

Theological Trends in Asia

New centres of vitality in theological construction are now found in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where the majority of Christians will be living in the year 2000. Though the Christian church is still a tiny minority in the vast complex of Asian religions, its growth is rapid. One of Asia's greatest evangelistic success stories is the Yoido Island Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, Korea. Its congregation is growing at the rate of 3,000 to 7,000 members every year, most of whom are new converts. It employs 1,400 lay pastors, and 60 full-time professional pastors. Its mission budget is well over \$100,000 a year and has an 8,000 seat auditorium crammed full four times every Sunday. Some 15,000 churches have been planted in South Korea with an overall growth rate of 10%. There are 18 Korean mission agencies with over 260 missionaries overseas and, by 1988, this Asian nation will be sending more missionaries than she now receives. Dynamic Christian movements thrive among the Karens of Burma and Thailand. But in Thailand as such, Protestants number only 40,000 in a nation of 44 million. The Philippines is supposed to be a "Christian" nation. But the dominant problem is the need to lead millions of "Christians" to Christ. In many Asian nations Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism or Communism prevail.

Asia has not one, but many faces. She is rich in her languages, cultures, and religious traditions. The issues the Asian church faces are complex. How must she approach different cultures, evangelism, social justice, poverty, denominationalism, Christian unity, nationalism, political oppression, neo-colonialism, revolutionary movements and the powerful inroads communism is making? Asia suffered centuries of exploitation in the colonial days prior to her independence. And today she is hurting from the continuing economic exploitation of her people and her natural resources.

Even today, Christianity is often perceived as Western religion, another form of imperialism. This Western identification with Christianity is a most serious hindrance to the witness of the church. Western Christians have not sufficiently appreciated the cultures of Asia. Western concepts have been used to explain the Gospel, but much of Western thought does not speak to the needs in Asia because it deals with the questions raised and discussed in the West. Western theology has been an academic exercise rather than a living theology of a church struggling with life and death issues.

The Western church has been transplanted to Asia. Missionaries identified their Western values with the Christian faith. They introduced denominationalism and disunity. The fragmentation of the Asian church came about as a result of the theological and personality conflicts within Western Christianity. Korean theologian Bong Rin Ro wrote: "Theologian John Baillie once said, 'Theological ideas are created on the Continent (Europe), corrected in Great Britain, and corrupted in America'. I should like to add, "and crammed into Asia". But forcing 'Westerner's Christianity' upon other nationals is no longer acceptable". Asian Christians want their own indigenous theology.

The first thorough confrontation between Western and Asian expressions of Christianity didn't occur until the World Federation of Christian Students conference held in 1933 at Tjiteureup on Java, Indonesia. At this gathering, representatives from China, Japan, Malaysia, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Indonesia and the Philippines openly tackled the problems of colonialism, nationalism, the foreign character of so much mission work, autonomy and unity of the church. Dr Leimena (Indonesia) pointed out that Christianity was not an extension of capitalism or Western culture, but identical with Christ, and that Christ was the great Easterner; Augustine Ralla Ram said that the initiative for evangelism in Asia ought to come from the Asians themselves.

The Asian church in our post Second World War era has emerged with a number of approaches to theology, missions and cultures. Paul Schilling writing about theologians in Southeast Asia, says that "with creative power and openness to new insights they are now beginning to develop their distinctive contributions ... They can be expected to enrich Christian thought, East and West, with new understandings and illuminating ways of expressing God's truth for our time". Asian insights are now making a profound impact upon worldwide missionary thinking.

Since Asia is not one but many, it is at times hard to discover what Asian Christians are thinking. There is no easily identifiable "Asian Christian theology". Major developments in Asian theology, taken as a whole have only been present within the past two decades. An Indian Christian, G.V. Job, writing in 1938, said. "The Christian movement in India has no theology, not even an indigenous heresy to show that serious thoughts ,, are simmering in its mind". Winburn Thomas, writing in the mid 1950s, remarked that "thus far, most of the theological contributions of Asian Christian scholars have been rewrites of Western theology". This situation was a result of the youth of the church: because few missionaries coming to Asia were theologians; and the fear of syncretism and Western paternalism. Do Asians really need their own expression of the Christian faith?

With a few exceptions, the churches in Asia are young. They resemble, in many ways, a life similar to the early church in the Roman empire. This is very much so with respect to the type of opposition faced, the immediate urgency of missions, the gradual shaping of structures and steady growth. In the Philippines, Christianity was shaped by the pre-Reformation Spanish Roman Catholic traditions. And it is also strongly mixed with folklore and ancient Filipino religions and practices.

Since Christianity has been identified with Western imperialism, the Asian church faces more difficulties than the early Church. She has to prove to those who still consider Christianity an expression of Western imperialism, that the Church is Asian. Her roots are deeply embedded in Asian religious soil.

The Asian church faces circumstances which are different from the West. If she wants growth and relevancy, she must know what the questions are. Dr Saphir P. Athyal, an Indian evangelical theologian, strongly warns against reliance on foreign theology, and points to the need of an indigenous approach. He says that "belonging to a foreign

structure and foreign theology is to be like a plant in a hot-house, secure and comfortable but not related to the soil. But only a life in the open field, with the cold of the nights, heat of the days, and the storms, will help the Church grow steadily with deeper roots".

For the Asian evangelical, the problem is not with the content of the Gospel, but with the form or framework in which it comes to each man. The responsibility of the Asian theologian is not to give a Christian expression of, say, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, but to effect an Asian expression of the Christian faith.

The young and growing church in Asia needs a biblically based indigenous theology. In its attempts to formulate its own theology, it must listen to Scripture as it is, without the aid of European or North American frameworks of reference. When the church believes that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God there is no more to study than what has already been revealed. And the church in Asia should also make a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians. The Biblical antithesis between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness is still valid for today - also for Asia.

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