

ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

The Postcolonial Challenge of Identity and Theology

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LET ME BEGIN by acknowledging the challenge of addressing a topic such as Asian Christianity. Firstly, we all know that Asia is not only a huge continent but one which is very diverse in many facets as well. Secondly, we are also aware of the diversity within Christianity, both in terms of the variety of its denominations as well as the different schools of theological thought within and between them. To be sure, there is no such thing as Christianity. Like all religions, Christianity can only be spoken of in the plural. Hence, I have to admit from the outset that the generalizations employed in this paper might appear reductive. These include what I shall be calling Asian Christianity. I hasten to add, though, that for now it is more appropriate that we speak of 'Christianity in Asia' rather than 'Asian Christianity.'

The focus of this paper, however, will be limited to the Christianity which developed through the era of colonialism, thus ruling out those which predate the colonial empires, such as the Syriac Christians of the Malabar coast in Kerala who trace their origins back to St. Thomas, or those which came into existence independent of the colonizers, such as the Korean church which was basically imported by local Koreans from China, or some of the younger churches such as the Church in Mongolia, which was established only in the last few decades.¹ The thrust of the presentation will be on how the experience of colonialism has impacted the development of Christianity in Asia. This will then be reflected against the challenges posed in the postcolonial era where

a postcolonial epistemology is helping to re-define Christian identity and theology in Asia. To that end reference will be made primarily to the Roman Catholic Church as given expression through the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

Christianity in Asia

Even as there is a 500-year history of Christianity in Asia it might be more appropriate to say that it is not so much a history of Asian Christianity as it is Western Christianity played out on Asian soil. To be sure, Asian Christians held on to so much of the characteristics of their mother-Churches that local churches in Asia were like little English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish churches. One could even say that churches in Asia were 'colonies' of European churches. It comes as no surprise then that Asians in general looked upon Christianity as a foreign religion. In my own national Malay language Christianity is often described as the *agama orang putih* (literally: white man's religion). This sentiment remains even until today since in most countries the vestiges of European Christianity lingers on. It is in this respect that we speak of 'Christianity in Asia' and not so much 'Asian Christianity' for Christianity in Asia hitherto could not yet be described by the adjective 'Asian.'

This is compounded by the fact that other Asians see even the Christianity as practiced by their Asian neighbors living in their own backyards as foreign. Architecturally there are still churches which continue to be built in

accordance with baroque and gothic styles. Symbols used in church liturgies are in the main vestiges of European and especially Roman imperial powers. Think of the vestments which priests put on and the attire which religious sisters and priests wear, as well as the way leaders of the church are addressed: His Eminence, His Excellency, My Lord, Superior General, Reverend Mother! Think also of how the piece of white wafer used at Holy Communion looks to Asians, who must be bemused when further told that it indeed is the body of a person who lived some 2,000 years ago. In most countries the wine used for liturgy has to be specially imported from Europe, much the same way as missionaries were imported to serve the churches and Western funds were brought in to support local projects. It is no surprise then for Asians to think that any Anglo-looking person walking the streets of Asia is a Christian missionary. Furthermore, when someone becomes Christian they adopt totally alien names such as James, Peter or Margaret, in place of more recognizable local names such as Kee-Fook, Budiman or Miyamoto.

Is it any wonder then that the percentage of Christians in most countries in Asia has remained in the single digit? Christianity's foreignness makes it an entity Asians do not warm up to easily. In short, Christianity has not really made inroads into most of Asia (save for the Philippines and East Timor) the way many of the other major world religions have. For example, Islam, which initially was foreign to Southeast Asia, has now become part of the landscape of much of the Malay archipelago. Buddhism, which hailed from the Indic sub-continent, has integrated itself into the socio-cultural matrix of much of East Asia and the Mekong Valley. Christianity's foreignness, on the other hand, makes it not only alien but also alienating. At the conclusion of the 1998 Synod for Asia, Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, had this to say:

It is indeed a mystery why the Savior of the world, born in Asia, has until now remained



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largely unknown to the people of the continent (art. 2).

Colonial Christianity

Of course it doesn't help that Christianity was actually spread to Asia in concert with the colonial expansionist program. It is therefore inevitable that the Church is associated with the imperial powers who, in the eyes of Asians, came primarily for the conquest of their lands. The Cross of Christ was therefore seen as coming alongside the swords and guns as well as the looting barrels in what the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris calls the 'unholy alliance of the missionary, the military and the merchant.' Just as the imperialists' aim was the plunder of the resources of Asia, Christianity was also viewed as coming to plunder the souls of the peoples of Asia.

