

Asian Christianities

Edited by

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Contents

Editorial

Part One: Asian Christianities: Postcolonial Readings

Asian Christianities and Theologies Through the Lens of
Postcolonialism 15
FELIX WILFRED

Reclaiming Christianity as Asian 27
JOSE MARIO C. FRANCISCO

A Postcolonial Reading of Galatians 3:28 37
PABLO VIRGILIO S. DAVID

Post-Colonial Approaches to Gal 3.27-28 to Achieve Diversity in
Asian Christianity 47
MARIE-THERES WACKER

Part Two: Liberation Theologies: Asian Encounters

South-America's Liberation Nourished by Asian Christianity 59
DIEGO IRARRAZAVAL

Linguistic Domination in Theology 67
JOSÉ M. DE MESA

Feminist Intercultural Ethics: Conversing with Asia 75
LINDA HOGAN

Female Image of God and Women's Leadership in
Ciudad Mistica de Dios 83
AGNES M. BRAZAL

Sensing the Other and the Divine in Embodied Experiences 93
STEFANIE KNAUSS

Part Three: Interfaith Dialogues in Asia

Interfaith Dialogue in Asian Religious Contexts 103
HUANG PO HO

The Listening Hand: In Dialogue with Asian Traditions 113
THIERRY-MARIE COURAU

Postcolonial Encounters with Indigenous Religions for Peace and
Ecological Harmony 123
JOJO M. FUNG

Part Four: Theological Forum

To Prophecy or Not to Prophecy – Is it the Question? 135
RAMON ECHICA

A New Wind Blowing Shaping New Platforms for Interreligious
Dialogue 141
ELISEO MERCADO

Contributors 145

Editorial

Historians of Christianity agree that before the end of the first century, Christianity has spread to as far as India and China. Historical records show that a certain Theophilus was sent by Emperor Constantius to ‘other parts of India’ in 354 and found a Christian group listening ‘to the reading of the Gospel in a sitting posture’ which he found repugnant to his Arian taste.¹ Or, in 635, Alopen arrived in the Kingdom of Ta-ch’in and was warmly welcomed by the T’ang Emperor whose tolerant government accepted Christianity.² Alopen was not the first Christian to step on Chinese soil since many of them were already doing business along the Silk Road long time earlier.

However, this Asian historical trajectory is less known because the dominant story of Christianity has always been Eurocentric. Most church history books used in seminary classrooms tell us of a tripartite division – ancient (Jewish-Greek), medieval (European) and modern (colonial expansion) – the last of which correspond to the ‘new age of world mission’ when Latin America, Africa and Asia join Christianity’s narrative. What was deleted in this narrative was the fact that ‘during the first millennium, there already existed diverse yet mature and vibrant expressions of the same Christianity in all the central cultures of the ancient world – Roman but also Mediterranean, Persian, Chinese, Indian, Armenian, Arabian, African, and so on.’³ The Christian East, for instance, has been obliterated from dominant historiography since they were all labelled as heretics or schismatics, Arians, Nestorians or Monophysites and – in our century – nobodies, as they were violently annihilated from existence. Asian Christianity thus became a ‘lost Christianity’.⁴ But it could not be denied that during the earlier periods, Christianity was stronger in Asia and North African than in Europe; and ‘only after about 1400 did Europe (and Europeanized North America) decisively become a Christian heartland.’⁵ Through different external political, military and

religio-cultural forces, Christianity was almost totally annihilated in the Asian continent from 14th century onwards. Thus, Christianity only came to be considered 'European' by default: 'Europe was the continent where it was not destroyed. Matters could easily have developed differently.'⁶

