

## ASIAN THEOLOGY CONSULTATION

Topic: Sacramentality and Asia/Asian America  
Convener: Julius-Kei Kato, King's University College at the University of Western Ontario  
Moderator: Sophia Park, Holy Names University  
Presenters: Joseph Cheah, Saint Joseph College  
Kenan Osborne, Franciscan School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union  
Peter Phan, Georgetown University

The aim of this year's session was to explore how the CTSA's 2012 general theme on Sacrament/s and the Global Church could speak more concretely from or to various facets of Asian and/or Asian American Catholic communities.

Joseph Cheah's presentation, "White Supremacy and the Sacramentality of Asian American Experience," focused on a few salient points which he has elaborated more completely in his recently published monograph entitled *Race and Religion in American Buddhism* (Oxford University). Cheah began inquiring about the religious roots of the typical Asian American experience commonly known as the "perpetual foreigner syndrome." He proposed a link with a late Victorian era's ambivalence about Asian religions in the west. For instance, although Buddhism was considered a repository of wisdom, it was at the same time denigrated. Such an attitude could be traced to an entrenched Western superiority complex exemplified even in such renowned scholars as Eugene Burnouf, considered one of the founding fathers of Buddhist Studies in the west. After translating many Buddhist sutras into French, Burnouf had the audacity to claim that he knew the Asian religious tradition better than the Asians themselves. He made the claim based on the Western, Protestant principle that knowledge of a primary text supersedes that of experience. The academic corollary was to style Asian Buddhism as having been corrupted by practitioners who made it accrue nontextual practices and beliefs. Hence, Cheah argues, Buddhism in the west was a carefully constructed entity based largely on a Western superiority complex. Cheah concludes that the sacramentality of Asian/Asian American experiences will remain obscured until Westerners welcome an Asian perspective.

The main thrust of Kenan Osborne's presentation, "Euro-American Sacramental Theology—It's Need for Asian Help," was to argue its main point specifically through the concept and value of "interrelationality." This notion contrasts the dominant and traditional Western approach to philosophy and theology in general, as well as to sacramental theology in particular, centered on the notion of essence. The traditional approach is showcased by the Aristotelian, Thomistic language of "form" and "matter," valid performance, and valid reception dominating the Catechism of the Catholic Church's section on sacraments.

Osborne juxtaposes the Catechism's language to a typically Asian way of viewing the world founded on the interrelatedness of everyone and everything, a relationality maintaining balance between *yin* and *yang*. Osborne argued that if this interrelationality is brought to bear on sacramental theology, a richer view of the sacraments and sacramentality itself emerges, one that is more firmly anchored on life experiences and not limited by the Western myopic focus on essence language and validity. Ultimately, an Asian sacramental approach based on interrelationality illumines the fact that life itself, human relationships, and even the whole cosmos are full of sacraments in that one can be profoundly touched by the divine through them.

Peter Phan's presentation, "Funerals and Cult of the Dead: Asian Context and Catholic Celebrations," centered on a Vietnamese context. He began by reminding the audience of the traditional distinctions in Roman Catholic sacramental theology between sacraments and pious exercises, with the priority falling on the former. Among pious exercises belong funerals and the cult of the dead, regarding which the Church takes a cautionary stance, that is, the official church urges that great caution be taken that they not be interpreted as residual pagan practices. In ordinary Catholic practice, moreover, the cult of the dead is dominated by the practice of suffrages or prayers *for* the dead, not *to* the dead.

In that vein, Phan pointed out that a radical departure from this official Catholic attitude toward the dead is seen in the mass approved for use in Zaire in 1969, which liturgically invites all departed ancestors to participate in the mass. This precedent has amazing implications. First, the practice clearly recognizes the communion of the faithful between living and dead. The invocation of the ancestors means that prayers are not only offered *for* the dead but also *with* the dead. Hence, in this rite for Zaire, we see a successful integration of sacrament and popular piety.

Phan then presented practices related to death and ancestral veneration approved for use Vietnamese Catholics (although there is no distinction in Vietnamese between "worship" and "veneration"). These run the gamut from an altar to the ancestors under the altar to God, to explicit mention of the historically loaded term "ancestor" (e.g. Chinese rites controversy), to the welcome of the ancestors during the celebration of *tet* (lunar new year). All these developments signal an African as well as Asian contribution to progress in the Catholic cult of the dead.

Heard by some 35 people, the presentations's penetrating insights were balanced with a delightful sense of humor. We look forward to continuing other theological conversations and contributing to the integration of Asian/Asian American theological insights into the wider theological activity being done in North America today.

JULIUS-KEI KATO  
*King's University College at the University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario*