

ASIAN PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY:  
A PERSPECTIVE FROM AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

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1. Introduction

My personal contact with Asian Pentecostalism began when I read the publication edited by Wonsuk Ma and Robert Menzies.<sup>2</sup> Impressed by the freshness of the viewpoints expressed (not all from Asians), I contacted Ma and received the response, “Who are you?” From that has risen a happy (if rather long-distance) friendship which I believe will culminate in a long partnership in Pentecostal theological education and research.

Since then it has become obvious to me that Asian and African Pentecostal scholars are natural partners, since we face many similar issues. Not least of these is the continual frustration of working with a dominantly North American and European Pentecostal theological establishment which, while it recognizes the essentially “non-western” nature of Pentecostalism, appears to do little to reflect this in much of its work. The final straw for many of us was the Society for Pentecostal Studies conference in 2000 in which the overwhelming majority of presenters were from the United States—and that when the topic was “Pentecostal Mission: Issues Home and Abroad.”<sup>3</sup>

I offer this paper as a contribution to the growing prospect of shared vision and research by Asian and African Pentecostals. However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the article was presented during the Second Annual Meeting of the Asian Pentecostal Society, Makati, Philippines on August 25, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (eds.), *Pentecostalism in Context: Essays in Honor of William W. Menzies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> A typical non-western reflection is another South African, Allan Anderson, “Signs and Blunders: Pentecostal Mission Issues at ‘Home and Abroad’ in the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 2:2 (2000), pp. 193-210.

necessary also to share a word of caution: while Africa and Asia share many distinctives that set them apart from the North American and European establishment, this does not always mean that they share similarities in *every* area. Indeed, cooperation between African and Asian Pentecostals should not be approached on the simplistic understanding that we have all things in common. I remember crossing from Zimbabwe to Mozambique some years ago, and in that heart of Africa seeing a Korean Pentecostal calendar hanging on the wall in the border post. It was written in Korean, and had been donated by Korean missionaries who had arrived to work for the Lord in Africa, without having taken note of culture, language, spirituality, or any other distinctive of Africa as opposed to Korea! They were undoubtedly motivated and worthy, but unfortunately (in that particular region) rather irrelevant.

## 2. Africa and Asia: Contextual Commonalities.

Ultimately, the most interesting lesson from the missionary outreach during the western colonial era is what happened to Christianity when the missionaries were not looking, and after the colonizers withdrew. The challenge for historians lies in seeing beyond an extension of western categories and into the hearts, minds and contexts of Christ's living peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

This concluding comment by Dana L. Robert is representative of many that have been made in recent years by missiologists and church historians. The shift in Christian "weight" has been to the South. Asia, Africa, and Latin America are the regions where Christianity as a whole is at its most dynamic. We also know that the major Christian movements in parts of these regions are primarily Pentecostal, Charismatic, or "spirit" churches. So Everett Wilson can say almost exactly the same thing about Pentecostalism as Robert does about Christianity in general,

By almost any standard, Pentecostalism presently is not what Charles Fox Parham or any of its successors has pronounced it to be, but rather what

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<sup>4</sup> Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24:2 (April 2000), pp. 55-57 (57).

contemporary Brazilians, Koreans and Africans demonstrate that it actually is.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time it appears as though western middle-class Pentecostalism is becoming moribund, fragmenting into a post-modern confusion of “ministries” marked by style rather than content. (This should not afford the non-western Pentecostal churches reason for being smug, however, as there is no guarantee that they will not someday fall into a similar situation.) Part of the task of Pentecostal scholarship on these two continents *must* be to urge the indigenous churches to retain both their powerful mission dynamic as well as their traditional Pentecostal commitment to the spirit of the scriptures. This may not always win us kudos with the demagogues, but is certainly more satisfying than sitting back and bemoaning the terrible degeneration taking place around us!

What commonalities are there between Asian and African Pentecostalism and the contexts in which they work? (I am treating Asia rather generally in this text, excluding southwestern Asia—the heartland of Islam which may surely be treated as a special case.) The following generalizations may be noted.

## 2.1 Non-western Interests and Challenges

This has been mentioned above. Of Asia, Kipling noted, “East is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.” This may equally be said of Africa. Moving from the North American or European thought world into Africa or Asia, for many westerners, is like moving to another planet. Things are different. In certain regions massive technological development appears to camouflage the differences, but it does not banish them. Scratching only a western itch may mean ignoring very real African or Asian itches.

