

Sample:

'Just right'. This is the key refrain in the Goldilocks story as she tries out the chairs, porridge, and beds of the three bears, whose home she has entered (apparently illegally, but nothing turns on that). 'Just right' is also a good summary of a formidable (if not conclusive) apologetic argument for God's existence. The argument suggests that it is staggeringly implausible, if not impossible, for so many finely tuned conditions necessary for human life (size of planet, atmosphere, distance from sun, etc.) to occur without conscious design. Our planet is a Goldilocks planet, with the competing extremes of heat and cold, light and dark, all just right for our existence. But alter the balance, and our life becomes impossible: too close to the sun, and our water is no longer liquid; or if the Earth is too small, it becomes harder to retain its gases.

The Goldilocks 'just right' idea can be applied to theology, too. In fact, I think it must be. One of the most powerful tensions in theology as a discipline is the tension between the local and the global. And here too we need a Goldilocks zone.

By 'local' in this context I mean theology's tendency to drive down into the particular. Thus, a theology gets qualified by particular adjectives: Liberation theology, Pentecostal theology, Black theology, Charismatic theology, Queer theology, and so forth. The particular adjective readily defines the theology from the viewpoint of the human who constructs the theology, and it delineates how Christian truth seems to them. There again, the theology can be qualified at the level of sub-disciplines, or sub-sub-disciplines, as with a study of John's Gospel using the tools of, say, Jungian psychology or Schüssler Fiorenza's liberation hermeneutics. But again, the result is a local theology since one or two particular tools are used out of a complete range, just as one may localise oneself at Palm Beach on Sydney's northern coast rather than the UK's oddly named Bognor Regis. This comparison highlights that a key question is not simply what 'local' tools one uses, but why one has chosen them. Thus, Paul's material on the submission due from slaves looks very different if one assumes that all history is really about class warfare.

Now, 'local' theologies have many strengths. Indeed, to some extent such localisations are necessary. The necessity arises because humans are finite knowers, and it is good to recognise that I am a white middle-aged male enculturated into the UK's professional classes. Here, 'localised' theology reminds me of my finitude as a justified yet sinful human creature in this particular society, space, and time. Further, I am reminded therefore of my necessary dependence on other local theologies to offset my limitations of race and class, as well as my professional limitations as a systematician who definitely needs the correcting perspectives of other theologians, whether they teach in seminaries and colleges or from the pulpit in local churches.

But 'local' theologies have their perils. A local theology can so stress the particular that what falls outside my own particularity becomes alien to me. Thus, the UK does not legally recognise slavery: if I restrict myself to my particularity of white middle-aged professional UK male, then Paul's slavery passages, including the duties on slave-owners, seem existentially irrelevant to me. Moreover, precisely because what falls outside my 'location' is alien to me, I can be isolated and deaf to some of what calls me to leave aspects of my location. My choice of 'local theology' can be deeply isolating, or better, insulating. A way of doing theology that could help me recognise finitude can instead allow me to lock myself into it. Sadly, the focus of local theology can become the 'local' human, not the transcendent God to whom that local theology should refer, an example at worst of theology morphing into anthropology.

Further, it is not just a question of being unable to hear others from different local theologies. Increasingly it may be a question of being unable to speak to them as well. I can become so obsessed with the technicalities of my own field that I both forget and am unable to communicate to those outside it. And sometimes, of course, those outside can play deaf. It might be tempting, for instance, to discount this article because its author is a white middle-aged professional, etc.

Naturally, I am going to suggest that local theology must be tempered by a more 'global' theology and that we need a theological Goldilocks zone which captures both local and global. However, before I do, we should recall why 'global' theology cannot simply replace local theologies.

By 'global' in this context I am not merely getting at the idea that theologians and ministers can learn truths which go beyond their own local positions, but also need to be heard within other local theologies. A westerner can have something of permanent value to say to an easterner and vice versa. At its best, global obviously gets beyond the local. But adopting a 'global' position can run the risk of suggesting we think we have expressed those truths completely and exhaustively, to the exclusion of other local theologies. It is worth remembering here how easy it is for an apparently local theology to *act* as if it were a fully 'global' theology. That is a significant danger given the way that a particular local theology may seem especially *chic*.

Two observations are appropriate about global theologies that claim not just truth going beyond the local, but exhaustive truth beyond the local. First, the tendency is to focus on me the theologian as the possessor of an exhaustive truth. Sometimes you do hear evangelicals talking about 'mastering', or 'cracking', or 'mining' a passage of Scripture. The trouble is such language can suggest that that passage has nothing fresh or deeper to say to me. There is profound spiritual danger here for me. I am tempted to see myself as just a bit more like God in my theological grasp than is possible, or fitting, for a human creature. Once again, theology becomes anthropology.

The second observation is that while we evangelicals rightly insist on both the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, at times we seem in more danger of confusing sufficiency with exhaustiveness than we think. And unfortunately, it is tempting to indulge that confusion since an ostensibly exhaustive account of, say, Green Christianity can become one which squeezes out any possible alternative view. Exhaustiveness allows my own account of social engagement, for instance, to become final. Postmoderns surely have a point here, that totalising truth-claims can offer intoxicating power.

By this stage we can see that, perhaps bizarrely, over-stressing either the local or the global leads to the same result: the morphing of theology into anthropology. This is why theologians, whether ministers or teachers, simply must stay in the Goldilocks zone, if, that is, they want to be theologians rather than anthropologists.

What does that look like? Older generations of evangelicals would remind us that the knowledge of God is in two broad classes: there is God's perfect self-knowledge of himself (sometimes called archetypal knowledge), and there is the knowledge God has of himself that he has communicated to us (sometimes called ectypal knowledge). God has indeed spoken to us, and his words are true. But we do not hold God's entire knowledge of himself. To have that would entail knowing all of God's perfect attributes completely and in complete relation to each other. Since we believe those perfections to be infinite, it is not possible for a finite creature to know the truth of them in the same way the infinite God does, namely, exhaustively. His archetypal self-knowledge is true *and* exhaustive, while our ectypal knowledge is true *but not* exhaustive.

That category of ectypal knowledge gives us space to be rightly local (my knowledge of God from his self-disclosure is not exhaustive) and rightly global (my knowledge of God from his self-disclosure has truths even for those who are not white middle-aged, etc., and I should speak those truths). Consistently seeing my theological knowledge derived from God's self-disclosure as ectypal, not archetypal, helps keep me in the theological Goldilocks zone. In spiritual terms it helps or requires me to be humble before truth (for I am a creature, not God), yet confident in truth (for I am a creature to whom God has spoken and whom God has created to be spoken to). Humility *and* confidence. Evangelicals rightly decry the distorted humility of agnostic theologies which have no confidence that God speaks at all. Equally, evangelicals need to beware an over-confidence that blurs the distinction between ectypal and archetypal. To focus that for myself, maybe I should ask if to my mind when a student or church member disagrees with my sermon or my lecture, it actually counts as disagreeing with God.