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living.*

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This list is by no means exhaustive and the approach suggested is by no means normative. Probably the best result that could come out of this consultation is to create cells of theological communities all around the world among the Evangelicals for regular habitual interactions and dialogues where various models could be tested. If this essay has contributed in some way to that stimulus, our trip to Korea has been greatly rewarded.

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Toward an Evangelical Asian Theology

Rodrigo D. Tano

This article is abridged.
(Editor)

INTRODUCTION

This is by no means the first effort to sketch some lines along which Asian theology may be developed. Preman Niles,¹ has suggested a framework for doing theology in Asia using

¹ See his "Toward a Framework for 'Doing' Theology in Asia," in E. Nacpil and D. Elwood, eds., *The Human and The Holy* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1978), pp.267–90.

creation (as opposed to redemption) as motif to support the idea that “in Asia God is realizing in a new way the promise of salvation given in Jesus Christ for all mankind.” He dismisses the “salvation history” concept as exclusivistic (limited to the church and Israel) and ineffective in Asia. He sees the task of the Asian church as that of discerning the “new thing” which God is doing in general (Asian) history apart from the “new humanity”, the Church. Kosuke Koyama’s,² effort in “theological rerooting” is exhibited in his *Waterbuffalo Theology*. The country of Thailand and his own observations of Thai culture serve as the backdrop of his theologizing. Koyama sees the following as key issues facing Asian theologians: communicating the Bible to the Asian mind; men of other faiths and ideologies; the nation of China; spirituality. Though Choan-seng Song³ follows a slightly different route (the Exodus as redemption theme), his concern, like that of Niles, is to show the significance of the new realities in Asia in the light of God’s salvific acts in history. He also claims that God can deal in a saving way directly with Asian cultures apart from the Church and Gospel proclamation; Saphir Athyal⁴ urges that Asian Christian theology be systematized “around contextual issues in Asia.” He delineates the lines along which theologizing in Asia may be done but does not elaborate, and Bong Rin Ro,⁵ suggests a method of doing theology and characterizes Asian theology according to its content, whether syncretistic, accommodational, situational or **P. 156** biblically oriented. He opts for a biblically based theology dealing with Asian realities but does not demonstrate how this may be done.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THEOLOGY

Contextualization is the process by which Christian truth is embodied and translated in a concrete historical situation. The concept calls attention to the significance of the present moment of faith for the Church’s mission. In this sense, contextualization involves: (1) dynamic interaction of the text (Bible) and the context (historical situation); (2) interpreting, challenging and transforming a particular situation; (3) appropriate adaptation of the Gospel within a given culture.

The Church’s historical task involves a proper grasp of the meaning of God’s revelation in history and its relation to the present moment. Understanding what the text means then requires the proper use of hermeneutical tools (historico-grammatical). Here the labours of the biblical exegete and theologian are indispensable in assisting the Church to unravel the meaning of the text. To understand the meaning of the present it is necessary to have a knowledge of the past (which somehow shapes the present) and a thorough grasp of the significance of a set of historical, cultural, social and economic forces at work.

Theological activity then is mainly theological reflection, seeking the meaning of the present in the light of the history of God’s redemptive acts and purposes. This produces a life-situation or pilgrim theology which arises from the necessity of confessing the faith in a changing socio-political milieu in which the Church is placed. Translating biblical

² See his “From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap,” in G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends* No. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp.211–222.

³ See his essay “Towards an Asian Christian Theology” in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.68–84.

⁴ See his “Contextualization: Asian Theology,” in D. Elwood, *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.47–58.

⁵ James Curtness, “Innovation as the Search for Probabilities: to Recontextualize the Text,” in *Learning in Context* (Bromley, Kent: TEF, 1973), p.13.

truth within the Asian situation involves what Filipino theologian Carlos Abesamis calls “bracketing off” the western (Greek) tradition of theology. Western theology is basically abstract and almost a-historical. Meaningful theologizing in the Third World is therefore not a matter of slanting or adapting western theology (Koyama calls this “salt and pepper” theologizing). This does not mean the setting aside of a long tradition of useful theological activity in the west. It means rather that the Christian communities in the Third World can come to the text directly with their questions, needs and aspirations, and allow the text to speak to them.

