

Presidential Address
THEOLOGY ON THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE BORDERS:
RESPONDING TO THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

This being a gathering of Christian theologians, it is proper, I presume, to begin with a prayer.

*Draw near in friendship.
Save us and help us.
Show yourself gracious, O Lord!*
*Be present, O Lord,
wonderful, adorned.
Shower on us treasure most precious!*
*Hear now our cry.
Lend us your ear.
Shield us from sins' contagion!*
*To you, radiant God,
we bring this prayer.
Shine on our friends in blessing!*¹

The fact that the prayer did not end with the usual invocation of the name of Jesus should have given the game away. You might have suspected that it is not a Christian prayer. Indeed, it is a Hindu prayer, taken from the *Rg Veda*, V, 24, the oldest and most important text of Vedic Hinduism, a collection of 1,028 hymns in ten books, composed in an oral tradition in ca. 1400–1200 BC in northwest India. But that you have responded to it with an enthusiastic Amen, and would have, I hope, no objection to my using it on this occasion, is indeed one of the most significant signs of the times with profound implications for our doing theology. For if all theology worthy of the name must sink its roots deep in prayer and worship—*lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex credendi*, *lex theologandi*—and if today we recognize that we can and should benefit from the worship and prayer of other religions for our own spiritual growth, then our way of doing theology, in response to this sign of our present times, must be different

¹Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjarī. An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977) 856-57.

from that of our forebears who thought that, to quote the council of Florence, "no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans," [Fulgentius of Ruspa, *De fide liber ad Petrum*, c. 38 §79] but also Jews, heretics, or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go the 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,' [Matthew 25:41] unless before the end of their life they are received into it."²

But even theologians who no longer subscribe to this teaching, at least as formulated in this negative fashion, and acknowledge with Vatican II that salvation is possible for non-Christians and nonbelievers have not, I submit, caught up with the implications of our newfound positive appreciation of the teachings and practices of non-Christian religions.³ Except, perhaps, those involved in spirituality, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology, most of us continue to do our theological business as usual, as though the sources and resources of Christian theology—its *loci theologici*—had not changed at all, as though recognizing that non-Christian religions may be ways leading their followers to God did not demand a new way of theologizing. One of the reasons for the lag between our theoretical convictions and our theological practices is perhaps the fact that we live and work in the U.S. where 159 million Americans (that is, 84.2% of the population) are Christian, and therefore can afford ignoring religious diversity in practice, even though rhetorically we pay lip service to globalization and the consequent need to welcome cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious differences.⁴

To explore the possibility of a different way of doing theology, I would like to invite you to cross the borders of the USA and go to Asia where Christians, after four centuries of evangelization, barely make up three percent of Asians who, incidentally, constitute roughly three quarters of the world population. Once you have arrived in Asia, your neighbors will be mostly non-Christians with whom you have to consort everyday, even for sheer physical survival. If you are unlucky, you may land in countries where it is forbidden to preach about Christianity, under pain of imprisonment or even death.

Where Christianity is legal, you may want to continue your career as a professor of theology, but now there are not too many universities and colleges for you to ply your trade in except a handful of universities and seminaries of your own church. Worse, should you be able to find a teaching position, your theology, acquired after years of graduate studies and developed with painstaking care in plentiful research and publications, with its hallowed vocabulary and its either/or dialectics, sounds Greek, literally and not merely metaphorically, to

²*The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 1982) 279.

³See Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16; *Nostra Aetate*, nos. 1-2; and *Ad Gentes*, nos. 3, 9, 11, and 18.

⁴See *U.S. News & World Report* (May 6, 2000) 43.

most if not all of your audience. It is not only that you have to be fluent in languages other than Western, with the same words changing meanings totally if pronounced in an imperceptibly different tone, and with indecipherable written characters, but also terms as basic to Christian theology as God, Christ, Spirit, church, sin, redemption, grace, and salvation do not readily admit of equivalents, let alone transliteration, in Asian tongues. Having been trained to be sensitive to cultural differences, you will no doubt engage in the process of inculturation, and while it may not be too difficult to see that the same things have different functions and meanings in various cultures, it is perhaps too much to ask that you do theology in a different way. At any rate, willy-nilly, you have to do theology differently, otherwise you will be condemned to incomprehension, because you have crossed the borders and are now in Asia.

With this thought experiment in place, let's now explore how Christian theology is being practiced in Asia, far away from our borders, on the other side of the planet. I will first present how Asian theologians conceive the task of theology and its relationship to the church. Secondly, I will describe the sources and resources that Asian theologians make use of. Thirdly, I will focus on how Asian theologians interpret the Christian Scripture. Finally, I will indicate how this Asian way of doing theology has produced different understandings of Christian doctrines by focusing on three key issues, namely, Trinitarian theology, Christology, and ecclesiology. Throughout the essay I will refer to the works of better-known Asian theologians and in particular to the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and its various institutes.⁵

THEOLOGY AS PRAYERFUL AND PARTICIPATORY DIALOGUE

In Asia, as in other parts of the so-called Third World, theology has been for many centuries an imported product either imposed by Rome and Western missionaries or brought back by native students from Europe or the United States. In the last few decades, a trenchant critique has been directed against this

⁵The FABC was founded in 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila, Philippines. Its statutes, approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* in 1972, were amended several times and were also approved again each time by the Holy See. For the documents of the FABC and its various institutes, see *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales & C. G. Arévalo (New York/Quezon City: Orbis/Claretian Publications, 1992) and *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996*, vol. 2, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997). These will be cited as *For All Peoples*, followed by their year of publication in parentheses. Of special interest to our theme is the Document of the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC, no. 96, entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology. Doing Theology in Asia Today* (January 2000). It will be cited as *Methodology*. The paper is available from FABC, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong. E-mail <hkdvac@hk.super.net>.

Western theology. Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan Oblate of Mary Immaculate, decries Western theologies as largely irrelevant to Asians—tribalistic, church-centered, clericalist, patriarchal, procapitalistic, devoid of socioeconomic analysis, and lacking an orientation toward praxis.⁶ Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, regards Western theologies as unfit for the Asian situation of crushing poverty and deep religiousness.⁷ Choan-Seng Song, a Presbyterian Taiwanese, faults Western theologies for being overly rationalistic and lacking in theological imagination, comparing them to the obese man in the Filipino folktale "The Gungutan and the Big-Bellied Man," who is suffering from indigestion and is incapable of further growth.⁸ Jung Young Lee, a Korean Methodist, criticizes Western theologies for their exclusivism based on the Aristotelean logic of the excluded middle.⁹ Many Asian theologians, both women and men, reject Western theologies' patriarchal image of God, predominantly sexist interpretation of the Bible, overemphasis on the maleness of Christ, and propagation of an antiwoman Marian cult.¹⁰

To some, these criticisms may sound too harsh and unjustified. But the point here is not whether they are accurate or undeserved; rather it is that there is a widespread perception that Euro-American theologies are at least not meaningful or relevant to Asian people. A significant group of Asian theologians, most of whom belong to the "Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians" (EATWOT), have recently attempted to construct an alternative theology based on Asian methods and resources.

Prior to these theologians, there have been others, mostly Indian, who undertook the task of formulating a Christian theology on the basis of their own cultures. For example, attempts have been made to understand the Trinity in terms of the *trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Other theologians sought to present Christ in terms of Hindu theology, e.g., Jesus as *Prajapati* (Lord of creatures), as *Cit* (consciousness), as *Avatara* (incarnation), as *Isvara* (the cosmic Christ), as *Guru* (teacher), as *Adi Purasha* (the first person), as *Shakti* (power),

⁶See Tissa Balasuriya, "Towards the Liberation of Theology in Asia," in Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1980) 26, and idem, *Planetary Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1984) 2-10.

⁷See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 81-83.

⁸See Choan-Seng Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1986) 3.

⁹See Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 64-70.

¹⁰See Virginia Fabella & Sun Ai Lee Park, *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989) 149. For a fierce critique of patriarchy by a male theologian, see Aloysius Pieris, *Fire & Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996) 3-62.

as eternal *Om* (logos), as *Bodhisattva* (the buddha who postpones enlightenment in order to help others achieve nirvana).¹¹

Since the 1970s, a younger generation of Asian theologians, including several women, mostly under the influence of Latin American liberation theologies, have applied new methods and brought new insights to enrich the older, more culture-based approaches. The result is a new and more holistic way of doing theology not only *in* but also *of* and *for* Asia. Of course, no Christian theology can be entirely new, but there are undeniably novel features in this emerging theology in the Asian context of cultural and religious pluralism that need to be highlighted as important contributions to the way of doing theology.¹²

In Asia, except very rare cases, theology, as distinct from religious studies, is generally not taught at universities but rather in seminaries and religious houses of formation. Its primary "public" is not the academy but the church, and more specifically, the church in its mission to the surrounding world. In Asia theology is at the service of the mission of the church and hence it is essentially ecclesial. It is a theology imbued with what Stephen Bevans calls "the missiological imagination."¹³ To construct an Asian theology in this context, two basic questions have to be asked: What kind of church should there be in Asia, and how does theology serve its mission there?

¹¹For a collection of recent essays on Asian Christology, see *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993); A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples: Towards an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the Documents of the FABC* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1999); and for a discussion of Asian Christologies, see Peter C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 399-430.

¹²For a general discussion of recent Asian theology, see Peter C. Phan, "Experience and Theology: An Asian Liberation Perspective," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 77, no. 2 (1993) 99-121. See also Barbara and Leon Howell, *Southeast Asians Speak Out: Hope and Despair in Many Lands* (New York: Friendship Press, 1975); *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1976); *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, ed. Douglas Elwood (Quezon City, The Philippines: Newday Publishers, 1976); Douglas Elwood, *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980); *Asian Expressions of Christian Commitment*, ed. Dayanandan T. Francis and F. J. Balsudaram (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1992); and *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994).

