

EXPERIENCE AND THEOLOGY: AN ASIAN LIBERATION PERSPECTIVE

by Peter C. Phan

This article first explains the theological method and resources of Asian liberation theology, in particular its critique of Western theology, its commitment to praxis, its analysis of the Asian social and religio-cultural situation, and its inventory of the challenges and sources for an Asian liberation theology. In the second part the essay presents and evaluates three representative attempts at developing an Asian liberation theology, namely, those of the Sri Lankan Tissa Balasuriya, the Taiwanese Choan-Seng Song, and Korean Minjung theology. The third part of the essay concludes with a reflection on the outstanding tasks of an Asian liberation theology.

The coupling of experience and theology in the title of this essay intimates a link between one's ethnic and national roots which are the contexts of one's experience on the one hand and one's religious living on the other. Such connection, it would seem, is unavoidable since religious faith is necessarily lived out in a local culture, expressed in specific languages and symbols, and celebrated in particular rituals. A culture, with its language, symbols, and rituals, is always symbiotically bound to a specific ethnic and sometimes national matrix. Christian theology, being a critical reflection on religious experience, is therefore intrinsically linked to the ethnic and national contexts in which religious experience occurs. To put it in another way, theology is ineluctably contextualized, inculturated, local, indigenized, and ethnocentric. A theology that is not ethnic is an oxymoron.

This ethnocentricity of all theologies has not always been consciously acknowledged; and if acknowledged at all, European-centered Christianity and its Greco-Roman theology have often been regarded as regulative for other parts of the world. This claim to universality and normativeness was operative particularly in missionary activities in the so-called Third World.

Recently there have been repeated and impassioned protests on the part of Third World theologians, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia, against the colonialism and imperialism of this self-styled mainstream (some say »malestream«)¹ Christian culture and its theology. It is urged that Western theology (European and North American) church tradition is no more than a series of local theologies whose principal formative influences are the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the French and American revolutions, technology, secularization, and capitalism. Third World

¹ The expression »malestream« was coined by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith. ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA adopted it in her »The Politics of Otherness: Biblical Interpretation as a Critical Praxis for Liberation«, in: MARC H. ELLIS & OTTO MADURO (eds.), *The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Maryknoll/New York 1989, 312.

theologians simply refuse to translate Western theology (even by the dynamic-equivalence method) into their own languages or adapt it to their own cultural forms. They prefer to »drink from their own wells«, to paraphrase the title of one of Gustavo Gutiérrez's books.² We stand then, as J.B. Metz points out, at the end of the eurocentric era of Christianity, and the Catholic Church is changing from a culturally monocentric church (Europe and North America) to a culturally polycentric world church.³

Whereas much has been written by and about Latin American and African (and Afro-American) Liberation theologians, comparatively little notice has been given to Asian theologians, at least in the United States.⁴ This essay intends to present and assess the attempts of some Asian theologians to envision and formulate a Christian ethnic theology.

Since the expression »Asian theologians« is denotatively large, a few preliminary words to define the parameters of my reflections are in order. By »Asian« I refer mainly to southeastern and far-eastern Asians. Though references will be made to Indian theologians, the focus will be on Sri Lankans, Taiwanese, and Koreans.⁵ Also excluded from consideration are theologians who, though working in Asia and having made valuable contributions to Asian theology, are not native Asians.⁶ By »Christian ethnic theology« I mean the discipline that critically reflects on the meanings present in the Christian

² See GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ, *We Drink From Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People*, Maryknoll/New York 1984. For a discussion of the three models of developing a local theology, i.e., translation, adaptation, and contextualization, see ROBERT SCHREITER, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll/New York 1985, 6–16.

³ See JOHANN BAPTIST METZ, »Standing at the End of the Eurocentric Era of Christianity: A Catholic View«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, Maryknoll/New York 1985, 85–90.

⁴ For a collection of essays by Asian theologians focusing on *Protestant* theology in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, see GERALD H. ANDERSON (ed.), *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1976. The book also contains an excellent bibliography of Asian theologians' writings in Western languages. The present essay offers a partial update on Asian theological writings since 1976, including those of Roman Catholics. See also J. RUSSELL CHANDRAN, »Development of Christian Theology in India: A Critical Survey«, in: SERGIO TORRES AND VIRGINIA FABELLA (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel. Theology from the Developing World*, London 1978, 157–72; DOUGLAS J. ELWOOD (ed.), *What Asian Christians Are Thinking. A Theological Sourcebook*, Quezon City/The Philippines 1976; DEANE WILLIAM FERM, *Third World Liberation Theologies. An Introductory Survey*, Maryknoll/New York 1986; TISSA BALASURIYA, »Emerging Theologies of Asian Liberation«, in: LEONARDO BOFF & VIRGILIO ELIZONDO (eds.), *Theologies of the Third World. Convergences and Differences*, Edinburgh 1988, 35–45; DANIEL T. ADAMS, *Cross Cultural Theology. Western Reflections in Asia* Atlanta 1987; EMERITO NACPIL, »Editorial: The Critical Asian Principle«, in: *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (1976) 1–11.

⁵ James A. Veitch distinguishes between »theology in Asia«, which is »the theological reflection of Asian-based or Asian-oriented thinkers, for whom being in Asia does not determine the form and style of their theological activity« and »Asian theology«, which »points to the possible existence, or potential creation, of a theology shaped, molded and related to a specific historical context, by particular socio-historical and religious factors (religious here includes philosophical) so that the emerging form of this theology differs in emphasis and possibly in structure, though not necessarily in content, from other kinds of theology — for example, Western theology in either its European or American cultural form.« See JAMES A. VEITCH, »Is An Asian Theology Possible?« in: EMERITO P. NACPIL & DOUGLAS J. ELWOOD (eds.), *The Human and the Holy. Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1980, 216.

