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Progressive Christianity from the Perspective of Constructive-Decolonial Theology: A Mirror of Liminal Space for Contemporary Theology

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Abstract

The emergence of the progressive Christian movement has sparked controversy and is considered a deviation from traditional Christian teachings. However, on the other hand, progressive Christianity is also seen as an effort to contextualize the Christian faith within the ever-evolving realities of the times. This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to illustrate the phenomenon of progressive Christianity. The aim of this study is to explore progressive Christianity and its development from the perspective of constructive-decolonial theology, thereby opening a more constructive paradigm in line with contemporary human life. Progressive Christianity is viewed as a "liminal space," or between old traditions and renewal in contemporary Christian theology. Constructive-decolonial theology are used as perspectives to understand progressive Christianity, where constructive theology encourages the Christian faith to exhibit dynamic openness. Progressive Christianity is a movement that has emerged in response to social, cultural, and theological changes. Openness and willingness to listen to and engage in constructive dialogue amidst differences are necessary, making liminality a space for ongoing theological creativity and transformation.

Keywords: *Progressive Christianity; Liminality; Constructive-Decolonial*

Introduction

Theology is a way for humans to understand how God works in their lives. The way people do theology will show how they try to understand God's work in their lives. Everyone has their own way of doing theology, so it is not surprising that many theologies emerge as a way for people to understand themselves and their relationship with God. Therefore, over time each theology began to be contextualized, seeing how it is related from the past to the present and will continue to be based on the context of human life. Contextualization combines past cultural experiences, namely the biblical tradition that has been lived throughout history in the scriptures, with present cultural experiences ([Wiharjokusumo, 2022](#)). Human efforts to understand themselves (culture) and theology (gospel) have given birth to a comprehensive theological study, namely contextual theology.

In relation to contextual theology, the author will explore more deeply and more complexly what is included in constructive theology. Constructive theology is simply how a theologian tries to build his own theology. In addition, non-theological sources are considered in constructive theology as one of the basic materials for constructing the theology of a theologian. Faithful and social imagination are used by a constructive theologian for a house of faith for his environment ([Adiprasetya, 2019](#)).

As is known now with the viral "progressive Christianity" causing controversy among the people and pastors. This progressive Christianity went viral because of the statement of a pastor with the initials BS, he told the teachings that he holds and believes about salvation and the authority of the Bible. According to Desrika Manalu in Kompasiana, progressive Christianity is a teaching that adapts to the development of the times, but is considered not true Christianity because it rejects the Bible ([Manalu, 2024](#)). Progressive Christianity is a

movement within Christianity that emerged in response to changes in social, cultural, and theological thought. The movement developed in the 19th and 20th centuries amid shifting values in Western society. These changes included advances in science, civil rights, women's rights, and new views on moral issues such as sexuality and social justice (Yerichokana, 2024). Progressive Christianity is a movement among Christians who continue to identify as Christians, but believe that Christian teachings should be updated to suit the present, and take into account modern science, historical criticism, and liberal humanism (King, 2023). The emergence of “progressive Christianity” to the surface through media, such as *TikTok*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Facebook* and others, has made discussions about “progressive Christianity” increasingly get a place in every discussion. Several YouTube channels that discuss progressive Christianity as apologetic channels, namely Verbum Veritatis (2024), Muriwali Yanto Matelu (2024), and Brave Talk (2024). Some of these YouTube channels are channels that disagree with progressive Christianity and even label it as “heresy”. Progressive Christianity is also an impact of the mobilization of religions (exclusive-pluralist). Thus, “progressive Christianity” is in a circuit or cycle of pluralistic acceptance of the existence of other creatures.

The issue of this has become controversial among Christians and religious figures such as a pastor with the initials GL, who was included in the Manado post. The pastor said that the teachings of progressive Christians are wrong, because their main teachings emphasize aspects of the state of the heart and good deeds (Mokalu, 2024). The author sees that in fact “progressive Christianity” has found a place in the tradition of contemporary theology, which the author calls “liminality” or the space between. The author sees this because from the controversy that occurs, the pros and cons can be read and are part of the “threshold space”. The threshold space (liminality) occurs when “something” that appears can cause two elements to be considered balanced, because it cannot be considered as a representative of one party. For example, some consider “progressive Christianity” as heresy, but some consider “progressive Christianity” as a way of constructive theology or not heretical. According to Andrew Lengkong, the “progressive Christianity” movement has become a source of inspiration and reflection for many people in their efforts to understand and live the teachings of Christianity in the context of an ever-evolving era (Lengkong, 2024). This is what the author means, that “liminal space” cannot represent one party, it will be between two sides, on one side it is rejected and the other side it is accepted..

