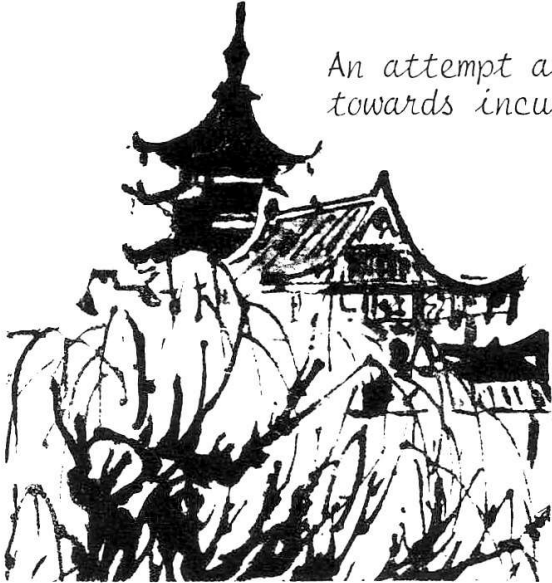


ASIAN THEOLOGY BEGINS TO RAISE QUESTIONS (Part I)

*An attempt at describing some of its efforts
towards inculturation and contextualization*

by Luis Gutheinz



It is springtime for Asian Theology. To have the privilege as a non-Asian to participate in its growing life brings me much joy and excitement. Since life carries with it a certain flair of mystery, as Asian people know so well, I offer, therefore, the following description with a deep sense of reverence and delicacy, while at the same time well aware of being asked to do the impossible thing, to offer a panoramic view of Asian Theology within the limited space of a single article. May we then be allowed to presume upon work already done by many industrious authors in this field?¹

Asia includes three major cultural areas, the Indian, Malayan, and the Buddhist-Confucian. Aloysius Pieris, SJ² breaks it down into seven major linguistic zones:

There is, first of all, the Semitic zone concentrated on the Western margin of Asia. The Ural-Altai group is spread all over Asiatic Russia and Northwest Asia. The Indo-Iranian stock alongside the Dravidian races have their cultural habitat in Southern Asia. The Sino-Tibetan region, by far the largest, extends from Central Asia to the Far East. The Malayo-Polynesian wing opens out to the southeast. Last but not least, is the uncatalogable Japanese, forming a self-contained linguistic unit in the northeastern tip of Asia. ³

The Asian reality has been the object of much study,⁴ the theme of many workshops, consultations, conferences and congresses.⁵ All this information may be considered as the matrix of Asian life from within which we can look at the efforts of Asian Theologians and attempt to grapple with the real questions raised by this young and growing theology. Some sixteen years ago, in December 1965, an EACC⁶ consultation in Kandy, Sri Lanka, issued the following statement:

*A living theology is born out of the meeting of a living church and its world. We discern a special task of theology in relation to the Asian renaissance and revolution, because we believe God is working out his purposes in these movements of the secular world. The Asian churches so far, and in large measure, have not taken their theological task seriously enough, for they have been largely content to accept the ready-made answers of Western theology or confessions. We believe, however, that today we can look for the development of authentic living theology in Asia.*⁷

The authors of this prophetic statement were not mistaken. In 1974 Kosuke Koyama⁸ - to mention one of the many inspiring Asian theologians - summed up precisely our present situation:

*Third World Theology begins by raising issues, not by digesting Augustine, Barth and Rahner.*⁹

How are these issues raised and what are their main concerns? I shall try to answer these questions in three steps. First, I would like to share with the reader my experiences of three different Asian meetings within the last three years. Secondly, from these experiences, I will single out important thrusts of present Asian Theology, and finally, I shall point out some of the more urgent issues raised by these various currents of Asian Theology today.

I. THREE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

1. The Asian Theological Conference (ATC)¹⁰ in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, January 7-20, 1979, sponsored by the "Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT),¹¹ was for me a shocking and a salvific experience, at one and the same time.

The Conference was a true experience of interdisciplinary effort.