Given diversities of cultural and conceptual filters and contextual issues peculiar to given regions, it should not be supposed that there is a uniform way of doing theology. To characterize a certain type of p. 157 theology as western or Asian is to recognize its specific features—methodology, emphases, themes and concerns.

SITUATIONAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY

The principle of contextualization indicates the situational character of theology as it relates the text to the context. The situational character of theology in turn points to some marks of theological reflection. First, theological reflection serves a critical or prophetic function. The theologian or reflecting Christian community should not only understand the biblical text in its original setting; it should also relate it to the burning issues of the day. Through theological reflection a community of believers analyzes, judges and seeks to transform a given situation in the light of the biblical message.

Second, since contextualization seeks to relate the text to the context, theological reflection is inevitably shaped or conditioned by a set of historical and cultural forces. Theological formulations therefore utilize the thought forms and symbols of the surrounding culture. The situational character of theology further indicates that no theological formulations should be transported into another period or culture without creative reinterpretation and recontextualizing.

A third implication of the situational character of theological reflection is that of theological self-determination. Since theology is shaped by a given situation, it is not necessary that the younger churches in developing countries engage in theological reflection following the same path taken by churches in the west whose theological agenda are drawn under different circumstances. Third World churches may therefore develop, for instance, a theology of change, of development, of culture and world religions.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND HERMENEUTICS

Inherent in contextualizing is the approach to the biblical text which gives serious attention not only to the life situation of the biblical writers and their original readers but also to the faith-and-life situation of the church around the world today. The biblical interpreter needs to be “inside that context as well as this context” to render the text meaningful today. The contextualizing of the biblical text and theology is the “cry for the recognition of the significance of this time and this place (wherever and when ever that may be, but particularly in the Third World) without which the Word is a dead word and the Christ is a non-living lord.”⁶ P. 158

PROCESS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

⁶ Louis Lutzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (South Pasadena, Ca.: William Carey Library, 1976), p.6.

The Church's relation to its surrounding culture is always one of tension, for as long as the Church is in the world but not of it, it will sustain a relation of continuity with culture. Contextualization then will take on several forms. It could take the form of *accommodation*—"the respectful, prudent, scientifically and theologically sound adjustment of the church to the native culture in attitude, outward behaviour, and practical apostolic approach."⁷ Paul's use of two lines from pagan poets to describe the Christian God is an example of accommodation (See [Acts 17:28](#)).

Adaptation as a process of contextualization differs from accommodation in that it does not seek merely to assimilate but to express the Gospel through the cultural forms and ideas. John's use of Logos to express truth about Christ is a case of adaptation. Others have suggested the idea of *possessio* as a way of relating the Gospel to culture. Possession (taking possession) is achieved through selection, rejection, and reinterpretation. Biblical faith was expressed in the symbols, ideas, and practice of human religions in general; however, only those which were compatible with biblical religion were retained. Once purged of their pagan components, the elements of a culture are to be given new meaning and usage.

The position of the World Council of Churches is frequently represented by the process of *dialectic*. Dialectic refers to the dynamic interaction between text and context. The concept assumes the process of change in the contemporary situation. It therefore rejects the idea of the static stability and unchanging nature of culture. Dialectic includes the prophetic role of the Church as it analyzes, interprets and judges a given situation. Some proponents of the process go so far as to say that contextualization as a dialectical process must allow ideology (Marxist ideology and categories, for instance, as in liberation theology) and the context to determine the content of theology. Nikos Nissiotis who initiated the 1971 consultation on "Dogmatic or Contextual Theology?" stated that "contextual or experiential" theology is to be preferred to systematic or dogmatic theology since the former takes as its point of departure "the contemporary scene over against the biblical tradition and confessional statement ..."

The first three approaches to the context more properly fall under the process of inculturating or indigenizing the biblical message and [p. 159](#) the Church in terms of a receiving culture. To a lesser or great extent, each of these approaches utilizes the components of a culture to express the Gospel and the life of the Church. More than any other approach, the dialectic takes serious account of the social, economic and political dimensions of a situation which it seeks to challenge and transform. There is the tendency to be selective in the use of Scripture to bolster partisan and nationalistic interests. Thus, in liberation theology, for example, the political meaning of the Exodus event in the Old Testament is stressed but its spiritual meaning in the New Testament is neglected, and *shalom* (this-worldly peace and well-being) is emphasized but *eirene* (peace with God through Christ) is often overlooked.