¹³Stephen Bevans, "Wisdom from the Margins: Systematic Theology and the Missiological Imagination," *Proceedings of the Fifty-sixth Annual Convention*, ed. Richard Sparks (Catholic Theological Society of America, 2001) 21-42. For reflections on doing theology in the context of mission, see Peter C. Phan, "Doing Theology in the Context of Mission: Lessons from Alexandre de Rhodes," *Gregorianum* 81/4 (2000) 723-49.

A Triple Dialogue as a Way of Being Church in Asia

No doubt Christian mission in Asia should count as one of the splendid achievements of the church.¹⁴ Born in Asia, Christianity soon moved to the West, but its early presence in Asia should not be forgotten.¹⁵ Contrary to many Western historical accounts, Christianity did not first arrive in Asia with Vasco de Gama in 1498. Even before St. Paul arrived on the scene, the Christian movement had already expanded into Syria. Moreover, we cannot discount the historical possibility that St. Thomas reached India. Christian presence was also significant in Persia, even after Zoroastrianism was made the state religion under the Sassanid dynasty (224–425), and despite frequent and violent persecutions. From the Persian capital, the church expanded east along the Silk Road that led from Northern Iran to China. From the first solid evidence of a Christian presence in China, namely, the famous monument erected near Xian in 781, we know that a Syrian-speaking, Nestorian mission, led by Alopen, was active in the Chinese imperial capital in 635.¹⁶ We also know of the translation or composition of the first Christian sutra in Chinese and the establishment of the first Christian monastery in the imperial city with the permission of the T'ang emperor T'ai-tung (627–649). In the thirteenth century, the Good News was announced to the Mongols, the Turks and the Chinese once more.

While these historical facts should not be forgotten, it is still true that by historical accident, Christianity was and continues to be a foreign religion for Asians. Even Pope John Paul II points out the paradoxical fact that "most Asians tend to regard Jesus—born on Asian soil—as a Western rather than an Asian figure."¹⁷ Furthermore, the church in Asia is still burdened by its past connections with colonial powers. Consequently, the FABC emphasizes that the most urgent task for the Asian churches is to become churches not only *in* but also *of* Asia, in other words, to become local churches.

¹⁴For helpful histories of Christian mission in Asia, see Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998); Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999); and *Handbook of Christianity in Asia, Volume One: 635–1800*, ed. Nicolas Standaert (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

¹⁵For a brief overview of Christian mission in Asia, see John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* [EA] (1999) #9. For an English translation of EA, see *Origin* 29, 23 (18 November 1999) 358–84.

¹⁶For an English translation of this Nestorian monument, discovered in 1623, see Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 291. This monument, erected in 781, has the title "A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Ta-ch'in (Syrian) Luminous Religion in China." The inscription was composed by Bishop Adam (his Chinese name is Ching-Ching), and introduced by a brief presentation of the Christian doctrines. For an English text of this introduction, see *ibid.*, 514–16.

¹⁷EA, #20.

This new way of being church in Asia demands a different ecclesiology, one that decenters the church in the sense that it makes the center of the Christian life and worship not the church but the reign of God.¹⁸ This sort of Copernican revolution in ecclesiology sees the goal and purpose of the mission of the church to be not the geographical and institutional expansion of the church (the *plantatio ecclesiae*). Rather it is to be a transparent sign of and effective instrument for the saving presence of the reign of God, the reign of justice, peace, and love, of which the church is a seed.¹⁹

This theme has been repeatedly emphasized by the FABC, especially in its first and fifth plenary assemblies in Taipei, Taiwan, 1974, and Bandung, Indonesia, 1990 respectively.²⁰ In Taipei, the FABC affirmed categorically: "To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church."²¹ In Bandung, the FABC spoke of "alternative ways of being Church in Asia in 1990s" and envisioned four specific ways. The Church in Asia, it said, must be a "*communion of communities*, where laity, Religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers," "a *participatory* Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful—lay, Religious, and clerics alike—are recognized and activated," "a Church that faithfully and lovingly *witnesses* to the Risen Lord Jesus and reaches out to the people of other faiths and persuasions in a dialogue of life towards the integral liberation of all," and a Church that "serves as a *prophetic sign* daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come."²²

This necessity to be local churches was reiterated by the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly (Samphran, Thailand, January 3-12, 2000). Speaking of "an Asian vision of a renewed Church," the Assembly's Final Statement declares that

¹⁸For a reflection on the concept of reign of God for Asia, see Peter C. Phan, "Kingdom of God: A Theological Symbol for Asia?" *Gregorianum* 79/2 (1998) 295-322.

¹⁹For reflections on the mission of the church in this new context, see Peter C. Phan, "Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What For, To Whom, By Whom, With Whom, and How?" *SEDOS* 33/11 (2001) 300-307; and idem, "Conversion and Discipleship as Goals of the Church's Mission," *SEDOS* 34/1 (2002) 19-28.

²⁰See *For All Peoples* (1992) 12-25; 53-61 and 274-89.

²¹*For All Peoples* (1992) 14. It says further: "The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own" (ibid.).

²²*For All Peoples* (1992) 287-88. For a development of this ecclesiology, see Peter C. Phan, "Ecclesia in Asia: Challenges for Asian Christianity," *East Asian Pastoral Review [EAPR]* 37/3 (2000) 220-26. See also S. J. Emmanuel, "Asian Churches for a New Evangelization: Chances and Challenges," *EAPR* 36/3 (1999) 252-75.

the church in Asia is moving toward a "truly local Church," toward a Church 'incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated' (2 FABC Plenary Assembly, Calcutta, 1978).²³ In this way, the church in Asia will become a "communion of communities," that is, a community of local churches, which, as *Lumen Gentium*, 23 teaches, image the universal church and in which and out of which the one and only Catholic Church exists.²⁴

The mode in which this process of becoming the local church is dialogue. It is important to note that dialogue is understood here not as a separate activity, e.g., ecumenical or interreligious dialogue, but as the *modality* in which everything is to be done by and in the church in Asia, including liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue. It is through this triple dialogue—with the Asian people, especially the poor, their cultures, and their religions—that the church in Asia carries out its evangelizing mission and thus becomes the local church. Hence, dialogue is not a substitution for proclamation or evangelization, as Asian theologians have sometimes been accused of doing; rather, it is the way and indeed the most effective way in which proclamation of the Good News is done in Asia.

The reason for this modality is the presence in Asia of the many living religions and rich cultures, among whom Christians are but a tiny minority and therefore must, even on the purely human level, enter into dialogue with other believers, in an attitude of respect and friendship, for survival. But, more than the question of number, there is the theological doctrine today, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, that, as John Paul II says, "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history."²⁵ In light of this divine presence in people's cultures and religions, and not just in individuals, and in view of the sociohistorical nature of human existence, it is possible to say, as some Asian theologians have done, that the followers of other religions are saved not in spite of them but in and through them, though it is always God who saves,

²³The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*. FABC Papers, no. 93 (Hong Kong: FABC, 16 Caine Road, 2000) 3.

²⁴For a clear exposition of the communion ecclesiology in Vatican II, see Joseph Komonchak, "The Theology of the Local Church: State of the Question," in *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Church*, ed. William Cenkner (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 35-49.

²⁵John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #28. For the English translation, see *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, ed. William Burrows (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993).

and Christians will add, in and through Jesus.²⁶ At least in this restricted sense, then, religions are "ways of salvation."²⁷

Given this religious pluralism, it is only natural that dialogue is the preferred mode of proclamation, as Michael Amaladoss puts it: "As soon as one no longer sees the relationship of Christianity to other religions as presence/absence or superior/inferior or full/partial, dialogue becomes the context in which proclamation has to take place. For even when proclaiming the Good News with assurance, one should do it with great respect for the freedom of God who is acting, the freedom of the other who is responding and the Church's own limitations as a witness. It is quite proper then that the Asian Bishops characterized evangelization itself as a dialogue with various Asian realities—cultures, religions and the poor."²⁸

It is important to note also that dialogue as a mode of being church in Asia does not refer primarily to the intellectual exchange among experts of various religions, as is often done in the West. Rather, it involves a fourfold presence:

- a. The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the

²⁶The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, in its response to the *Lineamenta* in preparation for the Special Synod of Bishops for Asia (1998), writes: "Salvation is seen as being channeled to them [followers of non-Christian religions] not in spite of but through and in their sciocultural and religious traditions. We cannot, then, deny a priori a salvific role for these non-Christian religions." See *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002) 22.

²⁷The Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dominus Iesus*, #22 (6 August 2000) warns that "it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological Kingdom of God." The operative words here are "complementary" and "substantially equivalent." Obviously, it is theologically possible to hold that non-Christian religions are "ways of salvation" without holding the view implied in those two expressions. Furthermore, it does not seem necessary to affirm, as the Declaration does, that "[i]f it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation" (no. 22) since (1) what is ultimately important, from the point of view of salvation, is that the person receives divine grace, no matter where and how, and (2) it does not do the Christians much good to have "the fullness of the means of salvation" and not in fact make effective use of them. As Augustine has observed, there are those who are in the church but do not belong to the church, and those who are outside of the church but do belong to it. At any rate, such expressions as used by the Declaration are nowhere found in Vatican II.

²⁸Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990) 59.

integral development and liberation of people. c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute."²⁹

As noted above, the FABC suggests that this dialogue take place in three areas: dialogue with the Asian poor, their cultures, and their religions.³⁰ In other words, the three essential tasks of the Asian churches are liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.³¹ It is vital to note that for the FABC these are not three distinct and separate activities of the church; rather they are three intertwined dimensions of the church's one mission of evangelization.³² As the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly puts it concisely: "These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act 'integrally.' As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do."³³

Theology as Prayerful and Participatory Dialogue

Within this understanding of the nature and mission of the church, Asian theologians see their task primarily as providing a prayerful and participatory dialogue to promote this new way of being church. First of all, just as the church's mission is performed as dialogue, so Asian theology is done as a triple

²⁹The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* 42 (19 May 1991). The English text is available in *Redemption and Dialogue*, ed. William Burrows, 93-118. See also *For All Peoples* (1997) 21-26.