## 2.2 Holistic Approach to Reality

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<sup>5</sup> Everett A. Wilson, “They Crossed the Red Sea, Didn’t They? Critical History and Pentecostal Beginnings,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus and Douglas Petersen (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), pp. 85-115 (109).

In Africa the western differentiation between the world of the spirit/mind and the physical realm simply does not exist. Neither does the emphasis upon the individual, as opposed to the family, clan, tribe, or community. This implies a different perspective on property ownership and disposition, on community relations, personal ambitions, and family obligations—indeed, even on the nature and importance of time itself. This difference partially explains the tremendous growth of “spirit” churches in Africa, at the expense of the less indigenized mission churches.

It might be argued that for much of Asia there is a similar emphasis on holism, although it might not always be expressed in the same ways as in Africa. Western insistence on individual rights and freedoms, and western objectification of truth and “facts” may therefore often win lip-service in Asia and Africa, but not actually be honored in the deed.

### 2.3 Ancestors

Africans and Asians do not simply walk away from their buried or cremated dead and forget about them. The holistic emphasis includes the notion of the deceased as part of the present day family or clan. In Africa this means that western notions of material and technological “progress” are often avoided or resisted, for fear of offending the ancestors. At the same time, achieving personal power confers status not only on oneself but also on one’s ancestors. Understand this and you are some way toward understanding much of the history of post-colonial Africa.

Asian respect for ancestors may take different forms, and have different social and political effects, to that discerned in Africa. (Africa, for instance, has nothing even remotely resembling the sophistication of Confucian thought, or Shinto ceremony.) However, it lends an element to Asian thinking that is distinctly non-western, and can be ignored neither in the evangelizing nor in the catechism of converts. Together with holism it provides a context in which the role of the shaman becomes central to the life of the non-Christian community. Some argue that modernization and urbanization in Africa and Asia often merely effect the replacing of the traditional village shaman with a re-invented “modern” one.

### 2.4 Tradition

In the west nostalgia may drive an individual, community, or even nation to attempt to rediscover its roots and traditions. *Vide* the recent emphasis on “family values” in North American and British politics. In

Africa and Asia, while rapid urbanization and technological development have at times seriously undermined the role and value of tradition, generally speaking these two continents have been spared the baby-boomer desire to treat with total contempt the values of their fathers (“the establishment”). While in Africa the custody of tradition has generally been left to the village elders and shaman, in parts of Asia large and articulate religious systems have developed in which tradition is guarded and nurtured.

Tradition is highly valued in a culture where the group is considered of greater worth than the individual, and where the ancestors have to be considered in every decision. Together with the other contextual elements noted above, emphasis on tradition often leads to strong emphasis on the Old Testament in indigenous African and Asian churches.

It is interesting to note how a Pentecostal theologian from East Asia perceives the challenges of the Asian context in which Pentecostal ministry is practiced. J. Ma<sup>6</sup> is far less positive about the socio-cultural context of Asia than is this writer from Africa. She lists as some of the negatives found in this region as follows: the prevalent oppression and deprivation found in many regions of Asia, poverty, child prostitution, sexual promiscuity, and the disadvantages accruing to tribal peoples in more remote areas. However, from the African perspective, while these are no doubt very real challenges—as indeed they are in Africa—they are generally accompanied by a background of regional development and prosperity that Africa does not know, and the answers (when they come) will no doubt be formulated on a different plane to those that may one day redress the African situation.

However, Ma’s description of the difference between the western ethos and the Asian is in many ways parallel to the interface between many African cultures and the emerging global order: individualism versus group identity, task orientation versus person orientation, political conflicts, and religiosity (Africans might speak of “spirituality”) and expanding religious pluralism.

### 3. Africa and Asia: Contextual Differences

While there are similarities in the cultures and value systems of many parts of Asia and Africa, there are also significant differences which cannot be ignored.

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<sup>6</sup> Jungja Ma, “Pentecostal Challenges in East and South-east Asia,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism*, pp. 183-202.

### 3.1 Post-colonial Histories

While the most significant factor in Asian decolonization was the Second World War, in Africa the process was longer delayed. By 1953 most Asian countries were independent of western rule, while African independence gained momentum in the early 1960s, with Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa only achieving majority (African) rule in 1980, 1990, and 1994 respectively.