The author uses the word “constructive” borrowing the term from Joas Adiprasetya's (2019) constructive theology is to show that progressive Christianity actually provides a reflection for Christian faith in general to show dynamic openness without eliminating the essence of faith itself (believing in Christ Jesus as savior). Then the word “decolonial” is a form of local theological determination against the influence of Western “ideo-theology” which tends to dominate other theologies (the other theology). The author's main emphasis is on the desire to “dominate” or “hegemonize” others, not on a particular ideology of Western Christianity.

Based on the description of this background, the author will then conduct a study from the perspective of constructive-decolonial theology, where is the place of “progressive

Christianity” in the eyes of the Christian tradition? Is “progressive Christianity” actually a form of constructive theology in Indonesia? How is “progressive Christianity” experienced as a reflection of contemporary theology that is in a liminal space? So the purpose of this study is to explore “progressive Christianity” which gives rise to a liminal space for contemporary theology from the perspective of constructive-decolonial theology, thus opening up a more constructive paradigm with current human life. The author is not defending any one “building” of theology, but starting from the context so that it is written as scientifically as possible to produce a complete, constructive writing.

Method

The research method that the author used in conducting this research is a qualitative method. According to Marinu Waruwu (2023), qualitative research method is a research method that uses narratives or words to describe and explain the meaning of various phenomena, symptoms, and certain social situations. In this approach, the researcher acts as the main instrument to understand and interpret each phenomenon, symptom, and social situation. Therefore, researchers must master the theory to analyze the differences between theoretical concepts and existing reality.

The approach used by the author in this study is a descriptive approach of the literature review type. Descriptive research is a research strategy in which researchers investigate events and phenomena in an individual's life, and ask one or a group of individuals to tell their life experiences. This information is then reorganized by the researcher in the form of a descriptive chronology. The main characteristic of descriptive research is that the data obtained is in the form of words and pictures, not numbers as in quantitative research. Another definition of descriptive research is a form of research that aims to describe existing phenomena, both natural and human made (Rusli, 2021). The literature review that the author uses is books, both electronic and printed, journal articles, news, magazines, periodicals, and others.

Result and Discussion

Progressive Christian Genealogy

Alisa (2020) Childers in her book entitled *Another Gospels? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity*, she made a comment, she said:

“The pastor and the church went on to become a “progressive Christian community.” At the same time, Christians all across the country were having the same types of conversations on internet message boards, in coffee shops, and in church classrooms. They were questioning their long-held assumptions about the nature of God and the Bible, the exclusivity of Christianity, and biblical norms regarding gender and sexual orientation. These disenchanted souls found each other. They wrote blogs. They penned books. Churches began identifying as progressive and removing or editing the faith statements on their websites.”

Childers describes that the “progressive Christian” movement emerged as a result of people’s anxiety about the existence of truth claims in the Bible and Christian tradition, which are too exclusive to the existence of the Other. Progressive Christianity is better known as “liberal theology”, where the beliefs believed in this tradition are adopted from the life of modernism that developed in the West. Christian theologians call progressive Christianity progressive dispensationalism. Then during the 1970s, the evangelical Christian movement developed a style and coalition that was later called “progressive evangelicalism” (Olson, 2022). Some of these terms are also similar to the terms used by those who call or consider themselves progressive Christians, as expressed by Roger E. Olson, who said that progressive Christians are often also called “progressive dispensationalism” (progressive dispensationalism). John E. Bowers (2016) emphasizes the aspect of spiritual change in a person based on his experience as a priest or spiritual teacher.

The movement encompasses some aspects of liberal Christianity, the roots of which can be traced back to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries. While progressive Christianity shares some similarities with the social gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it can also be seen as a reaction to that movement. The progressive Christian movement argues that the church needs to reexamine and adapt its methods, practices, and beliefs in line with cultural changes.