³⁰See *For All Peoples of Asia* (1992) 14-16; 22-23; 34-35; 107; 135; 141-43; 281-82; 307-12; 328-34; 344; *For All Peoples of Asia* (1997) 196-203.

³¹As Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz, secretary-general of the FABC, said at the Seventh Plenary Assembly: "The triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with peoples of other religions, envisioned by FABC as a mode of evangelization, viz., human liberation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue." See *A Renewed Church in Asia: Pastoral Directions for a New Decade*. FABC Papers, no. 95 (Hong Kong: FABC, 16 Caine Road, 2000) 17.

³²For reflections on the connection between evangelization and liberation according to the FABC, see Peter C. Phan, "Human Development and Evangelization: The First to the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences," *Studia Missionalia* 47 (1998): 205-27.

³³*A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*, 8.

dialogue, as explained above: with the Asian people, especially the poor and the outcasts, with their religions, and with their cultures. This dialogue is the mode in which the whole theology is developed. In elaborating a certain theological theme, beside examining Scripture and Tradition, Asian theologians would ask: What do Asian religions, in their beliefs and practices, teach about it? What do Asian cultures say about it, or how do they celebrate it, and which cultural-religious resources should be used to express it? How will the Asian people, especially the poor, be affected by what is taught? It is by critically correlating the teaching of Scripture and Tradition teach with what Asian people believe and do in their cultures and religions that an Asian theology is developed, with the view to contribute to the liberation of the Asian poor and marginalized.

Furthermore, this theological dialogue is most often conducted in a *prayerful* rather than academic context. This of course in no way means that Asian theology is not scholarly or rigorous. Rather, as mentioned above, the principal social location in which Asian theology is done and taught is not the university but church communities where prayer and worship form a necessary part of doing theology. Theology is still *intellectus fidei*, but this understanding is achieved not only in academic studies, which are indispensable, but also in prayer, contemplation, and mysticism. As a discipline, theology is understood more in the original sense of that word, that is, a training for a specific character and a particular pattern of behavior than in the derived sense of a branch of knowledge or teaching that needs to be learned in order to qualify for a job. Consequently, the theologian is like a guru, a woman or a man who through ritual performance, mental concentration, and mystical experience can claim to know Absolute Reality beyond the phenomenal world and therefore is qualified to initiate the students into the knowledge of the divine, rather than a scholar who accumulates knowledge and academic credentials by dint of research and publications.

Lastly, Asian theology is a *participatory* dialogue. By participation is meant here something quite specific, namely, participation in the non-Semitic religions and the massive poverty of Asia. Of course, Asian theology is participatory in the sense that, being ecclesial, it is viewed as a task in which all Christians, and not only professional theologians, are called to participate. More importantly, Christian theology must participate, or better still, be immersed in the double characteristics of Asia, namely, its pervasive religiousness and its massive poverty. Aloysius Pieris has repeatedly argued that like Jesus who was baptized in the river Jordan of prophetic religiousness and on the Calvary of poverty, so the church is called to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian religion and on the Calvary of Asian poverty.³⁴ It is only in this double baptism in Asian religiousness and Asian poverty that a truly Asian church can emerge, and subsequently,

³⁴See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 45-50.

an authentically Asian theology can be developed and formulated. As Pieris puts it concisely:

Theology will be explicitation rather than excogitation. Theology is an unfolding of a theopraxis. . . . By theopraxis I mean a God-experience (which is at once a *human concern*) of God's people living beyond the church, and among whom the church is called to lose itself in baptismal immersion or total participation. It is only in the unfathomable abyss where religion and poverty seem to have a common source—that is, God, who has declared mammon the enemy—that is *God-experience* is disclosed to the church and can be formulated into a *God-talk*. In short, *theology in Asia is the Christian apocalypse of the non-Christian experiences of liberation*.³⁵

ASIAN CONTEXT AS SOURCES AND RESOURCES OF THEOLOGY

Contextual Realities as Resources and Sources of Theology

Because Asian theology understands itself as a prayerful and participatory dialogue with the Asian people, their religions, and their cultures, it is a contextual theology par excellence. Traditionally, "context" has been used as merely the background against which theology was done. It was understood as the religious and cultural situation to which the Christian message was to be adapted or applied in the process accommodation—Vatican II's *aptatio*. A particular theology—most often the Western-European kind—claimed universal validity for itself and was imposed, through translation and the use of manuals in seminary training, on all parts of the church as the guarantee of the unity of the Christian creed, code, cult, and community. Such a claim to universal normativity, besides being invalidated by the irremediable particularity of its theology's social location, effectively prevents the formation of genuinely local theologies, since the context is treated as something extrinsic to theology itself.³⁶

In contrast, the FABC's Office of Theological Concerns holds that "context, or contextual realities, are considered resources for theology (*loci theologici*) together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition. Contextual realities become resources of theology insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of God and his Spirit."³⁷ It spells out the use of these resources in some detail:

³⁵Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 41.

³⁶The following is the frank assessment of European/Western theology by the Office of Theological Concerns: "The impressive unity in the theological enterprise could only be achieved at the expense of theological pluralism. It is striking how Eurocentric, and even parochial, this theology now appears. The claim of being *the* universal way of doing theology is negated by the obvious limitation that it really is restricted to the particular context in which it originated." See *Methodology*, 28.

³⁷*Methodology*, 30.

As Asian Christians, we do theology together with Asian realities as resources, insofar as we discern in them God's presence, action and the work of the Spirit. We use these resources in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church. Use of these resources implies a tremendous change in theological methodology. The cultures of peoples, the history of their struggles, their religions, their religious scriptures, oral traditions, popular religiosity, economic and political realities and world events, historical personages, stories of oppressed people crying for justice, freedom, dignity, life, and solidarity become resources of theology, and assume methodological importance in our context. The totality of life is the raw material of theology. God is redemptively present in the totality of human life. This implies theologically that one is using "context" (or contextual realities in a new way).³⁸

Asian Resources for Theology

These Asian contextual realities, which are the *loci theologici* of Asian theologies and are to be correlated with the specifically Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition, can be classified according to their provenance: (1) cultures with their manifold expressions; (2) religions with their scriptures, oral traditions, rituals, and popular religiosity; (3) social movements, in particular women, tribal, ecological, and popular movements.³⁹ In what follows, I will highlight some of these resources, bearing in mind what Choan-Seng Song has said about them: "Resources in Asia for doing theology are unlimited. What is limited is our theological imagination. Powerful is the voice crying out of the abyss of the Asian heart, but powerless is the power of our theological imaging."⁴⁰

The first resource is billions of Asian people themselves with their stories of joy and suffering, hope and despair, love and hatred, freedom and oppression, stories not recorded in history books written by victors but kept alive in the "dangerous memory" (Johann Baptist Metz) of the "underside of history" (Gustavo Gutiérrez). In recounting these stories, preferential love is reserved for "the migrants, refugees, the displaced ethnic and indigenous peoples, ... exploited workers, especially the child laborers."⁴¹ In recent years, "people" as doers of theology have assumed a special role in Asian theology.⁴² Korean theologians have developed a distinctive theology called "*minjung* theology" as a faith

³⁸Methodology, 29.

³⁹See Methodology, 30-37.

⁴⁰Theology from the Womb of Asia (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1986) 16.

⁴¹Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life. Final Statement of the FABC's Sixth Plenary Assembly, 1995, in *For All Peoples* (1997) 4.

⁴²For reflections on "theology by the people," see S. Amirtham and John S. Pobee, eds., *Theology by the People* (Geneva: WCC, 1986); F. Castillo, *Theologie aus der Praxis des Volkes* (Munich: Kaiser, 1978); and Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1976).

reflection of, by, and for the mass in their struggle against oppression.⁴³ In India, there is Dalit Theology, a liberation theology that incorporates the sufferings of the people known as the "untouchables," the "casteless," the "fifth caste," the "scheduled caste" who form the majority of Indian Christians.⁴⁴ In addition, there is also in many Asian countries Tribal Theology which calls attention to the oppression of the indigenous peoples.⁴⁵

The second resource is a subset of the first, namely, the stories of Asian women and girls. Given the pervasive patriarchalism of Asian society, the stories of oppression and poverty of Asian women occupy a special place in Asian theology. As Chung Hyun Kyun has said, "women's truth was generated by their

⁴³*Minjung*, a Korean word, is often left untranslated. By *minjung* are meant "the oppressed, exploited, dominated, discriminated against, alienated, and suppressed politically, economically, socially, culturally, and intellectually, like women, ethnic groups, the poor, workers, and farmers, including intellectuals themselves." See Chung Hyun Kyun, "Han-pu-ri': Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective," in *We Dare to Dream*, 138-39. For a discussion of *minjung* theology, see *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988); and David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 1991).

⁴⁴The *Dalits* (literally, "broken") are considered too polluted to participate in the social life of Indian society; they are the untouchable. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the Indian Christian community are *dalits*. On *Dalit* theology, see Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalit and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); James Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Rereading the text, the History, and the Literature* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994); idem, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Mahohar, 1995); and M. E. Prabhakar, *Towards a Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1989).

⁴⁵On tribal theology, see Nirmal Minz, *Rise Up, My People, and Claim the Promise: The Gospel among the Tribes of India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997) and K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl, Mizoram: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997). See also *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994) 11-62. The FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly (3-12 January 2000) draws attention to the plight of the indigenous people: "Today, in many countries of Asia, their right to land is threatened and their fields are laid bare; they themselves are subjected to economic exploitation, excluded from political participation, and reduced to the status of second-class citizens. Detribalization, a process of imposed alienation from their social and cultural roots, is even a hidden policy in several places. Their cultures are under pressure by dominant cultures and 'Great Traditions.' Mighty projects for the exploitation of mineral, forest and water resources, often in areas which have been the home of the tribal population, have generally worked to the disadvantage of the tribals." See *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*, FABC Papers 93 (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000) 11.

epistemology from the broken body."⁴⁶ First, the women's stories (Korean *minjung* theologian Kim Young Bok calls them "sociobiography") are carefully listened to; a critical social analysis is then carried out to discern the complex interconnections among the evil structures that produce women's oppression; and finally, theological reflection is done on them from the relevant teachings of the Bible.⁴⁷

The third resource is the sacred texts and practices of Asian religions that have nourished the life of Asian people for thousands of years before the coming of Christianity into their lands and since: the Hindu *prasthanatraya* (triple canon) of the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutra*, and the *Bhagavadgita*; the Buddhist *tripitaka* (the three baskets) of the *vinaya pitaka*, the *sutta pitaka*, and the *abhidhama*; the Confucian Four Books and Five Classics; and the Taoist *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*, just to mention the most well known of Asian classics. These writings, together with their innumerable commentaries, serve as an inexhaustible fountain of wisdom for Christian theology.

Intimately connected with these religious texts is the fourth resource known as philosophy since in Asia religion and philosophy are inextricably conjoined. Philosophy is a way of life and religion is a worldview, each being both *darsana* (view of life) and *pratipada* (way of life). To explicate Christian beliefs, Asian theology makes use of, for instance, the metaphysics of *yin* and *yang* rather than Greek metaphysics or process philosophy.⁴⁸

The fifth resource is Asian monastic traditions with their rituals, ascetic practices, and social commitment. This last element, namely, social commitment needs emphasizing. Pieris has consistently argued that the most appropriate form of inculturation of Christianity in Asia is not the Latin model of incarnation in a non-Christian *culture*, nor the Greek model of assimilation of a non-Christian *philosophy*, nor the North European model of accommodation to a non-Christian *religiousness*. What is required of Asian Christians is the monastic model of participation in a non-Christian *spirituality*. However, this monastic spirituality is not to be understood as a withdrawal from the world into leisurely "prayer centers" or "ashrams." Asian monks have always been involved in sociopolitical struggles through their *voluntary* poverty and their participation in social and

⁴⁶Chung Hyun Kyun, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990) 104.

⁴⁷See *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 103-109.

⁴⁸See, for instance, Jung Young Lee, *A Theology of Change: A Christian Concept of God from an Eastern Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1979) and *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). For reflections on the use of Asian philosophies for the inculturation of the Christian faith, see Peter C. Phan, "Fides et Ratio and Asian Philosophies," *Science et Esprit* 51/3 (1999): 333-49.

cultural activities.⁴⁹ At any rate, interreligious dialogue in all its multiple forms is an essential element of an Asian theology.⁵⁰

The sixth resource is Asian cultures in general with their immense treasures of stories, myths, folklore, symbols, poetry, songs, visual art, and dance. The use of these cultural artifacts adds a very distinctive voice to Christian theology coming from the deepest yearnings of the peoples of Asia. For example, *minjung* theology has made a creative use of real-life stories and folktales. These stories are narrated and sung at Korean mask dances (*talch'um*), opera (*pansori*), or shamanistic rituals (*kut*).

Asian theology can make full use of these and other contextual realities of Asia because of two theological convictions. As the Office of Theological Concerns has pointed out, "First, Christian faith considers the whole universe, all of creation, as a manifestation of God's glory and goodness," and "secondly, Christian affirms that God is the Lord of history. . . . that God, who created the universe and humankind, is present and active in and through his Spirit in the whole gamut of human history, leading all to the eschaton of God's kingdom."⁵¹

Doing theology in Asia, then, is much more than an academic enterprise. Of course, theology always is *intellectus fidei*—understanding of the faith, no matter where it is done. However, the starting point of Asian theologies is neither the Bible nor Christian Tradition from which conclusions are drawn by means of deductive logic and then applied to particular situations and circumstances. Rather Asian theologians are implicated from the outset in the sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious conditions of their suffering and oppressed people with whom they must stand in effective solidarity. It is from the perspective of this *praxis* that Scripture and Tradition are read and interpreted.

⁴⁹See Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 51-58 and *Love Meets Wisdom* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 61-72, 89-96.

⁵⁰The Vatican has spoken of four forms of interreligious dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange. See the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* jointly issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (20 June 1991) in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements 1974-1991*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1992). For a discussion of the method of interreligious dialogue as theological exchange, see Peter C. Phan, "The Claim of Uniqueness and Universality in Interreligious Dialogue," *Indian Theological Studies* 31, 1 (1994): 44-66.

⁵¹*Methodology*, 38. The text adduces two celebrated statements of John Paul II. First, "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 28). And secondly: "Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 29).

TOWARD AN ASIAN HERMENEUTICS

For Asian theology, Scripture and Tradition will of course continue to function as a normative resource with their the profession of faith in Jesus as the incarnated Word of God and savior of humanity. As the Office of Theological Concerns states unequivocally: "The first and most important resource for the interpretation of the Bible is the Christocentric faith that accepts Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God who became incarnate to save the human race."⁵²

Granted this fundamental profession of faith, the task of biblical hermeneutics still remains a complex one. In line with the historical-critical method, the Office of Theological Concerns affirms the primacy of the "literal sense," that is, "the meaning of a text in its original context, which is recovered through a critical, historic-literary study."⁵³ However, Asian theologians reject the hegemony of the historical-critical method that has dominated Western exegesis. Instead, they propose a multipronged hermeneutics, in light of the multicultural and multi-religious context of Asia. For them the primary task of biblical hermeneutics is to concretize the Word of God in the contemporary context for the people of today, and not simply to retrieve the literal meaning of the text. In other words, the interpreter must not only discover the world *behind* the text but also appropriate the worlds *in* and *in front of* the text for personal and societal transformation that is the culminating moment of the hermeneutical enterprise as a whole.⁵⁴

To achieve this goal, Asian theologians insist that all biblical interpretation must be contextual. The interpreter must be cognizant not only of the context of the text but also of his or her own context, that is, his or her social location as well as his or her gender, class, and race biases, and the sociopolitical and religiocultural context in which the Bible is being proclaimed. Neither the text nor the interpretation of the text is ever objective, if by objective one means ideologically unbiased. The text is written by the "historical winners" who do not simply tell *the* story but *their* story, and the interpreter must be aware of the interplay among knowledge, power, and interests to identify the distortions and dysfunctions in the text and possibilities of transformation. As a consequence, in approaching the text, the interpreter, according to Archie Lee, must keep in mind the following questions: "Who inscribes what for the interest of whom and at the expense of which group or sector of society?" "Who stands to gain as a result of the formation of the canon and who is being discriminated against?"⁵⁵

⁵²*Methodology*, 40.

⁵³*Methodology*, 41. The document carefully distinguishes this literal meaning from the fundamentalist or literalist sense, which it categorically rejects.

⁵⁴For a helpful explanation of this threefold hermeneutics, see Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁵⁵Archie C. C. Lee, "Refiguring Religious Pluralism in the Bible," in *Plurality, Power*

Given the presence of the teeming masses of the poor, the vitality of diverse religions, and the richness of many cultures in their continent, Asian theologians adopt the perspectives of the Asian poor, their religions, and their cultures as the lens or focus in reading the Bible. The uppermost questions in their mind are: How can the message of the Bible become good news for those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized? How can it be understood by the followers of other religions? How can it be enriched by Asian cultural expressions? Methodologically, Asian biblical hermeneutics takes at least three directions: retrieval of the hermeneutical tradition of the Eastern Churches, multicultural and multifaith hermeneutics, and people-based hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics of the Eastern (Syriac) Tradition

As is well known, the three theological traditions of Christianity, namely, Syriac, Greek, and Latin, are all represented in Asia. Unfortunately, the Syriac tradition, which is indebted to such theologians as Aphraates, Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, and Babai the Great, has often been forgotten and suppressed, even in Asia, where it has its historical roots. In India, this tradition is preserved by the Saint Thomas Christians, despite the fact that there has been an attempt at Latinizing them, particularly with the Synod of Diamper in 1599. Currently remaining in communion with the Roman Church are the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches, the latter rejoining the Catholic Church in 1930.

With regard to the Syriac tradition, the Office of Theological Concerns says: "The Syriac theological tradition is a legacy that enriches the whole Church. In particular it has to be given a very important place in the restoration/reform of the ecclesial life of the St. Thomas Christians in India today. This, in turn, will be a valuable contribution to the Church in Asia and to Asian theology."⁵⁶ Such contribution will enrich Asian theologies, especially because the Syriac tradition privileges typological exegesis, emphasizes the centrality of liturgy and doxology, accords priority to mysticism and apophaticism, highlights the special role of the Holy Spirit, and favors the use of icons, symbols, paradoxes, and poetry in theological expressions; all methodological approaches that accord well with the Asian way of thinking.⁵⁷

and Mission: Intercontinental Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium, ed. Philip L. Wickeri, Janice K. Wickeri, and Damayanthi M. A. Niles (London: The Council for World Mission, 2000) 222.

⁵⁶*Methodology*, 19.