It offered a challenging mixture of praxis and theory. At one point, the heated discussions threatened to dismantle the Conference completely, this was due to a rather violent polarisation. The basic thrust from below arising from an emphasis on praxis, the oppressed, and commitment to social action, clashed with the more academic stance of other theologians and Churchmen who were advocating a more pluralistic approach for Asian Theology, where quite different viewpoints and visions can find a home. The following section, it seems to me, represents fairly well the central message of ATC:

In the context of the poverty of the teeming millions of Asia and their situation of domination and exploitation, our theology must have a very definite liberational thrust. The first act of theology, its very heart, is commitment. This commitment is a response to the challenge of the poor in their struggle for full humanity. We affirm that the poor in their struggle for full humanity. We affirm that the poor and the oppressed of Asia are called by God to be the architects and builders of their own destiny. Thus theology starts with the aspirations of the oppressed towards full humanity and counts on their growing consciousness of, and their ever-expanding efforts to overcome, all obstacles to the truth of their history.

To be truly liberating, this theology must arise from the Asian poor with a liberated consciousness. It is articulated and expressed by the oppressed community using the technical skills of biblical scholars, social scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and others. It can be expressed in many ways, in art forms, drama, literature, folk stories, and native wisdom as well as in doctrinal-pastoral statements. ¹²

Biblical scholars had to fight for a place in the sun at ATC. We suppose that the Systematic theologians were granted asylum among the scripture scholars, for they did not appear at all in the text of the final statement. Here we are faced with a very new thrust for doing theology. In step two and three we have to deal with this new approach in greater depth.

2. The Colloquium on "The Significance of Context for Doing Theology in Asia", Pattaya, Thailand, March 30-April 6, 1980, was

organized by the Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia.¹³ This Colloquium was the first in a series of five sessions to be held over a ten year period (one session every two years), with the following themes:

- Methodology and Context in Doing Theology;
- The Search for a New Spirituality in Asia;
- Elements of a Christian Anthropology in Asia;
- Understanding Jesus Christ in the Asian Context;
- Understanding the Mystery of God.

Some forty men and women¹⁴ from fourteen countries gathered for the first session,¹⁵ to grapple with the task of finding ways of doing theology in an Asian context. The group was made up largely of teachers of theology (note the difference between participants in this meeting and that of ATC). Members also included Asians from other disciplines as well as Australian and Asian-American representatives. The task of properly contextualizing theology has been pressing itself upon us more and more in recent years as we have had to face two specific problems. First, while we are able to understand the text of the Bible in its original context, all kinds of difficulties arise as we attempt to bring that meaning into our own context. We must find ways of understanding how the Bible comes alive in our own very different Asian settings. Second, we have become increasingly aware of the inadequacy of those theological methods which have been framed in other continents, such as Europe and North America, for our own situation. We have found ourselves asking, in recent years, whether the urgent questions and issues of our Asian existence may not break open the Bible and add new dimensions of truth in understanding the Gospel, and whether this may not form itself into a specifically Asian type of theology.

After seven days of presentations and lively discussions, it became clear that while there will be much struggle and considerable difference of opinion, and while there will be a continued need for rigorous and sustained scholarship (the group liked to use the German word "Forschung"), the colloquium came to the end of the week with a realistic hope that eventually there will be Asian forms (!) of theology.

Those who are making attempts to do theology contextually revealed something of the struggle, and even anguish, which is an inherent part of the task. They also demonstrated something of the joy and sense of wonder that comes with new discovery. During discussion there were occasions of wit and laughter, flashes of insight and vigorous disagreement, as well as cordial mutual acceptance. The serious business of doing theology is a very human undertaking. In contrast to ATC, there was little of that

Conference's violence and roughness of argument. The atmosphere of this colloquium was tolerant and open. The group was able to delineate in a specific way the particular Asian character of doing theology. We are sure that such elements as Asian poetry and literature, Asian spirituality and the Asian feeling for earthy, practical existence, will put their own mark on Asian Theology.

The Asian members of the colloquium insisted on the need to break out of those modes of thinking inherited from other cultures and other times (e.g. Hellenistic, Cartesian, Hegelian). Such modes are felt to be too much a part of their mental make-up and Asian members called for a deliberate struggle to realize their own freedom and fresh discovery of their own Asian identity.

At the end of our week together we asked ourselves where do we go from here? While both the Gospel and the hope and aspirations of our peoples demand that we develop a contextual theology that is future-oriented, we still continue asking in what ways do we perceive the work of God as we know him in Christ, in our histories and traditions? In order to determine how the Christian community should participate in shaping the future, it is essential that we listen to the voices of our peoples - specifically those of their poets and artists. In this context, we must be especially sensitive to issues coming from victimized and oppressed groups. The purpose of our listening and participating is to discern the power of the Gospel to transform the structures of injustice and to release and enable our peoples to realise their full humanity in Jesus Christ. This should lead to the formation of a spirituality that is able to manifest the wisdom and power of the Gospel. And it is appropriate that the next Colloquium is dedicated to "The Search for a New Spirituality in Asia".¹⁶



3. My third experience, was my participation in the East Asian Assistancy Jesuit Theologians Meeting (JTM) and Social Analysis Seminar

(SAS).¹⁷ The goals of this rather large meeting were mainly to give to the theologians of the Assistancy an occasion to meet and dialogue with fellow Jesuits who are more explicitly engaged in the social reality and its analysis.¹⁸ It was hoped that such an interdisciplinary dialogue would lead to a more concrete and realistic understanding of what Father General P. Arrupe, SJ has called the "apostolate of Theological Reflection".

Such a meeting of people from various cultural and ideological backgrounds, entering a rather delicate and multi-dimensional thought-process, not only carries with it feelings of uncertainty and frustration, but also the gradual convergence of opinion. Among other insights the following surfaced with greater clarity, while still leaving some shadows in the minds of participants on many related questions of "Theological Reflection" (TR) and "Social Analysis" (SA):¹⁹

First, TR is not the same as the traditional academic theology of theological schools. Neither is it the more simple grass-root faithsharing of basic Christian communities. But it has to do with both of them. TR has its locus in a Christian community, i.e. a group of persons living in communion. (A theological school can rightly be called such a 'Christian community'). It involves interdisciplinary dialogue. It demands a closer connexion between theory and praxis. TR is a multifaceted process, where the differentiated consciousness of the professional theologian operates within a living community, face to face with the burning issues of today's world. Here, then, the need for social analysis becomes evident.

The second point of greater clarity that the conference reached was a sharper awareness of the many hidden presuppositions, deep-down 'biases', value-assumptions and underlying worldviews in those doing SA. These are the "questions behind the questions".²⁰ In consequence, there is strictly speaking no specific 'Christian SA'; neither is there a 'Marxist SA'.²¹

In other words, if a Christian takes an option for the poor, a commitment for the oppressed people, then his or her SA will be greatly influenced by such underlying presuppositions. This brings us to the Conference's third insight.

As SA is usually practiced in various countries (especially those of the Third World), the economic and political reality tends to hold the centre of attention. It seems to aim at a change in existing unjust social and political structures in order to change the basic situation of

the people. The Jesuit theologians present at JTM felt that this approach is too narrow. The task of SA can effectively be accomplished only if we can understand the various economic, socio-political, cultural, psychological and religious structures that underlie and condition the life of the people at various levels - intra-personal, inter-personal and societal, both micro and macro. Analysis is the process that unveils these structures and clarifies their interrelationships and modes of operation, their causes and their goals. This analysis should also carefully reflect on the underlying biases of the one who does such an analysis, thus gaining the right to claim more ready acceptance since it maturely points to an authentic search for objectivity. It is obvious that SA (some would prefer to call it "analysis of the human situation", or "analysis of the integral human reality") should be an interdisciplinary effort. It borrows its tools from the various connected human and social sciences. It demands genuine dialogue between the collaborators. While analysis helps the theologian to understand the human situation better, TR helps the scientist to set his analysis in the context of deeper structures of meaning offered by a faith-vision. While the various sciences enjoy a certain legitimate autonomy regarding their approaches and methods, the two extremes of a total autonomy of the sciences, i.e. in the name of objectivity, leading to uncritical acceptance of their conclusions especially as they move beyond their empirical foundations, and a total subordination of them to a particular orientation stemming from religious belief, leading to a kind of sacralized (pre-secular) thinking, should be avoided. The group of theologians felt that the use of historico-critical methods of analysis in Biblical exegesis and the role of philosophy in theological reflection offer useful analogies to understand the relationship of theology to the human and social sciences.

