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Whither Asian American Evangelical Theology? What Asian, Which American, Whose *Evangelion*?

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THIS PAPER ATTEMPTS to respond to four interrelated questions. First, what is Asian American evangelical (AAE) theology? Second, what are some of the pre-existing resources which can be mined for resources in developing an AAE theology? Third, what are the challenges and opportunities existing for AAE theologians? And finally, what might a programmatic sketch of an AAE theology look like? We take up each of these questions in order.

I What is Asian American Evangelical Theology?

By its very label, AAE theology presents itself as a complex nexus of ideas derived from three severely contested sets of Asian, American, and evangelical theological discourses. To begin, we must speak not of Asian theology, but of Asian theologies. This is the case both when we look at the various theological traditions that have developed over time and when we survey the present socio-cultural, religio-political, and geographic configuration of Asia.¹ Historically, for example, the

¹ See, e.g., John C. England, et al., eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*, 3 vols. (Delhi: ISPCK and Clarentian Publishers, and Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002-2004).

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Indian Orthodox Church claims a lineage extending back to St. Thomas the apostle on the one hand, while the church in North Korea is still in its very early stages of growing pains under the Communist government on the other hand. In between are various Christian theological traditions that have flourished for a time but then disappeared (like Nestorian Christianity during the T'ang dynasty) or that have emerged at various stages over the last millennium (e.g., along the 'Silk Road' during the medieval period, then from Roman Catholic missionaries, and later from the missionary ventures of the many Protestant denominations). Minimally, then, we have Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant theological traditions with histories of different length in different parts of Asia, each impacted perennially by indigenous expressions and, more recently, by the arrival and growth of Pentecostal-type churches.

This diversity is accentuated when we look at contemporary Christianity in Asia. Certainly there are vast socio-cultural differences ranging from east Asia to south Asia to southeast Asia to Australasia, with each of these regions being constituted by innumerable ethnicities, languages, and cultural groups. There are also pluralities of religio-political contexts which constrain theological reflection. Theologies produced by the Three-Self Church under the Maoist regime have a character very different from those produced by the indigenous churches of rural China, even as theologies developed in Muslim countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia are shaped variously from those developed in the missionary situation of an exiled

people like that of Tibet or those developed in a religiously plural context like that of India. Finally, we should not discount the impact of very different topographies, climates, and environments on theological reflection. Living amidst rice paddies, on mountains or islands, along rivers, or in or at the edges of deserts—each produces a distinctive ethos that in turn informs theological developments.

Of course, none of these variables—the historical, the socio-cultural, the religious, the national-political, and the environmental—operates in isolation from others. Hence it is the convergence of each of these aspects in particular places and times which accounts in large part for the transformation of Asian Christian theology (singular) into Asian Christian theologies: Indian theologies, Chinese theologies, south Asian theologies, Australasian theologies, and the like. And so far, of course, we have said nothing about how women's perspectives are informed by these various contextual configurations and how such in turn shapes theological reflection. In short, we cannot speak of the 'Asian' in Asian theology as a monolithic whole.²

The same can be said, certainly, of the 'American' in AAE theology. Note, however, that to even say the words *American theology* begs for elucidation

2 See also Nam-soon Kang, 'Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-orientalism', in Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), pp. 100-17.

at least along three lines. First, from one side may come the counter-assumption that all theology written by Americans has been universally applicable rather than just limited to the American experience. For these persons, there is no need to qualify *theology* with the word *American*. While this presumption may have gone unacknowledged and unchallenged a generation ago, it may no longer be given serious consideration today. But this leads to the second issue: that of the proliferation of American perspectives which leads us to ask, 'which American?' North American? Central American? Latin American? Caribbean American? South American? Native American? Each of these categories begs for even further clarification. But what if we limited ourselves to the dominant trajectories in the North American theological academy?

This third approach is of little help either. A recent textbook identifies six streams of North American theology: evangelical, postliberal, liberal, liberation, feminist, and deconstruction.³ These are neither self-evident in terms of their scope, nor helpful in defining what either American or North American theology is supposed to be. Of major theologians, to my knowledge only Douglas John Hall and Donald L. Gelpi, S.J., have attempted theological reflection with the North American historical and cultural context consciously in mind, and both of these pro-

jects are quite different.⁴

Could we perhaps avoid the problem of defining Asian and American theology if we focused on evangelical theology? Unfortunately no. Not only are there the geographically related matters we have already observed, but there are also historical and theological issues under negotiation. Historically, how do we define evangelical theology—according to the usage of some of the Protestant Reformers, or the pietists of the seventeenth century, or the revivalists of the eighteenth century, or the holiness Methodists of the nineteenth century, or the Reformed or Wesleyan or Pentecostal/charismatic churches of the twentieth century? Obviously we will never be able to agree on what is authentically evangelical theology if we go by what groups and movements and churches have claimed that evangelical label.⁵