Asian colonialism also comprised the Asian experience of Japanese imperialism, in which the first major industrialized power in Asia not only inspired terror in other nations, but paradoxically also pride in Asian achievement. The Japanese post-war industrial miracle became a role model for other East Asian countries, and these released “tigers” have changed the face of Asia forever. The history of much of post-colonial Asia, apart from a few Stalinist pockets of resistance, has been of progress, development, modernization, and enlightenment. With a hiccup or two along the way.

Sadly, this has not been true of any part of Africa. Colonial powers left the continent precipitously, without preparing the soil for any meaningful form of democracy. The result has been a continent where South Africa (SA), the most industrialized country, has a lower GNP than the American State of Ohio. The South African GNP is currently responsible for more than 50% of the African total. The problem has not been one of lack of resources nor even of the will of the people—it has been a problem of poor governance.

Post-colonial Africa also still has, particularly at the southern tip of the continent, a significant number of people of European descent whose roots in Africa go back over 300 years (here I stand!) These people maintain a western culture while being as African as any American of European descent is American. However, they are also more oriented to and committed to Africa than to any other continent, despite their well-documented paternalism toward the “African” people and cultures.

In terms of Pentecostalism, until today it is mainly these European Africans—most of them of Dutch descent—who provide the Pentecostal scholarship of that continent. For many their concerns have been the typical concerns of Pentecostalism in relation to Reformed Christianity. However, it is possible to distinguish a distinctive brand of Pentecostalism in Southern Africa which, while articulated primarily by European Africans, is significantly distinct from North American and European Pentecostalism. There is also now a growing nucleus of “African” African Pentecostal

scholars, particularly from South and West Africa, which will hopefully add its voice to the already well-established African evangelical school.

### 3.2 Modernization

Asia is a rapidly modernizing continent. Even a country with such vast social challenges as India has its own basis of scientific and medical research and development. East Asia and computerization are synonyms, and telecommunications and industrial developments rival many parts of the developed world. Walk around the car parks of most parts of the world and you will find a preponderance of Asian-made vehicles. At least three Asian nations have developed nuclear technology to the level of making nuclear bombs.

Africa, on the other hand, is a rapidly stagnating continent. Apart from the southern “European” enclave it has never really had a scientific or industrial base. Currently there are more Internet users in London than there are in the whole of Africa. Communications infrastructure is in ever-increasing disrepair, medical services are generally appalling, if not totally absent. African universities are often in a sad state, and few outside of South Africa and Nigeria offer credible courses in subjects such as science and engineering—which are normally followed only by Africans of European or Asian descent, anyway.

Obviously not all parts of Asia are experiencing the challenges and benefits of modernization—and not all parts of Africa are in degeneration and stagnation. However, the prognosis for Asia is much more positive than for Africa, astronomically so.

Ma points out the down-side of this Asian economic miracle: success-orientation challenges people-orientation, there is confusion between political ideologies and the western-style economic system, a growing gap is developing between rich and poor, and there is a negative effect of urban prosperity on family values.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.3 Resources

Asia has a growing pool of skilled human resources—Africa’s are dwindling, through emigration or through death by AIDS, warfare and

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<sup>7</sup> J. Ma, “Pentecostal Challenges,” p. 189.

famine. In huge parts of Africa basic primary schooling is lacking, while in parts of Asia there is in some parts an oversupply of skilled technicians, engineers and scientists. In Africa fertility rates are out of control, and few official attempts are made to do anything about it. In Asia many governments are dealing with the problem quite adequately.

Africa is blessed with vast natural resources, which, for the main part, the people of the continent themselves lack the ability to exploit. The result is that they are plundered (rather riskily at times) by western exploiters, and the manufactured benefits accrue to non-African concerns. Asia, on the other hand, appears to make goods with imported resources, or comes up with such unlikely miracles as Singapore, where the only real resources are geographical position and human skills.

Both Asia and Africa are farmed primarily by subsistence farmers. However, without a parallel development of science and industry, Africa lacks the resources to supplement the supply of food and wealth as many Asian countries manage to do. The result is the continuing need to rush food aid to parts of Africa during the regular droughts on that continent. The primitive nature of African subsistence farming, along with growing population pressure, has led to an environmental degradation of such proportions that the land in the medium rainfall areas will soon not be able to support any form of agriculture or pastoral farming at all. Post-colonial governments exacerbate this trend by appropriating viable commercial farmlands and distributing it to subsistence farmers—or to their own political cronies.

Africa and Asia are very similar worlds, and very different worlds. Both are home to growing Pentecostal populations, non-western people who are coming to know the saving, healing, Spirit-baptizing power of the Christ of the Bible. In the light of the similarities and differences, what does the future look like for African and Asian Pentecostalism?

#### 4. Africa and Asia: Commonalities in Future Prospects

As it faces the new century, the Pentecostal movement on these two continents shares a number of similar prospects, challenges, and goals.

##### 4.1 A Continuing Positive Response to Pentecostal Christianity

There does not seem to be a slowing down of this trend—where Pentecostal believers proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the power of his Spirit, individuals, communities, and nations are turning to Jesus Christ. In



Africa, Pentecostal ministry is achieving an overwhelming reaction at every level, whether preached in huge tents or stadiums, or by single faithful lay members in their own and adjoining villages, the response is gratifying.

Similar stories come from Asia. In the less-developed regions the testimonies are very similar to those coming from Africa. In the face of resistance from traditions, from established religion or spirituality, even of demonic resistance, faithful women and men are proclaiming the full gospel, and seeing the fruits of their labors. Unlike the North American and European countries, where Pentecostal growth is stabilizing or enfeebled, Asia and Africa are powerhouses of Pentecostal witness. What a time to be alive!

#### 4.2 The Challenge of Syncretism

Much of evangelization in the North American and European countries took place in the context of the traditional “historical” churches—those who came to know Christ in a Pentecostal context came from a national or ecclesiastical “Christian” background. Conversion often meant implementation or appropriation of already existing dogma, with some slight modification to accommodate Pentecostal phenomena.

In Africa and Asia this has rarely been the case. Conversion has not been to Pentecostalism, but to Christianity. And often from a vastly different and contrasting culture and religion. These are not Greek converts who were initially proselytes of the synagogues of the Jewish diaspora, but these are pagans who have known nothing but the emptiness of idols and the “table and cup of devils.”

In this truly “missions” environment, the convert to Christianity is confronted with an alternative thought-world, paradigm, worldview—call it what you will—that challenges them radically at virtually every level of their existence. And the radical “otherness” of this new scriptural life-style may be incompletely or inadequately appropriated, with the result that the new believer, or a whole community of new believers, becomes an adherent of a syncretistic form of Christianity.

One of the challenges facing African and Asian Pentecostal theology is the definition of syncretism, as opposed to contextualization, of the Christian message. While for North American and European theologians this is a theoretical question, and is sometimes influenced by an unrealistically romantic notion of non-Christian religions and cultures, for Pentecostal Asians and Africans it is the very stuff of survival.

In two recent contributions by Asian Pentecostal scholars, a clear stand has been taken against the subjectivism of a post-modern approach to the

Bible and theology. Wonsuk Ma<sup>8</sup> points out that there are elements that Pentecostals can validly borrow from a post-modern world, but the one they should definitely avoid is post-modernism's open-ended subjectivism. Tan, while arguing for a non-fundamentalist agenda for future Pentecostal theologizing, takes a stand against post-modernism precisely because of the plurality its subjectivism fosters—leading to an unacceptable syncretism that will sap Pentecostal focus and vitality.<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that a similar clearly upheld commitment to Christian absolutes by J. Ma<sup>10</sup> is dismissed by Hollenweger in his preface to the work, e.g., “All in all, this is the report of a not yet recognized but *de facto* marriage between pre-Christian and Christian elements”<sup>11</sup> and “I am not sure whether Julie Ma recognizes in the above description the intentions and kernel of her research. For her the break between the pre-Christian existence and the Pentecostal presence is probably much more marked.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that he so obviously denies the explicit intent of the author, who after all was the researcher on the spot.

A recent collection of papers and essays by evangelical African theologians reflects a similar commitment to the absolutes of the Christian faith in the African cultural situation. The spirit of most of the contributors is demonstrated in the following from one of them,

The man in Australasia, in the Americas, in Europe, and in Africa, should be comfortably Christian without surrendering his own cultural distinctives to any other culture but that of Jesus Christ. By the same token, the central core of Christianity as manifested in any given locality should be such that it is readily identifiable by others from outside it as truly Christian.... For us in Africa our battles in this sphere would be in vain if we reject European Christianity for being non-Christian only to replace it with an African Christianity which is so overlaid with our own cultural matter that it fails to meet the tests of true Christianity when it is

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<sup>8</sup> Wonsuk Ma, “Biblical Studies in the Pentecostal Tradition: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism*, pp. 52-69 (63).

<sup>9</sup> May Ling Tan, “The Spirit in Global Context: A Response to William Menzies,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 2/3 (March 2000), pp. 43-49 (47-49).

<sup>10</sup> Julie C. Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Philippines* (Frankfurt-a-M: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Walter J. Hollenweger, Preface to *When the Spirit Meets*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Hollenweger, Preface, p. 19.

subjected to close scrutiny. To wind up with the type of end product that is African at the expense of being Christian would be self-defeating....<sup>13</sup>

These evangelical sentiments are echoed by many Pentecostal Christians in Africa.

#### 4.3 Trans-cultural Christian Work

Although there are large parts of Asia and Africa that are mono-cultural, the cosmopolitan nature of church workers and church origins on these continents means that a significant amount of Pentecostal preaching and teaching is done in a cross-cultural or trans-cultural situation. The very remoteness of the Judaeo-Christian thought world from the national religions and cultures of these continents means that even an indigenous Pentecostal preacher or teacher is working in a trans-cultural situation with his or her own peers.

The colonial history of these continents also implies that many of the local populations are already acquainted (if not always fully conversant) with cultures and paradigms not their own. The ubiquity of Hollywood and western pop-culture adds to this awareness.

For Pentecostalism this means that the Asian and African Pentecostal movement has considerably more potential for producing credible proponents of a multi-cultural or non-parochial Pentecostal theology. Scholars *should* arise that can promote a form of Pentecostalism that is not limited by an obsession with the problems challenging single cultures or regions.

#### 4.4 Confrontation of Unacceptable Local Ethics

Any visitor to Africa will all too soon become acquainted with the graft and corruption that riddles the continent. The situation is similar in many parts of Asia. In many Asian countries that have otherwise impeccable

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<sup>13</sup> Watson Omulokole, "The Quest for Authentic African Christianity," in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, eds. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), pp. 24-37 (34).

public morals, the practice of jobs-for-cronies and loans-for-family-members is all too rife. Indeed, many ascribe the economic hardships of the last three years in East Asia to this kind of practice in the banking and industrial sectors.

One of the bleakest realities is that Pentecostal and evangelical revivals on these continents have rarely impacted national morality. It would appear that many are able to undergo a change of heart without undergoing a change of moral habits.

Much of the moral problem has its roots in the cultural values of the nations involved. If notions of property and community are centred on obligations to kin rather than on individual rights and responsibilities, then what is clearly moral (and economically sensible) by biblical standards becomes unrealistic in terms of local culture. For instance, in many tribal situations in Africa the notion of theft as immoral depends on from whom you steal! Stealing from a stranger is not immoral, but stealing from kin is harshly punished. Such a moral outlook may also be extended to matters of telling the truth, and even to the taking of human life.

Obviously Asian and African Pentecostalism will suffer from a credibility crisis if the much vaunted revivals and Pentecostal growth on these continents are not accompanied by the strengthening of biblical morality in their nations.

## 5. Africa and Asia: Differences in Future Prospects

While the commonalities listed above are impressive, the differences in some aspects of Asian and African contexts also imply differences in a realistic evaluation of the future prospects of the Pentecostal movement on the two continents.

### 5.1 Development and Upliftment Issues

While there are parts of Asia that are faced with similar development and social upliftment challenges to those of most of Africa, by and large the situation in Asia is much rosier than in Africa. The African Pentecostal church is growing so rapidly, and the educational standards of most converts is so low, that Christian education as such takes a back seat to more “practical” forms of training. And resources for these are exceedingly limited. To put it bluntly, Africa and Africans cannot pay for even the most basic forms of education or training. It has to be offered to them as a free service.

At one stage the church in Uganda was growing at 30,000 converts per month. Where do the pastors, teachers, youth-leaders, Sunday-school teachers, theological trainers, etc. come from at that rate? This sort of growth is fairly common in parts of Africa from time to time. If the church accepts the challenge of social upliftment wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, how does it achieve it in such a context?

The common African emphasis on leaders as “men of power” also often leads to a paradigm where the followers exist for the benefit of the leaders, and not the other way round. Instead of upliftment flowing from the few who are trained to the many they could benefit, the Christian leader often exploits the deprived for his own benefit. In doing this he is only following the example of many of Africa’s political leaders. Christian aid that pours into Africa thus often enriches a handful, and never reaches those for whom it was intended—or does so only at a price. This scandal affected the Pentecostal church in Mozambique when clothes sent by the truckload to the survivors of civil war and famine served only to enrich a few Christian leaders, who sold the free gifts to their own parishioners, and pocketed the proceeds.

On a recent visit to Malawi I found that an American college that offered a four-year degree to Pentecostal ministers produced only a few pastoral graduates. And many graduates at that level were snapped up by businesses that needed an articulate African graduate as a local “front” for their multinational work. Africa is obviously faced by much greater challenges in this area than is Asia.

## 5.2 “Deepening”

This aspect is closely related to the previous one: the river of God in Africa flows extremely wide, but is very shallow. While the same may probably be said of many Asian church situations, the prospects for deepening that exist in Asia are much more accessible than those for Africa. The educational challenges alone are mind-boggling in Africa. While it is one of the most enjoyable things on earth to worship with, testify with, and preach with, African Pentecostal Christians, it is rare indeed to find among them the requisite skills to significantly deepen the spiritual basis of their own members.

In the light of the much-hoped-for African Renaissance espoused by the present South African president, there are many that hope for theological training in Africa conducted by Africans themselves, as opposed to so-called “missions” colleges and seminaries. However, recent experience in Zimbabwe and South Africa shows that this is a hope that still remains far

from fulfilment. In Zimbabwe a United States-trained theologian has led a highly viable theological college and its associated pastorate into an unbelievable heresy that claims that black Africans are actually Hebrews, because their cultures are so similar! In South Africa no African-run theological faculty has yet shown long-term viability in the Pentecostal community, primarily because concern for the prerogatives of the management and faculty often outweighs concern for the training of the students. And Zimbabwe and South Africa, together with some parts of West Africa and Kenya, have the best-educated Pentecostal pastorate in Africa.

### 5.3 Resources

A major difference between Asia and Africa is the availability and implementation of resources. This extends to resources for Pentecostal training, ministry and development. Asian levels of productivity are unheard-of in Africa, and the African potential for Christian effect and expansion is correspondingly low.

One increasingly valued resource is the industry, vigour, and vision of African women. The status of women of the African continent is shockingly low by any norm, and is indeed one of the causes of the rapid spread of AIDS on the continent. The “no” of an African women means exactly nothing.<sup>14</sup> However, because in African culture it is traditionally the women that till the soil and take care of virtually every aspect of provision and nurture in the home, there is a pool of initiative among them which the openness of Pentecostalism to women’s ministry often allows to come to the fore. In the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa it is increasingly recognized that the women of the church may be the cutting edge for the upliftment of whole communities.

A side-effect of the appalling economic track-record of Africa is that local currency values are so low that a tremendous amount can be done with “hard” currency. The AFM Theological College, traditionally the Pentecostal training ground for descendants of Dutch people, has taken on more and more responsibility for the training of African Africans. At our campus in Kwa-Zulu Natal we are faced with the challenge of providing

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<sup>14</sup> “... women are the ones who progress to full-blown AIDS first and die fastest, and the underlying cause is not just sex but power. Wives and girlfriends and even prostitutes in this part of the world can’t easily say no to sex on a man’s terms.” Johanna McGeary, “Death Stalks a Continent,” *Time* (February 12, 2000), pp. 46-54 (52).

English- and computer-literacy classes, and have no resources to do so. Just a handful of US dollars or Japanese yen could go a long, long way....

Obviously the long-term answer is for the governments of Africa to get their act together and to generate the required wealth from a resource-rich continent. Perhaps the real challenge to the Pentecostal revival in Africa is to help hasten that day.

## 6. The Basis for Meaningful Interaction between Asian and African Pentecostalism

In the light of these commonalities and differences, what prospects are there for meaningful interaction between African and Asian Pentecostal theology and theologians? I would like to make the following tentative suggestions, which I am sure could be supplemented by insights from my Asian colleagues.

### 6.1 Joint Dialogue with the Pentecostal North

The North American and European Pentecostal establishment is not unaware of the shift of Christian and Pentecostal weight to the so-called "South." However, it does not always appear as certain about what the burning issues in this new context are. Since in the South, Pentecostal scholarship is much newer, and much thinner on the ground, it would make sense for Asia and Africa to join together in dialogue with the North. This would provide a credible and cogent Pentecostal voice from the South, stating not only that we face different issues, but also spelling out what those issues are. A useful occasion for this will be at the Non-western Pentecostal Conference in Los Angeles in May 2001, held to network among non-Northern Pentecostal scholars and to encourage their scholarship, just before the Pentecostal World Conference.

An example of the sort of dialogue I have in mind: While I respect William Menzies as a tremendous scholar and true hero of the Pentecostal faith, when I read his list of "burning issues" facing Pentecostal scholarship in the new millennium,<sup>15</sup> I wondered just how relevant these were to myself, facing the challenges of a growing Pentecostal movement in the

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<sup>15</sup> William W. Menzies, "Facing Theological Issues of the Twenty-first Century," in *Facing Issues of the Twenty-first Century* (Conference Papers, The Fourth General Assembly, Asia Pacific Theological Association, Sidney, Australia, Sept/Oct, 1999), pp. 1-16 (14-16).

disintegrating social situations of Africa. My scepticism seems to have been shared by at least one of the Asian respondents.<sup>16</sup> It appeared to me that Menzies has raised the issues typical of the North American and European Pentecostal establishment. I can recognize that in some African circles some of them are valid (as in the western middle-class churches in South Africa), but for the larger part of Africa there are numerous other issues that are more crucial. This is perhaps because the larger Pentecostal movement in Africa really has no problem with the Bible as the word of God, with tongues as initial evidence, with the reality of God's power as opposed to false spiritual power, etc. I would love to see theologians from the North and the South get down to serious business and identify and highlight those burning issues that are of global import, not local.

## 6.2 Informing the North of the Dangers of Syncretism

I have always been intrigued by the tendency of all human beings to flirt with remote dangers, while exercising tremendous care when the peril lies waiting at the door! Rarely does one hear calls for syncretism from Pentecostals who are on the cutting edge of Pentecostal proclamation to people of non-Christian religions. I heard a western Pentecostal friend extolling the benefits of yoga and reflexology as "alternative medicine," and wondered what the reaction would be if I were to ask him to repeat this to my Indian friends from Kwa-Zulu Natal, most of whom are converts from Hinduism! Similar appreciation expressed by some North American and European scholars with regard to traditional African medicine would be met with the greatest horror by African converts from African tribal religion.

Asian and African Pentecostal scholarship has the credibility, simply because it is so near to the firing line, to caution its Northern counterpart in this regard. It is for those who are in the heat of the struggle to work out the nature of a contextualization of the Christian gospel which will be faithful to the One who has commissioned us. Let us listen to the concerns of our Northern partners, but let us also raise our voice together when they do not appear to realize how serious the distinction between contextualization and syncretism is when one is doing the work at grass-roots level. I believe that it is Asians and Africans who, when reading the Bible, will be the first to notice how great the concern was, of the leaders in both Testaments, that they acknowledge how different their God and his ways are from the nations around them.

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<sup>16</sup> Tan, "Response to William Menzies."



### 6.3 Exchange of Information and Resources

While I foresee that African Pentecostal scholarship is probably going to rapidly fall behind its Asian counterpart in terms of numbers and volume of output, nevertheless the opportunities for mutual enrichment are limitless. Our first task is to learn to know each other, our second to expand our interaction, our third to work on joint projects. Both regions have something vital to say to one another, and they are credible co-workers who can urge one another to excellence.

South Africa has an extremely sophisticated university structure for theology and religious studies, and an increasing number of Asian post-graduate students are finding their way there. With African currencies as they are, study fees are reasonable in dollar terms. Theological resources are in fair supply, and most universities have highly qualified and recognized academic personnel.

Asian students generally bring with them an intensive work-ethic which is a revelation to many South Africans, as well as a combination of spirituality and intellectual ambition which is an eye-opener to young South African Pentecostals who come from an increasingly anti-intellectual climate in their own local churches.

