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Theology, Theologizing and the Theologian

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The authors are primarily concerned about three aspects of Asian Church and theological activities—theological methodology, Church worship, and Christian lifestyle. They opine that an evangelical stance here, namely a ‘looking unto Jesus’, is the best antidote to the growing influence of secularism and pluralism.

Editor

The church in Asia today will be able to stand against opposing forces, both from inside and outside, only as it manifests maturity in theology and theologization. What is needed is not merely a reaffirmation of our theology, nor even a spelling out of the content of our theological treatises for a theological creativity relevant to the Asian challenge. Very simply put, it is the ‘how’ of theology and not just the ‘what’. The whole exercise has been referred to recently as ‘doing theology’ or, for convenience, ‘theologizing’.

Almost all the theological confusion we are now facing can ultimately be traced back to a confusion in one Christian doctrine particularly: our doctrine of God. Unfortunately, along with other Latfricasian regions, Asia is gradually and increasingly attempting to approach reality and every aspect of it without God. This is secularism: a world outlook which necessarily leaves God out. Obviously the roots of such secularism are to be found not in Asia but in Europe, in the so called European Enlightenment (better ‘endarkenment’). Since then reason has become the supreme authority and man the measure of all things, and God is increasingly pushed out of every area of human life—individual or corporate.

THE ANTIDOTE TO SECULARISM

Asia has so far offered the best possible resistance to the process of secularization, for the simple reason that more than any other country or region Asia is the home of religions. Hence, if the philosophy of secularism and the process of secularization take hold in Asia then they have finally won indeed. So it is of paramount importance that Asian evangelicals establish an adequate theological defence against P.277 secularism. Till now the confrontation of the gospel in Asia has been primarily with Asian religions and understandably so. But as the influence of secularism grows in both church and society, there is a burning need to spell out the relevance of the gospel to non-religious situations. If Asia does not develop a convincing response to the threat of secularism, she may also follow the path of the so-called Christian nations of the West, and end in social chaos and spiritual vacuum.

Over two decades ago Harvey Cox had talked about the ‘secularization of religion’. Proponents of it are attempting to establish their credibility and relevance by relating their religious experience to the needs of man today. Rather than being attracted by messages of future life and salvation, people are being lured into being followers because of the physical and psychological effects of yoga and meditation in this life itself. It is concern for the relevance of Christianity within such secularized environments that made

Cox ask: 'How do we maintain an affirmation of transcendence in a culture whose mood is radical and relentlessly immanentist?' This could be the key question for Asia today.

The question for theologians is how we develop a theological antidote to secularism. To start with we need to return to the very root of the meaning of the word *theology*. We have been rightly reminded that theology is not simply *theos* plus *logos*, that is, an intellectual analysis or a science of God. Ever since Abelard used it in this sense in the 12th century we have continued this unchallenged. Going further back in history, we discover theology to have been seen as *theos* and *logia*, to connote the praise and worship of God. In this sense theology becomes a doxological adoration of God rather than the intellectual and academic involvement it has been accepted to be. If such an emphasis is restored we are certain to recapture some of the lost richness to theology which will enable it to stand by itself as an adequate antidote to secularism.

Asia is confronted with the resurgence of traditional religions. Whether in Islamic or Hindu contexts there is a fervour with which devotees are spreading their claims, of which the church will have to take note. For one thing it speaks of the failure of the Church to have adequately communicated Christ when the doors were open and the opportunity was ours to accept. The Hindu Revival movements flourished in the context of the preaching of the gospel, indicating that the message was not acceptable to the thinking strata of society that the missionaries were attempting to reach.

Primarily Asian people are worshipping people. In the West, by contrast, the tradition of secularism gained its strength by appeal to [p. 278](#) human reason as a supreme authority. Hence, rather than challenging this claim by pointing out the inadequacy of human reason, only a positive restoration of theology in all its doxological brilliance will meet the need of Asians who want to worship God. Our exposition, our teaching and preaching, our worship, in fact our whole life should be adorned with this doxological desire that will in itself counteract the false claims of secularism in a soil to which such an ideology is undoubtedly foreign.

The primary task of theology is not to approach God intellectually, for God is never the object of our search but the very subject. The Bible, especially the Psalms, makes it abundantly clear that the appropriate approach to God is the doxological approach. The Scriptures depict people who had a vision of God bursting out in praise and worship of him, and not merely making intellectual statements concerning him. It is of vital importance to note that even the Apostle Paul bursts out into doxology right within the context of his theologization.

Each of us are so created by our Creator that at the core of our being we are so designed to worship someone or something. An intellectual approach in theology and secular understanding of reality has robbed us of this rightful response of worship, perhaps the most essential element in any theology.

This must inevitably take us to the very rationale for theological education because this is where theologization ought to begin. If we are convinced that theological education is involved in training up men and women, to serve God, the topmost priority ought to be to impart a knowledge of God. It is this knowledge that would form the basis of communicating truths about God. No matter how much one strives to teach about God and godliness, if it is not producing a deep spiritual impact on the student, there is hardly any difference between theological education and any other form of education. A wrong emphasis in theology has obviously produced a wrong effect in our theological education.

J. I. Packer points out in his book 'Knowing God', in a chapter aptly titled 'The people who know their God', how it is possible that 'one can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him', or even 'know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God' (*Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton (1975), p. 22f.). He clarifies the

distinction between *knowing God* and merely *knowing about him*. This kind of emphasis will certainly assist the whole task of theologizing in becoming what it truly must be. Even our theology itself will then reflect a longing it must demonstrate for revealing God *p. 279 himself* rather than merely something *about* God. However, if we can recapture the essence of theological education as the imparting of the truths of God in order to change and equip the learner to impact them to others, we can see the necessity for such effort to be founded completely on doxological undergirdings. It is imperative, for example, that every course on theology has as its overall aim the objective of maturing the students' relationship with God so that they may more ardently praise him, fear him and love him—in the sense of the first commandment Jesus taught his disciples.

The recent phenomenal growth among Pentecostals and Charismatics, the mushrooming of the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America, the unparalleled Church growth in Korea can in some way be attributed to such a doxological approach to God, the desire to come to him in fear, and love, in adoration and worship. We 20th century Christians have not really grasped the meaning of the old saying, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. If only we acknowledge such a burning need in all our theological activities—he need to come to God as a living, loving and holy person and to approach him in fear and worship, to praise and to adore—we would experience a total transformation. However, this will only be seen when we see our theology just as we see our worship, that is in a doxological adoration and not just in logical affirmations. This does not mean we limit ourselves to liturgy, but it calls for a realization of the glory of God as the purpose of theology at every level.

A THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY NEEDED

When we talk about the need for theologization in Asia we are at once faced with the lack of an adequate theological methodology. It is only during the last quarter of this century that the significance of theological methodology has become central in theological debates. Here the concern is not so much what we produce in our theologies but how we produce them. It is not so much about practising a proper theology or grasping its theological truths, but rather the very basic question which the liberation theologians have posed to evangelicals. Though as evangelicals we cannot completely concur with liberation theology and its results, the questions it raises are of such magnitude that we must take them up most seriously in order to offer biblical answers. Otherwise the very survival of our theology is at stake.

For example, it does no one good just to reject the notion that praxis is the starting point in theology, or to argue that the context is primary. The real question is: have we an alternative we can supply in its place? *p. 280* I am sure we have—but it still needs to be articulated in a responsible and acceptable way. It is precisely for the lack of such an alternative evangelical theological method that in most of Asian theological writings we still refer only to European and American theologians and theologies, but hardly to any Asian works.