4 Hall has just published some autobiographical reflections on his project: Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). For an overview of Gelpi's attempt to develop an inculturated North American theology in dialogue with the North American philosophical tradition, see Yong, 'In Search of Foundations: The Oeuvre of Donald L. Gelpi, S.J., and Its Significance for Pentecostal Theology and Philosophy', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11:1 (2002):3-26.

5 Part of the story about the disputes over who can claim the label evangelical is told by Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). See also Yong, 'The Word and the Spirit, or the Spirit and the Word? Exploring the Boundaries of Evangelicalism in Relationship to Modern Pentecostalism', *Trinity Journal* 23NS:2 (2002):235-52.

3 Roger A. Badham, ed., *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

Can we then identify the nature of the *evangelion* theologically? Asking this question gets us to the heart of the problem, of course. But this begs all the questions already in play since it is arguably precisely the attempt to be theologically evangelical which has led to the various historical and contextual expressions of the good news in the first place. In short, I suggest that the biblical, theological, and situational factors cannot be isolated from each other, and that there is no access to a pure *evangelion* that sits above the flux of history.

If this is indeed the case, perhaps the quest for an AAE theology is also the attempt of those who find themselves in the AAE community to articulate theological views of this particular community. But the foregoing discussion suggests that there is no single AAE community. Rather, there are many different AAE communities which consist of people with diverse histories, cultures, languages, and experiences. Innumerable combinations are theoretically conceivable, although in reality, we are content to simplify matters using categories such as Asian, American, and evangelical. The fact of the matter remains, however, that the emergence of various types of Asian American communities which are evangelical is in some respects rather new.

So while we may be able to identify a limited range of Asian evangelical theologies (developed by Asians for Asians), or a wider spectrum of Asian American theologies (developed by Asian Americans in mainline Protestant denominations or in the Roman

Catholic Church),⁶ there is still a dearth of theological reflection by those who identify themselves as Asian-American-evangelical. Given the theological task, the road to an AAE theology can neglect neither Asian evangelical theologies nor Asian American theologies. Due to space constraints, however, we will focus only on the former, to which we now turn.

II Anticipating AAE Theology: Resources from Asian Evangelical Theology

Because of the relative youth of Asian American evangelicalism, it seems natural that aspiring AAE theologians mine the resources of existing Asian evangelical theologies for their own work. While Asian evangelical theology is still far from having come of age, it is much farther along the road than is AAE theology. Asian evangelicals have published on mission theology (e.g., Vinoth Ramachandra), social justice (e.g., Vinay Samuel), theology of the environment (e.g., Ken Gnanakan), religious pluralism (e.g., Ajith Fernando), ancestor veneration and worship (e.g., Bong Rin Ro), Pentecostal-

6 For examples of Asian American theology, see Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, eds., *Journey at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in Asian-American Perspective* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), and Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazer S. Fernandez, eds., *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003). For the definitive overview, see Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, forthcoming).

ism (e.g., Wonsuk Ma), and alternative spiritualities (Philip Johnson), among other topics. In what follows, we will look a little closer at the work of three individuals rather than skim the surface of too wide a range of theologians. Our goal is to ask about the promise and challenge of Asian evangelical theology from those who have thought about the matter.

Donald Leroy Stults is a missionary, educator and theologian in the Nazarene Church. His book, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology*, was one of the first to approach the topic in a comprehensive manner.⁷ The three parts of the book discuss the work of theology (including its necessity, the urgency of an authentically Asian theology, the work of the theologian, and the need for a theological and evangelical system), overview the cultural and contextual factors (including the relationship between gospel and culture, which includes religions, philosophies, and ideologies), and present a programmatic sketch of an Asian evangelical theology. We will briefly focus on Stults' discussion of contextualizing the gospel in Asia.

