

A Brief History of

EATWOT

in Asia



by Virginia Fabella

*The opening address of the Second
Asian Theological Conference: Hong Kong
August 2nd - 11th 1984.*

It is appropriate to begin the Second Asian Theological Conference with a question. What is ATC II all about that over forty Christians from 15 Asian and non-Asian countries should travel such great distances to meet in Hong Kong at a time when Hong Kong confronts an uncertain future? What possible relevance has a theological conference for the year 1997? It is my belief that what gathers us here together is our shared fidelity to the Risen Lord, our confidence in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and our deep love and concern for the people of Asia.

We have chosen as our theme "Faith Reflections on the Historical Processes of Asian Peoples Today". The organizing committee has invited me to open our conference with a brief history of EATWOT (the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians). EATWOT, as you know, sponsored the first conference, and some familiarity with its inception and growth will go a long way in aiding our understanding of the theme and process of our present conference.

EATWOT was conceived and born in 1976 when twenty-one theologians from Africa, Latin America and Asia met in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to

engage in a dialogue on the Third World. Actually, this meeting was the inspiration of an African theological student, Abbe Bimwenyi of Zaire. In his studies of the Third World, Bimwenyi noticed that there was no organized theological group comparable to the many socio-economic organizations that existed to foster understanding and cooperation among the developing countries. While some Third World Christians had already begun to question the adequacy and relevance of Western oriented theologies for their particular local situations, and had already drawn the attention of the theological establishment to the need for serious study of the local context as vital to the theological enterprise, still, there was no concerted effort by Third World Catholics and Protestants to offer any organized challenge to the Western style of theology that continued to dominate local Christian Churches. Dar was a turning point. Its perspective was Christianity from the view of the poor and oppressed. The Dar meeting created such an impact in theological circles of both the First and the Third Worlds that one European theologian referred to it as the "Bandung of Theology". The Dar participants agreed that a new theological model was necessary in order to respond to the needs and concerns of the poor and oppressed peoples of the Third World. This new mode of theologizing has two main features:

First, it insists on an analysis of the socio-economic, political and cultural realities as a vital part of the theologizing process. The Dar theologians examined the root of "Third Worldness" and agreed that without this critical analysis, it would not be possible to interpret meaningfully the will of God for Third World societies.

Second, the new methodological approach requires active involvement as a precondition for theological reflection. This is different from the traditional way of doing theology which usually takes place in academic circles, in libraries and universities somewhat removed from today's lives and struggles of the people.

It was at the close of the Dar meeting that the participants decided to form themselves into an Ecumenical Association of Third World theologians. Though there were differences in theological orientation and emphasis, which became manifest in the course of the dialogue, in the end, all came to realize the value of the interchange and the importance of their continuing to work together with a common purpose. In their provisional constitution, the founding members of EATWOT defined this common purpose as "the continuing development of Third World theologies which will serve the Churches' mission in the world and bear witness to a new humanity in Christ expressed in the struggle for a just society." The development of Third World theologies is not intended to

mean a complete rejection of Western theologies or the riches of our Christian theological tradition, but rather the ways of expressing our faith in the same Risen Lord which proceeds from a different starting point -- from the perspective of the "underside of history."

To implement the goal of promoting Third World theologies, the newly formed association decided to continue its dialogue, but in the future it would focus on one continent at a time. This would allow each continent to study its own concerns and realities and assess specific responses of the Christian Churches and their theology in each region. Since then, EATWOT has organized five inter-continental conferences. Three have focused on Africa, Asia and Latin America having taken place in Ghana, Sri Lanka and Brazil respectively. A fourth was held in India for the purpose of attempting a synthesis of the previous conferences. Most recently, a dialogue between First World and Third World theologians was held in Geneva.

Asia became the focus of attention in January of 1979 when 80 Christians, the majority from Asian countries, met in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, for EATWOT's first Asian Theological Conference. The all-Asian Organizing Committee chose for its theme: "Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology."

During this conference, it was not too difficult to identify the major groups struggling for full humanity on the Asian continent: urban and industrial workers, peasants and rural workers, the marginalized in the cities, ethnic and other minorities, women, youth and students. As part of the conference's inductive approach, the organizing committee arranged 3 day live-in experiences with the above mentioned groups.

It soon became apparent that while identification of the struggling groups and an analysis of their situation were one thing, faith reflection upon the struggle of these groups was quite another matter. Though it was clear from the start that ATC I did not aim at producing a systematic theology for Asia, there were different expectations as to what "A Relevant Theology" entailed. Consequently, the conference was not without its tensions and frustrations.

One point of conflict arose from the presentation of Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka, who spoke on "the religio-cultural dimensions" of an Asian theology. His claim that Asia's overwhelming poverty and its multifaceted religiosity constitute the two inseparable realities which form the matrix of any theology that is truly Asian, resulted in polarized positions regarding what characterizes the Asian context. While all agreed that the



There was a need to emphasize Asia's socio-economic and political reality

Asian context would be studied and taken seriously, there was disagreement in its characterization. On the one hand, the Philippine delegation contended that the Asian context had for its principal characteristic, its "Third Worldness", i.e. extreme poverty and oppression. For them, "Third Worldness" is the substantive, while "Asia" is the qualifier or modifier. Therefore, there was a need to emphasize Asia's socio-economic and political reality along with the system and structures that have caused the poverty and injustices against which people are struggling. This holds true not only of the context but of the resulting theology as well.

On the other hand, the Sri Lankan and Indian participants felt that while poverty is what Asia shares with the rest of the Third World, that which defines Asia within the other poor countries and gives it its peculiarly Asian character is its religiosity. Hence the need to stress the "religio-cultural" dimension and the important part other living religions of the continent play in a search for a relevant Asian theology.

A second major tension revolved around identifying the "doers" or "producers" of Asian theology. For some, mainly the Philippine delegation

again, a meaningful theology in Asia must be produced by the Asian poor from a liberated consciousness. It is people at the grass roots level who must reflect on and say what their faith-life experience is in their struggle to attain full humanity. The middle-class professionals and specialists are to serve only as "technicians" in the process.

For others, again principally the Sri Lankan and Indian delegates, while theology is a process which must start from real-life situations in the matrix of history, it must also involve biblical and theological specialists, social scientists, church officials, etc. in formulating systematic syntheses.

But all was not tension or frustration at ATC I. There were many worthwhile exchanges and insightful contributions as well. Among the latter I would like to mention two from Pieris' paper:

(1) The Asian style of sensing and doing things is holistic and harmonizing compared to the dichotomizing tendency of the West. In Asia there is harmony between God-experience and human concern, between word and silence; there is union between goal and method. In Asian culture, method is not separated from goal. An obvious conclusion from this is that the Asian method of doing theology is, in itself, Asian theology.

(2) The method of liberation theology, that puts the primacy of praxis over theory, correctly inculcates not merely a passive solidarity with Asia's poor, the majority of whom are non-Christians, but also represents a dynamic participation in their struggle for justice and freedom. As Asian Christians, we must seek more creative modes of humble participation in the non-Christian experience of liberation as it is revealed in the religiosity of Asian peoples as well as in their struggle for a more human existence. The locus of our search for the Asian face of Christ is, therefore, not so much the Christian life within the Church but rather the God-experience (and hence the human concern) of God's people living outside the institutional confines of the Church and among whom the Church is called upon to lose itself in total participation.



*In Asia there is harmony
between word and silence.*

Though many things remained unresolved, participants in ATC I came away with a sense of accomplishment and hope about prospects for a relevant Asian theology in the future, agreeing that theology in Asia needs a radical transformation. The ATC I final statement contains 4 major points of convergence:

(1) In the context of the poverty of its teeming millions, their exploitation and powerlessness, theology in Asia must have a definite liberational thrust. (This seems to confirm the Dar statement that involvement in the cause of the poor and oppressed is a necessary requisite for theological reflection.)

(2) For theology to be authentically Asian, it must be immersed in and grow out of the historico-cultural situation. It must integrate the insights and values of the other major religions. This integration should not remain exclusively on the intellectual level. One needs to question, therefore, attempts towards an "indigenization" or "inculturation" of a theology that separates itself from the people's struggle for a more just and human society.

(3) As theology is concerned with the real-life situations of the Asian peoples, it must include social analysis, but such analysis must keep pace with ongoing historical processes to ensure a continuing evaluation of economic and social structures, institutions, ideologies, etc., with special attention to the elements that shackle instead of liberate.

(4) Theology, then, can be regarded as the articulated reflection of the encounter of God by people in their historical situations. It is the same God as revealed in the event of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Thus the Bible, which records the Jesus event, is an indispensable source in the doing of theology.

The major elements for a relevant theology in Asia were actually only touched upon in ATC I. It was to be in the following EATWOT conferences, particularly at New Delhi in 1981, that a deepening process took place. The theme of the Delhi meeting was "Irruption of the Third World: A Challenge to Theology." "Irruption" here is deliberately spelled IRR - meaning a "breaking into", rather than ER - "breaking out".

The irruption of the Third World designates the growing historical force that evinces at one and the same time a new consciousness among the poor and oppressed, and their increasing resistance to the dominance of countries of the First World. This dramatic movement is described in the

Delhi statement as "the irruption of the exploited classes, marginalized cultures and humiliated races that are bursting from the underside of history into a world long dominated by the West... It is the irruption of religious and ethnic groups looking for affirmation of their authentic identity, of women demanding recognition and equality, of youth protesting the dominant system and values. It is the irruption of all those who struggle for full humanity and for their rightful place in history."