The late Indian theologian Stanley Samartha illustrates this situation appropriately by drawing an analogy to the arrival of a helicopter in Asia.² When descending upon Asia—from above, of course—Christianity came with all its power, grandeur and might. The helicopter mission then blew away all that was on the ground to pave the way for the European Church to land. It didn't matter what the native cultures and religions stood for or had to offer; they were to be wiped out. There was no way Christianity would tolerate these heathen and pagan cultures and religions, let alone respect or be nourished by them.

Christianity had to be transplanted onto Asia, where it was expected to take roots and

bear the same fruits as it did across the European continent in the first century and Latin America in the second. There was only one fate for the adherents of other cultures and religions in Asia; they were to be converted. There was almost no sensitivity to how the local population felt about the imposition of this foreign culture and religion. But this was basically the attitude and theology which Asian Christians were brought up to believe for most of the 500-year history of Christianity in Asia.

Asian Religious Revivalism

Things began to change, however, in the mid-20th century. The year 1945 is often regarded as the watershed for this transition. With the end of the Second World War and the Pacific War in Asia and with the subsequent dismantling of colonialism the indigenous peoples of former colonies began to rise up not only against political oppression but also in search of their own indigenous identities. In the words of Samartha:

Deep down, it is a struggle for identity, a quest for spiritual resources in the fight against injustice. The rejection of religious pluralism, the refusal to recognize that neighbors of other faiths in the world live by their own cherished beliefs and values, is a more serious form of injustice than the merely economic.³

Thus began what was to become a search not only for indigenous identities but also for the resources which help give shape to these identities. The Asian religious traditions factor significantly among these resources. It is no coincidence that the expulsion of Christian missionaries alongside the imperial governors in many countries in Asia was followed by a revival in the Asian religions. This happened all across Asia, thus bringing the religions to the consciousness of the global communities. It was then that peoples in the West began to take notice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka or Thailand, Hinduism in India or Nepal, and Islam in Bangladesh or Indonesia. In some instances this resurgence swung the pendulum to the

other extreme (as a form of catharsis against the many years of oppression and suppression during the colonial era), resulting in the more extremist forms of these religious traditions coming to the fore. This continues until today and it will be several decades more before the catharsis simmers.

This movement of revivalism or resurgence in the religions did not go unnoticed by the local Christians in Asia. Influenced by the mood and spirit of the times, they, too, began the quest for their own identities, one which could be at once truly Christian as well as truly Asian. Among the more significant issues in this quest was Christianity's relation with other religions. This was by no means an abstract theological issue to be discussed but one which had dire and concrete consequences on the lives of Asian Christians. This is because most Christians in Asia have roots in these other religions or continue to have family members, for example, spouses, parents, and children, who continue to adhere to them. While in the past they were informed by a theology which speculated that all their loved ones were destined to hell unless they were baptized, the quest for a truly Asian Christianity opened up new horizons for a theology which was not only more respectful of the other religions but also enabled them to be perceived in a more positive light.

Contextualizing Christianity

In view of this quest it was realized that Christianity in Asia was sorely in need of an authentic process of contextualization; one which takes seriously the world of Asia, in particular the plurality of its cultures, the diversity of its religions, and the distress of its poor. Using Stanley Samartha again, one can describe the nature of this authentic contextualization by depicting Christianity or the Church as a bullock-cart. A vehicle indigenous to Asia, the bullock-cart portrays a form of Christianity which is at once truly native and local as well as modest and humble. Coming from below

and in touch with Asian soil, a bullock-cart Christianity is certainly more in touch with the people, religions and cultures of Asia. It is therefore more acceptable to the people of Asia. Just as it is necessary for the bullock-cart to be in continuous contact and friction with the ground for it to move forward, Asian Christianity too must be in continuous contact and friction with the other people and religions of Asia. Contact and friction are therefore the modes by which the evangelizing mission of the bullock-cart Christianity is actualized.

Dialogue, therefore, is the process by which the Church makes contact with the contextual realities of Asia, especially its cultures and religions. This process is as much for the purpose of enabling Christianity to become more authentically local as it is for the purpose of enabling the people of other religions to better acquaint themselves with Christianity. Through this process of dialogue Christianity could hopefully become more acceptable to the people of Asia and be even regarded as one of Asia's own. It is then that we can say a local and contextual theology has developed from what would rightly be called Asian Christianity.