It is in the spirit of recovering the lost voices of Asian Christianities that *Concilium* engages in conversation with Asian theologians. These conversations are aware that all throughout history, Christianity in Asia as everywhere else has encountered different voices, faiths, economies, political societies and cultures. These encounters were not neutral exchanges, enmeshed as they were in relations of colonial powers. To reflect on how power was and is continually exercised in these cultural and religious interactions is a necessary dimension in the theological understanding of Asian Christianities in our times. As the postcolonial critic Edward Said writes: 'there is no way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and... each co-exists with the other.'⁷ There have been debates in postcolonial theory whether to write it with a hyphen or not. 'The unhyphenated version (postcolonial) refers to the 'always present underside' of colonization itself. In other words, the discursive struggle in the 'postcolonial' can already be located within the colonial itself.'⁸ Thus, postcolonial theory is not a mere analysis of discursive practices in the aftermath of the colonial enterprise; it centres on hegemonic discourses both within the colonial enterprise and in the 'continued messy and complicated history colonialism leaves in its wake'.⁹

Part of the postcolonial reflections on Asian Christianities during the *Concilium* Conference held in Manila, the articles in this volume are grouped into three main themes: post-colonial readings of Asian Christianities, liberation and feminist theologies' encounter with Asian cultures and religions, and reflections on interfaith dialogues in Asia.

Felix Wilfred and Jose Mario Francisco argue for the use of postcolonial theory both to decolonize theology from its Western moorings and to unleash its creative energies reclaiming itself as Christian. To argue that Vatican II was a landmark event that made the Church truly catholic and universal, as Rahner did, is for Wilfred a problematic direction. A rereading of the Christian historiography as we hinted above bears the Eurocentric direction of this claim. Likewise, Ratzinger's theological assertion that the Universal Church has 'ontological and chronological priority' over

particular churches runs in the same Eurocentric ecclesiological direction as Rahner. What Felix advances is the postcolonial concept of *singularity* adopted from Spivak to assert the *singularity* of Asian Churches which are not an application of the universal but something ‘repeatable and each one of the repetition has a difference and profile of its own.’ A cursory reading of history as Wilfred does reveals these different profiles, epistemes, and contributions to the Christian story. Through the same postcolonial reading, Francisco deconstructs the common misconception of Asian Christianities as a ‘minority, colonial and foreign religion’. These preconceived notions are often products of Western histories and frames, e.g., rigid and clear boundaries of denominational membership emerging from the religious wars of modern Europe. Asian Christianities, Francisco argues, admit of multiple belonging, chequered histories and subversive appropriations of colonial practices as it reclaims its ‘authentic identity, not in a unified, fixed, essentialized space but in a space of multiple, contradictory, paradoxical, hybrid positions, possibilities, and potentialities.’¹⁰

The concepts of ‘hybrid’ and ‘third space’ are crucial postcolonial categories theorized by Homi Bhabba.¹¹ He argues that individual agents and socio-historical events lend themselves to liminal ‘in between’ spaces, ambivalent but also fertile grounds of new meanings. It is in this spirit that two biblical scholars, Marie-Theres Wacker and Pablo David, agree to reflect on a common text (Gal. 3: 28) in order to search for alternative significations that may challenge dominant and hegemonic interpretations. Pablo David problematizes the ‘unity in Christ’ discourse in the Pauline text which sometimes lend itself to the imperial and colonial program to subjugate the different others. For him, ‘for all are one in Christ Jesus’ does not mean annihilation of these ethnic-cultural differences but a genuine appreciation of differentiation as a precondition for unity in Christ’s body. The hyphenated Christian thus is what Paul had in mind: ‘Judaean-Christian’ and ‘Hellenistic-Christian’ and, by extension, ‘African Christian’, ‘Asian-Christian’, and others. Beyond the binary concepts of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, Marie-Theres Wacker also sees in the porosity of the Pauline text an opening toward the presence of ‘in between genders’ in the New Testament exemplified, for instance, in the person of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-40). As a ‘God-fearer’, he is neither Jewish or Greek religiously; as an official, he is not just a freeborn, but also no ordinary slave. As a human whose sexual organs were probably

mutilated, he was located in a liminal space. Paul asserts that with his baptism, he belongs to those who are now 'one in Christ'.

Liberation theology has been recognized as a fertile field of dialogue between continents. The Latin American liberation theologian, Diego Irarrazaval reflects on the areas of cross-fertilization and exchanges between Asian and Latin American liberation theologies. Theologians of both continents value the peoples' wisdom born out of their struggle with poverty and oppression. They also employ theological mediations in tune with the journey of the people. Being in multi-religious contexts, they exhibit a humble posture in front of other faiths. These interchanges though are not without paradoxes. For instance, the author observes a sense of transactional spirituality, that is, devotion characterized not so much by a real relationship with God but by asking for divine favours; or contemporary spiritual movements are also co-opted by global market forces. This dialogue between liberation theologies of the two continents, Irarrazaval argues, needs to be founded on a 'renewed understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean and Semitic-Asian prophet who is light for the world.' Jose de Mesa's article argues for the centrality of language in the recovery of cultures and theologies of a people. Based on his personal experience as a Western-trained Filipino theologian who uses English, he unmasks the effects of the English language as perpetration of the colonial enterprise that will 'remain one major obstacle to the discovery of a truly Asian theology.' With an example, he illustrates how the Filipino language can truly re-appropriate theological categories in specific contexts.

Feminist intercultural ethics opens itself to dialogue with Asian liberationist issues and concerns. Linda Hogan argues that cultural – also read as colonial – assumptions of the northern hemisphere, complicit with the dominant colonial model, still predominate the feminist theological agenda. In a reflexive mode, she acknowledges the contributions of present Asian theologians and, taking her cue from Spivak, argues for an inclusive, pluralistic and intercultural discourse among disciplinary specializations, theological institutes, journals and professional associations. Agnes Brazal's article gives an example of how theology in general and feminist ethics in particular can learn from the theology and ecclesial practices of local indigenous faiths. A hybrid indigenous faith – *Ciudad Mistica de Dios*¹² – believes in God as Mother and consequently practices an all-women priesthood and inclusive leadership in its government. In

the spirit of dialogical reflexivity, Brazal hopes that ‘both the Catholic Church and *Ciudad Mistica* will become more reflexive and that a ‘space’ to reinterpret their traditions towards a liberating and inclusive society. Stefanie Knauss dialogues with Asian liberation theologies from the perspective of aesthetics. Arguing for the need of sensory experience in theological meaning-making and ethical practice, Knauss thinks that much of Asian reflections are already forms of aesthetic theologies in the form of songs, poems, stories and art. These more synthetic approaches to reality – unity of feeling and reason, knowing and doing, reason and emotions – characteristic to Asian way of life ‘offer a rich foundation for a theology of the encounter with the divine in the scents or tastes of daily life.’

For Christianity to survive in Asia where complex religious systems already thrive for several centuries before its arrival, it can only exist in the form of dialogue. Po Ho Huang thinks that religious plurality is a unique God-given reality and it is Christianity’s God-given mission ‘to make this pluralistic reality a blessing instead of a source of conflict or division.’ However, he also enumerates some difficulties why it is not automatic for Christians to do so: its colonial aggressive tendencies, its proselytizing program, the refusal to deeper dialogue among new converts, and its ‘minority complex’ and the ambivalent tendencies that go with it. Beyond dialogue as strategy, however, Thierry-Marie Courau thinks that salvation in fact comes in the form of dialogue of traditions, of peoples and of communities. Christians need to realize that salvation happens fully ‘when the other traditions are received as they are, and that each with its own rationality, sets out with others to listen to the truth that seeks them.’ Jojo Fung reflects on the dialogue between Christianity and indigenous religions whose belief in ‘many spirits’ are manifestations themselves of the one divine *Ruach*. This alliance between Asian Christianities and indigenous religions aims to counter the inroads of colonial and postcolonial capital to our ecological resources.

The Theological Forum centres on proposed perspectives of interreligious dialogue discourse and a theological analysis of the now controversial Philippine political situation.

Daniel Franklin Pilario, Felix Wilfred, and Huang Po Ho