For Stults as an evangelical theologian the parameters for inculturation are strictly established by the primacy of Scripture. However, scripture's authority is not just an abstract norm, but one which is rich in the content of evangelical theology. Evangelical doctrines such as total depravity, salva-

tion by grace alone, the Great Commission, and the return of Christ are non-negotiable, and evangelical theologians cannot go beyond these traditional formulations without betraying the evangelical label.⁸ It is on this basis that Stults proceeds to criticize the general trend of Asian theology—seen in the work of Klaus Klostermaier, M. M. Thomas, Kitamori Kazoh, Brahma-bandhav Upadhyaya, A. J. Appasamy, and Choan-seng Song, among others—as politically oriented, syncretistic, and normed by social analysis rather than by Scripture. Continuing this same line of thought, while the various Asian religious traditions have some degree of truth and any Asian Christian theology has to use some concepts and terms from these religions, still all non-Christian religions are human and cultural creations and do not lead to salvation.⁹

It is within this framework that Stults proceeds to sketch the central features of an Asian evangelical theology. Surprisingly, however, Stults' rendition of an authentically Asian evangelical theology retains the same loci as that developed by post-Reformation dogmatic systematicians. It begins with the doctrine of a trinitarian God, proceeds through christology, theological anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology, and concludes with eschatology.¹⁰ Along the way, whatever may have been dis-

⁷ Donald Leroy Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 1989; reprint, Denver, Colo.: Academic Books, 2001). References to the reprinted version.

⁸ Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology*, pp. 164-71.

⁹ Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology*, pp. 128-29.

¹⁰ Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology*, pp. 195-99.

tinctively Asian recedes into the background, or if not, fades away completely. Stults is clear that, 'The [sic] biblical message is constant and unchangeable while the method or systematic approach may differ according to the situation and mode of communication'.¹¹ Of course this assumes that evangelicals have understood this message correctly, that the kernel and the husks can be easily distinguished, and that the modes of communication used by evangelical missionaries have not affected the content of the biblical gospel.

Hwa Yung's *Mangoes or Bananas?* is a revision of his Asbury Seminary DMiss dissertation.¹² Unlike Stults, Hwa Yung recognizes that a truly indigenous Asian Christian theology has yet to emerge precisely because Asian evangelical Christian theological contributions have been held captive by western presuppositions, concerns and methods. Thus, for example, he concurs with missiologists like Charles Kraft and anthropologists like Paul Hiebert that Enlightenment rationality has bequeathed to the contemporary evangelical theological mind what Hiebert calls the 'flaw of the excluded middle': the arbitrary reduction of reality to two tiers that erroneously dismisses or purposefully ignores the middle realm of spiritual, angelic, and demonic beings.¹³ This has

resulted in less than fully contextualized theologies that have only superficially engaged Asian cultures and thought forms which include ancestors and complex layers of cosmological spirits.¹⁴ Asian Christian theologies have therefore to date been more akin to bananas (Asian-yellow on the outside, but Western-white on the inside) than mangoes (the quintessential Asian fruit representing an authentic homegrown theological product).

More adequate contextual Asian Christian theologies, Hwa Yung suggests, must therefore be theologies of mission or missiological theologies. With this in mind, he develops four criteria by which to assess Asian evangelical theologies: (1) their ability to address the diverse socio-political Asian contexts in which the churches find themselves; (2) the empowerment they bring to the evangelistic and pastoral tasks of the churches; (3) the means by which they facilitate the inculturation of the gospel; and (4) their faithfulness to the Christian tradition.¹⁵ Theologies are defective if they fail any one of these criteria—e.g., if they are overly accommodative to Asian cultures and religions, or if they are unconcerned with either social justice or evangelistic proclamation.

To be sure, Hwa Yung's criteria are much more expansive than Stults'. At the same time, while he exposes the inadequacy of the western theological

11 Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology*, p. 193.

12 Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997).

13 Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, pp. 72-74.

14 For a spectrum of Asian evangelical views on ancestors, see Bong Rin Ro, ed., *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985).

15 Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, pp. 57-58 and *passim*.

paradigm (based as it is on Enlightenment dualistic categories), and successfully argues that Asian evangelical theology has yet to achieve emancipation from the west, he does not in turn suggest what kind of worldview is needed for an authentically Asian Christian theology. If 'dualism' is to be discarded, is 'monism' now favoured? Hwa Yung never comes out and says that an eastern worldview (which eastern?) is to be preferred to that of the Enlightenment West. On the one hand, this may be what is implied by his suggestion that a fully contextualized Asian Christian theology must be presented and comprehensible in Asian categories. On the other hand, his treatment of theologians like M. M. Thomas, C. S. Song, and Kosuke Koyama would seem to suggest that the Asian worldview is the object toward which inculturation is directed rather than the framework within which theologizing occurs.

