Christian Witness in an Age of Violent Competing Fundamentalisms

Lecturer: Prof Sathianathan Clarke

Religions tout peace, peace even when they themselves are identified more with violence on the world stage. Some of this stems from the expansion of fundamentalism, whereby religions cultivate the muscular, inflexible and imperial from their scriptural and theological storehouses to construe their witness in the world. Against the escalation of what I term competing religious fundamentalisms, I envision Christian witness as encompassing two aspects of engagement with the world: “the undoing project” dismantles beliefs and practices that legitimize the violent establishment of divine imperial order and “the redoing project” circulates nonviolent ways of living between religions, mindfully completing each other in God’s economy of abundance.

The first part of the lecture analyzes the absolutist, conflictual and expansionist vision and mission of fundamentalisms in the world as a religious problem. Using Islam and Christianity as competing fundamentalisms, I glean religious themes that bind these present-day violent movements. In the second deconstructive segment of the lecture, I make an audacious though honest effort to disarm the violence that is extracted from Scripture to legitimize such a destructive worldview. I suggest that an embodied canon of nonviolent self-giving (Jesus Christ) be utilized to relativize and humanize an encrusted canon of violent self-expansion. In the third constructive part of the lecture, I revisit the sacrosanct theological concepts of ‘grace’ and ‘work’. I reinterpret both of these key doctrines with an eye toward curing the violence that religions have fermented in the world. I suggest that ‘distributive grace’ and ‘costly work’ are Christian offerings to guide witness in our violence-ridden world.

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