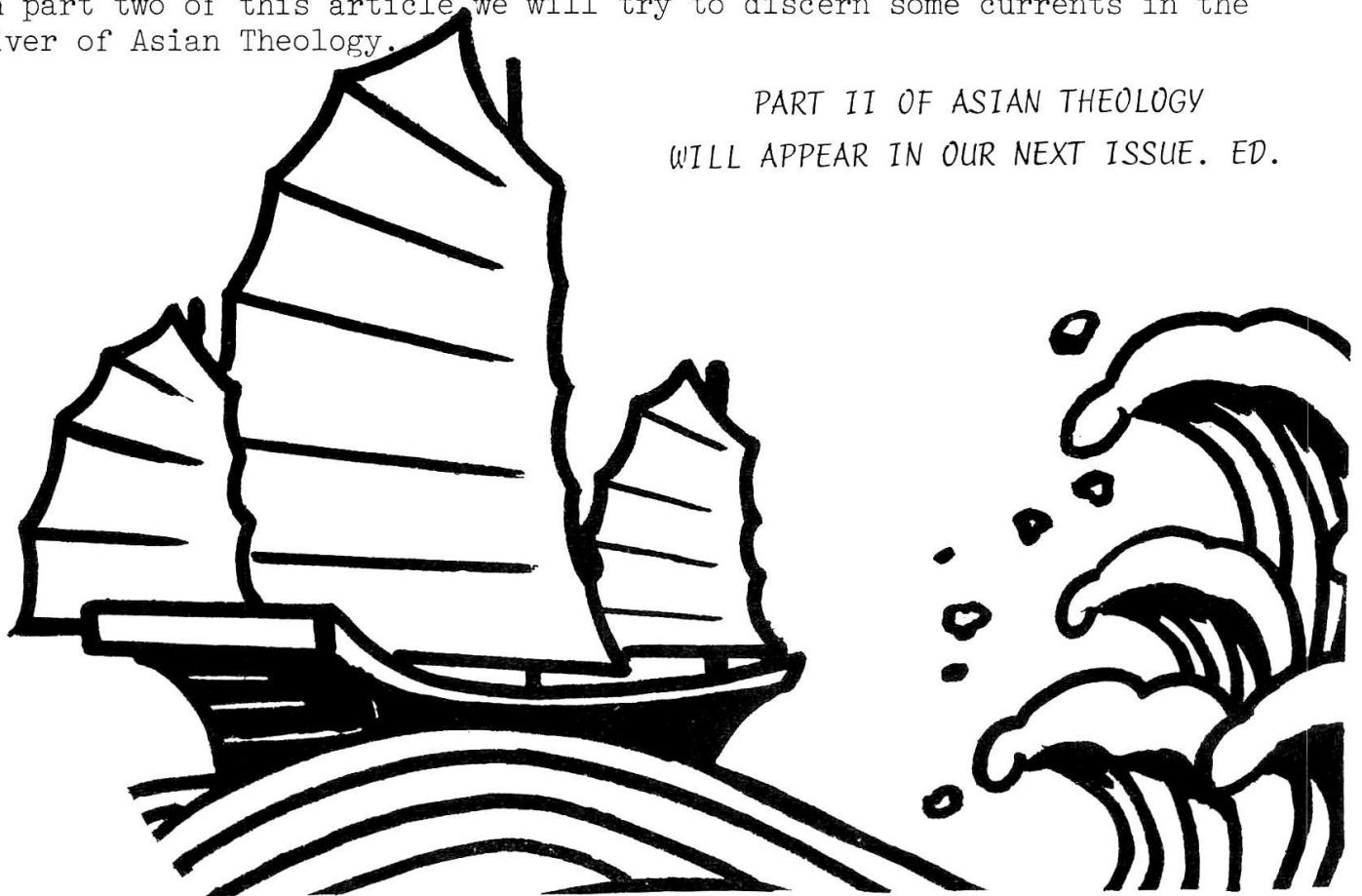
In the course of these discussions a fourth insight surfaced. If SA is done in Asia, then it has to have a certain 'Asian-ness', i.e. it should not neglect the role of empathy and intuition²² in deepening our grasp of human situations. Here again we find a dialectical process. While analysis will throw a critical light on global impressions, an intuitive perception may reach out to, and integrate, human and experiential aspects not accessible to empirical analysis.

