

# ASIAN THEOLOGY BEGINS TO RAISE QUESTIONS (Part II)

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## II. THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS OF ASIA

As currents in a river, so, too, are currents in Asian theology. They have a tendency to merge and mingle to a certain degree while at the same time consistently retaining their own individuality. This problem of sharply differentiating one current from another is compounded by the general situation of Asia today—a continent in ferment. Contemporary Asia is now facing the onslaught of modernity—modern sciences, new technology, secularism, urbanization and the sudden growth and expansion of multi-nationals. In this context, Asian Theology seeks to assert its own identity and to make its own contribution to this vast modernization process that is creating the Asia of tomorrow. Such a contribution cannot any longer be simple and one-dimensional. No, it will be extremely complex and pluralistic, containing many dialectical elements. Some urgent questions posed by Asian theology as it faces this task will be raised in the latter half of this article. For the present, let us offer here a short description of four major theological currents in contemporary Asian Theology with a view to gaining a better understanding of the general, overall panorama of Asian Theology today.

### 1. The Theology of Professional Theologians:

There is, first, the theology of professional theologians as propounded in Asian theological institutions and seminaries, both Catholic and Protestant. By and large, attempts at authentic indigenisation, adaptation, inculturation and the contextualization of theology has been the work of individual theologians, sometimes working in isolation, or

engaged in research at various encounter centers, or involved in social action programmes and liberation struggles. These theologians have done the spade work and are still actively engaged in making solid contributions to the development of a relevant theology for Asia.<sup>23</sup> As they themselves are fully aware, they have been trained mostly in the West-Europe and North America. Many of them are also overburdened with administrative tasks in the day-to-day management of the theological institutions which serve their respective local Churches. Despite this, they are the ones who have done most of the ground-work, laying the foundations for a broader range of theological thinking in Asia. If it might be said that we are now in the 'Springtime of Asian Theology', these theologians, who have laboured for decades, diligently and unpretentiously, have made the Springtime possible. While their theology is still heavily influenced by Western theology, they are keenly aware that there is no other way to an authentic Asian theology than by passing through a long process of gradual change. Because of this, many of these theologians are more and more occupied by a deep concern for their own cultures. This brings us to the second current in Asian Theology.

## 2. Culture as The Main Focus of Asian Theology:

The second current of Asian Theology has as its main focus native culture. In all three of the major Asian cultural areas, Indian,<sup>24</sup> Malayan,<sup>25</sup> and Buddhist-Confucian,<sup>26</sup> we find genuine attempts to relate the Gospel and the substance of the faith of the Church to their cultural heritage. It is consoling to note that most of these Asian theologians address themselves first to creative theological work, rather than becoming pre-occupied with questions of theological method. It is their conviction that theological methodology and its related issues will become clearer and provide more fruitful material for reflection in the light of actual theological work already accomplished. Reflection on theological methodology, however, is not neglected. To mention just one example of such reflection while in the process of doing theology, there is the work of ATSSEA<sup>27</sup> under the title of 'The Critical Asian Principle (CAP).' Such a focus offers us in a concrete way an example of what an Asian Theology of Culture is all about.

CAP seeks to identify what is distinctively Asian and use this distinctiveness as a critical principle of judgment on matters dealing with the life and mission of the Christian community, theology, and theological education. The specific characteristics of the Asian situation raise many important questions, especially in the area of Asian culture. To mention a few: What does Asian cultural diversity and plurality mean for the life of the Christian community? What does the experi-

ence of colonialism mean for an understanding of cultural alienation and the loss of human dignity, for understanding human liberation and human development? How does one do theology in the context of modernization, and what can it contribute to the creation of a living culture for today and tomorrow?

CAP can be used as a frame of reference in the following four ways:

(a) As a situational principle, by which to locate where we are and thereby indicate areas of responsibility and concern, namely, the varieties and dynamics of Asian realities.

(b) As an hermeneutical principle, which suggests that we are to understand the Gospel and the Christian tradition within these realities. Accordingly we must approach and interpret the Gospel and its traditions in relation to the needs and issues peculiar to the Asian situation. Alternatively, we must approach and understand Asian realities not only through the variety of academic disciplines available through study and research, but also in the light of the Gospel and its traditions.

(c) As a missiological principle, which aims to form people with a missionary commitment, a commitment that is informed by a missionary theology capable not only of illuminating Asian realities with the light of the Gospel, but also of helping to manage and direct the changes now taking place in the region along lines more consonant with the Gospel and its vision of human life in God.

(d) And, finally, as an educational principle, which should give shape, content, direction and criteria to the educational task of our theological institutions.

Given the above description of this current of Asian theology, we can see more clearly how an Asian Theology with its main focus on culture operates. Representative theologians from the third theological current have accused it of being, at centre, 'bourgeois'. They see it as too academic in approach and lacking in the kind of commitment relevant for the construction of an authentic, living theology for the people of Asia. It is to this group that we now turn our attention.