The “progressive” movement began to emerge in the 1960s, when the sexual revolution was taking place. After Western society had gone through World Wars I and II, there was a nostalgia or desire to return to the “golden age of the West,” namely Victorian culture. Victorian culture was a syncretism of Christian values, modernism, and the British Empire. However, it also signified Western society’s attachment to religious traditions and a political system that tended to be authoritarian. Coupled with the context of the Cold War, the state made military service mandatory for young men to fight in Vietnam (Nobel, 2024). More precisely, progressive Christianity is a belief that arises from self-transformation or self-reflection on what has been experienced, thus changing the paradigm from conservative to a more progressive life (Martin, 2020).

Progressive Christianity is present in a position to renew or move towards dynamic renewal in Christian life and create a life of greater pluralism or even superplurality. It is undeniable that progressive Christianity comes from the heart of Christianity, because it is rooted in the awareness of questioning faith or truth claims in the Enlightenment era in Christianity itself. Genealogically, a person does not actually move from Christianity to progressive Christianity, but rather to religious deconversion. A narrative change that occurs to a person because of an experience that makes him sick or feels disadvantaged because of an experience that brings him pain.

According to King (2023), deconversion is a distinct experience, though it shares some similarities with conversion, in that it places greater emphasis on reassessing one’s previous religious beliefs. Whereas conversion narratives present a new system of meaning and obedience characterized by a linear shift from rebellion to obedience, deconversion narratives emerge from a cultural critique of previous beliefs and practices. In other words, deconversion narratives focus on the identity that the individual has left behind. Their power

lies not in the initial experience that is acknowledged, but in the way the individual recounts and reflects on that experience after the fact. Thus, progressive Christianity is a reinterpretation or reconstruction of what has been essentialized, to make it more dynamic.

Constructive-Decolonial: An Attempt to Decolonize the Theological Chambers

Adiprasetya (2019) provides a limitation of “constructive theology” borrowed from expert Jason A. Wyman, namely non-universal theology, non-eternal theology, and non-essential theology. Non-universal theology means that every theological building is formed from a local perspective, namely that every theological departure is always local (the theologian's social context) and perspectival. Theology is not a medicine that can cure every disease, although the recognition of the truth of Christ is maintained, but basically theology cannot be applied universally in every place and to every person.

Theology is not eternal, This gives the understanding that if theology is eternal, then it is no longer dynamic (continuous), while theology is a characterization of man's continuous search for God, so theology must be open at all times; not free from criticism. Theology must be attentive to itself, meaning that theology (by theologians) does not only make human suffering a context, but rather as the text itself (Adiprasetya, 2019). As the author of this article, I agree with Adiprasetya that theology is not eternal and cannot be eternalized.

Theology is not essential, when Adiprasetya (2023) quoted from James B. Nelson about essentialism, that essentialism is “a reality that can be defined objectively... (and) has its own intrinsic meanings”. Essentialism in theology will easily create uniformity. When seeing something different it will be considered heretical and heretical. Excessive essentialism will create disbelief towards others.

Regarding Adiprasetya's perspective on “non-essential theology”. Theologians try to deconstruct the single meaning of theology itself, and place it in the (local) context of the theologian. According to Adiprasetya, universal, eternal, and essential implementation is a trap that theologians often do when doing theology, especially the absolutization of the perspective of theology itself, then an obscuration or “scotosis” appears, as a result of which various other perspectives are ignored and rejected (Adiprasetya, 2023). Constructive theology is built on the awareness of the diversity of theology, the nature and attitude of being open to other theologies is the nuance of constructive theology. Constructive theology according to Shai Cherry: “*Constructive theology is a critically conscious integration of interdisciplinarity and activism/advocacy. Much of the focus of Christian constructive theology is grounded in the Torah's liberation motif*” (Cherry, 2020).

Contextual theology tends to propose a single meta-method or method that is then applied universally. This kind of theology impoverishes itself. Constructive theology is more about the relationship between the entire faith community which applies the diversity of texts that it has or faces and randomly but responsibly when managing intertextual relations creatively and imaginatively. This is intended for the transformation of theology by a theologian who moves to the locality of their theology, so that non-theological texts can become the basic material for the construction of their theology (Adiprasetya, 2019).