What are the elements of this dialogue? What are the constituents of an Asian theology? To respond, reference is made here to the wisdom of Aloysius Pieris, one of Asia's foremost contextual theologians. In his seminal article 'Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation', Pieris writes:

Any discussion about Asian theology has to move between two poles: the *Third Worldness* of our continent and its peculiarly *Asian* character. More realistically and precisely, the common denominator linking Asia with the rest of the Third World is its overwhelming poverty. The specific character defining Asia within the other poor countries is its multifaceted religiousness. These two inseparable realities constitute in their interpenetration what might be designated as the *Asian context*, the matrix of any theology truly Asian.⁴

That Asia is poor is beyond dispute. It is

therefore in need of the liberation which Jesus Christ offers and which Christianity can bring. In other words, Jesus and the Church are necessary in Asia, not so much because the majority of Asians are not Christians but because they are suffering and poor. This is an essential task of the contextualizing Church in Asia, a process which has been variously referred to as inculturation in Roman Catholic circles. To that end Pieris points out that inculturation 'can never be induced artificially. The Christian tends to appropriate the symbols and mores of the human grouping around it only to the degree that it immerses itself in their lives and struggles. That is to say, inculturation is the by-product of an *involvement* with a people rather than the conscious target of a program of action.'⁵

In the context of Asia, inculturation is effected, first of all, through the dialogue with Asia's poor, in view of facilitating their integral liberation. Secondly, because the other religions have their own views of what liberation and salvation mean and because the majority of Asia's poor owe their allegiance to these other religions, the process of inculturation, which entails the Church's dialogue with the poor, must also include the dialogue with the religions. In short, inculturation, interreligious dialogue and the process of integral liberation are mutually involving ministries, all of which are integral to the evangelizing mission of Christianity in Asia.⁶ This is what the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) refers to as the Triple dialogue, *i.e.*, the dialogue with the poor, the cultures, and religions of Asia.

Towards a Church in Asia

This is about the only way by which Christianity in Asia can discover its identity and acquire its authority. It has to consciously submit to the challenge of the other religions and the challenge of the poor. In Biblical terms, unless Asian Christianity is baptized in the 'Jordan' of Asian religions

and confirmed by the ‘Calvary’ of Asian poverty, it will remain foreign and unacceptable by the majority of the people of Asia. Such is the process of inculturation and such is the challenge which Christianity knows it has to accept if it wants to become an authentically local religion in Asia. Realizing this, the Asian bishops are of the mind that:

the primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church.... The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions (*FABC I*, art. 9, 12).⁷

Implicit in this is the transformation of Christianity’s image and ways of functioning so as

to embrace what the Asian bishops call the *New Way of Being Church*. This ‘new way’ of ‘being’ entails a relinquishing of the Church’s image of power and wealth in favor of a Church which is meek and humble and involved in the lives and struggles of the people of Asia. It is the shedding of the ‘helicopter’ image of Christianity in favor of the ‘bullock-cart’ image, where Christianity is identified with the religions, cultures and poor of Asia. When that happens, Christianity would have integrated itself into the Asian cultural fabric and be recognized and accepted as one of Asia’s own. When that day comes, Christianity would have moved from being merely a Church *in* Asia to becoming a Church *of* Asia. It would no longer be a European Church *in* Asia but truly an *Asian* Church serving the people of Asia.

NOTES

1 See Georg Evers, *The Churches in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005) and Peter Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2010), 85-104.

2 Stanley Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 115. See also Georg Evers, *op cit.*, xix-xxii.

3 Stanley Samartha, *op cit.*, 2.

4 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 69.

5 *Ibid.*, 38.

6 See Edmund Chia, ‘Wanted: Interreligious Dialogue,’ *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12/1 (2002): 101-110.

7 First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, *FABC I* (Taipei, 1974), in Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, ed., *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences*, Documents from 1970 to 1991, vol. 1, (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997), 14.

The new evangelization does not mean a ‘new Gospel’, because ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (Heb 13:8), but rather, a new response to the needs of humanity and people today in a manner adapted to the signs of the times and to the new situations in cultures, which are the basis of our personal identity and the places where we seek the meaning of our existence. Consequently, a ‘new evangelization’ means to promote a culture more deeply grounded in the Gospel and to discover the new man who is in us through the Spirit given us by Jesus Christ and the Father.

—*Lineamenta* for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation.