

Problem and Possibility of an Asian Theological Hermeneutic

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In a previous essay I considered the Asian version of the perennial theological problematic of transcendence and immanence, namely, the poles of religiosity and poverty, and looked at the works of two Asian Christians which exemplify the integration of these poles.¹ In this essay I would like to back track a little and raise the more fundamental hermeneutical question: How do we communicate the Christian faith in the light of this particular cultural context? To answer this question, we need first to better nuance the dynamics behind the transcendence-immanence problematic in its Asian form. What we discover is that Asian religiosity pole provides the framework for understanding the poverty pole rather than the other way round. Such as understanding of the situation will entail its own distinctive way of doing theology.

The Nature of Asian Religiosity and Poverty

Without sounding too repetitive, we need briefly to recall some important features of the Asian problematic. Asia is a place where religion plays a determinative role in the lives of ordinary people. I am not referring to the fact that traditional Asian society manifests a certain religious consciousness—that is something it shares with the rest of humanity. What is unique about Asian societies is that the majority of the people live under one of the “great religions”: In West Asia we have Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In East Asia Confucianism, Taoism and Shinto predominate. In Southern Asia, we have Hinduism and Buddhism, while in highly cosmopolitan South East Asia Islam, Buddhism and Taoism exist side by side. These are well-developed religions with their comprehensive systems of thought embracing all of life. At the same time Asia is a continent where we find massive poverty. Except for the countries in the Pacific Rim (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) which have seen rapid economic development since the Second World War, much of Asia still remains in the throes of deep poverty.

For centuries the great religions have shaped the Asian way of life producing a rather static traditional society characterised by a deep communal consciousness, as seen in the inter-generational or extended family, the clans and tribal communities. Relationships are governed by a hierarchical structure which stresses duties and responsibilities rather than individual rights, reciprocal obligations between people in the “higher” and the “lower” levels of society rather than individual freedom and egalitarian values. The aim was an ordered society.

The Challenge of Modernity

Modernity, however, has challenged this way of ordering society. From one perspective, Asia is very much like the rest of world which is decisively shaped by a global culture created by modern technology. There is no question that technology, especially information and media technology, has deeply affected much of Asia in its everyday life (as it does the rest of the world). Sometimes it's the relatively undeveloped societies that felt the negative impact of modernity much more keenly. These societies often do not have the means to handle problems associated with a global economy. About nine years ago in one of my regular trips to Nagaland, a state in northeastern India, I was surprised to watch the live telecast of the St. Andrew's golf tournament in a dingy restaurant. Cable television had arrived in this pre-industrial society several years before it came to cosmopolitan Singapore. CTV had entered a society that until the early 70s was still practising head-hunting. The impact of so-called modern civilisation on a primitive society is quite devastating. Today Nagaland has a drug and alcohol problem among its youth which matches any major modern city. Ironically, it is the state that is more than 90% Christian and where the sale of alcohol is prohibited. Globalisation has a levelling effect, but some societies, as in Nagaland, are more effectively levelled off than others.

The Limit of Modernisation

Globalisation does not affect all societies in the same way. The same golf tournament may be seen on television sets in Scotland and Nagaland simultaneously, but the impact and connotations may be vastly different. For the Scot it may mean an afternoon of entertainment, a pleasant break from his bored Sunday routine. For the Naga, it may awaken a subconscious aspiration to work hard for a pair of branded shoes. Modernisation has introduced into traditional societies a linear consciousness which was hitherto unknown to them.

The effects of modernisation, however, vary from place to place. In some Asian societies modernity has done quite a thorough job sweeping away much of the traditional values. This is particularly true of tribal societies. But in the Asia that is dominated by what the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris calls the “metacosmic” religions, with their all-encompassing systems of thought and ways of life, the forces of secularisation have not been able to penetrate as deeply. These religions are called metacosmic because they approach reality from a transcendent or eternal perspective rather than a historical perspective. Societies under these religions have shown a remarkable resiliency in the face of the secular challenge. At one time it was thought that with modernisation, secularism would eventually sweep away all the ancient religions. But this has not happened. What we see are reascent Asian religions fighting back and holding their own. It is these metacosmic religions which make Asia unique. They are also a major factor that we must come to terms with if we are to develop any meaningful contextual theology.

The continuing influence of the metacosmic religions is the reason why I have argued that the Asian situation is best understood in terms of the poles of transcendence *and* immanence, with a heavier accent placed on transcendence than on immanence.² It is also the reason why the Moltmannian theological project where God is conceived of as “immanent-transcendence” will not succeed in Asia. The Asian religious instinct rebels against any secularising faith that threatens an all-pervasive mystery.

The pervasive presence of the metacosmic religions of Asia helps to explain the deep tension between tradition and modernity. In much of Asia traditional values sit uneasily with modernisation. This can be seen in the fact that as Asia, especially the Pacific Rim of Asia, experiences rapid economic development in recent years, it is also raising basic questions about “Asian values”. None has done this more vigorously than the former Prime Minister (now the senior minister) of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew. There is much talk nowadays about the difference between Asian communal values and Western individualistic values, about the possibility of a distinctively Asian democracy, and such like. Obviously, other motives are involved when politicians start championing Asian values *as a political doctrine*. Yash Ghai has summed up the socio-political dynamic quite well:

The doctrine of Asian values seeks to achieve various objectives. It seeks to differentiate Asia from the West, and indeed to show

the superiority of the former over the latter. Through this differentiation, it seeks to disapply norms of rights and democracy. It aims to fight the gospel of governance by 'demonstrating' the distinct cultural foundations of Asian capitalism and markets, which unlike the West, are not dependent on legal norms and independent judiciaries, but the ties of family and kinship and the trust they generate.... It aims to strengthen Asian solidarity by positing (a false) unity.³

What lends credence to Ghai's observation are the contradictions that often exist between, for example, the communitarian ideals that political leaders talk about on the one hand, and the tendency to suppress and coerce dissenting members of the same community on the other.⁴

Be that as it may, the raising of the question of Asian values vis-à-vis the modern global economy makes an important point: It demonstrates that the socio-political life of a community cannot be divorced from the fundamental values that shape it. As the book *Asian Values* has shown, we cannot talk about Asian values without reference to underlying worldviews provided by the Asian religions and philosophies. Behind the immanent realities—the market, capital and technology—lie certain transcendent values derived from the traditional religions. These values are seen either as supporting or being threatened by the process of modernisation. In either case, these "Asian traditional values" are being vigorously promoted in recent years especially in East Asia.

The impact of modernisation has not created but only heightened Asia's awareness of its own distinctive identity, that its traditional way of life is very much undergirded by the metacosmic religions. Even at the level of ordinary, day-to-day living, we see the practical outworking of a religious faith. Let me cite two examples. Whether a person is a Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist, when he or she faces a misfortune like the threat of an untimely death in the family or a failed business venture, the instinctive response is either a question, "Is God punishing me?" or, a resigned acceptance, "That's just the way with life." What these responses illustrate is that the law of karma is still a deeply ingrained habit of mind in many people. My second example is seen among Chinese in South East Asia. It is not uncommon to find Western educated Chinese businessmen who make use of the latest technology to run their business enterprises, but before building a house, would consult a geomancer to decide on where the building should be located and which direction the front doors should face.

All this is to ensure that the building is in harmony with the flow of the cosmic forces or *feng shui* as taught in Taoism. I personally know of a good Christian businessman who did just that when he constructed his office block. The sense of transcendence runs deep in the Asian soul. So, when the demythologiser Rudolf Bultmann said that it was impossible for people using electricity and modern medicine to believe in a universe inhabited by angels and demons, he was speaking as a typically modern Western man. If he had looked beyond his own narrow confines, he would have discovered that there are people who do use modern medicine, computers and the latest information technology, who nonetheless believe (all too readily sometimes) the verdict of fortune-tellers, mediums and geomancers.