### 3. Social Injustice As The Proper Centre of Theology:

The third current of Asian Theology centres on the actual situation of social injustice and political oppression in Asia. It seeks to contribute to change. It therefore begins with a commitment to the poor and

oppressed.<sup>28</sup> It is a theology of 'practice' rather than one of 'theory'. It comes 'from below', from the 'underside' of Asian reality and is set on the transformation of society with all its structures, including those of the Church as well. It is violent and angry in its rejection of the Asian status quo, but, at the same time, seeks to discover the Asian face of Christ<sup>29</sup> in the common struggle of peasants, fisherfolk, workers, slumdwellers, margined minority groups, oppressed youth and women. It sees it in Mary, the truly liberated woman who participated in the struggle of Jesus and her people for liberation. It seeks to bridge the gap between denominations and rewrite the history of the Asian Churches from the perspective of the poor. The terminology used by these Asian theologians is reminiscent of Marxist philosophy and social analysis, and, as such, gives rise to the question of Asian Theology's position in countries actually governed by Communism, where institutionalized Marxism is the ruling ideology. This brings us to the fourth, and final, major current of Asian Theology.

#### 4. Asian Theology in Communist Ruled Countries:

Asian Theology in countries ruled by Communist regimes does not produce much literature. It does not operate from an ample range of theological categories or intricate methodological considerations. The question of survival as a community of faith does not allow for such 'intellectual luxuries'. For this reason, it is more of a living Theological Reflection than a systematic academic elaboration. This, however, in no way does away with its innate depth and vitality, as the recent experience of the Montreal Conference clearly shows.<sup>30</sup> There the delegates from Mainland China explored basic theological themes: the incarnation (implying the individuality of a people and a Church; the Trinity (as a community model rather than a theological debate over homousios and filioque); the Resurrection and the Cosmic Christ; the vigorous autonomy of the Churches as found in the Acts of the Apostles; the fundamental Christian and human value of mutual respect.

It became obvious during the Conference that delegates from the China mainland when speaking of 'contextual theology' meant something quite different from theologians of the Third World, although both shared the same option for the people. As we have noted above, the 'context' for Third World theologians is a socio-political reality in need of change, with theology offered as an instrument of change. For many Chinese Christians, however, the change has already taken place in the form of the Communist revolution. The question for them is, then, how to identify with the historical experience of their people; how to appropriate a liberation already accomplished, and how to heal wounds and deepen

the life of faith.<sup>31</sup>

The living testimonies of the Chinese delegates gave clear evidence that more than thirty years of persecution has not succeeded in eliminating the ongoing search for theological understanding and reflection there. In addition, questions posed by the Patriotic Association of Catholics from the China mainland, for example, the question of independence from and interdependence with the Holy See in Rome, are also cause for debate in theological circles in the rest of the world.

Having described briefly four major currents of contemporary Asian Theology, let us now turn to some of the urgent questions being raised by Asian Theology as a whole.

## II. SOME URGENT QUESTIONS RAISED BY ASIAN THEOLOGY

While many of these questions have already surfaced in our previous review of Asian Theology, their urgency demands that we attempt to articulate some of them here, to bring them into sharper focus for the reader. We will limit our attention to three basic areas.

1. The first area giving rise to a host of theological issues is that which belongs to the perennial tension between theory and praxis. M.L. Lamb has already described the theory-praxis relationship in contemporary Christian theologies in masterly fashion.<sup>32</sup> He enumerates five actual correlations: the primacy of theory, the primacy of praxis, the primacy of faith-love, critical theoretic correlations, and critical praxis correlations. For Doctor Lamb the most outstanding of the five is the correlation where praxis holds primary place. He argues that the challenge of praxis is the strongest challenge that contemporary theological education must meet and answer. Theology must be functional. It is the transposition of the Marxist norm that primacy must be given to the transformation of society and history over theoretical constructions: one is not here to contemplate reality but to change it. The primacy, in Lamb's view, must go to the praxis of evangelical-love within history over the merely correct affirmation of faith and the constructions of theology. And while many theologians and Church leaders may not identify themselves with the basic option behind such challenges and issues, nonetheless, the insistence on the primacy of praxis (with its evident foundation in Holy Scripture in its teaching of the meaning of human life) will continue to have a strong impact even on those theologians who argue for the primacy of theory.

The relationship of theory and praxis brings us to the second area

of questions raised by modern Asian Theology. It may be summarized by the fundamental question: What is theology?

2. What is theology? The question itself is not a new one.<sup>33</sup> However, the answers posed by Asian Theologians imply new questions. This was the fundamental question running through all the discussions during our meeting in Pattaya, Thailand. There we were greatly helped in our search for a proper response by a simple metaphor, namely, that Christians are the bearers of two stories: their own stories as members of Christian communities and their stories as participants in their own heritages and cultures.

It seemed to us that theology takes place where these two stories come together, when they inter-act one with the other, and then, lead us to a new understanding of both. We do not wish to give a false impression that we saw this as a simple process. We confess that we went through considerable intellectual struggle as we searched for ways to clarify such an inter-action. We recognized in the process of our meeting that such a theology must be undergirded by our own spirituality, for, theology has no exclusive life of its own, but draws from and contributes to the life of worship and service.

