage. To return to

⁴ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). It is possible, of course, that Miyahira believes that his own statements about the Japanese culture and language are not similar to what theological scholars in the past have said about Hebrew and Greek language and culture. But he might realize that among his readers someone may be struck by the similarity and complain. Shouldn't he at least give us a footnote which addresses the issue?

the matter of context, as Barr emphasizes, words have meaning in sentences, not as isolated units. But what is even more important is the ultimate context for the use of both words and sentences: the worldview of the speaker. Within that larger context, people use words with different meanings in different discourses, which is why every dictionary offers multiple meanings for a single word. Only the linguistically naive or the perversely political⁵ assume that all of these meanings somehow overlap or include one another.

What do Japanese people mean by the word “ningen”? Miyahira tells us the history of the word and offers an analysis by a philosopher, as if all Japanese people had a common notion of “ningen.” I think, rather, that even in Japan, it depends upon the person and his or her worldview. A television program some years ago, “A Warning for the 21st Century,” featured, among other things, two Japanese scholars arguing about the nature of man. While they both assumed the basic truthfulness of the theory of evolution, one of them, the Nobel prize winning Japanese biologist Tonegawa, asserted in no uncertain terms that man is a machine,⁶ while the Jungian psychologist Kawai, naturally, denied that man is a machine. Though these men operate from more or less the same starting point — biological evolution — they have come to have very different definitions of man. When they use the word “ningen,” they have in mind a being that conforms to the peculiarities of their own worldviews. The fact that they are both Japanese is not primary at all. This is not to say that Buddhist, Shinto, or Japanese background does not come out in various ways in Japanese life and thought. But there is no reason to believe that it is so fundamental to their view of humanity that most Japanese must be thought to be carrying around the kind of cultural baggage Miyahira imputes to them in his notion of “betweenness.”

Whatever ancient influence from the Japanese agricultural past a sufficiently sensitive observer might be able to detect in the thought of men like Tonegawa or Kawai, it is clear that they are attempting to offer a definition of man that fits their own modern secular views of the world. The question, then, is, what is the view of man that we find in the Christian worldview and what kind of terms should we develop to express that. If the proper word for Tonegawa is “machine” because that word expresses his understanding of man as a biologically determined being, what is the proper word for a Christian who views man as created in God’s image and likeness?

But I digress. The point is that the linguistic argument is basic to Miyahira’s whole work. If this is faulty — and it seems to me that his argument is grossly naive from a linguistic perspective — the entire thesis is undermined. In spite of its importance to his whole thesis, the linguistic side of the argument seems neither well researched nor adequately considered.

⁵ I am thinking of feminists, for example, who insist that words like “chairman” contain some hidden bias.

⁶ Ironically, after Tonegawa went on to explain, with some emphasis, that there is nothing in man that cannot be explained by scientific method, he also added that humans are not simple machines. Rather they have “many random elements” in them. This is the kind of magic that only Nobel prize winners can perform! On the one hand, Tonegawa pontificates that man is totally explicable by scientific method. Then, at the same time and with no apparent sense of contradiction, he also asserts that random elements, which in the very nature of the case no science can explain, abound in this rational machine. The question now is whether or not scientific method has any explanation for why a machine like Tonegawa wishes to perplex us with such paradoxes!

Contextualization

But linguistics is not the only major problem. Miyahira follows Charles Kraft's approach to what is called "contextualization."⁷ The idea is that Tertullian and Augustine, together with the early Church in general "contextualized" theology in their construction of the doctrine of the Trinity. Barth with his Hegelian method is presented as a modern example of contextualization. Since, Miyahira argues, every one else is "contextualizing" according to the time and culture in which they live, Japanese theologians should, too.

There are numerous problems with this whole approach. To begin with, the notion of "contextualization" itself is controversial. One would think that a doctoral dissertation that relies so heavily on the assertion that the ancient Church Fathers "contextualized" would have a great deal more to say about the whole subject. What, for example, does "contextualization" mean? Since there are significant differences in the answer to this question, we would expect some discussion of the different answers and justification for the usage that Miyahira prefers. We would also expect some serious attempt to demonstrate, not simply presuppose, that the notion is legitimately applicable to the ancient Church.