It should be noted that in dealing with a culture and a given situation, some degree of adjustment, adaptation, selection, rejection, reinterpretation and transformation is inevitable. It is therefore essential to employ the insights from each of these approaches provided great care is exercised so that biblical truth and the Church's life and mission are safeguarded.

PROBLEMS AND LIMITS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

⁷ "The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism Report," in J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publication, 1975) p.1227.

The divine-human encounter never takes place in a cultural vacuum. To be received intelligently, the supracultural message of the Gospel has to take on the forms of a receiving culture. The basic problem therefore would be how the supracultural but transcultural Gospel may be communicated in culturally suitable and meaningful terms without at the same time being distorted or diluted by non-Christian elements of a culture. Determining the proper relationship between the supracultural and the cultural is not a simple matter. Form and meaning are inseparable.

One basic problem involved is that of distortion or dilution known as syncretism. Syncretism occurs “when critical and basic elements of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture.”⁸ Assimilative syncretism incorporates elements of non-Christian religions based on the claim that there is no qualitative difference between the Christian and other religions. Syncretism by accommodation reduces or rephrases the Gospel’s content by applying unbiblical viewpoints to determine the meaning or interpretation of the Christian faith. The claim that Christian theology has nothing new to offer to the Hindu or that the knowledge of Christ may be transposed into *Brahmavidya* (knowledge of the Supreme and union with the Absolute) is an example of assimilative syncretism.

The dangers described above point to the problems and limits of adapting and contextualizing the Christian message within a given situation. What then are the legitimate boundaries in which indigenization/contextualization may be undertaken?

First, a valid indigenous or contextual theology must uphold the supremacy of the biblical revelation as normative for faith and conduct. Such a theology then must be biblically based. What one derives from the biblical text depends on the questions he brings to it. There should therefore be flexibility in interpretation as application of Scripture.

Second, it is equally essential that any type of theology maintain in proper balance the doctrines of the personality, transcendence and immanence of God. In the Christian religion one has to do with a personal God who makes himself known to man and with whom man may have a meaningful personal relationship. As transcendent Creator, the Christian God is not part of the created order nor is the created order part of him; however, his power pervades the universe which He sustains, guides and rules. The incarnation of Jesus Christ demonstrates that although there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and man, God is interested in, and has made himself accessible to, man. This concept of the Christian God rules out any form of pantheism, idolatry, deism and absolute idealism.

Third, to be valid, any type of contextual theology must uphold the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, his teachings, person and work. His humanity, divinity and resurrection set Him apart as the world’s only Saviour and Lord, and his atoning death provides the sole basis for man’s reconciliation with God.

Fourth, any indigenous or contextual theology that claims to be Christian at all must affirm human sin and lostness, and repentance/faith as appropriate response to God’s offer of grace. The affirmation of man’s lostness should not minimize his moral sense, rationality, and creativity as reflections of the image of God in him.

Fifth, a valid theology includes as an essential element the call to the fellowship of the Christian church. As a community of love the Church is commissioned to make known God’s words and deeds and to promote the worth and integrity of the human person.

⁸ Adapted from W. A. Visser’t Hooft’s guidelines for “canonical accommodation.” See “Accommodation: True or False,” *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 15 (January 1967), p.14.

Sixth, it is essential that in adapting the Christian message to any culture, the message fill the local and national cultural religious p. 161 concepts with biblical substance. Traditional cultural concepts should not be employed in theological formulation without critical evaluation and reinterpretation.⁹

ISSUES AND THEMES

The realities in Asia require that theology—if it is of any value at all—must be pastoral and prophetic. It must enable the Church to be God’s people where it is situated. Hence, theological reflection in Asia, as suggested by Koyama, “must not begin by studying Augustine, Barth and Rahner with an English-Indonesian (or English-Chinese, or English-Thai) dictionary nearby. It must begin with an interest in people.”¹⁰ In view of the pressing issues and challenges in Asia today, theology in the region need not concern itself with system building as such but with decisions that need to be made now.

Following is a suggested listing of issues and themes which evangelical Asian theologians have to wrestle with in their effort to bring the biblical message to bear upon the Asian situation. The list is not intended to be exhaustive nor is the treatment of issues comprehensive.

CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

What is the relation between Christianity and other religions? Should we dismiss other religions as utterly false? Is Christ present only within the Christian religion? One group of Christians sees the relation as one of radical or absolute discontinuity. Karl Barth contended that in the face of God’s self-disclosure, judgment falls upon all religions, including Christianity. Emil Brunner claimed that based on its message of atonement, Christianity alone “knows God who is Himself Redeemer.”¹¹ To Hendrik Kraemer the “world of religion and religions (of culture as a whole) with all its marvellous achievements and satanic deviations” is under judgment.¹²

On the opposite side are those who see religions as continuous with Christianity, sharing its truth and saving power. Karl Rahner has p. 162 advanced the idea that the sincere non-Christian should be considered an “anonymous Christian” since Christ already resided in his “grace-endowed” being. Raimundo Panikkar affirms that there is “no genuine human relation from which Christ is absent.” The whole created order is itself a “christophany” moving toward the new heaven and new earth. Hence, the Christian duty is not to bring Christ to other religions but to discover Him there.¹³

Is there a middle ground between these two views? Is there not some interpenetration between Christianity and other religions? In the New Testament, Peter recognized that

⁹ Kosuke Koyama, “Reflection on Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia,” *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 15 (1974) p.22.

¹⁰ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p.236.

¹¹ Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p.257.

¹² See “Christians and So-called Non-Christians,” in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.338–376.

¹³ Choan-seng Song urges that Christians not speak of Christ as absolute or unique but as “decisive.” The latter term, he claims, is less exclusive as it allows for the recognition of truth and virtue in other cultures. At the same time it places non-Christians cultures and religions under Christ’s judgment.

God does not show partiality; in every nation, the man who fears Him and does right is accepted by Him ([Acts 13:34–35](#)). Paul taught that though God allowed the nations to walk blindly in their own ways, He did not leave Himself without witness since He did good to all ([Acts 14:16–17](#)). Here it is implied from prehistorical times that God's self-witness is obvious to all men. Speaking to the Athenians, Paul also declared that all men, regardless of culture and belief, live and exist in God who placed them within their own geographical boundaries so that they may seek Him, since He is not far from each person ([Acts 17:24f.](#)).

In the early church, Justin and Clement employed the Stoic doctrine of the *logos spermatikos* to interpret the relation between Christ and the best of pagan culture. They taught that the logos which was incarnate in Jesus had implanted the seed of divine truth in the Greek mind so that whatever is true and virtuous, wherever found, should be accepted as the work of the universal Christ. We can therefore think of other religions as containing both positive and negative elements.

Religion is man's quest for and response to the transcendent. All beauty, truth and virtue in other religions derive from the Light which enlightens every one that comes into the world ([Jn. 1:9](#)). Christianity therefore has no monopoly of truth or beauty or virtue. We hasten to add, however, that whatever amount of truth and virtue is found in them is partial and will not lead to salvation.

Religion as experience of the holy and transcendent may be a point of entry for the Gospel. In India the concern for holy living, the quest for release from bondage, the search for a worthy *guru* could be favourable entry points for the Gospel. Moreover, there are aspects p. 163 of some Asian religions which could illuminate and enrich our understanding of some dimensions of Christianity. It is suggested that the *advaita* concept of transcendence in Hindu thought (comprehensive vision of reality) may provide a clue to viewing reality as a whole. The concept of *Tilakkhana* (anicca, dukkha and anatta) in Buddhism could assist the Christian in the analysis of the human predicament which is marked by change and decay.

These positive factors notwithstanding, natural religions contain negative elements. Since men are alienated from God, their response to Him is often marred by disobedience. Their search for the transcendent often ends up with an entity less than the true God—an idol. Devotees of other religions often claim to find salvation apart from the grace of God. They suppress the truth and reject the Son of God. It could not be claimed therefore that the Allah of Islam is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus.