The author himself feels that there are many “chambers” of theology that need to be evaluated by theologians themselves. The main awareness of theologians is to consider the

theology that is built, whether it does not dominate other theologies or in an effort to determine one theology to be the “all-powerful” or “superpowerful” theology. As Adiprasetya said, constructive theology is not yet final or in the process of development in order to achieve its various unique forms and this needs to be done by theologians (Adiprasetya, 2019). A theological transformation is very necessary, so that theologians are forced to delve into every theological building based on its local social context. Basically, it is necessary to acknowledge that the theology that is built and widely accepted in Indonesia is Western theology (Raintung and Raintung, 2020). This awareness must arise in the minds of theologians in building their theology, so that they can carry out evaluations by accepting all criticism in the midst of developments in a direction that is always dynamic.

So through this awareness, the theology that is present is more constructive and can be discussed academically. The author says that there are parts of theology that need to be decolonized because of the awareness that the nuance of theology that is now in Indonesia is Western-Western. The way of doing constructive theology actually has implications for “*decentering and liberation*” or to break away from the center and liberation, in other words to move away from the roots of Western concerns (Segovia, 2000). A complete evaluation needs to be carried out by a constructive theologian regarding the buildings of contemporary theology, so that the theologian becomes an “impulse” or as far as possible provides stimulation to other theologians.

Apologetic Attitudes Towards Progressive Christianity

What kind of apologetic attitude is appropriate to the presence of “progressive Christianity”? Is an apologetic system needed to respond to “progressive Christianity”? Before answering this question, first know what apologetics is. The Greek word “*apologia*” which are absorbed into the English language “apology” and “apologize”, the two words are used in Christian and non-Christian literature. Because of the understanding that apologetics is a concern of various religions, not only Christianity. The word “*apologia*” appears in Acts 25:16; Philippians 1:7, 16; 2 Timothy 4:16; 1 Peter 3:15; 1 Corinthians 9:3. Apologetics is basically the accounting of faith and efforts to defend it, and how to provide various answers regarding the Christian faith and its truth (1 Ptr. 3:15) (Hutahaeon, 2019). Apologetics is a message of defense or accountability delivered to others. The message contained in apologetics must be understood by the listener according to the speaker's intent.

Failure in this case is called miscommunication, which can cause misunderstandings between the communicator and the communicant. Apologetics is carried out with a defensive approach but aims to provide clarification regarding the truth of God's Word. God's mission is delivered peacefully but is still able to explain the truth of God's Word. A defensive apologetic approach also opens up opportunities for the audience to hear and accept the truth of God's Word, so that God's mission can be delivered in a peaceful way (Suaji dan Prayitno, 2024). The author feels it is wrong if the communicator has to give an answer to the communicant with the hope that what is conveyed can be accepted by the communicant.

In addition to apologetics packaged in a defensive form, there is also one packaged in an offensive form. Apologetics that is carried out offensively is a type of apologetics that is given to the opposing party as a form of attack or questioning the existence of the other

party's beliefs. The act of defending the faith that is offensively directed at them that their "theology" is wrong or incorrect. As a clarification, this action is not to belittle or insult the other people (Harefa, et, all, 2023). Once again, that the act of apologetics whether done defensively or offensively, shows that theological activities are very exclusive and close themselves off from criticism and even lock faith as something that is truer than others. Finally, it is trapped in the marginalization of other theologies, so that it is possible that there has been one theology that has been built and is eternal.

Regarding "apologetics", the author sees a mistake that has been built by apologists. Apologetics build a way of communicating the defense of faith with a sense of retention towards the communicant, meaning how the apologist tries to defend his faith but hopes that what is conveyed is accepted by the party who questions or attacks the faith. This often happens externally, or apologetics with different beliefs. Caution in apologetics must also be considered so as not to get caught up in the arrogance of apologetic (Hudianto et, all. 2023). Why is it important for the author to explore this a little, because this kind of method of defending the faith generally avoids criticism, is not open, considers its own beliefs to be the most correct, considers others to be heretics, and there will even be mutual hatred and bringing down of others. The author also sees this happening in the Christian life that is apologetic internally, namely in the case of progressive Christianity which is considered by progressive Christianity to be "another theology" that needs to be eliminated (heresy).