It may not be true in this decade to say that Asian theology is still a 'potted plant', but it *is* true to say that many of the questions we discuss are simply carried over from Western theological debates. Hence, another accusation holds good, and that is that Asian theologies are not unanswered questions, but unquestioned answers. Any because we do not yet have an articulated evangelical way of doing theology, even the problems we are dealing with are to a great extent irrelevant. We are sure that subjects such as the likelihood of creation or evolution, the deity of Christ, the relationship between science and religion, faith and religion, ideology and theology, and so on, though of first magnitude

in importance, are not the questions Asians are asking. We are glad to note increasing attempts during the last several years to deal with relevant topics, such as an evangelical response to ancestral worship; a biblical approach to the caste system; the question of Asian Christian identity; the urban Asian Church; Asia's role in world history; the question of multinationals; and so on. No doubt a particular theological method may have different applications. Even in the New Testament itself different contexts produced different types of solutions. In the same way, we too need to consolidate a principle of contextualization (and indigenization) relevant to Asian issues. But still the fact is, the teaching of theology in our seminaries smacks of woodenness, since it was for the most part developed in situations other than Asian.

Here again we note the lack of the proper foundation which theological institutions should be providing for students. Our whole emphasis on heavily academic curricula, final examinations, accreditation, and so on, has robbed theological education of its very essence. Theological education must prepare people for Christian ministry. No 'body of facts' or quantum of knowledge acquired will serve in facing the challenges of life. When the student is equipped with tools to face life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he is taking with him the requirements for relating that which he has learned to the situations he faces. Our present educational systems may be producing topnotch scholars but poor servants. God is always looking for men and women who will serve him in their generation, communicating the things of God to people who need to hear God.

It is the lack of holistic approach to theological education that has [p. 281](#) resulted in fossilized forms of theology and communication. The lack of an adequate theological methodology displays a lack of concern for communication within our context. We are not asking for 'contextualization' in the restricted sense it recently has gained, but for a sensitivity to the context that will be expressed in attempts to theologize relevantly.

A commitment to relevance will start with an awareness of the people to whom we are communicating the gospel. The prime objective of any theological methodology is to evolve a message that will be relevant to real men and women in real life situations and faithful to the Scriptures and Church historical development.

What this means is that we must not hand down packages of theology which we feel can universally communicate whether in America or Asia. Universal communication is not impossible if we believe that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who is the communicator of the truths of God. But we tend to forget that theology is itself a human attempt to show the relevance of the truths of God to people in their context. Methodologies in this sense are *all* man-made; but that does not exempt us from seeking a biblical method to evolve our theology for the varied contexts of Asia.

Even at its most basic level, all communication is really an attempt to theologize. Between the Bible, the message, and the receiver, the people in their context, theology is the inevitable link. The moment we try to communicate the gospel to people in a meaningful and responsible way in order to evoke a response to Jesus Christ we have already entered into the realm of theologizing. No one will argue about the fact that the urgency to communicate in context presses on us. If theology is seen as the inevitable link then the need for theologizing, and therefore a need for a theological methodology, is urgent. To remind ourselves again, it is *how* we get involved in the whole of the theological challenge, rather than *what* we say, that is confronting us. An evangelical theological method is the burning need for the Church in Asia today.

THE POWER OF JESUS CHRIST IN OUR THEOLOGY

Finally, the theology that Asia needs today is the kind that will exalt Jesus Christ. Jesus said, 'If I be lifted up I will draw all men to myself'. The question that arises, then, is whether we have truly lifted Jesus up in our individual contexts. We still get criticized for introducing a foreign religion. Christianity is said to have come to India with the Apostle Thomas, long before it reached Europe or America. We have [P. 282](#) yet to show that Jesus belongs to the soil of Asia, much more than he belongs to the West. He is not someone we are struggling to make relevant to a strange land.

One of India's great orators, Keshub Chandra Sen, gave a stirring address entitled 'India Asks: Who is Jesus Christ?'. In it he reminded his audience that India was being touched and transformed by a superior power. He went on to state: 'Gentlemen, you cannot deny that your hearts have been touched, conquered and subjugated by a superior power. That power—need I tell you—is Christ ... It may seem strange, but it is a fact that India knows not yet this power, though already so largely influenced by it. She is unconsciously succumbing to its irresistible influence. Therefore India ought to be informed as to the real character of the source of this dominant moral influence, Christ. None but Jesus, none but Jesus ever deserved this bright, this precious diadem, India; and Jesus shall have it ...' (Keshub Chandra Sen, p. 199).

