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From the World House to
an Oikopoetic Interreligious Imagination
Dr. Joas Adiprasetya1

Global Vision : Milk's World House
Prior to his assassination in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. published *Where Do We Go from Here:* Chaos or Community? that includes a chapter titled "The World House." He begins the chapter by maintaining vibrantly,

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found
a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored
being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house
in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem
of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house"
in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and
Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and
Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest,
who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to
live with each other in peace. (King 1968, 167)

Such a beautiful statement demonstrates King's mature idea as
the result of a shift from his earlier passion for the freedom of his

 African-American fellows into a wider vision of global solidarity. The
shift is obviously demonstrated in the next sentence, when he maintains, "However
deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle
to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot
ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers ... All
inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors" (King 1968, 167). King
also argues that the shift requires "a genuine revolution of values," in
which "our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional"
(King 1968, 190; italic mine).
        King introduces here an idea that the scope of ecumenism
should be widened beyond the Christian community. In other words,
the true ecumenism must also embrace people from other faiths. To
be sure, King's imagines the "world house" as a creative product of his
Christian perspective after being enriched by his deep encounter and
friendship with non-Christians, such as the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi,
the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Jewish rabbis Abraham
J. Heschel (Baldwin, Dekar, and Crawford 2013, 18; Heckman and
Neiss 2008, 117).
        However, I have some reservations against King's imagination. The first one
is more theoretical. King's global vision of the
"world house" seems to come closer to the pluralistic model that assumes the
necessity of a single ultimate reality and a single unifying
value applicable to all particular religious traditions. He argues,
This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern
beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an
all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. This often misunderstood and
misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute
necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love, I am speaking of that
force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme
unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door which
leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about

(King 1968, 190; italics mine)

By combining theocentric pluralism ("ultimate reality") with a
more ethical pluralism ("the supreme unifying principle of life")[1] and
applying both to all religions, King is confident that the once closed

112

 "world house" is now unlocked, using the universal key, to welcome
all people. The key, however, is found in the Christian tradition that is
later claimed to be universal and applicable for others as well.
        One of the most recent trends in theology of religions has
shown dissatisfaction with such a pluralistic model. While I will not
discuss the issue at lenght, suffice it to say that pluralistic theologies
propounded by some contemporary theologians are in fact not pluralistic enough and
are in need of serious revision in order to be even
more pluralistic.2
What interests me more is actually King's scope of picturing
the religious and cultural diversity. While I praise King's vision of
the pluralistic "world house," I would argue that his global vision still
needs to be exercised toward a more down-to-earth level of everyday
life, in which interreligious encounter is tied with concrete pain, real
struggle, and particular complexity.3 Any idea that bears the wiff of
globality—such as the "world house"—must be placed under suspicion of building an
empire by the subjugation of the others. Of course,
such a critical stance pertains not only to King's "world house" but
also many Christian slogans, including our workshop's central key
themes: God's household, ecumenism, etc.
This criticism also resonates with the rejection against any
theo-logy of religions by comparative theologians. The comparativists
argue that theologians of religions always talk about non-Christian
religions vaguely, theoretically, and "globally," without firstly having
real encounter and relationship with their non-Christian fellows.
They argue further that any theological theoretization of religious
plurality must result from living encounter and interreligious friendship, not vice
versa (Fredericks 1999, 173-177). For Christians, Fredericks argues,
"interreligious friendship" is a skill "for living responsibly and creatively with
non-Christians" (Fredericks 1999, 167). In
short, friendship is the most basic value for living together with the
religious others in daily life, in concrete encounter with them.
2 For a deeper criticism of pluralism and a proposal for post-pluralistic theology
of religions, see
(Adiprasetya 2013)
3 I believe, that is the reason of why in the following chapter, titled "Appendix:
Programs and Prospects," King applies his global vision to more practical programs
for his African-American fellows:
education, employment, rights, and housing (King 1968, 193-202).

113

 Interreligious friendship is certainly offered as an ideal virtue
that needs to be skillfully nurtured and exercized. However, we also
have to deal with the fact that such an ideal friendship is not the only
story in our concrete encounters with the religious others. In many
parts of Asia and the rest of the planet, people from different religious
backgrounds are also facing hurting competition or committing religious violence—
often done in the name of God. For many,
interreligious friendship has become too ideal a virtue, where in reality they live

in interreligious enmity with one another.[32] Based on this
realism, what I offer in the following section is a loose and reflective
re-reading of the story of Stephen in Acts 6-7, which happened as a
very concrete and face-to-face experience.