It will not suffice therefore for evangelical Christians merely to dialogue with adherents of other religions with no intention to persuade them to own Christ as Lord. It is the task of the Asian theologian to explicate the meaning of "no other name" and "there is no salvation in any other" ([Acts 4:12](#)) and to describe the conditions under which the Christian can appropriately approach the non-Christian and witness to the uniqueness of Christ.¹⁴

MODERNIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The impact of the West in the form of technology and progress has caused a profound shaking of the foundations of Asian life. The far-reaching social ferment that obtains in Asia may be explained by the process of modernization. Modernization has a total thrust. Not only does it involve economic and technological change; it also involves a quest for a

¹⁴ See "Toward Christian Ethnology," in A. Tippet, ed., *God, Men and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p.110.

new social order and new conception of man. Its direction is from tradition to modernity, involving a series of changes accompanying the growth of knowledge and its effects on doing things.

Modernization has brought noteworthy benefits. It has brought release from a cyclical view of time, from a fatalistic understanding of the world, and from inhibiting social structures. This has enabled Asian people to break out of the past and participate in shaping their social and political destinies. Modernization and the resulting economic progress have brought a great measure of economic, social and physical well-being. p. 164

On the negative side, modernization has disrupted Asian traditional values of harmony which preserve human dignity and solidarity. It has created a'n acquisitive attitude and a secular outlook which eliminates the category of the transcendent. In the wake of the longing for a better life in Asia, developed countries have also taken advantage of the situation. Through the economic activities of multinational corporations which pursue protectionist and exploitative policies, the local economies are being drained.

How may the Christian understanding of history interpret modernization within God's purposes for man? What is the mission of the church in relation to modernization and social change?

God is the Lord of history and history is the locus in which God and man are engaged. The biblical material describes man as a responsible, creative being mandated to subdue the earth, to shape and utilize it for the common good. Thus man as steward is in partnership with God as designer, decision-maker and creative agent in the world.

GOD AND CAESAR

The political situation in many Asian countries is unstable and unpredictable. Revolutions, coup d'états, authoritarian rule and armed conflicts have marred the scene. How may we determine if a particular regime or government ceases to serve its purpose? When does Caesar cease to be just? When should a particular regime be replaced? And what is the role of the church in regard to the exercise of political power? How do we develop a theology of power?

From the biblical data, the following propositions may be formulated as guidelines in dealing with these issues.

First, power belongs to God. Government or the state as an institution reflects the lordship of God in a fallen world.

Second, the basic functions of Government are: (1) preserving order and stability (preservative): (2) punishment of evil (punitive): (3) rewarding the good (remunerative): (4) promotion of social justice and the welfare of the citizens (supportive). The exercise of power and coercive authority to maintain order is necessary to the normal processes and functions of societal life.

Third, when a particular regime or administration fails to accomplish these functions it should be replaced through those legitimate avenues and instruments available to the citizens. p. 165

Fourth, government is to function within its legitimate boundaries under God. Caesar is just Caesar and not God. When a ruler or regime becomes corrupt, cruel and unjust, or if it takes the place of God, it ought to be resisted or changed. For the Christian, God rather than men must be obeyed under these circumstances. The change sought may be radical but need not be violent.

Fifth, revolution as radical and violent change in the political order may or may not promote justice. It may in fact bring in a new form of bondage and tyranny. The best

course of action at a given time and place is that which promotes the greatest good under the circumstances. A thorough grasp and evaluation of the situation is required before a course of action is taken.

Christians are called upon to actively participate in government to bring about a just and stable order. The form of government which a Christian should or should not espouse depends upon tradition or custom. At all times he should support that regime which best accomplishes the purposes of God and promotes human well-being.

In many Asian countries the governing elite and the affluent class are unwilling to share the means of economic and social advancement with the majority of citizens. Often they entrench themselves in power and seek to maintain the status quo to protect vested interests—their own, those of their proteges or of multinational corporations which help maintain their positions of power.

Christians must join all men of goodwill in exposing the mechanisms of power and exploitation, in lobbying for positive and egalitarian legislation that will enhance the condition of the weak and powerless, and in opposing ideologies and techniques that abet the wrong use of power.

THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION IN ASIA

The Church's mission is indicated by some metaphors and titles in Scripture which point to its nature and role in the world. The following are appropriate in defining the mission of the Asian church today.

Salt and Light. Under these metaphors, the church serves as moral preservative and conscience in society. As salt, believers are to penetrate society and through their influence the process of moral decay that obtains in society. As light they are to bring God's truth to bear on every dimension of human life and to make known the saving truth in Christ.