⁵⁷For a brief exposition on Eastern, and more specifically Syriac, theological and church tradition, see *Methodology*, 11-19. Pope John Paul, in his 1999 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, urges respect and promotion of the traditions of the Catholic Eastern Churches in Asia: "The situation of the *Catholic Eastern Churches*, principally of the Middle East and India, merits special attention. From Apostolic times they have been the custodians of a precious spiritual, liturgical, and theological heritage. Their traditions and rites, born of a deep inculturation of the faith in the soil of many

Multicultural and Multifaith Hermeneutics

The second important hermeneutical approach of Asian theologies is what has been called multifaith or multireligious or cross-cultural or cross-textual or comparative or contextual reading. This approach includes four distinct but interrelated elements. First, in general, as the Office of Theological Concerns puts it, "Asian interpreters of the Bible, both at the scholarly and the popular levels, search for the meaning of biblical texts: (1) in relation to Asian world-views and cultures which are cosmic, Spirit-oriented, family and community-oriented; and (2) in relation to Asian situations in the socioeconomic, political and religious fields."⁵⁸ Secondly, because most countries of Asia have been devastated by a long history of Western colonialism and imperialism, a reading of the Bible in relation to their socioeconomic and political situations inevitably leads to a postcolonial hermeneutics. Thirdly, this approach requires a knowledge of how other religions interpret their own sacred scriptures: "If Christians wish to understand and dialogue with peoples of other faiths, it is important they understand how they have interpreted their text down the ages."⁵⁹ Learning how the adherents of other religions interpret their sacred texts enrich the hermeneutical strategies that Christians have traditionally deployed. Fourthly, this approach places the sacred texts of Christianity side by side with those of other religions and allow them to throw light on one another, challenge, complement and even correct one another.⁶⁰ A brief word on each of these four elements is on order.

The first hermeneutical aspect is simply part of the effort of Asian Christians to become a truly local Church, that is, a Church not only *in* but *of* Asia. The Final Statement of the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly (2000), on the basis of the report of Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, General Secretary, summarizes the eight features that form the vision of a renewed Asian Christianity: a Church of the poor and the young; a truly inculturated and indigenous Church; a Church of deep interiority and prayer; a Church as communion of communities of authentic participation and coresponsibility; a Church committed to integral evangelization; a Church with an empowered laity; a Church engaged in the struggle for human rights and in the service of life; and a Church practicing the triple dialogue with

Asian countries, deserve the greatest respect. With the Synod Fathers, I call upon everyone to recognize the legitimate customs and the legitimate freedom of these Churches in disciplinary and liturgical matters, as stipulated by the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches" (no. 27). English translation is available at the FABC office, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong.

⁵⁸*Methodology*, 41-42.

⁵⁹*Methodology*, 39-40.

⁶⁰A helpful introduction to Third-World hermeneutics is *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991).

other faiths, the poor, and with the cultures.⁶¹ Interpreting the Bible in relation to the Asian context is the first and most important step toward implementing this vision of Church.

Secondly, such a biblical interpretation is by necessity a postcolonial hermeneutics. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has amply demonstrated in the Indian context, "historical-critical methods were not only colonial in the sense that they displaced the norms and practices of our indigenous reading methods, but in that they were used to justify the superiority of the Christian texts and to undermine the sacred writings of others, thus creating a division between us and our neighbors. Such materials function as masks for exploitation and abet an involuntary cultural assimilation."⁶²

In contrast, a postcolonial scriptural reading is marked, according to Sugirtharajah, by five features: first, it looks for appositional or protest voices in the text by bringing marginal elements to the center and, in the process, subverts the traditional meaning; secondly, it will not romanticize or idealize the poor; thirdly, it will not blame the victims, but will direct the attention to the social structures and institutions that spawn victimhood; fourthly, it places the sacred texts together and reads them within an intertextual continuum, embodying a multiplicity of perspectives; and fifthly, it will address the question of how oppressed people can take pride and affirm their own language, ethnicity, culture, and religion within their multilingual, multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious societies.⁶³

Third, a postcolonial hermeneutics must be enriched by the ways in which the followers of other religions have interpreted their own sacred writings. Concretely, there must be an effort in Asia to learn about how Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Confucians, and Taoists interpret their own sacred scriptures.⁶⁴ In familiarizing themselves with these interpretative methods, Asian theologians may learn that not only there are striking parallels between these methods and the traditional Christian approach to the Bible but also that these methods are more in tune with the Asian worldviews and mode of knowing and speaking than the Western ones, and therefore can enrich Christian hermeneutics. Thus, for example, Christian theologians can learn from classical Vedanta's teaching on the three steps in the process of moving from the desire to know Brahman to the liberating experience of Brahman in the perfect integration (*samadhi*) of the self (*atman*) and Absolute Reality, the three steps being hearing

⁶¹See *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*, 3-4. The text of Archbishop Quevedo is available in *A Renewed Church in Asia: Pastoral Directions for a New Decade*, FABC Papers no. 95 (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000) 12-16.

⁶²R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998) 127.

⁶³See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 20-24.

⁶⁴For a helpful overview of these five hermeneutical methods, see *Methodology*, 43-84.

(*svavana*), reflecting (*manana*), and meditating (*nididhyasana*), each containing in itself various acts of interpretation.

From Buddhism Christians will learn the necessity of "taking refuge" in the "Three Jewels," that is, the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* (his teaching) and the *Sangha* (the community) and its four rules of interpretation.⁶⁵

In relation to Islam, Asian theologians can benefit from the Sunnite emphasis on exegesis through the traditions (*hadith*), from the Shi'ite stress on allegorical interpretation (*tawil*), and from the Sufi preference for mystical interpretation.⁶⁶ Confucianism teaches Christian interpreters the necessity of linking knowledge with action and the use of images, stories, parables and dialogues as ways to convey truths. Finally, from Taoism Asian theologians can learn the mode of apophatic thinking appropriate to dealing with the eternal and nameless Tao, the "mystery upon mystery."

Lastly, because of the overwhelming presence of non-Christian soteriologies in Asia, Asian theologians also practice an interfaith or multifaith hermeneutics. They abandon the earlier apologetical approach of using the Bible as a yardstick to judge the sacred texts of other religions. Rather they read the Bible in light of the other sacred texts and vice versa for mutual cross-fertilization.⁶⁷ The intent of such reading is not merely to prove that the Christian Bible and the sacred

⁶⁵The four rules are: "The doctrine (*dharma*) is the refuge and not the person; the meaning (*artha*) is the refuge and not the letter; the sutra of precise meaning (*niartha*) is the refuge, not the sutra the meaning of which requires interpretation (*neyartha*); direct knowledge (*jnana*) is the refuge and not discursive consciousness (*vijnana*)." See *Methodology*, 55-56.

⁶⁶*Methodology* highlights the following three Islamic hermeneutical principles: "i. that the meaning should be sought from within the Qur'an, and never should a passage be interpreted in such a manner that it may be at discrepancy with any other passage; ii. no attempt should be made to establish a principle to establish on the strength of allegorical passages, or of words liable to different meanings; iii. when a law or principle is laid down in clear words, any statement carrying a doubtful significance, or a statement apparently opposed to the law so laid down, must be interpreted subject to the principle articulated. Similarly, that which is particular must be read in connection with and subject to more general statements" (63).

⁶⁷For examples of interfaith hermeneutics, see the brilliant essays of Samuel Rayan, "Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context," in Virginia Fabella & Sergio Torres, eds., *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985) 134-39; "Wrestling in the Night," in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds., *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989) 450-69; Peter K. H. Lee, "Rereading Ecclesiastes in the Light of Su Tung-p'o's Poetry," *Ching Feng* 30/4 (1987): 214-36; idem, "Ta-T'ung and the Kingdom of God," *Ching Feng* 31/4 (1988): 225-44; idem, "Two Stories of Loyalty," *Ching Feng* 32/1 (1989): 24-40; Choan-Seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology From an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1984). See also the essays in the fourth part of *Voices from the Margin*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, 299-394, and *Frontiers in Asian Theology*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, 65-137.

scriptures of other religions are mutually compatible, or to find linguistic and theological parallels between them for apologetical and missionary purposes. Rather the goal is to enlarge our understanding of both sacred writings, to promote cross-cultural and cross-religious dialogue, and to achieve a "wider intertextuality"⁶⁸ To carry out this hermeneutical exercise successfully, what is needed is what Kwok Pui-lan calls the "dialogical imagination." She explains the implications of this dialogical model:

A dialogical model takes into consideration not only the written text but also oral discussion of the text in different social dialects. It invites more dialogical partners by shifting the emphasis from one scripture (the Bible) to many scriptures, from responding to one religious narrative to many possible narratives. It shifts from a single-axis framework of analysis to multiaxial interpretation, taking into serious consideration the issues of race, class, gender, culture, and history. It emphasizes the democratizing of the interpretative process, calling attention to the construction of meanings by marginalized people, to the opening up of interpretive space for other voices, and to the creation of a more inclusive and just community.⁶⁹

In this way Kwok Pui-lan suggests that the Bible be seen not as a fixed and sacred canon giving rise to one normative interpretation but as a "talking book"—the juxtaposition of *talking* with *book* highlighting the rich connections between the written and the oral in many traditional cultures. The image of the Bible of a "talking book" puts the emphasis not on the text but on the community that talks about it; not on the written but the oral transmission of the text; not on the fixed but the evolving meaning of the text; not on one canonical but many voices, often suppressed and marginalized, in the text; not on the authoritarian decision about the truth of the text but on the open, honest, and respectful conversation about what is true.⁷⁰

People-Based Hermeneutics

The image of the Bible as a "talking book" brings us to the third track of Asian interpretive method, namely, people-based hermeneutics. In Asia the biblical interpreters are not only professionally trained scholars, whose work is of course important for the community, but also the ordinary believers themselves, especially as they gather in basic ecclesial communities for Bible study and worship. Furthermore, people-based hermeneutics makes extensive use

⁶⁸George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Two Mission Commands: An Interpretation of Matthew 18: 16-20 in the Light of a Buddhist Text," *Biblical Interpretation* 2/3 (1994): 282. See also Archie Lee, "Biblical Interpretation in Asian Perspective," *Asia Journal of Theology* 7/1 (1993): 35-39.

⁶⁹Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995) 36.

⁷⁰See Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World*, 42.

of popular myths, stories, fables, dance, and art to interpret biblical stories. The most prominent advocate and practitioner of this hermeneutics is Choan-Seng Song, a Taiwanese Presbyterian.⁷¹

The most celebrated example of this story-based hermeneutics is his *The Tears of Lady Meng*, in which he develops a powerful political liberation theology from the story of a woman (Meng Chiang) whose husband was buried alive in the wall that Emperor Ch'in Shih was building to guard the wall. Lady Meng went in search of her husband at the wall and her tears made the wall collapse. The emperor ordered her to be brought to him, and struck by her beauty, asked her to be his wife. Lady Meng agreed, but only on condition that a forty-day festival be held in her husband's honor; that the emperor and all the court officials be present at his funeral; and that a forty-nine feet high terrace be built on the bank of the river. When everything was ready, Lady Meng climbed on the terrace, cursed the emperor in a loud voice for his wickedness, and then jumped into the river. The emperor ordered his soldiers to cut up her body into little pieces and grind her bones to powder. But when Lady Meng's ground bones were scattered into the river, they turned into little silver fish, in which the soul of faithful Meng Chiang lives for ever.⁷²

Will an Asian theology constructed with Asian resources and along the hermeneutical approach indicated above be different from an Euro-American theology? A Black theology? A Hispanic/Latino theology? An African theology? A Latin American theology?⁷³ The question is perhaps otiose, since de facto Asian theologians have already produced a theology that is recognizably distinctive and different. This is obvious to anyone familiar with the works of Choan-Seng Song, Archie C. C. Lee, Kwok Pui Lan, Jung Young Lee, Chung Hyun Kyun, Kosuke Koyama, Kazoh Kitamori, Aloysius Pieris, Tissa Balasuriya, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Ryan, Felix Wilfred, M. M. Thomas, Stanley Samartha, José M. de Mesa, and numerous other men and

⁷¹The following are Song's most important works: *Third-Eye Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990); *The Compassionate God* (London: SCM Press, 1982); *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1984); *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1986); *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

⁷²See C. S. Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1982).

⁷³For a discussion of Black, Hispanic, and Asian theologies in the United States, see Peter C. Phan, "Contemporary Theology and Inculturation in the United States," in *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Theologies*, ed. William Cenkner (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 109-30, 176-92.

women theologians associated with the FABC, the Christian Conference of Asia, and EATWOT (to mention only those whose writings are available in English).⁷⁴

TOWARD AN ASIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A method, and the resources it makes use of, whether in theology or in any other discipline, are as good as the results they produce. The question then is whether Asian theology, with its distinctive method and resources, has contributed anything of its own to Christian theology. Limited space will not permit a detailed consideration of all the ways in which Asian theologians—in spite of their still small number and the severe strictures, both financial and political, under which they work—have made a difference to theology, Catholic as well as Protestant. Here I will focus briefly on Trinitarian theology, Christology, and ecclesiology.

Trinity: God-Humanity-Earth

It is a truism that the Trinity, after centuries of benign neglect, has in the last couple of decades occupied again center stage in contemporary theology. Efforts have been made, e.g., by process, feminist, and liberationist theologians, to retrieve the soteriological import of the Trinitarian doctrine by emphasizing the identity between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity and by highlighting the Trinitarian *koinonia* and *perichoresis* as the model for human relationships in church and society.⁷⁵

As is well known, over against subordinationist and modalist heresies, the early church had recourse to Greek philosophy and its terminology—*ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon*—and their Latin equivalents—*essentia*, *substantia*, and *persona*—to express the Christian faith in the one Godhead existing in three subsistent relationships. Such metaphysical transposition of the New Testament narrative of the activities of God, Jesus, and the Spirit in the history of salvation is of course legitimate, and even necessary to protect the Christian faith from possible deviations. The challenge for such a Trinitarian theology is to remain rooted in the threefold pattern of our experience of God's activities as expressed in the Bible and to offer a blueprint for our life conformable to the way in which the three divine persons are related to each other. To meet this challenge successfully such a Trinitarian theology must, among other things, show the intrinsic, albeit not essential, relations between God, humans, and the earth.

⁷⁴A useful introduction to many of these theologians is available in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994).

⁷⁵See in particular the works by Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Catherine LaCugna, and Elizabeth Johnson.

Of great help to such an articulation of our Christian experience of the Triune God is the Vietnamese philosophical worldview called the "three-element philosophy" (*triet ly tam tai*).⁷⁶ The three elements are Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, (*thien, dia, nhan* in Sino-Vietnamese, or *troi, dat, nguoi* in pure Vietnamese), which are the three "co-ultimates" constituting the whole reality. "Heaven" refers to the firmament above humans (as opposed to the earth), to the law of nature, and to the Creator, endowed with intellect and will. The firmament is the place where the Creator dwells; the law of nature is the Creator's will and dispositions; and the Creator is the supreme being who is transcendent, omnipotent, and eternal.

"Earth" refers to the material reality lying beneath humans (as opposed to heaven above), to that which gives rise to entities composed of the five constituents (*ngu hanh*) of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth; and to matter in general which is essentially directed upward to Heaven.

"Humanity" refers to human beings "whose heads carry Heaven and whose feet trample upon Earth" (*dau doi troi, chan dap dat*), that is, humans as the link or "hyphen" between Heaven and Earth. Humans express the power of Heaven and Earth by being "the sage inside and the king outside" (*noi thanh ngoai vuong*) through a twofold movement: First, by orienting themselves upward to Heaven (*tri tri*) through knowing Heaven, trusting in Heaven, and acting out the will of Heaven, and, secondly, by orienting themselves downward to Earth (*cach vat*) through the use of material things for the benefit of all. As the link connecting Heaven and Earth and as the microcosm, humans unite the male and the female, the positive and negative, light and darkness, spirit and matter (*yin* and *yang*), and the characteristics of the five constituents: subtlety (water), strength (fire), vitality (wood), constancy (metal), and generosity (earth). In this way humans practice the "human heart" (*nhan tam*) and the "human way" (*nhan dao*).

The most important principle of the *tam tai* philosophy is that all the three constitutive elements of reality—Heaven, Earth, and Humanity—are intrinsically connected with one another and mutually dependent. Heaven without Earth and Humanity cannot produce or express anything. Earth without Heaven and Humanity would be an empty desert. Without Heaven, Humanity would be directionless, and without Earth, Humanity would have nowhere to exist and to act. Each of the three elements has a function of its own to perform: Heaven gives birth, Earth nurtures, and Humanity harmonizes (*Thien sinh, dia duong, nhan hoa*).

Consequently, human action must be governed by three principles in order to be "successful," that is, virtuous: it must be carried out in accord with Heaven's will (*thien thoi*), favorable to the well-being of Earth (*dia loi*), and

⁷⁶For a more extensive elaboration of this philosophy, see Peter C. Phan, "The Dragon and the Eagle: Toward a Vietnamese-American theology," *Theology Digest* 48/3 (2001): 203-18.

producing harmony in Humanity (*nhan hoa*).⁷⁷ This threefold harmony is the fundamental ontological principle uniting all beings as well as a basic ethical goal directing human actions.

As Western theology has used different models to elucidate the mystery of the Trinity, e.g., the metaphysics of being as relation among the Cappadocians, a psychology of *mens, intellectus, and voluntas* in Augustine, and a metaphysics of human knowing and willing in Thomas, Asian theology can use this Vietnamese *tam tai* philosophy to elaborate a theology of the Trinity. As will be made clear below, such a Trinitarian theology has the advantage of linking the mystery of the Trinity with anthropology and ecology.

First, with regard to the Trinity, it is possible to correlate God the Father with Heaven, God the Son to Humanity, and God the Spirit to Earth and correlate their roles in the history of salvation with the functions of Heaven, Humanity, and Earth as presented in *tam tai* philosophy, namely, giving birth, harmonizing, and nurturing respectively.⁷⁸ The Father's role is to "give birth" to Humanity and Earth through "creation"; the Son's is to "harmonize" Heaven and Earth through "incarnation" and "redemption"; and the Spirit's is to "nurture" Heaven and Humanity through "grace." These roles are truly distinct from one another (hence Trinitarian and not modalistic) but intimately and equally linked with one another (hence one and not subordinationist or tritheistic). As Heaven, Humanity, and Earth are indissolubly connected with each other, the three divine Persons are united with each other in a *perichoresis* or *koinonia* of life and activities. In this Trinitarian theology God's transcendence and immanence are intrinsically related with each other. God, though transcendent, is conceived as internally connected with and dependent on Humanity and Earth to carry God's activities in history. Indeed, the Trinity is conceived as inscribed in the structure of reality itself.⁷⁹

⁷⁷This philosophy is claimed to be represented on the upper surface of the bronze drum, especially the one discovered at Ngoc Lu in 1901 and now preserved at the Center for Far-Eastern Antiquities (*Vien Dong Bac Co*) in Hanoi. This philosophy has been elaborated in detail by the Vietnamese philosopher Kim Dinh in his *Su Diep Trong Dong* [*Message of the Bronze Drum*] (San Jose CA: Thanh Nien Quoc Gia, 1984). See also Vu Dinh Trac, "Triet ly truyen thong Viet Nam don duong cho Than Hoc Viet Nam" ["Traditional Vietnamese Philosophy as Preparation for Theology"] *Dinh Huong* 11 (1966): 23-47. Vu Dinh Trac believes that traditional Vietnamese philosophy is constituted by *tam tai* philosophy, *yin-yang* metaphysics, and agricultural philosophy. These three strands are illustrated by the various symbols on the upper surface of the Ngoc Lu bronze drum.