Local Encounter: The Story of Stephen

A Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong argues that Luke and
Acts together offer a continuous story of pneumatological hospitality
applicable to the interreligious context (Yong 2008). Yong's perspective of
interreligious hospitality makes an addition to the classical
agreement that Luke and Acts, specially the latter, focuses on the mission of the
early church to Gentiles. In such a larger context, I try to
understand that the story of Stephen's speech and death serves two
goals. First, it triggered the scattering of the believers but the apostles,
who remained in Jerusalem.[31] Soon after the death of Stephen, "… a
severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the
apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea
and Samaria ... Now those who were scattered went from place to
place, proclaiming the word." (Acts 8:1, 4). Thus, the death of Stephen
became the seed for missional activities of the early church outside
Jerusalem. Secondly, Stephen's speech and death seem to justify the
disconnection of the believers from the temple in Jerusalem. He was
charged as having said "things against this holy place and the law"
(6:13) and saying that Jesus "will destroy this place" as well (6:14).
        In chapter 7, Stephen gave his lenghty defence, which has
confused many modern interpreters as to what is the purpose of the
speech in the context of the entire book (Gealy 1962, 442; Marshall
1980, 131, 137). I would not discuss the issue any futher but to make

114

 my point that Stephen's speech is the key to understanding the importance of God's
cosmic household, which is unnecessarily related
to the temple—God's ritualistic and political house—in Jerusalem. To
do so, the author inserted the work oikos and its several paronyms
thirteen times throughout the speech of the martyr.
Stephen began his speech by retelling the history of the Jews'
ancestors, trying to make a connection with his accusers. He told the
story of Abraham who was in Mesopotamia before living (κατοικῆσαι;
katoikēsai) in Haran (7:2). He repeated the story of Abraham in a
more detailed way,
Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled (κατῴκησεν;
katōkēsen) in Haran. After his father died, God had him move
(μετῴκισεν; metōkisen) from there to this country in which you are
now living (κατοικεῖτε; katoikeite). (7:4)

The dialectic between settling or living and moving is introduced here. But then
another paronym of oikos emerges as Stephen
continued his story of Hod's promise to Abraham that his descendants "would be
resident aliens (πάροικον, pároikon) in a country belonging to others" (7:6). The
story of the faith ancestors continued
with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It was Joseph who was marginalized
and victimized by his brothers, but then he was appointed by Pharaoh
to become the ruler over Egypt "and over all his household" (καὶ ὅλον
τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, kai holon oikon auton) (7:10). Stephen carried on
with the story of Moses in verse 20 forward. "For three months he was
brought up in his father's house (ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ πατρός αὐτοῦ, en tō
oikō tou patros autou)," before being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter
(7:20-21). Therefore, similar to Abraham, Moses also experienced living in his own

house and being dehoused to live in the house of his
people's enemy.

Other variations of oikos occurs in the fragment of Israel's
disobedience when they became sojourners in the wilderness. Interestingly, Stephen
employed the image of "church in the wilderness" [30]▶
(τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, tē ekklēsia en tē erēmō) to describe the
descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who escaped from Egypt
(7:38). Citing Amos 5:25-27, Stephen expressed God's disappoint
115

 ment toward "the house of Israel" [31]▶ (οἶκος Ἰσραήλ, oikos Israēl) who
have rebelled against God (7:42). Therefore, God removed (μετοικιῶ,
metoikiō) them beyond Babylon (7:43). In verse 47, after telling the
story of David, Stephen told his audience about Solomon who built a
house (ᾠκοδόμησεν αὐτῷ οἶκον, ōikodomēsen autō oikon) for God.
We have seen the usage of oikos and its paronyms throughout 47 verses. The climax
of Stephen's story, however, is his argument
against any oikos built by human hands, as expressed in verses 48-50
(citing Isa. 66:1-2).
48 Yet the Most High does not dwell (κατοικεῖ, katoikei) in houses
made with human hands;
as the prophet says,
49 'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house (οἶκον, oikon) will you build (οἰκοδομήσετέ,
oikodomēsete) for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
50 Did not my hand make all these things?'