Christian service in Asia should no longer be limited to the activities p. 166 of the institutional church as though the sphere of Christian influence is to be confined to ecclesiastical life. Believers as salt should be out of the salt shaker in order to exert their influence in every area of social life and activity. This means that believers in Asia should fulfill their Christian vocation as they live and work among their fellowmen. Through their good works they are to bring glory to their Father in heaven.

Servant in the midst of Suffering. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that He was sent to preach good news to the poor, to bring freedom to prisoners and to release the oppressed. He is described as anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, doing good, healing all who were under the devil's grip ([Acts 10:38](#)).

There is considerable suffering in many parts of Asia due to poverty, sickness, exploitation, political and armed conflicts and natural calamities. Like her Lord, the Church should not seek to be served but to serve the needy. In doing so, it will manifest its solidarity with men in their predicament. Sharing in the suffering of our people and meeting their needs could well be a point of entry for the Gospel. Through his servant Church Christ can bring hope to the millions of Asia in the midst of suffering and pain. The Asian church must identify with those who struggle for a better life. Asian Christians can authenticate the truth of the Gospel by identifying with the predicament of those who suffer.

People of God. As the people of God, the Church in Asia is a pilgrim Church situated in a world which is unfriendly to God's grace. As a pilgrim people, the Church is dependent on God, in need of continual reform. It is therefore subject to judgment, correction and cleansing. Called in history from among the nations, Asian Christians are to constantly

discern what God is doing in the world and to respond to his call at this or that time and place. In the vicissitudes of history, Yahweh is the God who acts—judging, creating, renewing, redeeming, reordering, saving, healing and reconciling. In the welter of historical forces, the Church in Asia is to affirm the divine Yes to all processes that enhance justice and righteousness, that approximate the values of the kingdom, that promote human dignity and well-being. On the other hand, it is to say No to all forms of human perversity and corruption that defeat the purpose of God.

As God's people, Asian Christians are a kingdom of priests. They are to offer spiritual sacrifices, represent God to the nations and the nations to God, and mediate God's blessings to them ([Gen. 12:1, 2](#); [Exod. 19:5, 6](#)). God will continue to take a *laos* from the myriads of the ethnic groups in Asia as the churches in the region rehearse p. 167 God's mighty acts of deliverance through Gospel proclamation.

Instrument of the Kingdom. The kingdom of God was central in the teaching and mission of Jesus. His acts of healing and exorcism were signs of God's rule over nature and demons. The coming of God's rule in Jesus fulfilled the idea of the kingdom as bringing deliverance and wholeness. Hence, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose in creation and redemption.

The Church is not to be equated with the kingdom but it is part of the kingdom, the sphere of God's rule. The kingdom therefore is present in the Church. Though not the kingdom, the Church is the instrument through which its boundaries are extended. Through word and deed, the Church presents the claims of the King and exemplifies the values of his kingdom. While awaiting the full manifestation of God's rule in the world, the Church witnesses to its power and presence. The life and fellowship of Christians are to be a foretaste of life in the consummated kingdom; they are to reflect in the world something of what the future reality is to be.

The Asian Church is a minority in the vast Asian complex. All the more it is mandated by the King to extend the boundaries of his rule by Gospel proclamation, because only those who give their allegiance to the King will enjoy kingdom blessings. Through its fellowship and service the Asian Church should embody God's mercy, justice and righteousness in society. Though the Church cannot duplicate the works of Jesus, any act or word that lifts and restores human dignity and worth, that delivers from bondage and displays God's mercy and righteousness can draw men's attention to the presence of God and reflect his rule.

CHRISTIAN ETHNOTHEOLOGY

One activity in which Christian communities in Asia should engage is doing theology in terms of specific cultural systems. Charles Kraft employs the term "Christian ethnotheology" to describe the effort which combines insights from Christian theology and anthropology and maintains "an interpretive approach to the study of God, man, and divine-human interaction."¹⁵ Buswell proposes the term "inculturation" to point to the process of communicating Christian P. 168 truth in the linguistic idioms and forms of a culture.¹⁶ Here the culture provides analogies, illustration, framework, forms and principles of communication.

¹⁵ J. O. Buswell, III, "Contextualization," *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 14 (January 1978), p.16

¹⁶ See "The problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity," in D. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Saying* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976), pp.105–118; "Sri Lanka: Theological Construction in a Buddhist Society," in G. Anderson, ed., *Asian Voices in Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 19), pp.37–52.