Alternatively, Hwa Yung could have engaged more with Asian Pentecostals, given that Asian Pentecostalism has ignored the dualism bequeathed by the Enlightenment. Cho Yong-gi, the pastor of the Pentecostal megachurch in Seoul who Hwa Yung discusses, is unabashedly evangelistic without neglecting social justice issues.¹⁶ Does Cho successfully negotiate the tension between inculturation and faithfulness to the Christian tradition? Does Pentecostalism's emphasis on the experiential and bodily aspect of spirituality provide common ground for an evangelical dialogue with and cri-

tique of Asian religions and spiritualities that could contribute to the kind of missiological theology envisioned by Hwa Yung?

It is with these thoughts in mind that I wish to look at the work of Pentecostal theologian, Simon Chan, long-time professor at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. While Chan has not published extensively on the topic of Asian evangelical theology, he has written two essays which are especially pertinent to us.¹⁷ In the first essay, Chan is concerned that Asian theologians have focused too much on history and historical processes, resulting in an over-emphasis on immanence to the neglect of transcendence in theology. Asian religiosity and poverty have framed the discourse of Asian theologians, leading to the domination of theological themes like the cosmic Christ, God's suffering, and the God of the poor.

Chan responds, however, that there is 'an irreducible transcendent reality in the Christian faith',¹⁸ and it is this transcendent reality to which the masses who are truly suffering turn. A viable Asian Christian theology must

¹⁷ Chan, 'The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence in Asian Contextual Theology', *Trinity Theological Journal* 8 (1999):5-18, and 'Problem and Possibility of an Asian Theological Hermeneutic', *Trinity Theological Journal* 9 (2000):47-59. Chan has published two books: *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), and *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Chan, 'The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence in Asian Contextual Theology', p. 8.

¹⁶ See Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, pp. 205-13.

therefore include both social reform and evangelistic proclamation, both political action and supernaturalistic charismatic empowerment. As examples of those at the vanguard of such a theological trajectory Chan points to the work of Vishal Mangalwadi who has worked among the Dalits in India, and Wang Ming Dao, an evangelist-reformer among the Chinese churches. Both recognized the indispensability of social action, but based such on the proclamation of the gospel (a counter-discourse to that of the world) and on church-planting and the ecclesial life of the church (a counter-culture to that of their societies). Chan concludes that 'those who are so concerned about making Christ immanent in Asia have ended up making the church powerless and irrelevant'.¹⁹

In his sequel, Chan takes on the question regarding the theological hermeneutic and methodology of a viable Asian Christian theology. The problem with Asian Christian theology has been an uncritical acceptance of a modernism which demands secularization in terms of worldview, and demythologization in terms of biblical interpretation. Such moves sit very uncomfortably, Chan suggests, with the Asian forms of thinking. The Taoist worldview, for example, locates human beings within a wider cosmological

context even while it does not separate human embodiment from that wider environment. Chan goes on to propose that the kind of 'body thinking' prevalent among cultures long informed by religious Taoism has a deep affinity with the Christian understanding of truth most clearly embodied in the life of Jesus and in the biblical narratives.²⁰

In short, 'liberal' Asian Christian theologies may provide astute social analyses of the pervasive poverty which characterizes the Asian situation, but they fail to offer religious and spiritual answers that concretely engage the masses of Asia. On the other hand, unexpectedly, a theological hermeneutic based on the good news of the incarnation remains plausible in the modern world since it can and does meet the spiritual needs of people whose lives are deeply religious to begin with.

III Toward an Asian American Evangelical Theology: Issues, Challenges, Opportunities

Where then are we at with regard to our attempt to work toward an AAE theology? In the following, we will assess the work of the Asian evangelical theologians discussed in the previous section, attempt to locate some of the situational issues confronting AAE theologians, and suggest one hermeneutical path forward for AAE theology.

Looking back over the work of Stults, Hwa Yung, and Chan, a few

19 Chan, 'The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence in Asian Contextual Theology', p. 17. Chan's salvo echoes that of Bruce J. Nicholls, 'Salvation and Humanisation in the Theology of Evangelism', in *Voice of the Church in Asia: Report of Proceedings Asia Theological Association Consultation* (Singapore: Asia Theological Association, 1975), 154-63.