⁶ The names of two prominent theologians come to mind: Raimundo Panikkar in India for interreligious dialogue and William Johnston in Japan for spirituality.

tradition with an explicit and deliberate starting point from and basis in the meanings present in a specific religious, racial, national, linguistic, and geographical context. Such theology addresses itself simultaneously, though in various degrees to the three »publics« of academy, church, and society.⁷

In what follows, I will first explain the Asian theologians' theological method and resources. Secondly, I will examine how they reformulate certain basic themes of Christian theology; thirdly and finally, I will present an assessment of this effort to create an ethnic theology and suggest further tasks to be accomplished.

I

In comparison with Latin American and other forms of liberation theologies, Asian voices in Christian, especially Roman Catholic, theology were until recently no more than a whimpering whisper. Comparing Asian theology to the fat man in the Filipino folktale »The Gungutan and the Big-Bellied Man« in which the Big-Bellied Man is forced by the Gungutan to act out his feigned dream and in the process is transformed into a handsome athletic young man, Choan-Seng Song, a Taiwanese Protestant theologian, describes the current condition of Asian theology:

Christian theology in Asia has been overweight, like that big-bellied man. It could hardly walk or run with its huge belly of undigested food — a belly crammed with schools of theology, theories of biblical interpretation, Christian views of cultures and religions, all originating from the church in the West and propounded by traditional theology. It became even more obese when the vast space of Asia, with its rich cultures, vigorous religions, and turbulent histories, began to compete for room in that already over-loaded theological belly. The result is painful indigestion. Our chief concern must be how to cure its indigestion, reduce its weight, and regain its agility and dynamic to win the hand of theology authentic to the Asian mind.⁸

But how is the work of slimming down the big-bellied theology into a svelte, authentically Asian theology to be carried out? Song goes on to suggest that the theological Gungutan who can assist Asians in this task is

(1) the power of *imagination* given to us by God who created us human beings in the divine *image*; (2) it includes the *passion* that enables us to feel the *compassion* of God in us and in others; (3) it is the experience of *communion* that makes us realize we are *responsible* for one another and for God; and (4) it is the *vision* of God's redeeming presence in the world, enabling us to *envision* a new course for theology.⁹

In more concrete terms, Asian theologians see themselves challenged to perform the following tasks: (1) a critique of Western theology; (2) a radical commitment to the

⁷ See DAVID TRACY, »Ethnic Pluralism and Systematic Theology: Reflections«, in: ANDREW M. GREELEY & GREGORY BAUM (eds.), *Ethnicity*, New York 1977, 91–99 and *The Analogical Imagination* New York 1987, 3–46.

⁸ CHOAN-SENG SONG, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, Maryknoll/New York 1986, 3.

⁹ Ibid.

praxis of liberation in society and church; (3) a comprehensive socio-cultural analysis of the Asian situation in order to identify its challenges; (4) making an inventory of Asian resources for doing theology; and (5) a theological reformulation of basic Christian doctrines.

Critique of Western Theology

It is a curious fact that despite or perhaps because the overwhelming majority of Asian theologians received their graduate training in the West, they, not unlike their Latin American colleagues, are deeply disappointed with Western theology. Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan Oblate priest, attacks Western theology as largely irrelevant to Asians, tribalistic, church-centered, clericalist, patriarchal, capitalistic, devoid of socio-economic analysis, and lacking in action-orientation. He calls for a new orientation in theology, a fundamental break from Western theology which provides, in his view, the ideological support for Western hegemony of the world, for capitalist domination over the poor, and for male clerical domination within the church.¹⁰

This scathing attack upon First World theology is echoed by the group called »Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians« of which Asian theologians form a sizable membership: »We reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action. We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on praxis of the reality of the Third World.«¹¹

It is now a commonplace among Asian theologians to regard Western theology as a product of an alienated and alienating culture. Carlos H. Abesamis, a Filipino Jesuit, speaks of three major stages of theological development: the Semitic, the Greek, and now the African and the Asian. He further distinguishes between »doing theological reflection« and »studying theology«. »Studying theology« requires as a part of the curriculum a historical investigation of the development of the faith in the Greco-Latin tradition; »studying theology« makes one a theological »technician«. »Theological reflection«, on the other hand, is reflecting on the contemporary human situation in the light of one's faith and in so doing one becomes a »theologian«. This does not mean that Asians should exclude the Western theological tradition from their activity of doing theological reflection. Indeed, for Abesamis, Western theology could provide examples and models of theological reflection with which Asians can compare their own. Further, its theological insights could eventually be grafted into the Asian indigenous theology. What must absolutely be avoided is simply to translate works of Western theology or even Vatican II's theology into Asian languages or to »adapt« them to the »local situation«. »How can I ›apply‹«, asks Abesamis, »the ›Theology of the Death of God‹ and the ›Theology on the Use of Leisure‹ to the situation of my people for whom God is

¹⁰ See TISSA BALASURIYA, »Towards the Liberation of Theology in Asia«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1980, 26 and TISSA BALASURIYA, *Planetary Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1984, 2–10.

¹¹ SERGIO TORRES & VIRGINIA FABELLA (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel. Theology from the Developing World*, 269.

alive and life is difficult?»¹² The correct procedure, says Abesamis, is not to take a western tree and transplant it on Asian soil; rather »it is planting our own African or Asian tree and grafting on whatever is needed for life and health.«¹³

Women Asian theologians, on their part, condemn Western theology for its contribution to the oppression of women and its patriarchal bias: »We saw how theology itself has added to these distortions. We unearthed theological premises, traditions, and beliefs that have prevented us from being fully human and have blurred the image of God that we are.«¹⁴ The final statement of the meeting of Asian Church Women in Manila, the Philippines, on November 21–30, 1985, goes on to list these distortions: the patriarchal image of God, the predominant male interpretation of the Bible, the over-emphasis on the maleness of Christ, the propagation of a ›Mary cult‹, and the bias against woman in the Christian tradition buttressed by male-oriented Asian religious beliefs.¹⁵

Choan-Seng Song faults Western theological epistemology for over-emphasizing rational argumentation to the detriment of what he calls »the power of theological imaging.« Speaking of the echo or deep resonance (*hibiki*) that the shortest form of Japanese poetry, consisting of seventeen syllables (*haiku*), evokes in us (especially that of the seventeenth-century master poet Basho),¹⁶ Song describes theological imagination as the power of perceiving the echo of God's presence in everything in the universe.