There are some nascent plans for future interaction in theological research and post-graduate studies which we fervently hope will soon be implemented and bear much fruit.

### 6.4 Custodians of the Basic Dynamics of Pentecostalism

Moving between middle-class western Pentecostalism and my African brethren and sisters, I am continually startled by the vast gulf in practice and interests. The large urban churches of westerners are apparently taken with the ebb-and-flow of everything that is new on the church market, every new wave. In a truly post-modern way, nothing stays the same for long, local churches are trying to find their niche in the church market, management and marketing (as they are buzz words these days), networking of apostolic ministries, and so on. It is consuming the energy of the church. The major crisis in the theological training of ministry candidates from these local churches is that they expect a theological college to be able to provide them with the skills to cope with this tower of Babel—something impossible to do, since no training institution can possibly keep up with the rapidity with which the (often contradictory) waves and streams come and go.

Where the Pentecostal movement is found on the cutting edge of Christian mission, as opposed to the boredom of middle-class urban westerners, there is no time for these things. Here the emphasis is on the old basics, things that would never fill an urban mega-church in the west: prayer, Bible study, gifts of the Spirit in the context of Christian witness, personal witnessing, and persecution for the faith, etc. Theological students from black communities in South Africa are less interested in church management skills and guru-type leadership than in acquiring the basics required to proclaim the Lord in situations of economic deprivation, the ravages of AIDS, and social dislocation. Their songs are still of heaven, the cross is still their passion, and the depth of the need around them drives them to tears. Surely doing Pentecostal theology in this environment must be different to the challenges in the self-sufficient and complacent North?

I know that many Asian Pentecostals share this urgency for Pentecostal basics. Thus, I believe that Pentecostal scholarship from these two continents is best suited to be the custodians of such basics, preserving their centrality not for the sake of conservatism or nostalgia, but simply because they *are* the basics of adequate Pentecostal witness and lifestyle.

### 6.5 Mutual Missions

Africa is becoming a popular destination for Asian missionaries, with the Koreans in the van. Africans, particularly South Africans, find Asia an ever popular destination for their mission work. Since Pentecostals are accustomed to this seemingly crazy way of doing Christian ministry, perhaps it is time to get together and talk to each other about sharing in missions. Some of the Asians who come to Africa have not the faintest notion what lies ahead for them. Many South Africans who head for Asia have returned within a few months, unable to cope with a totally foreign (yet often so similar!) ambience.

I believe that mission workers and thinkers from these two continents can gain much by talking to each other. I can envisage a theological conference of Pentecostal scholars who work trans-culturally in Asia, Africa and Latin America, a conference in which issues such as contextualization, syncretism, relating to quasi-Christian groups (such as many African Initiated Churches) could be shared, thrashed-out, and mutual strategies evolved.

## 6.6 A Truly Global Pentecostal Theology

This would be the cherry on top—a partnership of Pentecostal scholarship from the North and from the South, being informed by Asia and Africa, aware too of the burning issues of the North, developing a Pentecostal understanding of theology and the theological task which would be relevant to and comprehensible to all Pentecostals everywhere.

Asians and Africans will be aware that much of the discussion of Pentecostal distinctives and hermeneutics that has proceeded over the last 15-20 years has come from the context of the Northern theological establishment. It has been interesting, but not always relevant. In an interactive partnership with the South, our obviously competent and imaginative Pentecostal peers in the North could surely make a far better job of it!

The success of such a venture will depend on the credibility, stature, and relevance of Asian and African Pentecostal scholars within their own local Pentecostal community. Let us urge one another to excellence based upon hard work and not just opportunism, to passion based upon the knowledge of the powerful presence of God among us, and to endurance based upon the sure knowledge that our reward is in the Lord himself.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to systematize the thoughts that have occupied much of my own time for the last two or three years. They are tentative, needing elaboration from my Asian peers. In my heart I am saddened that Africa has so little to contribute in terms of indigenous scholarship, or even in the prospect of its development. However, though our voice is small, it sings the same melody that I hear in Asia.

I believe Pentecostal scholarship has a window of opportunity in Asia and Africa that our forebears in the North never knew. This is a period not only of a wealth of scholarship and resources available to Pentecostals, but a concurrent, dynamic work and moving of the Spirit in the church. Let us not miss the boat.