But the sad fact is that we have not been able to sustain that power. Paul even at the end of his ministry longed to 'know the power of his resurrection'. Where is that longing in our Church in Asia today? We argue over right doctrine and denominational distinctives. We even maintain the priority of the gospel but have failed to show all the potential Jesus Christ has for Asia. In India we constantly face the question: 'What is the difference between Christianity and Hinduism? You conduct your life the same way we do.' Here is the heart of the matter. We move from theologization to the theologian, from the message to the messenger.

What we are pleading really is that relevant theology for Asia must come from men and women who have personally experienced the power of Christ and who possess a passion to make this power known. What a Christian leader said recently was most appropriate: the crucial issue for me today is not whether I am known as leader, a minister, a Bishop or Archbishop, or even a world renowned evangelist, but whether I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. Theology written by disciples of Jesus Christ will breathe of the power that Asia awaits.

This is where our theological institutions need to take note. What kind of men and women are we producing? Mere academics or disciples of Jesus Christ? A pastor narrated his experience in seminary. Fresh from the freedom of university life, he reacted against the disciplines which were part of seminary living. Having complained to the Principal, he received a very apt response: 'What are you wanting to be at the end of your seminary life? A graduate with a theological degree or a pastor?' What we need is pastors, teachers, preachers and [p. 283](#) theologians longing to experience the power of Christ and to share it with people who are powerless.

If it is true that the blind man came to believe in Christ because of the power and the character of Jesus, how much more true it is that the Hindus and the Muslims accept our message to the extent we as the messengers live it out. And this is the theological issue, not in the sense of an intellectual clarification but in the sense of theology as doxology, whether my life brings praises or glory to God. We have here already entered into the practical aspects of theology. But as Martin Luther discovered, true theology is always practical. What is needed urgently in Asia today is the 'living' of the power of the gospel, the demonstration of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the disciple's life. Ultimately, theologization in Asia has to do with credibility and creativity that will show from the

courage of the theologian who is bold enough to release all of the potential of Christ for our context.

The onslaught of secular ideologies within the Church, and even questionable theological methodologies, can only be counteracted by the revival of the fundamentals of what biblical theology and theologization is all about. Our theology will ultimately stand or fall depending on whether it has taken into account the inherent power of Jesus Christ it has to demonstrate. The power in our theology will only be there if we have experienced that power. Theology as doxology will restore to theologization and theology the dimension of worship which displays an ultimate adoration of all that God is. Paul expresses this so clearly and powerfully:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God,
How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!
'Who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been his counsellor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?'
For from him and through him are all things.
To him be the Glory forever. Amen.

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Book Review

PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

by Margaret A. Farley
(Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1986)
138 pp. US \$13.95

Reviewed by Lewis B. Smedes in The Reformed Journal Vol. 37, Issue 3, March 1987

Margaret A. Farley, who teaches ethics at Yale Divinity School, has given us a first-rate ethical study of commitment. Dr. Farley examines the cumbersome moral concept called commitment thoroughly and, above all, intelligently. For this reason, but also because her book is, as far as I know, the only systematic analysis of commitment around, it will be of intense interest to anyone who wants to think hard about why we make commitments, why we are obligated to keep them, and when we are justified in breaking them. She says she spent fifteen years at it. I, for one, am grateful that she did not wait any longer.

Most people have at least some vague sense that we *ought* to keep our commitments. But why should we? Why shouldn't our investment in our private pursuit of happiness have as much validity as any promise we make to stick with someone we made a commitment to? Farley provides a reasonable answer, in keeping with moral tradition: when we make a commitment to a person we give that person a claim on us, we surrender to him or her a right to expect us to keep it. In short, when we make a commitment we obligate ourselves to honour the rights that our commitment concedes to the person we make it to, and when we break our commitments we violate that person's rights. There