The particular forms of a cultural system refer to the philosophical presuppositions or world-view of a culture which functions as the framework against which the members of the culture understand the nature of the universe. This framework constitutes the context and provides the vehicle in which Christian truth is understood and communicated.

Lynn de Silva's attempt to construct theology in a Buddhist context¹⁷ is a clear example of how the thought forms and world-view of a people may serve as meeting points between Buddhist and biblical thought. De Silva, for example, sees parallels between the *Tilikhana* or the Three Signata in Buddhism (*anicca*—possibility of non-being; *dukkha*—finitude; *anatta*—non-self) and the biblical ideas in [Romans 8:18-25](#) (expressed by *mataiotes*, *pathemata* and *pthora*) which describe the human predicament. Paul teaches that the whole creation is subject to decay (*anicca*); is groaning in travail (*dukkha*); and subject to dissolution (*anatta*). De Silva discerningly observes that the three Greek terms have close approximations with the Pali terms *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

The Buddhist solution to the human predicament lies in the complete extinction of the self by the eradication of *tanha* (craving, thirst for existence). While Buddhism holds that this idea does not amount to self-annihilation, at the same time it rejects eternalistic notions of the self. Noting an inconsistency in Buddhist thought at this point, de Silva inserts the Christian solution found in the concept of authentic self-hood signified by *pneuma*. In Christian faith it is possible to deny the self without lapsing into nihilism and to affirm it without eternalizing it in the process. In explaining this truth, de Silva employs both the notion of *anatta* (not self) and the Christian concept of "spirit" (*pneuma*). God's love in Christ is the basis of the intermingling of the "I" and the "Thou" where the self is both negated (through suffering) and affirmed (through resurrection).

In the Philippines, the Christian theologian can construct an ethnotheology by analyzing, interpreting and evaluating some elements of [p. 169](#) the Filipino world-view and value system. In an essay on some traditional Filipino beliefs about man, Elwood isolates two major components of the Filipino traditional world-view which relate to the understanding of man.¹⁸ These are the *swerte* belief ("fate") and the *hiya* value ("shame").

To the average Filipino, *swerte* is not just "luck"; it is "one's predetermined lot in life." Based on this belief, one cannot do much to change his situation or improve it and therefore can easily rationalize a do-nothing or do-little economic philosophy. *Swerte* in turn is based on a cyclic view of life illustrated by the "wheel of fortune". This outlook leads to the *bahala na* mentality which could mean "come what may," or "it's up to God." Elwood observes that *bahala na* and *swerte* are reinforced by an unorthodox understanding of the role of divine providence in human affairs. This distorted view of divine providence encourages a fatalistic and careless attitude ("God wills everything; there's nothing I can do to change my lot").

A related value orientation is *hiya* which could mean a sense of shame, embarrassment, inferiority or timidity. The average Filipino usually feels inhibited to speak out or to act for fear he may fail or lose "face." The belief in fate supports the unwillingness to disturb the status quo as implied in the *hiya* concept. *Hiya* in turn supports the feeling that there is nothing we can do about our "assigned status."

Theological reflection in the Philippines must address these two components of the Filipino world-view and value system through proper explication of divine providence as not eliminating the exercise of human freedom and initiative based on the teaching that man, created in God's image, is a responsible being.

¹⁷ J. Elwood, "A Theological Approach to Some Traditional Filipino Beliefs About Man," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1970), pp.37-53.

¹⁸

Man and Nature. Theological construction in Asia must include the question of man's relation to nature.

Man and Nature in Asian Thought. Generally speaking, in Asia, man and nature are understood as having a sense of kinship and affinity. Man is understood as part of the cosmic whole, as in the Hindu concept of *advaita*. There is therefore the absence of an analytic or detached view of nature. Based on the principle of Tao (the organizing principle), nature is viewed as self-contained and self-operative. In animistic cultures, nature is considered as sacred, an object to be hallowed or feared.

The Scientific View of Nature. The effects of science and technology have disturbed the traditional Asian views of man and nature. The establishment of factories and industries have produced harmful wastes that pollute air and water, bringing an ecological imbalance. The scientific view of nature has disrupted an essentially relational p. 170 understanding of man and nature. This has alienated man from nature and man from man. *Biblical Teaching.* There are several strands of biblical teaching on the relation of man and nature that should be considered.