The author offers an extract of Daniel Boyarin's critique of a view, because the church must criticize and the church must be open to criticism, for an important offer for theologians using a method of criticism "Generous Critique" (Mihaely, 2022). This criticism is translated as "generous criticism" or "great criticism". This is a criticism of a certain culture in the past that then emerged as a current agenda. A generous attitude is needed to submit criticism and must be possessed by everyone in terms of criticism. This criticism is formulated in order to protect culture and without playing around with the truth (Biale, 1996). Perhaps this kind of apologetics is what fits the presence of "progressive Christianity".

Liminality of Contemporary Christian Theology

Contemporary Christian theology is in a liminal space or threshold between old tradition and renewal. This liminal space emerged as a consequence of critical questions about the truth claims in the Christian tradition, as well as efforts to adapt Christian teachings to the context of the ever-changing era. In this liminal space, there is a tug-of-war between acceptance and rejection of new ideas that emerge. As stated by Joas Adiprasetya & Cahyono B. Wibowo (2023), that liminal space is *adventus* and *adventurus*, which means a life that is open to the outside and accepts all risks with courage (Ad). It seems that progressive Christians who come with all the courage and risk are able to be accepted.

It should be, when "theology" that is considered not in accordance with theology that has been believed to be fundamental theology in Christianity begins to emerge, it is not attacked or criticized without any basis or research basis, even though in reality "progressive Christianity" has existed before in the West (America and its surroundings). The main difficulty for theology in general in accepting "other theology" is dialogical activity. In fact, the main narrative of "progressive Christians" or those who claim to be progressive

Christians is about humanity and social issues that are current challenges that have escaped the attention of Christian theology in general. Richard M. Gamble commented on progressive Christianity, that it needs to be respected intellectually, credibly, relevantly, and liberatingly, because progressive Christian theology is a therapeutic vehicle for modern humans entering the 20th century. Quoting the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick in David M. Felten & Jeff Procter-Murphy. Stagnation in thought or effort means death to Christianity, as it does to any other important movement (Felten dan Murphy, 2012). Stagnation, not change, is the deadliest enemy to Christianity, for this is a progressive world.

Progressive Christianity is present as one form of liminality in contemporary theology. Its presence has caused controversy because it is considered by some as a deviation from traditional Christian teachings. However, on the other hand, progressive Christianity is also seen as an effort to reinterpret and contextualize the Christian faith in the reality of the ever-evolving era. Sharon Michelle O. Pattiasina, Izak Y. M. Lattu, & Ebenhaizer I. Nuban Timo (2018) reveals that liminality will form a community with a new character, meaning that the community that is formed is anti-structure and not a structured community, because structure will create distance, inequality, and create boundaries between genders.

In this liminal space, a very pluralistic dynamic occurs. On the one hand, there is openness and acceptance of diverse perspectives, but on the other hand, there is also the danger of forms of rejection or even insults to old traditions. The liminal space becomes an arena where various points of view negotiate and engage in dialectics. The author uses the term “constructive” to indicate that progressive Christianity actually provides a reflection of Christian faith in general to show dynamic openness without eliminating the essence of faith itself (belief in Christ Jesus). The liminality of contemporary Christian theology is indeed full of challenges and tensions. However, it also contains opportunities to develop a theology that is more constructive, dynamic, and open to diverse perspectives. The challenge is how to build a dialogue that respects each other amidst differences, and to make liminality a space for creativity and ongoing theological transformation.

Conclusion

Progressive Christianity is a movement in Christianity that emerged as a response to changes in social, cultural, and theological thought. Its presence has caused controversy because it is considered by some as a deviation from traditional Christian teachings. The author sees Progressive Christianity as a “liminal space” or threshold between old traditions and renewal in contemporary Christian theology. This liminal space is an arena where various points of view negotiate and engage in dialectics. Constructive theology invites Christian faith to demonstrate dynamic openness without eliminating the essence of faith. Meanwhile, decolonial theology seeks to free theology from the influence of the dominance of Western “theological ideologies”. On the contrary, liminal space demands openness and a willingness to listen to each other and engage in constructive dialogue.

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