20 Chan, 'Problem and Possibility of an Asian Theological Hermeneutic,' pp. 52-56.

observations and related questions emerge. First, while Stults' attempt to develop an Asian evangelical theology without any recognizable Asian features may be questionable in Asia, is that necessarily the case for an AAE theology? In other words, might not Asian Americans who have been assimilated into the American evangelical mainstream adopt the evangelical theology of their churches without thinking specifically about what is Asian about such formulations? I would say that most Asian American evangelicals think about their theology in evangelical terms rather than in Asian or even American terms. This may be a leftover of the assumptions of previous generations of evangelicals that true evangelical theology is by definition universally applicable rather than parochially or contextually emergent. If this is right, of course, the whole project of developing an *Asian American evangelical theology* is misguided from the beginning, and there is no point to qualifying 'evangelical theology' in any way. That I am writing this paper in itself suggests that I think this line of thinking is mistaken.

But then, what is normative—i.e., universally applicable—in any distinctively AAE theology? Might this not refer to the biblical core of any AAE theology? Earlier with Hwa Yung we saw that any viable Asian evangelical theology would need to eschew the dualistic assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism. While Hwa Yung did not then go on to suggest that this be replaced with an Eastern monism, as an evangelical he would seem to advocate a 'biblical' worldview. But does this refer to a Hebraic-Semitic mind or is this synonymous with the under-

standing of his mentors at Asbury Theological Seminary (a Wesleyan-Holiness institution)? Further, how would it be possible to access the purely biblical worldview? Is it possible to read the Bible apart from any presuppositions that the reader may bring to the text? Even if it were, is there a biblical worldview that is not always already constituted and informed by ancient near eastern cultures and patterns of thought?

Simon Chan's work suggests that the way forward for evangelical theology is to negotiate the perennial tensions confronted by theology: between transcendence and immanence, between social action and individual piety, between gospel and culture, between biblical religion and other religious traditions. While Chan correctly re-emphasizes the motif of transcendence, he also realizes that any authentically Asian theology must connect with the sensibilities of Asian commoners whose framework is wholly informed by Asian cultures and religions. Two further questions need to be addressed to Chan. The first is whether or not the motif of transcendence can be accessed in any way other than historically. If Chan answers affirmatively that this is possible because of biblical revelation, then the same question posed to Hwa Yung resurfaces: is it possible to read Scripture on its own terms and what might those terms be? Second, if Chan is correct in formulating an Asian evangelical theology in dialogue with Asian religious and cultural ideas (in his case, in dialogue with Taoism)—and for the record, I believe that he is—then how can this be done in a way that is respectful toward eastern religious

traditions on the one hand while also being faithful to the Christian tradition on the other?

We will return to this question momentarily. But meanwhile, we need to turn our attention to the situation of Asian Americans in general and of Asian American evangelicals more specifically. Any Asian American theology and any AAE theology must take into account the various socio-historical contexts within which Asian Americans live, move, and have their being. Allow me to elaborate briefly on three interrelated issues of globalization, intergenerational dynamics, and cultural assimilation.²¹

Although Asians have lived in North America since the founding of the republic and even contributed to the building of the American empire during the nineteenth century, the 1965 Immigration Act repealed the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 and reopened the door to a new wave of Asian migration. During the last generation, Asian American life has been further transformed by the forces of globalization²²: diasporas created by modernization, industrialization, and urbanization; refugee populations displaced by war,

famine, and climate changes; movement enabled by the emergence of a worldwide market economy, advances in technology and mass communication, the cross-fertilization of ideologies, and shifts in international relations.²³

The result is the appearance of Asian American communities across North America. Life in such communities is fluid, impacted by migration patterns, socio-economic pressures, and the strength of relations with those 'back home'. The stronger the transnational ties between Asians immigrants in America and their families, organizations, and institutions (religious and otherwise) in their homeland, the more intense and longer-lasting the exchange of religious goods and ideas (in the form of books, periodicals, and various forms of telecommunications).²⁴

Unsurprisingly, then, first generation immigrants often deepen the religious commitments which they held or practised perhaps more nominally before moving. Sometimes immigrants convert to the more dominant religion of their new home. In either case, religious affiliation often serves to secure social networks, confer status otherwise difficult to come by for immi-

²¹ The following condenses what I cover at greater length in my 'Asian American Religion: A Review Essay', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9:3 (2006): forthcoming.

²² I discuss the implications of globalization for Christian theology further in Amos Yong and Peter Heltzel, 'Robert Cummings Neville and the Global Future of Theology', in Yong and Heltzel, eds., *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 29-42, esp. pp. 30-34.