⁷⁸For an attempt to construct a Trinitarian theology on the basis of *yin yang* metaphysics, see Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁷⁹For an attempt at conceiving reality in Trinitarian terms, see Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis

Secondly, a Christian anthropology constructed in light of *tam tai* philosophy will offer a Trinitarian and ecological understanding of human existence. In this anthropology there is no opposition between theocentrism and anthropocentrism, nor between theocentrism and geocentrism, nor between geocentrism and anthropocentrism. Indeed, *tam tai* philosophy is opposed to any *ism* that excludes any other perspective. The human is understood neither as subject nor object but as intrinsically *related* to the divine and the ecological, just as the divine is intrinsically related to the ecological and the human, and the ecological is intrinsically related to the divine and the human. This anthropology will be an important corrective to Euro-American culture which tends to view, under the influence of the Enlightenment, God and humans as competitors locked in a zero-sum struggle, and Earth as a resource to be exploited for the untrammelled benefit of humanity.

Thirdly, a Christian ecological theology which relates Earth to the Spirit avoids the Scylla of materialism and the Charybdis of spiritualism. On the one hand, by being related to the Spirit, Earth may be considered as the "body" of the Spirit who as the living "Breath" animates and "nurtures" her body and draws it upward toward Heaven. Earth then is not mere matter opposed to Heaven and Humanity, but rather an open organism driven by the divine energy to transcend itself toward the other two realities. On the other hand, by being related to Earth, the Spirit is prevented from being conceived abstractly, as some sort of ghostly being hovering over the universe. Rather the Spirit is thought of being embodied, as "conceiving" Earth and endowing it with life.⁸⁰

Christ: Guru, Bodhisattva, Ancestor

To answer Jesus' question: Who do you say that I am? Asian theologians have attempted to depict various portraits of Jesus that complement the doctrine of Jesus as the God-Man. Pope John Paul II, summarizing the various suggestions made by the Asian bishops at the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops (April 18–May 12, 1998), mentions some of the images of Jesus that appeal to the sensibilities of Asian people and at the same time are faithful to Scripture and Tradition: "Jesus as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Obedient One."⁸¹Of these images I would like to single out two for consideration and add one that has not been mentioned by the Pope. These three images, derived from the three most widespread religions of Asia, seem to be of special significance for Western Christology.

Books, 1993).

⁸⁰For an attempt to understand the Trinity in terms of *yin* and *yang* metaphysics, see Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁸¹EA, #20.

The first is Jesus as "the Spiritual Guide," or in Hindu terminology, the Guru (lit. "heavy, weighty"). According to advaitic Hinduism, *Brahman*, that is, the Supreme Reality, is in all things and is the self of all living beings. *Atman*, that is, the soul or self of all living beings, especially humans, is identical with *Brahman*. Such an identity between *Brahman* and *Atman* is known only to the one who has, by means of ritual, mental discipline, and mystical experience, has achieved a consciousness of his or her identity with *Brahman*. As guru, the person awakened to God-consciousness is able to guide the disciples to realize their real selves. In addition to this external guru, there is also an interior guru, that is, the supreme state of one's own self that is identical with *Brahman*. Beside the guru, there is in advaitic Hinduism another figure, namely, the *avatar* (lit. "descent") who is a manifestation of *Brahman*. The *avatar* is a descending divine being or God-man, whereas the guru is the ascending human or man-God. In their God-consciousness, the *avatar* and the guru are identical.

Several Asian theologians have attempted to present Jesus as a guru.⁸² It has been argued on the basis of John 10:30 ("I and the Father are one") that ontologically Jesus is the guru. Jesus sees himself as being one with God, with a unity unique to him, even if at the same time he knows that he is a distinct person in relation to God. There is thus unity in distinction between him and the Father, an interpersonal communion rather than a merely advaitic identification with the Absolute, or, as theologians would say, Jesus is identical with the Father in *what* he is, but distinct from the Father in *who* he is.⁸³ Functionally, Jesus is also the "true guru" (*sadguru*). His entire ministry is to devoted to awakening in his disciples the same God-experience that he has: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Jesus' prayer also aims at making the unity between him and God available to his disciples: "That they

⁸²See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Gervasis Mattam, "Jesus Christ: The Unique and Universal Guru," *Salesianum* 58 (1996): 487-513; Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones: Reflections on the Theology of Indian Christian Culture* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1986); Bede Griffith, *Vedanta and Christian faith* (Los Angeles: The Dawn Horse, 1973); idem, *Return to the Centre* (London: Collins, 1987); and Abishiktananda, *The Further Shore* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975).

⁸³For an extended discussion of the nature of Jesus' consciousness and the experience of *advaita*, see Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus at the Encounter of World Religions*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1991) 55-66. Dupuis, after maintaining that Jesus' human awareness attests to the distinction between Jesus and God the Father, writes: "Jesus' consciousness of his personal communion with the Father in the *advaita* of the divinity is the crown and fulfillment of the intuition of the seers of the *Upanishads*. . . . Jesus' awareness of his relationship with the Father is the supreme realization of *advaita* in the human condition—a realization, indeed, that even the seers of the *Upanishads* did not foresee or describe" (63).

may all be one even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21). Lastly, Jesus is not only the external guru but also the interior guru, dwelling in his disciples: "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). Jesus is present to his followers as the interior guru through the indwelling of his Spirit in them. The Spirit leads Jesus' followers to all truth and through him Jesus shares his sonship with them. Thus between Jesus and his followers there obtains a relationship similar to that between a guru and his disciples (*guru-sishya*), who form a community of discipleship which is the church.⁸⁴

The second Christological image, which is present in Buddhism, is that of the "Enlightened One," or the bodhisattva (lit. "a being for enlightenment"). A bodhisattva is one who is already awakened but postpones entrance into Nirvana out of compassion for other suffering sentient beings still in need of enlightenment until they too experience liberation. A bodhisattva is animated by two aims: the welfare of all sentient beings and the attainment of Buddhahood, the latter serving as the means to achieve the former.

In the Theravāda (Hīnayāna) tradition, the path of the *arhant* (lit. the worthy), more concerned with his or her own liberation, is the ideal model for religious aspiration, reserved exclusively to monks and nuns, though it also acknowledges the bodhisattva career as a legitimate alternative. With the rise of Mahāyāna movement, the bodhisattva as one who is more concerned about the welfare of others than his or her own, became preeminently the ideal model open to all, monk, nun, and laity alike.

The bodhisattva is characterized by infinite wisdom, compassion, and power. Three metaphors have been used to describe the way the bodhisattva exercises his or her three endowments on behalf of others: in the manner of a king, who first ascends to the throne and then provides for the welfare of his subjects; in the manner of a boatman, who accompanies his fellow travelers to the far shore; and in the manner of a shepherd, who enters the safety of the pen at night only all the sheep have gone in before him. Among famous bodhisattvas, there is in India the male figure of Avalokiteśvara, "the lord who looks down," seen as the physical embodiment of all the compassion of all the Buddhas (who assumes the female form as Kuan-yin [Japanese: Kannon] in East Asia). Another bodhisattva is Maitreya (meaning "loving kindness") who, according to Buddhist doctrine, is the Buddha who will come in the future when Buddhism has disappeared from the world.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Jacques Dupuis has also shown how from the Hindu perspective Jesus can be conceived of as a yogi. See *Jesus at the Encounter of World Religions*, 48-55. For further reflections on Christology in the context of Hinduism, especially the Christologies of M. M. Thomas and Stanley Samartha, see Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, trans. John Bowden (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2001) 79-91.

⁸⁵For a description of the bodhisattva, see *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., and Steven C. Rockefeller (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987)

It does not take much imagination to see that Jesus embodies to the highest degree the three virtues of the bodhisattva, i.e., wisdom, compassion, and power. He is wisdom incarnate, the Word of God, and the perfect revelation of God. He proclaims the merciful blessed and feels compassion for the hungry crowd and those who suffer. He is the prophet and teacher who teaches with power and performs miracles to heal the sick and raise the dead. Like the bodhisattvas, he is presented as the king who rules with mercy over his subjects, the boatman who calms the storm, and the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And, like Maitreya, he too will come in the future to usher in the final salvation.⁸⁶

The third Christological image, rooted in the Confucian tradition, is the ancestor. As is well known, when Catholic missionaries came to China in the seventeenth century, one of the greatest obstacles they encountered was the veneration of Confucius and the ancestors. The dispute among missionaries, Rome, and the Chinese emperor K'ang Hsi, known as the "Chinese Rites Controversy," is without doubt one of the saddest chapters of the history of Christian mission.⁸⁷

Contrary to the official Roman opinion, ancestor veneration in Southeast Asia is not merely a "merely civil and political" gesture but a religious, indeed, the most sacred, act of the Confucian religious tradition.⁸⁸ This cult is one of the ways in which "filial piety," the fundamental virtue of Confucian ethics, is practiced, and in which a person lives out the five relationships (*wu lun*)—ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, older and younger siblings, and

23-29.

⁸⁶For further reflections on Christology in the context of Buddhism, see Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 92-117.

⁸⁷The literature on this theme is immense and is readily available in the works cited below and needs not be given here. For a readable account of the controversy, see George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginnings to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985) with helpful bibliography (325-45). An international symposium was organized in San Francisco in October 1992 by the Ricci Institute on the significance of the Chinese Rites Controversy in the context of the history of the relationship between China and the West. It resulted in two important publications: *100 Roman Documents concerning the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645-1941)*, ed. Ray R. Noll (San Francisco: Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, 1992) and *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, ed. David E. Mungello (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994). A recent important study is by Roland Jacques, "Le Dossier des rites chinois doit-il être rouvert?" *L'Année canonique* 41 (1999): 363-400. For a brief outline of the controversy, see the introduction of Ray Noll in *100 Roman Documents*, vi-xviii. On the larger question of how the Jesuits transmitted Christian ideas to the Chinese literati and the latter's reactions, see John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1983).

⁸⁸See Peter C. Phan, "Culture and Liturgy: Ancestor Veneration as a Test Case," *Worship* 76/5 (2002): 403-30.

friend and friend.⁸⁹ The reason for the cult of ancestors is that a person, no matter what his or her moral behavior has been, once she or he has died, is owed gratitude and filial piety because she or he has transmitted the gift of life to the next generation.⁹⁰ An ancestor is never absent from the family. On each and every important event of the family, from birth to wedding to funeral, and on public festivals and celebrations, their memories are invoked, sacrifices and prayers are offered to them, to give them thanks, and to ask for their protection.

It is true that the New Testament does not refer to Jesus as an ancestor. Nevertheless, Jesus may be said to have acquired his status as an ancestor through four events: his descent among the dead, his resurrection-exaltation, his becoming the new Adam, and the worship rendered him by his followers.

First, however 1 Peter 3:18-19 and the credal formula "He descended into hell" are interpreted, they can be taken to mean that Jesus entered the world of his ancestors through whom he was linked to his clan and tribe. His bringing of salvation to them can be compared with a Vietnamese ritual called *phan huynh*. When a person obtains the rank of superior mandarin, the emperor would issue a certificate making his deceased parents honorary mandarins. It is the highest honor a son can give his parents. In a most solemn ceremony the certificate is burnt in front of the ancestral altar. It is a most moving manifestation of filial piety and the happiest moment for the entire family gathered around the ancestral altar. The son is now regarded as *qui tu* (the beloved son). Analogously, by bringing salvation to his ancestors Jesus made them share in his own glorification.

Secondly, Jesus' resurrection-exaltation is his own enthronement as ancestor. He is no longer dead but alive and dwells among his own family of spiritual descendants, his adopted brothers and sisters, just as the ancestors are truly alive and present in the memory of their descendants. Of course, Jesus' resurrection cannot and should not be reduced to this aspect of being made an ancestor alone; indeed, an objective and thorough interpretation of the resurrection event will bring out many other aspects not included in the Confucian concept of ancestorhood. Nevertheless, there is no denying that it can be illuminated and enriched by such a concept.

Thirdly, the New Testament repeatedly presents Jesus as the new Adam, the ancestor of the new human race. Luke's genealogy of Jesus explicitly links him to Adam. Mark describes how Jesus dwelt among the animals (Mark 1:13). Behind a Pauline hymn (Philippians 2:6-11), there is an implied contrast between the old Adam, who sought to make himself equal to God, and Jesus the new

⁸⁹For a description of the ancestor cult, especially the funeral rites among the Chinese and Vietnamese, see Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia: An Essay on Jesus as the Eldest Son and Ancestor," *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 25-55.

⁹⁰See Benoît Vermander, "Theologizing in the Chinese Context," *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996) 126: "Cultivating filial piety is a way of forgetting oneself by relating to one's origin through an appropriation of the whole process of life."

Adam, who did not jealously retain it. Besides these hints, there are texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 and Romans 5:12-21 that explicitly oppose the first Adam and the present Adam, the former marked by filial impiety ("disobedience") and the latter by filial piety ("obedience"), the former a bad ancestor who brings about death and condemnation, and the latter a good ancestor who restores life and justification.

Lastly, just as the ancestors receive the cult of their descendants, so Jesus receives the worship of his spiritual descendants. As I have stated above, ancestor worship is not just a civil and social act of expressing gratitude and solidarity with the forbears; it is rather a *religious* act. Of course, it is possible and necessary to make a distinction between *latreia* and *dulia*, but such a distinction does not in the least diminish, much less take away, the sacred character of ancestor worship. Through this worship, Christ, just as the ancestors, is made present and is made to share in the lives of his spiritual descendants, just as through this worship the latter are made to participate in the life of Jesus (e.g., in the Eucharist) and their physical forbears.⁹¹

Church: Community of Equal Disciples

As has been pointed out above, for the FABC, the most urgent task for the Church *in* Asia is to become the church *of* Asia by becoming a participatory church, a community of communities. One way to contrast this "new way of being church" with the hierarchy-centered ecclesiology that the Roman Curia has been trying to restore in the last three decades despite its rhetoric of communion ecclesiology and collegiality is to examine how the Eucharist has been imagined artistically in the West and the East. If *eucharistia facit ecclesiam*, then the way we celebrate the Eucharist is a sure indication of what we think about the church.

Perhaps a brief reflection on artistic representations of the Last Supper will explain what I mean.⁹² Among paintings of the Last Supper no doubt that of Leonardo di Vinci has exerted the most powerful pull on the imagination of Western theologians. Jesus is represented as seated at a long rectangular table, with his twelve male disciples on either side of him. It looks as if the Last Supper were a private banquet in an elite male-only club. There was no one else present, not Jesus' mother, not the many women who had followed and supported him (and who most probably had cooked the dinner!), not the poor, the sick and the oppressed to whom Jesus had proclaimed the Good News with

⁹¹For further reflections on Asian Christology, see Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 118-34, 152-62.

⁹²I am indebted to C. S. Song for the following reflections on the Eucharist at a round table. See his *Jesus, The Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 199), 188-207. I have presented these reflections in an earlier essay, "How Much Uniformity Can We Stand? How Much Unity Do We Want? Church and Worship in the Next Millennium," *Worship* 72/3 (1998): 194-210.

preferential love, not the children whom he had blessed and held up as the model of discipleship and whom he had loved to play with. It was simply Jesus and the twelve men.

Furthermore, the table was rectangular. Because of this shape, not every disciple was within equal reach of Jesus; the men nearest to Jesus could talk to him directly, whereas the ones at the two ends of the table had to lean sideways and strain their necks to see and hear him. It is not difficult to imagine how theologians contemplating this painting would develop the theology of the Eucharist, the sacrament of orders, and the role of women in the church.

Suppose an Asian artist tries to represent the Last Supper for his or her people. The first thing she or he would do is to change the shape of the table from rectangular to round.⁹³ Most Asian homes have round dinner tables, probably because Asian families being normally large, round tables can accommodate as many people as necessary; you just need to add more chairs and squeeze in a little bit. Furthermore, at a round table, everyone has equal access to the foods; if necessary, a lazy Susan (what a chauvinistic phrase!) will make the foods available to everyone. A rectangular table sets up a hierarchy among the diners, with the most important one at the head of the table. With sharp edges and corners, a rectangular table create separation rather than union. At a round table, everyone—man, woman, child, host, guest—is equal; the circle begins with anyone and ends with anyone. At a round table, everyone sees and hears everyone else. Its circularity bespeaks inclusiveness and harmony. Metaphysically, this inclusiveness is expressed by the symbols of *yin* and *yang*, forming a circle in which opposites are united to achieve cosmic harmony.

Because of its roundness, the dinner table symbolizes communion per excellence. Not only does it create and express equality among the diners, host, guests, and family members; it also brings about and manifests unity in the way the foods are served and taken. Usually, at dinners in Asian families, each member is not served portions of food on separate plates. Rather the foods are placed on a common plate in the middle of the table, and the diners extend their arms and use the chopsticks to take the foods. The physical act of reaching out to a common food makes manifest and at the same time deepens the communion of minds and hearts that binds those who sit at the table together.

Finally, in Asian religious traditions the circle symbolizes heaven. In eating at a round table Asians remember the Lord of Heaven who makes rain fall to fertilize the earth so that rice can grow and feed all. They also remember their ancestors to whom they offer foods as symbols of communion with them. Thus,

⁹³In a recent visit to the Accademia dell'Arte in Venice, I saw a fourteenth-century painting of the Last Supper. The table is round and Jesus and the apostles sit around it. There was no information on who the painter was, and my persistent attempts to identify the artist have been so far fruitless. On the other hand, the first Chinese painting of the Last Supper, now exhibited in the museum of Fu Jen University, Taipei, Taiwan, represents Jesus and his disciples gathered around a round table.

in sharing food with one another, Asians achieve communion with God and with each other, both living and dead.

Now construct a theology of the church and of the Eucharist on the basis of a round rather a rectangular table at the Last Supper. What shape will the church have, rectangular or round? Will the emphasis be placed on hierarchy, power, and distinction? Or on equality, communion, and inclusiveness? Will only men be present, perhaps sitting at the head of the table, or also women, extending their arms equally, with equally long chopsticks, to share in the common foods? Will only one voice be heard which people have to crane their necks to hear, or will everyone be equally seen and heard? Will the host at the head of the table dominate the gathering, dictating what his fellow diners are to eat and drink and how they are to think and speak and behave, or will the host and guests, family members and strangers, be equal participants in the festival of communion and sharing, where everyone is duly recognized and every voice respectfully listened to?

Plan a Eucharist with a round rather than a rectangular altar. Will the focus be placed on someone (for the time being a male exclusively) "presiding" over the rituals and all the other participants, or on the common and equal participation of children, women, and men in the act of worship? Will the readings be taken exclusively from the Christian Bible, or will they also include the sacred writings of the local people? Will the eating and drinking be of bread made from flour and wine made from grapes, expensive items imported from far-away countries, or will the local people eat of foods made from what their own "earth has given" and their own "hands have made"? Will the prayers and songs be translated from previous compositions of foreign experts in Rome, or will they come from the depths of the people's cultural and religious traditions? Will the rituals be rigidly patterned on rubrics determined from above, or will they incorporate the native sacred celebrations?

Now our trip to Asia has ended and it is time to go home. We have crossed over and come back. We have seen that theology on the other side of our borders has different goals, different sources and resources, different methods of theologizing and modes of interpreting, and different ways of understanding God, Christ, Spirit, and Church. In our trips abroad we often bring home souvenirs to remind us of the exotic landscapes we saw, the wonderful people we met, and the enjoyable moments we experienced. As the result of these things, our imagination is stretched, our understanding enlarged, our sensibilities refined, and, hopefully, we become better persons. May this theological trip to Asia help us stretch our imagination, enlarge our understanding, refine our sensibilities, and as a result, become better theologians.

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