Poets image their poems. Painters image their paintings. Should theologians too image theology? They not only should, they must. Especially theologians in Asia must be able to image their theology and not conceptualize it, for they live in the midst of rich cultures to which the power to image has greatly contributed. Ours is a culture shaped by the power of imagining, not by the capacity to conceptualize. It is a culture vibrant with the rhythms of life that cannot be abstracted into definitions, logic and formulas. Such culture must lend itself to theological imaging. Unfortunately, a culture created in the West by the power of abstraction has taken control of the Asian theological mind. To regain an ability to image theology as a poet images poetry and a painter images paintings is fundamental to theological efforts in Asia.¹⁷

¹² CARLOS H. ABESAMIS, »Doing Theology in a Philippine Context«, in: SERGIO TORRES & VIRGINIA FABELLA, *The Emergent Gospel*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴ VIRGINIA FABELLA & SUN AI LEE PARK, *We Dare to Dream. Doing Theology as Asian Women*, Hong Kong 1989, 149.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Basho's famous *haiku* reads: »*Furukeya, kawazu tobikomu, mizu no oto.*« English translation by Choan-Seng Song:

Breaking the silence
of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water —
A deep resonance.

In: CHOAN-SENG SONG, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

Commitment to Theopraxis

Like Latin American Liberation theologians, Asian theologians insist that theology is the second act following the first act which Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, calls »liberation-theopraxis.«¹⁸ This praxis is the struggle for economic and socio-political freedom on behalf of and with the teeming millions of Asians who make up more than five-ninths of the world population. This theopraxis is already the formulation of theology. The Final Statement of the Asian Theological Conference held on January 2–20, 1979, in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, affirms:

In the context of the poverty of the teeming millions of Asian and their situation of domination and exploitation, our theology must have a very definite liberation thrust. The first act of theology, its very heart, is commitment. This commitment is a response to the challenge of the poor in their struggle for full humanity. We affirm that the poor and the oppressed of Asia are called by God to be the architects and builders of their own destiny. Thus theology starts with the aspiration of the oppressed towards full humanity and counts on their growing consciousness of, and their ever-expanding efforts to overcome, all obstacles to the truths of their history.¹⁹

Several Asian theologians' participation in this struggle for justice and peace, even though still rather sporadic, deserves notice. Aloysius Pieris cites four experiments made in his country: the Devasarana movement, led by the Anglican monk Yohan Devananda; the Satyodaya group, led by the Jesuit Paul Caspersz; the Christian Workers' Fellowship which has a Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Marxist membership of both Sinhalese and Tamils; and the community established by the Oblate priest Michael Rodrigo.²⁰

Cynnyc Cheng (from Hong Kong) and Eunice Santana de Velez (from Puerto Rico) describe their live-in experience in a coconut plantation.²¹ Samuel Rayan, an Indian Jesuit, relates his experience of living in the slums in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and shows how this experience affects his work as a theologian.²² These theologians' experiences were part of the three-day live-in plan organized by the Asian Theological Conference for its members before their meeting on January 7–20, 1979, in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka. Seven other live-ins, besides the two mentioned above, include living with village folk, fisherfolk along the Indian Ocean coastline, tea-plantation workers, industrial workers and trade-union personnel, women in Baddegama, youth and students on a collective farm, and minority groups in Parantha. These experiences, though very short, confirmed Asian theologians in their conviction that »no theology or talk of God can be separated from the life of the people, especially from the struggle of the poor and the margined.«²³

¹⁸ See ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* Maryknoll/New York 1988, 80.

¹⁹ VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 156.

²⁰ See ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 57–58. For more information on the Devasarana movement, see LAKSHMAN WICKREMESINGHE, »Sri Lanka: The Devasarana Movement, 1970–1983«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES, *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, 33–39.

²¹ See »The Coconut Plantation Live-In Report«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 42–49.

²² See »Reflections on a Live-In Experience: Slum Dwellers«, *ibid.*, 50–56.

²³ »The Live-In Plan«, *ibid.*, 41.

More significant is the participation of Korean theologians in the development of Minjung theology, of which more will be said later. Many of these theologians (e.g., Prof. Suh Nam-dong, an initiator of minjung theology, and the Catholic poet Kim Chi-ha) were removed from their teaching positions or imprisoned and tortured by the regime of Park Chung-hee.

There is, however, another aspect of theopraxis that is peculiar to Asian theologians, namely, interreligious dialogue. This activity, necessitated by the overwhelming presence of non-semitic religions in Asia, occurs, as Tissa Balasuriya points out, on four levels: »dialogue of intellectual discourse and study; dialogue in worship and liturgy; dialogue of life — living together and relating to society at different levels; dialogue while participating in the people's struggle for life.«²⁴ Perhaps with the exception of the Philippines, today in Asia hardly any large-scale action for justice and peace can take place among Christians without the collaboration with members of other religions.