The Delhi participants affirmed that Christians in Asia cannot be mere spectators of any historical process demanding greater equality, justice and liberty for the people. They must place themselves at its service. This, in fact, is to participate in the liberating mission of Jesus. (D,S. #72). This Christian involvement is truly faith in action. However, action must be accompanied by silent, prayerful contemplation; otherwise, it will be pure activism, and "God's face is only partially seen and God's word only partially heard within our participation in God's liberating and fulfilling action in history." (D.S. #39).

Theology in Asia cannot disregard the growing protest against existing imbalances and inequities. But since the majority in the Third World are those of other faiths, the irruption of the Third World is virtually an irruption of the non-Christian world. It is bursting into history with a voice of its own. If theology does not speak to, or through, this non-Christian world, it will be, to quote the Delhi statement, "an esoteric luxury of the Christian minority." In fact, in Asia, no renewal in theology can take place without addressing the non-Christian majority. Their sacred scriptures and traditions are a source of revelation for us also. Neither can any social revolution be effective nor lasting unless it takes into account the religious roots and experiences of the people. In contemporary times, we see this fact confirmed in such countries as Tibet, Iran and India to mention only three.



Theology is concerned with the real-life situations of the Asian peoples.

During the Delhi conference, differences in attitudes towards poverty were also discerned. Many Third World peoples think of poverty only in economic terms. For Asians, however, poverty has religious overtones as well. It is considered both as sin and as virtue - sin when it is imposed from the outside, a virtue when it is voluntarily embraced to combat personal greed and acquisitiveness. As practiced by the Buddhist monks and nuns, voluntary or religious poverty not only helps to free the self from overattachment to possessions, but it can also be a powerful antidote against the growing consumerism in our Asian societies today.

In all the EATWOT conferences, it has been acknowledged that injustices and oppression arise not only from economic, political or cultural causes, but also are based on sex, race, caste or ethnicity, all of which are interwoven and interrelated. In ATC I there was an attempt to highlight the double and sometimes triple oppression suffered by Asian women. In Delhi, the Asian participants concurred that the inferior and oppressed status of women can no longer be ignored or tolerated. The final document itself states that unless this discrimination is eradicated and women's perspective is included in the search for a meaningful theology, there can be neither a genuine social transformation nor an authentic theological renewal.

No work on Asian theology is really adequate without reference to China, which has almost half of Asia's population. EATWOT from the start has been conscious of China's impact on Asia and the rest of the world, but unfortunately it has been unable to establish any dialogue with Christians on the China mainland.

Without any doubt, the work of theological reformulation is already underway in Asia. Here EATWOT-in-Asia wants to acknowledge the enrichment it has received from its dialogue with Africa, Latin America and minority groups from the United States, as well as the valuable input it has received from many different religions and ideologies.

To summarize EATWOT's efforts in Asia, let me borrow points from a talk given at the sixth EATWOT conference in Geneva in January of 1983 by Samuel Rayan:

(1) A theology capable of serving the wholeness of life must spring forth at the meeting point of faith and the reality of Asia -- its people, its poverty, its political and social backgrounds, its religiosity.

(2) The main resources for Asian theology are its people and the liberative potential of their cultural and religious traditions -- among

which are their age-old Scriptures and folktales, and their spiritual history.

(3) Asian theology will be a process of discovering and joining God as God lives and works with the Asian poor, who form the majority of its people. As the poor in Asia are mostly non-Christian, to meet God in the poor is to meet God in the non-Christian poor, in their beliefs, hopes and symbols.

(4) Theology in Asia will have to pay far more attention to the subversive dimensions of God's interventions. Too often and for too long, we have pictured God as the guarantor of the status quo and the guardian of law and order. Theology will need to be converted to the God who identifies with the women, the landless, the untouchables, the unemployed, the bonded, the starving, the humiliated and broken.

So we come to the end of our brief history of EATWOT. Our chosen theme for ATC II is "Faith Reflection on Historical Processes of Asian Peoples Today." While the work of ATC II continues that which began in ATC I, it must go beyond it to a deepened faith reflection upon our peoples' initiatives and struggles for a full humanity for all of us. Our theme challenges us to pool our resources together to uncover what our Christian faith has to say about our peoples' march towards God's Kingdom of Justice, Truth and Love. We pray for the Spirit's enlightening and fortifying grace that as we partake in our peoples' quest for a new self and a new society, we will encounter, together with our people, the Asian face of Christ.