Aloysius Pieris expressed similar thoughts in a pointed way:

*"Our theology is our way of sensing and doing things as revealed in our people's struggles for spiritual and social emancipation and expressed in the idioms and languages of the cultures such struggles have created.*

*Theology then is not mere God-talk; for, in our cultures, God-talk in itself is sheer 'non-sense'... God-talk is made relative to God-experience... It is word-less-ness that gives every word its meaning. This inner harmony between word and silence is the test of Asian authenticity, indeed it is the Spirit, the eternal energy which makes every word spring from silence and lead to silence, every engagement spring from renunciation, every struggle from a profound restfulness, every freedom from stern discipline, every action from stillness, every 'development' from detachment, and every acquisition from nonaddiction..."<sup>34</sup>*

C.S. Song speaks about theology as the love of the God-Man in action,<sup>35</sup> of theology that deals with concrete issues that affect life in its totality and not just with abstract concepts that engage the theological mind...of theology that must begin with humanity and all that it means because it is in humanity that God is theologically engaged...of a theology that has to wrestle with the earth and not with heaven."<sup>36</sup>

It is clear from these few examples that Asian Theology seeks to become integral human enterprise, inspired by faith, in service to man. The question then arises: Who carries this theological enterprise forward; is it the task of the academic and professional theologian alone? Who is the agent of theology?

3. This third question, with its intimate connection to the preceding questions, deals with the agent of theology. Most people assume that it is the trained theologians as individuals who do theology. But the conviction in Asia grows that we must correct this faulty assumption and re-affirm that it is, along with trained theologians, the whole community of faith which is involved in doing theology. The traditional view that theology is the exclusive province of the male members of the Christian community is also being challenged by the growing presence of women in the theological arena, who are gradually deepening the awareness of the essential role of women in the field of theology. For many of us this is a new discovery. We should be grateful for it.

The conviction that the proper agent of theology is the whole Christian community has many deep implications and serious consequences for the structures and methods of theological education. We are at this moment only at the threshold of a whole new era of theological work and education.

All of this will take some time. But, a promising Asian Theologian has reminded us: "It took the West a good thousand years to build its theological edifice. For some time to come our Asian house may look like a mix of many architectural styles, some Asian and others Western. But the construction is in progress; it cannot be stopped; and, by the grace of God, we shall one day recognize that we have an Asian home."<sup>37</sup> Yes, it is indeed, the springtime of Asian Theology.

#### FOOTNOTES

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.

C.S. Song is at present Associate Director of the Secretariat of the Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches, at Geneva, Switzerland.

23. Cf. Tissa Balasuriya, Emerging Theologies of Asian Liberation, in: Kofi Appiah-Kubi and V.J. Asumin, Ed., Third World Theology en Route, from Dar Es Salaam to Accra, Part II (mimeographed).

24. It is impossible to mention here all the important theological works of Indian Theology. Cf. footnote 1.

- "Vidyajyoti", Journal of Theological Reflection, edited in collaboration with the staff of Vidyajyoti, Institute of Religious Studies, Delhi, permits the interested reader fairly well to follow the recent development of theological work in India.
- "Report on Seminar on Theologising in India", in: Indian Missiological Review, Vol. I, Nr. 1, January 1979.

25. The Malayan world includes in our understanding especially Malaysia, Indonesian and the Philippines.

Also here we have to refer to footnote 1.

26. The reader will find ample material in the sources, indicated in footnote 1.

27. Cf. Handbook of the ATSSEA and the SEAGST (cf. footnote 17), 1978-1979, 26-28. Cf. also G.H. Anderson, op. cit. (footnote 1), Introduction, 3-4. We follow E.P. Nacpil's description, that time Executive Director of ATSSEA. (E.P. Nacpil is since 1980 bishop of the Methodist Church in Manila, Philippines.)

28. This is the basic starting point of Liberation Theology of Latin America. But as many Asian Theologians point out again and again, Asian Theology will not be a mere copy of Latin America's Theology. It will be marked by Asia's religiosity, sense for harmony, and mystique of poverty.

29. Cf. footnote 3, 158-159.

30. Cf. Pro Mundi Vita, CECC Newsletter, Nr. 11, October 1981.

31. Ibid., 2

32. M.L. Lamb, The Theory-Praxis Relationship in Contemporary Christian Theologies, in: Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Washington, D.C., June 9-12, 1976, Vol. 31, 149-178.

33. Cf. e.g. B. Lonergan, Method in Theology, London 1972,



just to mention one example which has caught the attention of many theological readers.

34. Cf. footnote 3, 93.

35. Cf. footnote 22, chapter IV, 78-98.

36. Id., New Frontiers of Theology in Asia: Ten Theological Theses. A paper presented at the Conference of Chinese Theologians in Hongkong, February 1979.

37. A.B. Lambino, A Critique of some Asian efforts at Contextualization with Reference to Theological Method, in: The South East Asia Journal of Theology 21 (1980, 2), 22 (1981, 1), pp. 88-96.