Interreligious Oikopoetics
The speech of Stephen to some extent reflects the interreligious
conflict between Christians and Jews, although the disconnection or
separation between both has not been settled completely. Unlike the
ideal of interreligious friendship suggested by the comparative theologians,
Stephen's speech reveals the reality of interreligious conflict.
[31]▶
Stephen strongly reacted to the charges that have been made against
him, but at the same time he did it theologically, through an imaginative and
constructive form or argument, especially through the reimagining of oikos and its
paronyms.
Now, what I would like to offer is a constructive reflection on
Stephen's interreligious oikopoetics. [32]▶ The oikopoetic reading of the
text, as suggested by Nirmal Selvamony, informs us that there are
three different images of oikos: [32]▶ integrative, hierahic, and anarchic. To
begin with, there is a strong impression that the author of Acts favors
with homelessness as the true identity marker for those who believe
in Christ, either as resident aliens or strangers in other land (v. 6; par
116

 oikov) or sojourners in the wilderness (v. 38). Stephen calls them "the [30]▶
church in the wilderness" (tē ekklēsia en tē erēmō). Each of the two
images is related differently with the word oikos referring to national
and religious identities. As resident aliens (v. 6), the descendants of
Abraham received hospitality from Pharaoh, that is, when Joseph was
entrusted to be the ruler over Egypt and over all Pharaoh's household.
As sojourners in the wilderness (v. 38), "the house of Israel" rebelled
against God (v. 42).
If we employ the oikopoetic method,4 the encounter of Israel
with other nations leads to the invitation for both nations to struggle for an
integrative oikos (the first oikos in Selvamony's oikopoetic

model). The integration thus requires the encounter between two
groups or houses who were once strangers to one another. On the
contrary, we find the model of hierarchic oikos (the second oikos) in
both the house of Pharaoh and the house of Israel itself. There is an
obvious difference, however, between both houses. While integration
of the house of Pharaoh is done through hierarchy, the house of Israel
turns to be an anarchic oikos (the third oikos) through their rebellion.
Thus, for Stephen, the house of Pharaoh is better than the house of
Israel; but at the end, both use oikos in a more hierarchical sense.
Another interesting note is that the true identity of Israel as
resident aliens or sojourners occurs only after God moves them for
their house. In verse 4, God de-housed or removed (metoikizō) Abraham from Haran;
in verse 43, God de-housed or removed (metoikizō)
the house of Israel and led them to Babylon.[34] This is to say that God
did not want Israel to reside as inhabitants of a static oikos. Stephen
expressed the divine will to de-house Israel as rooted in God's unwillingness to
dwell in houses made with human hands (v. 49; here
the word metoikizō occurs again). In this sense, Stephen justified his
argument against the Jews by undermining the building (oikodomeō)
of a house for God by Solomon (v. 47; cf. v. 49). Verses 48-50 thus become
Stephen's basis for rejecting katoikeō (residing) and oikodomeō
4 The oikopoetic method that I use here loosely is proposed by Nirmal Selvamony. He attempts to
read specific texts through the lens of oikos that he understands as a nexus in which the sacred,
the humans, natural, and cultural phenomena stand in an integrated relationship.
Selvamony distinguishes three types of oikos: integrative, hierarchic, and
anarchic. See (Selvamony n.d.)

117

 (building), because the whole world is God's oikos for everyone, every nation, and
every religion.[32] In conclusion, first, interreligious oiko-logy must begin with
the global vision of God's inclusive oikos, which is non-hierarchical,
yet still integrative. Any theology of religion that assumes the construction of
oikos, dominated by a single religious entity, including
the Christian one, must be rejected, because it always tends to become an empire
for all with one single religion dominating the hierarchic oikos. Of course, the
hierarchic oikos could be either generous
(as in the Pharaoh's oikos) or anarchic (as in the oikos of Israel). But,
either one is far from our vision of the non-hierarchical and integrative global
oikos or "world house,"[34] which is rooted in the multiplicity
of inhabitants. Secondly, the Christian oiko-logical theology of religions must
function as a reminder for all Christians that they are sojourners in the
wilderness and resident aliens in the strange land. We
are always dehoused from our comfortable Christian house, so much
so that we are always invited to live in the wider "world house"[31] with
all other strangers. In such a way of life, we must favor a spirituality of
wilderness over a spirituality of temple, hospitality over hostility, and
friendship over hierarchy. Thirdly, from the oiko-logical perspective,
the fluid identity of being sojourners is important in interreligious
encounter, because it enables us to always question critically our own
idea of truth, goodness, and beauty within our own oikos. Theology
of religions in the context of God's household invites us to "denaturalize"—
meaning, criticizing any socio-religious construction that
we take for granted as "natural"—our fixed identity and our religious
grandeur.5 The result would hopefully be comforting: the wilderness
is our house, the journey is home!

5 It is important to see Susan S. Friedman's work on the issue of denaturalization of home and
homeland; see (Friedman 1998)

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