The need for such means in approaching reality becomes even clearer when, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are called to go beyond understanding the situation, to prophetic proclamation of the Gospel in an articulate and relevant way and to a discernment and establishment of a suitable program of action.

Finally, a fifth and last point deserves attention. At the end of a week's discussion and reflection, a final joint session of both groups (JTM and SAS) served as an opportunity for a continued dialogue in the plenum. After the presentation of the reports from both sides, questions for clarification were raised and answered. At this point it became clear that the SAS group has thought and written more in the conflict-model. This model basically looks at conflicts in the social - human reality and considers confrontation as the essential method for social change. The JTM group moved more explicitly in the so called consensus-model which basically looks at harmony in the social-human reality and considers consensus as the essential method for social change. At the manila-meeting, the dialogue between those two basic models of looking at social change was only just begun. We have still a long way to go.....

By narrating the experiences of these three different theological meetings (ATC-Sri Lanka, ATSSEA-Thailand, JTM-Philippines) I have tried to let each 'story' speak to the reader itself. Each story moves like a river and carries along with it many theological elements and insights. In part two of this article we will try to discern some currents in the river of Asian Theology.

PART II OF ASIAN THEOLOGY
WILL APPEAR IN OUR NEXT ISSUE. ED.



FOOTNOTES

1. - G.H. Anderson, Ed., Asian Voices in Christian Theology, Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York 1976.
Appendix II, A selected Bibliography in Western Language, compiled by G.H. Anderson, M.C. Apilado, and Douglas J. Elwood, 261-321.
 - Douglas J. Elwood, Ed., What Asian Christians are Thinking. A Theological Source Book, New Day Publications, Quezon City, Philippines 1976.
Bibliography, 459-500.
 - Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio e.V. Ed.,
Theologie im Kontext. Informationen über Theologische Beiträge aus Afrika, Asien und Ozeanien:
Nullnummer, Mai 1979.
 - 1. Jahrgang, Nr. 1, Januar 1980.
 - 1. Jahrgang, Nr. 2, Juni 1980.
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 - L. Gutheinz, S.J., Asiatische Theologie im Werden, in: Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 36 (1980/1) 39-57.
 - Ders., Theologie im Asiatischen Kontext, in: Orientierung, 44, Nr. 16 (31 August 1980) 171-174.
 - East Asian Pastoral Review, Vol. 18, Nr. 3, 1981: Inculturation, with a good bibliography, 295-299.
 - Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio e.V., Ed.,
"Theologie der Dritten Welt", eine neue Buchreihe.
Band 1, Den Glauben neu verstehen. Beiträge zu einer asiatischen Theologie, Aachen 1981.
Band 2, Evangelisation in der Dritten Welt.
Abstösse für Europa, Aachen 1981.
2. Aloysius Pieris, S.J., is founder and director of the Centre for Research and Dialogue at Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.
3. V. Fabella, M.M., Ed., Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology. Papers from the Asian Theological Conference, January 7-20, 1979, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York 1980, 76.
4. - G. Myrdal, Asian Drama. An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations, Vol. I - III, reprinted in Taiwan 1969.
 - Asia Yearbook, edited each year by the "Far Eastern Economic Review".

5. - FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences), Evangelization in Modern Day Asia, Statement of the First Plenary Assembly of FABC, Taipei, April 22-27, 1974.
 - Cf. footnote 3, 152-156.
 - International Congress on Mission, 2-7 December 1979, Toward a New Age in Mission, Book 1-3, Manila 1981: St. Cardinal Kim, A Vision of Asia, Book 3, 149-158.
6. Cf. footnote 1, D.J. Elwood, Ed., 458: EACC (East Asian Christian Conference), now CCA (Christian Conference of Asia), a roof-organization of Protestant Churches in Asia, to a certain degree the equivalent of the Catholic FABC.
7. Cf. footnote 1, G.H. Anderson, Ed., Asian Voices, The Task of Theology in the Asian Churches, Preface.
8. Kosuke Koyama is a Japanese theologian; he has been working in Thailand and in Singapore; he also has been the Dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, Singapore, from June 1968-June 1974.
9. Id., Waterbuffalo Theology, SCM Press, London 1974, 3. Cf. also Fabella, footnote 3, 4-6.

10. As an Asian theological event, the ATC received the support of the Commission on Theological Concerns of the CCA (Christian Conference of Asia) in Singapore and the Office of Human Development (Manila) of the FABC.

11. EATWOT was formed at the conclusion of the Dar Es Salaam Conference in 1976, the first official gathering of Third World Theologians.

12. Cf. footnote 3, pp. 156-157. Since the majority vote carries, dissenting voices are not heard in a final statement at the end of such conferences.

13. ATSSEA was established in 1957 in Singapore. It is a protestant, ecumenically openminded organization of Theological schools. It publishes the "South East Asia Journal of Theology" and operates the SEAGST (South East Asia Graduate School of Theology), which grants Doctoral degrees in Theology.

Since July 1981 ATSSEA is called ATESEA (Association Theological Education in South East Asia), with its central office in Singapore, Trinity Theological College; Dr. Yeow Choo-Lak serves since July 1981 as its Executive Director.

ATESEA has its rather independent place under the umbrella of CCA (Christian Conference of Asia); it cooperates with CTC (Commission on Theological Concerns) of CCA.

14. Fr. Antonio B. Lambino, S.J., Dean of the Loyola School of Theology, Manila, and the present writer were the only Catholic participants.

15. In the following description we follow the main lines of the final statement which tells the story of the meeting.

16. The outline for the second Colloquium, to be held during 1982, has been worked out in the Planning session of Hongkong, September 20-23, 1978.

17. From July 21 to 29, 1981, a group of about fifty Jesuits met at the EAPI (East Asian Pastoral Institute) on the campus of the Ateneo de Manila. The meeting was sponsored by the Major Superiors Conference of the Jesuit East Asian Assistancy. Three different groups were present: Theologians, social scientists, and Major Superiors.

As special guests were present Fr. Michael Amaladoss, Vice-Provincial for Formation, and Fr. John Thoonunkaparambil (who insisted on being called John T.K.), Dean of the Theological Faculty of Vidyaoti, close to Delhi, India; then Fr. Tom Clarke from the Woodstock Theological Center; further, Fr. Michel Campbell-Johnston of the Roman Social Secretariate, Fr. Stan Lourduswamy of the Indian Social Institute of Bangalore, Fr. Peter Henriot, Director of the Centre of Concern in Washington, D.C., and Fr. Paul Valadier, Director of "Etudes", Paris.

18. - J. Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice, Centre of Concern, Washington, D.C. 1980.

- Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Mission Research and Planning, Department, Social Analysis according to Gospel Values, Maryknoll, New York 1979.

- Id., Social Analysis and Research with Grassroots groups: Basic Models and Approaches, Maryknoll, New York 1981.

19. We follow some papers and statements of this meeting.

20. Peter Henriot, Social Analysis: One Year Later, in: Center Focus, issue 45, September 1981, 2-3.

21. Cf. P. Arrupe, S.J., On Marxist Analysis. To the Provincials of Latin America and for information to all Major Superiors, Rome 1980.

22. Cf. C. S. Song, Third-Eye Theology, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1979. The so called "Third Eye" is a power of perception and insight that enables the theologians to grasp the meaning under the surface of things and phenomena.

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