If Miyahira had adequately considered those questions, I think he might have dropped his whole project. Perhaps not. At least it would have been greatly modified. For the fact is that what is called contextualization is not some easily identifiable, invariable, or simple procedure. Which is to say, not all the Church Fathers have done the same kind of "contextualization." Moreover, what Augustine and Tertullian did in the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is arguably very different from what Barth did in his reformulation.

It seems to me that Miyahira has missed the very heart of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. I am not saying that he is a poor scholar. I am saying that I think he has specialized in depth on a few issues while missing the larger picture of development, especially as that relates to a matter of central concern to his theses. What I am asserting is that in connection with the complex notion of "contextualization," Miyahira has missed the general flow of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. What I believe we see in the early Church is that in the earlier fathers there is a great deal of cultural and philosophical compromise with Greek ideas of the "logos." Origen is the perfect example here. But the Nicene trinitarianism is very different from Origen's ideas and may be described as what Harvey Conn called "decontextualization," the elimination of foreign cultural elements from theology.

To be brief, scholars like R. P. C. Hanson, T. F. Torrance, and J. N. D. Kelly, though they disagree with one another on various details, certainly do not describe the growth and development of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of the "contextualization" model. Where they make comments that are relevant, they seem to point in the opposite direction, a doctrine that borrows terms, but radically changes the fundamental meaning of the words as compared with the general or philosophical usage. Above all, the last thing we find in the Church Fathers is an attempt to accommodate their theology to the language of the surrounding culture. Rather, men like Athanasius directed their energy entirely to finding means to express the Biblical truth as accurately as possible in the language available.

If Kraft's notion of "contextualization" does not apply to what the early Fathers did — even if it may be appropriate to describe Barth's theology — then Miyahira's own suggestions

⁷ See page 136 ff. and the notes on p. 159. Kraft's approach is presupposed throughout the discussion.

for revising the doctrine cannot be justified as an imitation of their sort of theologizing. Indeed the very legitimacy of “contextualizing” as an attempt to conform doctrinal statements to a particular culture is thrown into doubt. It is one thing to observe that we are inescapably creatures of context who can only communicate with words that make sense in particular cultures. It is something altogether different, however, to claim that the fact of man’s inescapable contextuality legitimizes a self-conscious effort to mold theological expression into the forms of a particular culture.

Is it not clear that the basic question is whether or not the Biblical worldview offers a sufficiently complex and comprehensive framework for a theological reconstruction of culture according to the standards of Christian teaching? Why, for example, should Christians be forced to cull through cultural resources for theological language, when experts in the computer world make up new words in order to communicate the precise technical meaning they wish to convey? If the Bible gives Christians a distinct metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, should not Christians attempt to become ever more faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures, molding culture in the direction of the Biblical worldview, rather than the other way around?

There is another question of fundamental import. Does Miyahira’s proposed terminology actually help Japanese people understand the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity? Even if the foundations of his approach were considered theologically weak, if Miyahira suggested an approach to the doctrine of the Trinity that enabled Japanese people to obtain a deeper grasp of Biblical truth, there may be significant merit in it.

The problem, however, is that Miyahira attempts to communicate truth about the totally personal God by multiplying impersonal and abstract terms. In a land in which Buddhists believe that the ultimate reality cannot possibly be personal and Shintoists tend to erase or minimize fundamental distinctions between non-personal and personal reality, one might think that the most important issue on the agenda of trinitarian theology would be the development of an approach that emphasizes that God is totally personal. Why, under the cultural circumstances in which Miyahira labors, should one probe the tenebrous recesses of the Japanese mentality to extract terms even more esoteric than those of the Middle Ages? How can such supererogatory labors really enable Japanese Christians to better understand the personal God?