²³ For a recent overview, see Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, eds., *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

²⁴ These aspects of Asian-American transnationalism are discussed in Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2002).

grants, and strengthen ethnic, cultural, and linguistic bonds and identities. But for the 1.5 generation (those born in Asia but who grew up at least in part in America) the process of assimilation is well under way. In these cases, the ethnic enclave will develop English-speaking sections, as will social organizations, school clubs, and Christian congregations.

For young adult Asian American evangelicals, however, there is often a keen sense that their own ethnically organized congregations or groups are somehow less religiously and theologically legitimate because they do not have the more 'universal' appeal that the white or multicultural evangelical churches or parachurch organizations enjoy.²⁵ The result is either the transition of ethnic congregations into pan-ethnic congregations or movement by Asian Americans from their 'home' congregation to other less ethnically defined church environments.²⁶ By the time the second generation arrives on

the scene, the remaining cultural or linguistic barriers to full assimilation into American society have been overcome, often to the dismay of their parents and grandparents.²⁷

What does such assimilation consist of? Certainly speaking English, participating in the market economy, and adapting to the options provided by American secularity and politics are minimal adjustments. But perhaps assimilation also requires abandoning the norms of the immigrant culture in favour of American norms for family and gender relations, and engaging with the public square on its own terms rather than on Asian terms. If this is the case, can this happen to Asian Americans without impacting their evangelical identity? Would this not lead to a kind of evangelical self-understanding deeply formed by American culture, politics, and even economics? As important, would this not result in a subordination and even deformation of all that is Asian except for the biological phenotype? It would appear, then, that becoming American would ease embrace of evangelical Christianity, but with the cost of losing one's Asianness. It is perhaps for these reasons that Asian Americans who have been drawn to and made evangelical commitments have minimized their Asian identity.

One could also make the reverse argument, however, that evangelicalism in America has already been

²⁵ See, e.g., Rebecca Y. Kim, 'Negotiation of Ethnic and Religious Boundaries by Asian American Campus Evangelicals', in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 141-59, and Rudy V. Busto, 'The Gospel according to the Model Minority? Hazardous an Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students', in David K. Yoo, ed., *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp. 169-87.

²⁶ See Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

²⁷ As can be discerned by reading between the lines of Tom Lin, *Losing Face and Finding Grace: 12 Bible Studies for Asian Americans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

moulded by its social, cultural, and historical context to the extent that the very features that marked the latter—i.e., individualism, experientialism, pragmatism, even consumerism—have also come to characterize the former. Does this mean that full acceptance of evangelicalism includes ‘repentance’ from Asia and ‘conversion’ to Americanism?

How then do we retain and legitimate the *Asian* of any theology which is nevertheless fully evangelical? Asked another way, is it possible for a theology to be formulated which draws from Asian traditions and patterns of thought (i.e., as suggested by Simon Chan), speaks to the lives of contemporary Asians attempting to survive in America, and is resolutely evangelical? With other Pentecostal theologians,²⁸ I suggest that Luke’s narrative of the outpouring of the Spirit in the second chapter of Acts serves as a biblical image of divine blessing and reception of human diversity and pluralism. Building on this idea, I have gone on to suggest that the many tongues of Pentecost signify and anticipate not only the multi-lingual and multi-cultural character of the kingdom of God, but also the potential and possibility of the many religious traditions of the world being caught up in the redemptive

work of God in the eschatological long run.²⁹

Other Asian American theologians have made similar observations. Filipino American theologian Eleazer Fernandez reads the Pentecost narrative as an extension of the Babel story, itself a production of exilic Israel as a counter-discourse to the hegemony of the Babylonian empire.³⁰ In this reading, the diversity of tongues resists the imperial ideology and praxis which seeks to make a name for itself in ways which oppose the rule and reign of God. Pentecost then represents the construction of counter-projects aimed at undermining the totalitarian rule of the world (in Fernandez’s analysis, the Americanism of Manifest Destiny, *e pluribus unum*, and assimilation into the ‘melting pot’). The result is a plausible vision for Asian Americans that ‘does not homogenize but allows the flourishing of various colors and narratives’.³¹

From a Pentecostal and evangelical perspective, I would add two observations. First, I would caution us against an uncritical equation of Babel with any contemporary socio-political project in its totality. To be sure, there is

28 E.g., Samuel Solivan’s discussion of ‘cultural glossolalia’ in his *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 112–18, and Frank D. Macchia, ‘The Tongues of Pentecost: A Pentecostal Perspective on the Promise and Challenge of Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Dialogue’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35:1 (1998):1–18.

29 For development of the argument, see Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), esp. 4.3.1 and 4.3.3.

30 See Eleazer S. Fernandez, ‘From Babel to Pentecost: Finding a Home in the Belly of the Empire’, in Tat-siong Benny Liew and Gale A. Yee, eds., *The Bible in Asian America*, Semeia 90–91 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), pp. 29–50.

31 Fernandez, ‘From Babel to Pentecost’, p. 42.

no government that is fully righteous, no not one! At the same time, all governments carry out certain divinely ordained functions, some accomplished more and others less righteously. Similarly, all languages and cultures are similarly tainted by human sin, even if they represent and enable human well-being and flourishing in other respects. Discernment is needed to identify when cultures, societies, political structures, and even religious traditions are advancing the kingdom versus when they are hindering the coming of the Lord.

This, second, discernment leads to prophetic critique and resistance on the one hand, and to dialogical reconciliation and shalom on the other. In the Pentecost narrative, not only did the many tongues testify to God's wondrous deeds (Acts 2:11), but they also served to introduce the name of Jesus, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). The good news of Pentecost announces the reconciliation of all persons to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Such reconciliation includes the judgment of sin and the redemption of the world for the glory of God. Is it plausible to conceive of AAE theology as discerning and even participating in some way in the work of the Spirit to both judge and redeem 'Asia' and 'America'? If so, might AAE theology itself be a chorus of voices heralding the coming kingdom?

IV Whither Asian American Evangelical Theology? A Prophetic-Redemptive Trajectory

In these closing pages, allow me to

sketch very briefly some suggestions of how AAE theology can serve a prophetic and yet redemptive role. As the following is merely programmatic, it is general in the extreme. The details are already being filled in by others, whose work is documented only sporadically below, but to which I wish to return and collaborate with should time and opportunity present itself in the future.

First, AAE theology cannot be any less than Asian. But we have already seen how difficult it is to determine what this means. I suggest that one way to answer this question is to return to the wellsprings of Asia, and to draw from them in a critical manner. While some might be concerned that such a move may presume an essentialist view of Asia, I think such a risk is unavoidable for various reasons. Chief among them is that whatever Asia means cannot finally be negotiated in our globalizing context apart from Asia itself, nor apart from the immigrants who will continue to depart from Asia's shores for the foreseeable future. So be sure, 1.5 and later generations of Asian Americans who are interested in doing *Asian* American theology, evangelical or otherwise, will need to wrestle with the meaning of Asian in this new context, but they will not be able to do so in isolation from their contemporaries who remain closely tied to Asia in various ways.

Further, the prophetic-redemptive stance I am recommending assumes that the glory and honour of Asia will also be brought into the eschatological kingdom (Rev. 21:26). Might not the Asian American return to, retrieval from, and reappropriation of elements from the wellsprings of Asia not only

contribute toward this redemptive vision, but also serve as a springboard for the church to speak prophetically to the Asian world? It is in part for this reason that in the following I attempt to conduct a retrieval of Asian religious traditions since from an evangelical perspective the dialogue with the religions of Asia is the most challenging. At the same time, I am intentional in engaging Asian religions also because I am convinced that Christian theology in the twenty-first century cannot proceed by ignoring the religious traditions of the world.³² Yet having said all of this, I present the following, not as the only way to legitimize the Asian of AAE theology, but in order to press this question of the meaning of Asianness among all who are interested in developing an Asian American theology in general and an AAE theology more specifically.

Recall that Simon Chan has already helped us to see the possibility of drawing from Taoist modes of thought in ways that allow the gospel to be more deeply rooted in the Asian heart and mind. I would further add that religious Daoism's 'neo-naturalistic' cosmology can serve the kind of reenchancement of nature so desperately needed for a more robust environmental and ecological ethic. At the same time, as Chan argues, the rich Daoist cosmology

overlaid upon the indigenous beliefs and practices of the Asian masses over the last millennia cannot and should not be completely demythologized.

Evangelical theology, cosmology, and even demonology can be reinvigorated in dialogue with religious Daoism. On the other side, of course, rather than placating the spirits, Pentecostal theology would insist on exorcism, and, perhaps as important, evangelical theology would provide an alternative vision of eternal life in contrast to religious Daoism's historic quest for immortality. Still, in either case, evangelical theology can only be enriched if challenged to return to its own sources in dialogue with the broad spectrum of the Daoist tradition.