Struggle for justice and interreligious dialogue should not be regarded as two parallel activities for developing an Asian theology. A. Pieris has repeatedly argued that they are two sides of the same coin. By interreligious dialogue he means more than official doctrinal exchanges among various religions. He suggests that interreligious dialogue go beyond institutional religions (what he calls »metacosmic religions«) and reach the »cosmic« religiousness (often referred to pejoratively by Westerners as »animism«) of the Asian peoples. This cosmic religiousness is lived by Asia's poor.

Pieris further distinguishes between »forced poverty,« which is the fruit of injustice and oppression, and »voluntary poverty«, which is the seed of liberation. It is by embracing »voluntary poverty« as a protest against »forced poverty« and in solidarity with the poor that one can overcome the dichotomy between liberation as an interior emancipation from spiritual slavery and liberation as release from sociopolitical and economic enslavement. Asian reality is an interplay of both religiousness and poverty. It is the religiousness of the poor. For Pieris, »the indigenization of the Asian church can never take place if only one sector of Asian reality — that is, only the metacosmic religiousness — is taken seriously. The *religiousness* of the poor and the *poverty* of the religious masses *together* constitute the complex structure of Asian reality that is the matrix of an Asian theology.«²⁵

Social and Religio-Cultural Analysis: The Challenges of Asia to Christian Theology

In order to fashion a truly ethnic theology appropriate to Asia, Asian theologians insist on the necessity of socio-cultural analysis as an important component of the theologizing process. Asian theologians meeting in Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, declared:

Theology working for the liberation of the poor must approach its task with the tools of social analysis of the realities of Asia. How can it participate in the liberation of the poor if it does not understand the socio-political, economic, and cultural structures that enslave the poor? ... This analysis must extend to the whole length and breadth, height, and depth

²⁴ TISSA BALASURIYA, »Emerging Theologies of Asian Liberation«, in: LEONARDO BOFF & VIGILIO ELIZONDO(eds.), *Theologies of the Third World*, 40.

²⁵ ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 113.

of Asian reality, from the family to the village, the city, the nation, the continent, and the globe. Economic and socio-political interdependence has shrunk the earth to a global village. The analysis must keep pace with the ongoing process to ensure a continuing self-criticism and evaluation of religions, ideologies, institutions, groups, and classes of people that by their very nature run the hazards of a dehumanizing bureaucracy.²⁶

Of course Asian countries are so diverse from each other in so many respects that a general socio-cultural analysis will not do. Detailed analyses of each country are called for, and Asian theologians, with the help of experts in the field, have attempted thumbnail sketches of such countries as Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.²⁷ Kosake Koyama, a Japanese theologian who had worked for seven years as a missionary in Thailand, has offered a brilliant and witty description of, besides the countries mentioned above, Singapore, Thailand, China, Burma, Japan, and Taiwan.²⁸

In spite of cultural and political divergences, however, there are some broad situations common to all Asian countries. The Asian theologians meeting in New Dehli, India, on August 17–29, 1981, identified the following: (1) colonial experience and debilitating structures of domination; (2) poverty of the many and opulence of the few; (3) increasing marginalization of sections of national communities; (4) the inferior and oppressed status of Asian women; and (5) growing international militarism and repressive regimes in Asia.²⁹

Asian feminist theologians have highlighted the oppression of Asian women: »In all spheres of Asian society, women are dominated, dehumanized and dewomanized; they are discriminated against, exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused, and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male supremacy. In the home, church, law, education, and media, women have been treated with bias and condescension. In Asia and all over the world, the myth of the subservient, servile Asian woman is blatantly peddled to reinforce the dominant and stereotype image.«³⁰ They cite the violence against women in the forms of dowry system, bride burning, forced sterilization and sex-determination tests in India; sex tourism in the

²⁶ VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 158.

²⁷ See »Toward a Relevant Theology in Asia. Asian Group Report«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1983, 65–69.

²⁸ See KOSAKE KOYAMA, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1974, 3–26. For more recent information, see K. MATTHEW KURIAN, »Socio-Economic and Political Reality in Asia«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 59–74; CARLOS H. ABESAMIS, »Faith and Life Reflections from the Grassroots in the Philippines«, *ibid.*, 123–39; PETER K. H. LEE, »Between the Old and the New«, in: SERGIO TORRES & VIRGINIA FABELLA (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel*, 124–36; D.S. AMALORPAVADASS, »The Indian Universe of a New Theology«, *ibid.*, 137–56; SAMUEL RAYAN, »Theological Priorities in India Today«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World*, 30–41; Id. (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, 182–87; »Asian Report«, in: K.C. ABRAHAM (ed.), *Third World Theologies. Commonalities and Divergences*, Maryknoll/New York 1990), 3–15.

²⁹ See »Toward a Relevant Theology in Asia«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World*, 61.

³⁰ VIRGINIA FABELLA & SUN AI LEE PARK (eds.), *We Dare to Dream*, 148. See also HENRIETTE (MARIANNE) KATOPPO, »Asian Theology: An Asian Woman's Perspective«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 140–51.

Philippines; discrimination on the basis of religious fundamentalism in Malaysia; the male-oriented emperor system in Japan; and Confucianist family law in Korea.

While acknowledging their indebtedness to Latin American theologians' use of Marxist analysis, many Asian theologians criticized their one-sided emphasis on the economic and political aspects of the society. Pieris points out that a »'liberation-theopraxis' in Asia that uses only the Marxist tools of *social* analysis will remain un-Asian and ineffective until it integrates the psychological tools of *introspection* which our sages have discovered.«³¹ Marxism, he points out, is unable to appreciate the religious dimension that Asian cultures attribute to poverty and therefore fails to acknowledge the revolutionary impact of voluntary poverty. Of course, Asian theologians are aware of the ways in which religions have been used to legitimize the status quo and to perpetuate social oppression (e.g., the caste system in Hinduism), nevertheless they are convinced of the liberative power of non-semitic religions which have inspired and guided a number of liberation movements in the past.

Social analysis is not restricted to society and culture in Asia but is extended to the Christian church as well. It is the near unanimous view of Asian theologians that, with very rare exceptions, the official Christian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have remained largely Christian churches *in* Asia and have not yet become churches *of* Asia. Pieris has accused the Christian church of »theological vandalism«, a strategy by which the western churches, in the name of inculturation, took over and »baptized« religious symbols of non-semitic religions to serve their own interests: »Inculturation of this type smacks of an irreverent disregard for the soteriological matrix of non-Christian religious symbolism, and it easily lends itself to the charge of being a disguised form of imperialism ... Placed against this background, inculturation-fever might appear to be a desperate last-moment bid to give an Asian facade to a church that fails to strike roots in Asian soil because no one dares to break the Greco-Roman pot in which it has been existing for four centuries like a stunted *bonsai*!«³²

While being grateful for the Christian churches' accomplishments in the field of social service to the sick, orphans and the needy and in the area of education (Christian schools have earned the respect and sometime envy in all Asian countries), Asian theologians bemoan the fact that the official churches still remain a »potted plant' in Asia, transported from outside without being transplanted, and act more like glue than leaven, sticking among themselves in small ghettos, more concerned for their own survival than for nation-building and socio-political effectiveness.³³

Asia's Challenges to Christian Theology

Social analysis, while essential for the task of theologizing, is not done for its own sake. Its purpose is to identify the challenges the socio-cultural situation poses to the

³¹ ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 80.

³² *Ibid.*, 53.

³³ See GERALD H. ANDERSON (ed.), *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, 5–6. The exceptions are Cardinal Kim of Seoul and Cardinal Sin of Manila who are deeply committed to the service of their peoples.

church and theology. What are then the challenges facing Asian theology today? Samuel Rayan has discerned eight.³⁴

The first challenge comes from the teeming millions of Asians themselves: What are their roles in shaping an Asian theology with their everyday experiences and their poverty, and what contributions does such theology make to their lives? In which ways can they be the »subjects« of this theology? The second challenge comes from the religious sense of Asian peoples, and of the many ancient religions of the continent: What account will theology take of them, without which no meaningful word about God can be spoken in Asia and no undertakings for liberation effective? How does theology understand the claim of the uniqueness of Christ? The third challenge arises from the material poverty of the immense masses of Asia: Will this destitution, misery and squalor of the people be a *locus theologicus* for theology? Will there be a clear break with theological traditions that legitimize oppression and poverty? The fourth challenge derives from religious poverty: Will theology bring to light the social dimensions of the Gospel and sacraments and institute a searching critique of the capitalist system and the concrete geopolitics of the church? The fifth challenge comes from the aftermath of colonization: How can theology help people rebuild their pride, discover their own power, see fresh social visions, and act upon them? The sixth challenge emerges from the political background of military regimes, martial law governments and dictatorships: Will theology assume a critical, prophetic role with regard to the ruling classes and to the political processes set afoot by them? The seventh challenge stems from the background of social oppression, caste and class distinction, numerous taboos, fears and superstitions: Will theology dare to take sides, to think in terms of class, and to explore the implications of »the good news for the poor«? The last challenge is posed by the socialist countries of Asia to which about half of the Asian population belongs: Will theology explore the religious and spiritual meaning of the unbelief and atheism that accompany the political realization of the Marxist dream? Or will it conform to the rabid anticommunism of ecclesiastical politics and ignore this loudest of questions God is posing?

Resources for an Asian Liberation Theology

What are the available resources wherewith to fashion an Asian Liberation theology in response to these eight challenges? We have already mentioned Asian theologians' deep suspicion of Western theological tradition. Both Tissa Balasuriya and Sebastian Kappen (an Indian Jesuit) call for a »dedogmatization« of Western Christianity.³⁵ Carlos

³⁴ See SAMUEL RAYAN, »Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, 124–31. See also »Toward a Relevant Theology in Asia«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World*, 65–69; and TISSA BALASURIYA, *Planetary Theology*, 130–50.

³⁵ TISSA BALASURIYA, »Emerging Theologies of Asian Liberation«, in: LEONARDO BOFF & VIRGILIO ELIZONDO (eds.), *Theologies of the Third World*, 44; SEBASTIAN KAPPEN, »Orientations for an Asian Theology«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 117. Kappen, in particular, describes the critical function of theology as an explicit effort to renounce money, power, and what he calls the »Anti-God«, namely, cult, dogma, and law. He further says: »In order to develop a theology that is faithful to the living God Asian theologians have, therefore, no other alternative themselves but to opt out of the institutional church or at any rate

Abesamis suggests bracketing off the western tradition in doing theological reflection, even if not in studying theology.³⁶ In general, however, Asian theologians insist that theology should be done in the context of the church, though it should not be church-centered but humanity-centered. Its purpose is not to serve the interests of the church but to promote the liberation of the poor and oppressed masses.³⁷

Together with the Christian tradition, the Bible, of course, remains the fundamental, though not exclusive, source for Asian theologians. The reason for this is that, though it is culture-bound, the Bible belongs to the semitic stage of the development of western theology. This semitic stage, Abesamis argues, represents the founding phase of Christianity and is the first expression of the Christian message. In it the history of redemption is depicted in its integrity and its fullness; it is less interested in metaphysics and more concerned with history and hence more akin to the oriental spirit and to Third World aspirations.³⁸

Besides the Bible and church tradition, which they must reinterpret for their contexts, Asian theologians have at their disposal other more local resources.³⁹ The first source of an Asian theology is the Asian people themselves with their rich and varied human experiences, their poverty and oppression. The people themselves are the »subjects« or actors of theology. Asian Liberation theologians accept that »the poor are the ones who can best contribute to the development of Christian theology in the direction of the liberation of the poor.«⁴⁰ The people's situation, aspirations and struggles are sources for Asian theology. But, as Pieris points out, in Asia the theologians are not poor and the poor are not theologians. Professional theologians, therefore, must listen to the voices of the poor and the oppressed, and articulate their aspirations and needs. Furthermore, in Asia some 97 percent of the poor are not Christians; doing theology with them as subjects entails speaking of God in and through non-Christian religiousness, beliefs, symbols, rituals, and ways of life. This situation presents both a tremendous challenge to and an abundant resource for Asian theology.

disassociate from its practice.« (ibid., 115–16). Kappen's radical stance is, as far as I can ascertain, not widely shared.

³⁶ See CARLOS ABESAMIS, »Doing Theological Reflection in a Philippine Context«, in: SERGIO TORRES & VIRGINIA FABELLA (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel*, 121.

³⁷ See SAMUEL RAYAN, »Commonalities, Divergences, and Crossfertilization among Third World Theologies«, in: K.C. ABRAHAM (ed.), *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*, 198: »We hold in common the need to retain our church base, in spite of our churches' differences both as denominations and as regional expressions of their stance on the realities in which they find themselves, of their involvement in theology and the liberation process, and of their responses to the situations on which we agree. For some situations this is an asset, for others, it is a challenge. However, we agreed that the church of Christ is God's instrument for the liberation of the human spirit and for demonstrating the first fruits of God's reign.«

³⁸ See CARLOS ABESAMIS, »Doing Theological Reflections in a Philippine Context«, in: SERGIO TORRES & VIRGINIA FABELLA (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel*, 120–21.

³⁹ See C.S. Song, »Let Us Do Theology with Asian Resources!« *East Asia Journal of Theology*, 3/2 (1985), pp. 202–208; Samuel Rayan, »Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context«, in: *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, pp. 131–39; J.C. Duraisingh and K.C. Abraham, »Reflections from an Asian Perspective,« in: *Irruption of the Third World*, pp. 209–16.

⁴⁰ TISSA BALASURIYA, »Divergences: An Asian Perspective«, in: K.C. ABRAHAM, *Third World Theologies*, 115.

The second source is the sacred texts of Asian religions — Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucianist and others. Many Asian theologians affirm that God speaks in and through these scriptures which have been the spiritual nourishment of Asians for centuries before the advent of Christianity and since. Not only should these sacred writings be mined for theological insights but also be used in liturgical worship.⁴¹ Interreligious dialogue and *communicatio in sacris mythis* are essential for Asian theology.

The third source is the religious monastic traditions, stories (oral and written), symbols, art, architecture, and folklore. Pieris has argued that the most appropriate form of indigenization 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 is the monastic model of participation in a non-Christian *spirituality*. But he warns against various abuses of Oriental spirituality such as »theological vandalism« (already mentioned above) practiced upon it; the tendency to create or perpetuate a »leisure class« (otium) through »prayer centers« and »ashrams« to attract the more affluent to short spells of mental tranquillity rather than to a life of renunciation; the commercialism that exports mysticism and meditation techniques to be consumed by the West like tea, copper, wood or oil; and the conscious or unconscious instrumentalization of monasticism as a strategy against common spiritual enemies. Participation in oriental monastic tradition, to be authentic, must be coupled with struggle for justice.⁴²

The use of stories (real stories and folk-tales) and dance has been creatively made, as will be shown later, by Minjung theology. As Andrew Park Sung-ho has pointed out, its analytical tool is narrative much more than economics: »Rather than Marxist social analysis, the stories of the minjung are the tools which effectively unmask the structure of a deeply oppressive society.«⁴³ Minjung feminist theologians have also rediscovered the liberating power of shamanism for women.⁴⁴ Asian theologians would agree with Pieris' injunction:

Learn, first, folk language. Assist at the rites and rituals of the Asian people; hear their songs; vibrate with their rhythms; keep step with their dance; taste their poems; grasp their myths; reach them through their legends. You will find that the language they speak puts them in touch with the basic truths that every religion grapples with, but each in a different way: the meaning and destiny of human existence; humanity's crippling limitations and its infinite capacity to break through them; liberation both human and cosmic; in short, the struggle for full humanness.⁴⁵

Of course Asian theologians are aware that their religio-cultural sources have been and can be used to legitimize oppression and to serve the interests of the dominant classes.

⁴¹ For an excellent collection of Vedic texts, see RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR, *The Vedic Experience*, London 1977.

⁴² See ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 51–58.

⁴³ Quoted by ROBERT MCAFEE BROWN, »What Can North Americans Learn from Minjung Theology?« in: JUNG YOUNG LEE (ed.), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective. Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, Mystic/Connecticut 1988, 38. See also Lee's introduction on the use of storytelling in Minjung theology, *ibid.*, 16–18.

⁴⁴ See HYUNG-KUNG CHUNG, »Opium or the Seed for Revolution?: Shamanism: Women Centred Popular Religiosity in Korea«, in: LEONARDO BOFF & VIRGILIO ELIZONDO (eds.), *Theologies of the Third World*, 96–104.

⁴⁵ ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 70.

For example, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics, and the Puranas were either written or rewritten by the ruling caste of the Brahmins to preserve their supremacy and their privileges. In the *Purusha-sukta* of the *Rig Veda*, for instance, the caste system is given a divine sanction. It is vitally important, therefore, to use these sources critically, unmasking their ideological biases and retrieving their liberative potential. A brilliant example of »rereading« the religious texts in favor of liberation is given by Samuel Rayan in his interpretation of the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁴⁶

The fourth source for an Asian theology is the Asian women's life stories and experiences of oppression and poverty. A growing body of Asian feminist theologians have attempted to do theology from the perspective of their »Asianness« and their »womanness.«⁴⁷

These considerations of the resources for an Asian theology point out one central concern of Asian theologians: to link inculturation with liberation. Indeed, as Pieris puts it forcefully, »theology in Asia is the Christic apocalypse of the non-Christian experiences of liberation.«⁴⁸ An Asian theology is a theology based on the religiousness of the poor and the poverty of the religious.