Social trinitarians, by highlighting the reality of interpersonal relationships in God, opened the way for a deeper appreciation for God’s love — though their approach is not altogether historically new. Already Richard of St. Victor in the 12th century argued for a relational view of the Trinity in his doctrine of God as three Persons devoted to one another in love. In the Reformed tradition, Abraham Kuyper recognized the importance of the Reformed idea of a *pactum salutis*, but, unlike most Reformed theologians, did not limit the idea to soteriology. Kuyper argued that the only way to truly take into account the full personhood of Father, Son, and Spirit, while at the same time, avoiding any tendency toward tritheism is to acknowledge the covenantal relationship of the Persons as an eternal aspect of God’s being. The concord of God is the covenant oneness of three Persons who mutually indwell one another and share a fullness of covenantal life and love.

If Evangelical trinitarianism is going to make a serious contribution to trinitarian discussion, it must, like its ancient Fathers, apply itself to serious exegesis and creative effort to escape the limits of non-Christian thought. Miyahira rather than offering a helpful approach to understanding the Trinity instead accosts the Japanese believer with the kind of befuddling words and concepts that may delight scholars by their abstruseness, but will hardly lead the man

or woman in the pew to bow down before God with a deeper appreciation of who He is or what it means to worship and serve Him.

That, at least, is my own non-Japanese opinion of the practical value of his approach. Perhaps Japanese Christians will find Miyahira's doctrine more helpful than foreign speakers of the language. However that may be, the problem of impersonal language remains. Add to this other fundamental questions about his whole approach, and I can only conclude that Miyahira is heading in the wrong direction. That he intends to express the doctrine of the Trinity so that Japanese people can understand it is commendable. I hope that he will be open to the possibility that he needs to fundamentally rethink his work.

Conclusion

One final word.⁸ Miyahira mentions at the beginning of his work that he is disturbed that Christianity in Japan is stagnated, especially in comparison with Christianity in Korea and China. This is certainly true. But why look into theological formulations for the reason? Have the Chinese or the Koreans developed their own peculiar trinitarian doctrines? Is it because Chinese Christians in house churches have a deeper appreciation for the doctrine of the Trinity that their churches are growing? How can we make the jump from the observation that Japanese Christianity lacks the vitality of Chinese and Korean Christianity to the need for a new trinitarian terminology when no nation in which Christianity is blossoming ever experienced its growth because of its trinitarian doctrinal expression?

Does it not make better sense to look into the covenant word of God and ask why God's curse might rest on the Church in any particular nation? Might not the God of Daniel be offended at compromise with idolatry? Might not the God of Ezra refuse to bless those who tolerate marriages between Christian and non-Christian? Might not the God of the covenant remove His blessing from our families if we neglect to educate our children in His covenant truth (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-9)?

From the perspective of God's covenant, we should assume that the failure of the Japanese church is ethical. I think that it is grounded in the compromise with idolatry that characterized her churches during the Second World War. Even now, too many churches refuse to stand clearly against the idolatry of ancestor worship. The Japanese way, as Miyahira himself observed, is to "behave in such a way as to adjust themselves to the particular situation in which they need to relate to others. . . . To feel alienated from the context in which they are situated would be almost tantamount to denial of their existence."⁹ Indeed. It is just this sort of self-denial that Japanese Christians avoid. They want to be Japanese and be part of their society. But here is the problem: it is precisely the sort of self-denial that Japanese tend to avoid that Jesus demands. We cannot be His disciples unless we forsake ultimate loyalty to human society. We are called to hate father and mother, brother and sister, husband and wife. We must hate even our own lives (Luke 14:24 ff.). My own fear is that the Japanese Church has compromised its loyalty to Christ. If that is true, then the issue is much deeper than "contextualization." Until Japanese Christians take up the cross and follow Jesus, Japanese churches will continue to be withered twigs on a wilting branch.

⁸ There are a number of relatively minor issues on which I disagree with Miyahira and also a number of places in which I believe that he offers insightful Scriptural exegesis. In this short review, I am only addressing what seem to me to be the most important aspects of his thesis.

⁹ Miyahira, p. 118.