Similar approaches are recommended toward Confucianism and Buddhism. Neither of these labels is monolithic, yet each presents opportunities for evangelical theology to reconsider itself in dialogue with the beliefs and practices of the majority of Asians. To be sure, the sexism and authoritarianism of traditional Confucianism would need to be criticized, along with popular understandings of Buddhist atheism and nihilism. At the same time, evangelical theology has much to learn from the filial piety, relationality, and humanism characteristic of the main streams of Confucianism, as well as from the 'middle way,' nonviolence, meditative practices of historic Buddhism.

Again, these proposals do not require that we uncritically embrace all forms of Chinese religious traditions so as to produce a syncretistic hodge-podge of ideas and practices. Rather, I am suggesting that any contemporary AAE theology must respon-

32 I have argued elsewhere for the importance of doing Christian theology in the twenty-first century in dialogue with the world's religious traditions; see Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

sibly engage that which is distinctively Asian, prophetically judging what needs to be judged according to the gospel on the one hand, even while being reconciled to all things good as made possible by the redemptive power of the gospel on the other.³³

Second, any AAE theology must also engage the American context intentionally. There is much to be grateful for in America—which is precisely the reason why immigration continues at a torrid pace. Still, all evangelicals need to wrestle continuously with what it means to be a democratic nation vis-à-vis policies which underwrite violence; what it means to be a free society vis-à-vis the class, gender, and race stratifications and the materialistic consumerism which characterize our social, political, and economic lives; what it means to be ‘one nation under God’ vis-à-vis the linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity which constitutes the beliefs and practices of its citizens, etc. Each of these issues is complex, and replete with religious and theological presuppositions, implications, and applications.

From a Pentecostal and evangelical perspective, I suggest that Azusa Street, Los Angeles, symbolizes and encapsulates the promise and challenge of American life: the promise of reconciliation across ethnic, racial, class, and gender lines, and the chal-

lenge of how to live out this reconciliation in a world that remains fallen and in need of full redemption. Hence an AAE theology must serve as a catalyst for the AAE church, enabling her to be a reconciling community, speaking prophetically against injustice on the one hand, and yet bringing healing to the ‘nations’ within this land on the other.³⁴

Finally, of course, an AAE theology should also be resolutely and vigorously evangelical. Of course, if the foregoing is correct, there is no ahistorical *evangelion* disconnected from Asia or America. Rather, the *evangelion* in AAE theology is precisely the good news as encountered concretely by Asian Americans in history. Thus evangelical theology must be trinitarian, which I take to mean both incarnational and Pentecostal in terms of taking historicity, embodiment, and pneumatic empowerment seriously, and in terms of prophetically critiquing the accommodations of previous formulations of evangelical theology to any kind of ideological captivity. Further, evangelical theology must emphasize not only orthodoxy but also orthopraxis and orthopathy, by which I mean both embracing rightly oriented belief and confession and rightly oriented action and affection, and resisting any bifurcation of head and heart, mind and

33 I further defend the importance of a posture that is open to learning from the interreligious dialogue in my ‘The Spirit of Hospitality: Pentecostal Perspectives toward a Performative Theology of Interreligious Hospitality’, *Missiology* (forthcoming).

34 One example is Peter T. Cha and Greg Jao, ‘Reaching Out to Postmodern Asian-Americans’, in D. A. Carson, ed., *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 224–41.

soul, spirit and body.³⁵

Finally, evangelical theology must underwrite the whole gospel for the whole person for the whole world, by which I mean not only proclaiming and living out a holistic soteriology in terms of being explicit about the personal, confessional, embodied, social, environmental, spiritual, and eschatological dimensions of the saving work of Christ by the Spirit, but also rejecting any attempt to reduce the redemptive work of the trinitarian God to any one of these aspects.³⁶

I am convinced that only the theological reflection of the entire oikumene can together formulate such a robust evangelical theology. In this scheme of things, insights from Asian American evangelicals will contribute an indispensable perspective, not only for the Asian Americans, but also for all Americans, all evangelicals, the whole church, and, in the eschatological long run, for the whole world.³⁷

35 So, for example, any interpretation of the doctrine of justification solely in forensic terms will be inadequate from a Chinese perspective; see the various articles in the *Chinese Theological Review* 18 (2004), which address this issue. I thank Rich Mouw for this reference.

36 I develop aspects of such a holistic soteriology in *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, ch. 2. Similarly, see also Lai Pan-chiu, 'Chinese Religions and the History of Salvation: A Theological Perspective', *Ching Feng* 40:1 (1997):15-40.

37 My thanks to Jonathan Tan and Tony Richie for their comments, and to my assistant, Christopher E. Emerick, for proofreading the penultimate draft.

Mangoes or Bananas?

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