Coming to Terms with Asian Religiosity

In summary, if Christianity is to make any inroads into Asia it must come to terms with Asian religiosity. How this is going to be done will be taken up later. I might again add here that one reason for the general ineffectiveness of the ecumenical Asian theologians is that they tend to confine themselves to the socio-political context of Asia to the neglect of Asian religiosity. Even when the religious dimension is taken seriously, it has tended to be treated as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The spiritual reality that these religions embody is not seriously taken into account.⁵ Immanentist theologians tend to see Christian mission exclusively as involvement in the socio-political processes. Their concern for relevance has turned Christianity into another movement of social reform. If this is all that Christianity offers, if getting involved in society is all that the gospel is about, then Christianity has signed its own death warrant in Asia.

The Taoist Worldview

Not all, however, have sought to demythologise Asian religiosity. The Korean theologian Jung-Young Lee has tried to use the Taoist yin-yang concept to shed light on the Christian doctrine of God.⁶ The yin-yang concept is the Taoist way of explaining the ultimate principle of the universe. It is the principle of change. As the *I Ching* (*The Book of Change*) puts it,

There is the Absolute which produced two forms, yin and yang; and the yin and yang between them produced all things.... One yin and one yang constituted what is called Tao.

This change, it must be remembered, does not refer to historical but cosmic change (unlike, for example, the Marxist dialectical process which is a historical process leading to a historical fulfilment: the classless society). It has to do with the cyclic movement of the universe. The universe operates cyclically according to a process of growth and decline, like the waxing and waning of the moon. Yin and yang may be described as the harmony or balance of opposites. The practical ramifications of this concept are wide-ranging, from traditional Chinese herbal medicine to acupuncture, Tai Chi, and geomancy. For example, Chinese herbal medicine operates on the principle of achieving balance of the life force *qi* in the body. Imbalance between the "hot" and "cold" energies causes sickness. The human body is the microcosm of the earth body. Just as harmony is needed for the well-being of the human body, harmony in nature is needed for the well-being of

the "earth body". Geomancy or *feng shui* is the science of achieving such a harmony with the world. A house must be built to harmonise with the rest of the world if it is to ensure the health of its occupants; humans must harmonise with nature, etc.

What comes through in the Taoist worldview is that man is not the centre of the universe, but must find his proper place in the larger universe. Reality as the Chinese see it, is not anthropocentric but cosmocentric. Man must learn to harmonise with nature rather than dominate it. This is well reflected in traditional Chinese landscape painting or *shan shui*. Human beings and human creations occupy only a small part of the canvas dominated by huge mountains, rivers and trees.

Implications

This view of the world corresponds to some of the most neglected features of Christianity. We shall consider briefly two of them.

First, while the concept of *imago Dei* does make man different from the rest of creation, the idea that human beings are the "crown of creation" has often been interpreted in Cartesian terms in which they take centre stage as the sole determinant and arbiter of meaning. Man is the "I", the subject, standing in relation to all other things as "it" or object. We make even God the "object" of our knowledge. Theology has become a "scientific" study of the object "God". This Enlightenment approach to knowledge has effectively reduced all true knowledge to objects of our thought, as "things" which human mind can manipulate. No doubt, this approach has yielded a vast body of "scientific" knowledge, but it has also kept us from knowing reality as it really is. E.g., when we talk about personal knowledge, we enter into a realm of knowing which no amount of analysis could yield. Knowledge of a person can only come about through an "I-Thou" relationship. We know a person when he or she chooses to reveal him or herself to us; otherwise, our knowledge will always remain partial and inaccurate. Holistic knowledge occurs in the moment of "revelation".

This kind of holistic thinking is not totally absent from Western thinking. Theologians like Karl Barth have taught us the importance of "revelation", and so have philosophers like Martin Buber and scientists like Michael Polanyi. Theologian Thomas Torrance, building on the work of Polanyi and the "new physics," has developed an epistemology that seeks to unify theological knowledge and scientific knowledge based on the *belief* in the inherent comprehensibility of the universe. We do not know reality because

of our mind's ability to impose a rational structure on things; we know reality because reality itself is inherently knowable and, in a manner of speaking, *wants* to be known. But this kind of thinking has not been a dominant part of Western epistemology since the Enlightenment. The Chinese view of the universe, even if it does not put us in the "right" place theologically, can still help to remind us that we are not the masters of the universe, that we are part of a larger world which itself is created. It predisposes us to take a humble, listening posture towards reality instead of a colonising mentality.

Second, the Taoist view of man's place in the cosmos not only tells us about *what* the real nature of knowledge is (that holistic knowledge is personal knowledge), it also tells us about *how* that knowledge is to be given and received. East Asian theologians and philosophers have often spoken of the path of knowledge as involving "non-linear thinking",⁷ or "yin-yang symbolic thinking"⁸ or "body thinking".⁹ If reality is not something that we can fully grasp rationally with our minds, then to know things as they really are requires an approach that is not purely analytical and logical. We have to approach it non-linearly or indirectly. Perhaps the way to illustrate the nature of "body thinking" is in terms of the difference between an idea and a story. Whenever we deal with an idea or concept we apply to it terms like *grasp*, *explain*, and *analyse*. But when we deal with a story we *tell*, *listen to* and *indwell* it. An idea is something we abstract from the concrete reality, and because of it, it is never quite whole, whereas a story seeks to convey reality in its totality. We narrate a story in which people, things and events exist in their complex web of relationship with one another. We receive the story not by drawing "applications" or moral lessons from it but by "indwelling" it. We indwell the story by participating in the events of the story, imitating the examples, carrying out certain instructions. In this way, the story—the truth—becomes a part of us, or rather, we become a part of that reality. Literary critics speak of the need for "the willing suspension of unbelief" if we are to enter the world of a particular story. That is to say, we have to lay aside temporarily the knowledge that this is "just a story" and treat it as if it were true in order to enter its world and appreciate its full meaning. But unlike other stories, the gospel is the Good News concerning Jesus Christ, the True Story. As C. S. Lewis puts it, in the gospel, myth has become Fact: it is a story which can be indwelled not by "the willing suspension of unbelief" but by accepting it for the truth that it is. The story provides modern people with an avenue to appreciate the fact that knowledge of reality comes by way of listening to it rather than manipulating it.

In Christianity, the truth is given and received by the telling of the Story. Truth is first and foremost a person: the person of Jesus Christ ("I am the Truth"). In this connection, we note a major weakness in modern evangelicalism: It tends to approach truth as *primarily* an idea about Jesus which first needs to be expounded, and *then* it hopes that this idea will introduce people to the person of Jesus. This tendency is evident in a number of ways. For example, if upon hearing a story, our response is to ask for the "meaning" or "moral" of the story, we have already made certain questionable assumptions about the nature of story. We assume that truth can exist independently of stories and that stories are just embellished ways of talking about a more basic idea. If we were Aristotelians we would explain the story as the "accidental" embodying the "essential" core of truth. Truth, however, cannot be reduced to a principle. A principle is a generalisation about reality and can never adequately express the concrete particular.¹⁰ The gospel truth is not something we distil from the gospel story; it *is* the gospel story about a particular person in a particular place and time, who performed particular acts and said particular things. Another instance is seen in the common tendency among evangelicals to equate the gospel with a particular theory of the atonement, especially the penal-substitutionary theory. A theory of the atonement is only one way (no doubt, a very illuminating way) of explaining the gospel story. But the explanations will always be perspectival. It will never fully comprehend the story and therefore cannot be a substitute for the story any more than the reading of a literary criticism of *The Brothers Karamazov* can be an adequate substitute for reading Dostoevsky's great novel itself.

The point I am making is that epistemologically there is a deep affinity between the Christian understanding of truth as embodied in the story of Jesus Christ and Chinese "body thinking". Among Chinese Christians, "body thinking" is seen in their penchant for the visual arts, songs and story-telling. In Singapore where English-speaking and Chinese-speaking congregations often exist side by side, the contrast is quite telling. Both types of congregation are ethnically Chinese, but most of the activities involving what we call the fine arts are found in Chinese-speaking churches. The English-speaking churches are heavily influenced by popular Western culture, especially from North America. There is a joke among English-speaking pastors that Chinese preachers don't preach; they tell stories. But without either of them knowing it, the Chinese preachers may have had the last laugh. In conveying the gospel through story-telling, they

have in fact come closer to the biblical narrative tradition than their Western-educated counterparts.

Some of the greatest Chinese preachers were also great story tellers. I would like to cite the example of two: John Sung¹¹ and Wang Ming Dao. Both are usually regarded as "conservative" but are very different in their theological emphases. Sung was more concerned with personal, spiritual matters in his preaching. His sermons come through as rather pietistic. Wang on the other hand dealt more with the gospel and its social implications, particularly during the period when he was the target of attack by the Three Self Patriotic Movement. But stylistically, both have one thing in common. Their sermons are mostly taken from biblical narratives, especially the gospels, and filled with anecdotes and testimonies. The truth is not discussed as an abstract principle but as a reality which is either confirmed in the daily lives of Christians or denied in the daily lives of unbelievers. For example, when Wang challenged his congregation to obey God rather than men in the face of the pressure of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) to capitulate to the Chinese Communist Party, he did not launch into a discussion of ethical principles, dilemmas or casuistry. For him, the example of Peter before the Sanhedrin clinched his argument: We ought to obey God rather than man when a human command contradicts God's word. Or, take the case of John Sung. His sermons are liberally spiced with anecdotes from real life situations. From the story of the rich man calling for mercy in Hades, Sung enjoined his audience to turn to God while there is still time. Then he told the story of a girl in Shanghai who out of fear of losing her unbelieving husband stopped going to church, but repented only after her husband had forsaken her and her only daughter died.¹² By drawing on real life encounters, they show that their messages have the "ring of truth". Their implicit message comes through loud and clear: "The gospel is true and you can see it in these true stories."

From the more "liberal" Asian theologians we also find the extensive use of stories and other art forms in their messages. But in keeping with their own particular concerns, they are used to create a deep awareness of certain issues and conditions. For example, the minjung theologians of Korea often recount stories of oppression and suffering of ordinary people ("social biographies"). They reflect on folktales and traditional art forms like the mask dance which was used in ancient times by the ordinary folks to critique the ruling elite and satirise the behaviour of their oppressors. Using this mode of expression they showed their indomitable spirit by being able to laugh at their oppressors as well as at themselves. Here is the last scene

from the mask dance as narrated by the Korean theologian Hyun Young-hak:

Miyal halmi [Old Woman Miyal] comes into the scene looking for her husband. She was separated from him many years ago when there was a war on the Cheju Island where they used to live. Then an old man comes in searching for his long separated wife. These two stage a reunion and happily engage in sexual intercourse. Nothing happens. They begin to tell each other all the troubles they have been through. The husband suffered hunger, trouble with tax collectors, beatings from monks for raping a nun, etc. The old woman tells him how their children were carried away by a tiger when they went to the mountains to gather wood for fuel. Their lives were miserable. Then the old woman discovers that her husband has a young concubine. They fight with each other; and they try to negotiate a divorce. But the husband will not give her any alimony. In the fight the old woman gets killed. A village elder comes in and calls for a shamanistic ritual for the purpose of committing the dead woman's soul to heaven.

Hyun Young-hak gives his interpretation:

The minjung audience participates in the sad story. This is their lot in this world. In a world where the aristocrats rule, it is the minjung who suffer hunger, separation, exploitation, beatings, etc. No help comes from the respectable religion. Even nature (tiger) seems to be against them....

At the end of the mask dance, the village elder would say to the audience, "Children, awake! The dawn is approaching from the east and the south."¹³ Their "willing suspension of unbelief" is over. They have to go back to the "real" world. But in "indwelling" the mask dance, the minjung have found the spiritual resources to face the world of suffering, pain and oppression—or have they?

Perhaps the great tragedy is not the minjung but minjung theology itself. While it is profoundly insightful with respect to the human condition, it offers no real consolation to a world of poverty and oppression in which the story fails to materialise in fact. In this respect, there is nothing very Asian about minjung theology.¹⁴ If the Christian Story remains a myth, then

identification with the story will have to be by way of the willing suspension of unbelief, still. One will have to leave the world of the Christian story to return to the "real" world of pain and suffering. There is no final assurance that the Christian's resources for dealing with suffering are derived from the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ as actual events. If the Christ event is ultimately just a matter of religious experience, then there is no answer to the Camusian riddle: How do we explain the drive towards transcendence in a universe that offers no justification for it? Or, to put it in religious terms, whence the saint, when there is no God?¹⁵ The gulf between transcendence and immanence, between religiosity and poverty cannot be bridged by demythologization, however profound the religious experience the myth conveys. It can only be bridged if the myth has indeed become Fact, if the Incarnation represents a real adjustment in our human history from the side of God. It is this latter presupposition that lies behind the constructive efforts of men like Mangalwadi and Wang, as discussed in the earlier essay. And it is this tradition, we believe, that represents the real hope of the church in Asia.

¹ "The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence in Asian Contextual Theology", *Trinity Theological Journal* 8 (1999), pp. 5-18.

² Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), chap. 2.

³ See Yash Ghai, "Rights, Duties and Responsibilities", in *Asian Values: Encounter With Diversity*, eds. Josiane Cauquelin, Paul Lim and Birgit Mayer-König (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-37.

⁵ See my earlier essay "The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence", pp. 6-8.

⁶ *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁷ Peter Chang, "Steak, Potato, Peas and Chopsuey, Linear and Non-Linear Thinking in Theological Education", *Evangelical Review of Theology* (Oct. 1981), pp. 279-86.

⁸ Lee Jung Young, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective*.

⁹ Wu Kuang Ming, *Chinese Body Thinking: A Cultural Hermeneutic* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

¹⁰ Interestingly, a recent book on trinitarian theology has criticised many contemporary trinitarian theologians (including LaCugna, Moltmann and Gunton) for doing just that: reducing the concrete particular to generalisations. Such generalisations are incapable of addressing the practical concerns of the church in its concrete existence in the world. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, New York: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 29-45.

¹¹ John Sung (1901-1944) came from southern China. A man of exceptional brilliance who took his Ph.D. in chemistry at 26, he gave up a promising career to follow the call to preach the gospel. In fifteen years (1927-42) he blazed a trail in China and Southeast Asia. His preaching won many converts and brought revival to many churches. The fruits of his ministry are still evident in many Chinese churches throughout Southeast Asia.

¹² John Sung, *Revival Sermons*, III, trans. Timothy Tow (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1983), p. 6.

¹³ Hyun Young-hak, "A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea", in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), pp. 49-50.

¹⁴ This tendency to reduce the reality of Christian belief to a kind of human experience called "religious experience" goes back to the tradition that Schleiermacher initiated in the West. For a recent account, see Carl E. Braaten, "The Role of Dogma in Church and Theology", *The Task of Theology Today*, eds. Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 23-54.

¹⁵ As seen in the noble figure of Jean Tarrow in Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1979). Echoes of Camus' existentialism can be seen in a similar character, Mr. Shin, in *The Martyred* (New York: George Braziller, 1964) by the Korean writer Richard E. Kim.