First, nature is created; hence, it is not self-existent or self-ordered. It is upheld and borne along by the immanent sustaining power and providence of an ordering Creator. As a created entity, nature has no inherent sacredness, nor does it have magical powers.

Second, nature was prepared like a home, with all its furnishing, for man's dwelling and use. God created everything in it to sustain life and to meet man's need. It is in this sense a manifestation of God's faithfulness and steadfastness.

Third, the creation accounts ([Genesis 1](#) and [2](#)) depict man as the crown of God's creation. The creation of man is indicated as the highest point in God's creative activity. Man is at the centre of things, and his dignity, worth, and exalted position are clearly indicated.

Fourth, man is part of nature, though transcending it. Sustained by nature, he is dependent upon it. Man shares some features of animal life. He has a mortal body and basic biological needs.

Fifth, the biblical tradition describes man as having the prerogative of exercising dominion over creation ([Genesis 1:26-28](#); [Psalm 8](#)). As God's representative, man is to subdue the earth and to utilize it for his purpose.

Sixth, nature is to be the object of man's contemplation and reflection. As such, it is to be the source of man's enjoyment and human curiosity is to be excited by the intricacies, beauty, order and variety in nature.

Seventh, nature is the expression of God's glory, the reflection of his power and wisdom. General or natural revelation points to some of the perfections of the invisible God ([Romans 1:18-21](#); [Psalm 19](#)).

Eighth, man and nature are to rejoice in God together, to glorify the Creator. In the creation Psalms, in the book of Job and in Isaiah, man and nature are depicted as reflecting the Creator's glory.

It is to be noted, however, that in the exercise of his rule over nature, man is to be a faithful steward as God's covenant partner. Man is to care for nature, seeing to it that it is not polluted or destroyed.

The reciprocal relation between man and nature is to be recovered in view of the negative effects of modernization and technology in Asia. Asian man's sense of community based on the relational understanding of nature is to be preserved to offset the p. 171 dehumanizing and depersonalizing effect of science and materialistic ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Theological reflection is the search for the meaning of the present in the light of God's unchanging Word. That which distinguishes a particular type of theology is its method, themes and emphasis. It is in this sense that evangelicals in Asia can engage in theological reflection. The product of such an enterprise is a theology that must be biblically oriented and responsive to the issues and challenges posed by each situation in Asia. As a pilgrim and prophetic community, God's people in Asia must continually pursue the hermeneutical task of relating God's Word to the total context, discerning where the Spirit is leading and being alert to the burning issues of the day.

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Towards an Evangelical Theology in India

by Sunand Sumithra & Bruce Nicholls

INTRODUCTION

A clear grasp of and a genuine commitment to evangelical theology which seeks without reservation to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God is our first priority in attempting to develop "an evangelical theology in the context of India and Hindu cultures". A second priority is a sympathetic understanding of Hindu cultures and of the historical moment in contemporary India. Thirdly, we take the Church as the people of God seriously in our theological task. Therefore we want to reflect carefully on the strength and weaknesses of earlier and current attempts at formulating theologies and evaluate them both from the normative standard of Scripture and the response of the churches as they have sought to implement such a theology in the fulfilling of the church's mission in the world.

We affirm that good theology faithful to the Scripture and relevant to a particular cultural situation cannot be done from a distance. The task of formulating theology must be done in the context of worship and a right relationship to God on one hand and in the context of a commitment as Christ's disciples in his mission in that particular situation. God himself did not consider solving the problems of the human predicament from a distance. He became incarnate, identified with us, lived as a servant, was crucified on a cross and rose again from the dead for our salvation. In the spirit of worship and personal involvement as God's fellow-workers we take seriously and sympathetically the effort of other theologians in India to bring the Good News to those without the knowledge of Christ. We bring their insights and achievements along with our own to the foot of Christ and the judgement of his inscripturated Word. Therefore, in this paper we seek to describe some of the vital cultural issues which we in India face and analyze our own part in them. We then reflect on the questions that these issues ask of biblical theology. We then seek to evaluate some of the methods and answers that Indian theologians have given in this dialogue between context and text. Finally, we want to suggest some