II

In this second part of the essay, I would like to examine three current attempts at constructing an Asian theology. Despite their common methodologies, they represent three different types of Asian theology. The first is done by Tissa Balasuriya, a Roman Catholic Oblate priest from Sri Lanka; the second is by Choan-Seng Song, a Taiwanese Presbyterian layman; and the third is developed in Korea called Minjung theology. It is, of course, impossible to expound here in detail any one of them, let alone all three. My limited objective is to discern the main themes of these theologies and to see how successfully they carry out the methodological directions discussed above.

I have already mentioned Tissa Balasuriya's trenchant critique of Western theology as culture-bound, church-centered, male-dominated, age-dominated, pro-capitalist, anti-

⁴⁶ See SAMUEL RAYAN, »Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & SERGIO TORRES (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, 134–39.

⁴⁷ See ARUNA GNANADASON, »Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation«, in: VIRGINIA FABELLA & MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE, *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1988), 69–76; VIRGINIA FABELLA, »A Common Methodology for Diverse Christologies?« *ibid.*, 108–17. See also VIRGINIA FABELLA & SUN AI LEE PARK (eds.), *We Dare to Dream*, Hong Kong 1989; HYUN-KYUNG CHUNG, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, Maryknoll/New York, 1990.

⁴⁸ ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 86. In this way Asian theologians attempt to overcome the dichotomy between the two approaches of indigenization, namely, through religio-cultural inculturation and through socio-political liberation. Their position has been called »contemplative commitment«. In terms of methodology, they make use of both Marxist analysis and religio-cultural analysis. The same problem is found in African indigenous theology which has to negotiate between the liberation approach (especially in South Africa) and the religio-cultural approach (e.g., the *negritude* movement in francophone Africa). See ENGELBERT MVENG, »African Liberation Theology«, in: LEONARDO BOFF & VIRGILIO ELIZONDO (eds.), *Theologies of the Third World*, 17–34.

communist, non-revolutionary, bereft of social analysis, and overly theoretical.⁴⁹ As an antidote to this type of theology, he welcomes the development of contextual theologies of liberation in various parts of the world. Nevertheless, these contextual theologies, by their very nature, tend to be partial, being rooted in local situations and experiences. They may sidestep the problem of *global* domination.

Accordingly, he proposes what he calls a »planetary theology«.

What is needed ... is a dialectical exchange between local struggles and the world situation, between local theologies and a theology that tries to read the significance of global realities ... The universal approach will be very valuable in the development of a global strategy for bringing about social change. Only a universal approach can help us respect human beings everywhere, whatever be their ethnic inheritance, color, creed, sex, or social class.⁵⁰

Faithful, then, to the method of liberation theology and to his own conception of planetary theology, Balasuriya dedicates half of his book *Planetary Theology* to an analysis of the world economic and political system, Asia, the vision and goals of the new world order, strategies for worldwide transformations, the role of religion in this process of transformation, the link between Western Christianity and the present world system, and lastly, Asia's challenges to Christianity.⁵¹ It is not necessary here to evaluate either the accuracy of Balasuriya's economic and political analysis or the efficacy of his strategies for a new world order. What is of interest is how on the basis of his analysis Balasuriya reformulates the basic Christian doctrines.

As Balasuriya sees it, there are three main issues confronting Christianity in Asia: the struggle for human life, the presence of other Asian religions, and the oppression of Asian women. To develop a planetary theology in this context, Balasuriya attempts to rethink certain basic beliefs of Christian faith. God is presented as creator and above all as liberator. As creator, God is concerned about the well-being of both humans and the earth. Balasuriya tries to strike a balance between the use of the earth resources to satisfy human needs and the protection of the environment. Using the Exodus story, Balasuriya presents God as the liberator not only for the Israelites but also for all humankind.

Balasuriya's reflections on christology emphasise the historical Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God, which Balasuriya interprets as a message »of a new person and a new society, of new personal and societal values«,⁵² and Jesus' defence of the dignity of the poor and women and his critique of the power establishments — both religious and political. Conceding that Jesus was essentially a religious leader, Balasuriya points out that his behavior and teachings concerning love, justice and freedom became »the

⁴⁹ Tissa Balasuriya holds degrees in agricultural economics from Oxford University and in theology from the Gregorian University in Rome and the University of Paris. He was president of the Aquinas University College in Sri Lanka and is now at the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo. He has published many articles and the following books: *Jesus Christ and Human Liberation* (1976); *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Maryknoll/New York 1979; *Planetary Theology*, Maryknoll/New York 1984.

⁵⁰ TISSA BALASURIYA, *Planetary Theology*, 14.

⁵¹ *Planetary Theology* is 274-page long. 150 pages are given to social and religio-cultural analysis; the rest is a reformulation of basic Christian doctrines, such as God, Jesus Christ, church, catechetics, worship, and spirituality.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 167.

rallying point of revolutionary struggles for these values« and can be »an inspiration for an emphasis on a pattern of socio-economic development in favor of the masses rather than of privileged elites«. ⁵³ Balasuriya does not discuss at any length the divinity of Jesus (he does not deny it), but prefers to speak of the »cosmic Christ and universal fulfillment« or the »Christic dimension« and spells out its implications for a planetary theology.

Meditation on the cosmic dimension of Christ can lead us to a re-evaluation of some of the basic injustices of what has passed for Christian thought. Creation has to be rethought in terms of the Christic presence in all created reality. Our attitude to the universe will be deeply influenced by such a consideration. Respect for nature and the prevention of its pollution, exhaustion, and destruction would acquire a christic dimension.

The incarnation and redemption would have to be thought out not only in terms of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth but also in terms of the associated universal significance as engaging the cosmic dimension of Christ. Human history would then be re-evaluated as the privileged area of the Christic return of conscious and intelligent humanity to the Creator. Revelation would have to be understood as a continuing process, begun with creation itself and never ending. The message of God to humankind would have to be humbly discerned in nature, in history, and within our own selves — in addition to the written Scriptures and Christian tradition. The other religions, theologies, and movements of humanity will also have to be discerned as part of this christic manifestation. A spirituality for a planetary age will then be a consequence of meditation on the world, on the agony of human beings in it, and on the designs of a divine providence for all creation. ⁵⁴

In his ecclesiology, Balasuriya calls for a »conversion « of the Church's mission away from concerns for ecclesial self-survival and consolidation to human liberation: »A renewed, planetary concept of mission and evangelization has to give priority to the fostering of relationships of solidarity among persons and peoples based on the biblical values of the rule of righteousness, the Kingdom of God.« ⁵⁵ Conversion, which the Church seeks, must not be only of persons but also of societal systems. In this task, the Church must cooperate with its actual or potential opponents such as Marxists or socialists. Concerning the inner life of the church itself, Balasuriya calls for a re-examination of the goals and mission of religious orders, missionary work by the Third World Christians to the First World Church and the local elites of Third World countries, the abolition of denominational divisions, the liberation of women from sexist discrimination in Church organization.

Moving on to catechetics and worship, Balasuriya reinterprets the Ten Commandments and the seven sacraments by highlighting their social implications. He decries the individualistic and ritualistic character of Christian worship and urges an action-oriented

⁵³ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 189–90.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 194.

liturgy.⁵⁶ He also calls for the incorporation of cultural feasts into the liturgy and the adoption of non-Christian religious rites, symbols and sacred scriptures.⁵⁷

Lastly, Balasuriya develops a spirituality of justice. He contrasts cultic and prophetic spirituality, the former more individualistic and devotional, and the latter directed to social transformation. Spirituality of justice views faith in God as requiring a deep conviction in the march of history in which personal, social, and planetary relationships can be improved; hope as an unquenchable, optimistic thrust into the building of the future; and love as the fruit of justice. He makes very concrete suggestions as to how to acquire the virtue of social justice and delineates strategies for political action based on courage, prudence, and moderation.⁵⁸

Balasuriya's planetary theology is markedly consistent with Liberation theology methodology of starting from social analysis and theologizing on that basis. He deserves credit for drawing attention to the need of formulating a global theology of liberation that does not minimize the necessity of local or contextual theologies but situates them in the context of international systems of oppression and injustice. Also praiseworthy are his refocusing the church's mission on the task of liberation and his highlighting the social dimension of the liturgy and sacraments. His is the first attempt by an Asian theologian to reformulate from the Asian perspective the main doctrines of the Christian faith.

Nevertheless, despite his intention to develop a planetary theology from the Asian perspective, there is little explicit integration of Asian *cultural* and *religious* traditions into his theology, except for a call to incorporate cultural feasts and religious rites and scriptures into worship. For instance, there is no attempt to reconceive God or the divine Trinity in light of Hindu religious thought or of Theravada non-theistic Buddhism. In his christological discussion, despite his notion of christic dimension, there is no explication of how it is present in Asian religions or in which sense it »fulfills« them. Nor is there an explicit effort to ground social justice in the practice of voluntary poverty of Oriental monasticism. In general, his theological elaboration reads like a Liberation theology with an Asian slant but not a culturally and religiously Asian theology.

This lacuna is amply filled by the theological writings of Choan-Seng Song.⁵⁹ At the beginning of the essay I have already mentioned his critique of Asian theology as overly

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, 226–43.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, 243–51. See also his extended exposition of the socio-political implications of the Eucharist in *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*.

⁵⁸ See *Planetary Theology*, 254–74.

⁵⁹ Choan-Seng Song is currently Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, and Regional Professor of Theology at the Southeast Asia Graduate School of Theology. Trained in philosophy at the National Taiwan University (B.A.) and in theology at New College at the University of Edinburgh (B.D.), Song obtained his Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was Principal of the Tainan Theological Seminary, Taiwan; Visiting Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary; and Associate Director of the Secretariat of the Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches, at Geneva. The following are his main publications: *Christian Mission in Reconstruction. An Asian Analysis*, Madras 1975 / Maryknoll/New York 1977; *Third-Eye Theology. Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, Maryknoll/New York 1982; rev. ed. 1990; *The Tears of Lady Meng. A Parable of People's Political Theology* (World Council of Churches) Geneva 1981 / Maryknoll/New York 1982; *The Compassionate God*, Maryknoll/New York 1982; *Tell Us Our Names. Story Theology from an Asian Perspective*, Maryknoll/New York 1984; *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, Maryknoll/New York 1986, and his announced trilogy on christology of

dependent on Western theology and his proposals to construct a genuinely ethnic theology with the resources of Asian imagination and liberative action on behalf of others based on God's compassion. His critique of Asian churches and their theologies is already implicit in his first book in which he attempts to reconstruct the concept of Christian mission from the Asian perspective. Song calls for a celebration of the end of the foreign missions of the church in the West, »rejoicing that the church of the Third World has at long last come of age, rejoicing that she is now bold enough to declare that the final chapter of Western foreign missions has been written.«⁶⁰

He sees Christian mission rooted in the twin doctrines of God's creation and incarnation. Corresponding to God's creative act, Christian mission must be exercised in four areas: culture, history, society, and politics. Corresponding to God's act of self-emptying in the incarnation, Christian mission must not be concerned for its own self-aggrandizement but for the sake of humanity, for, says Song, »as long as the church is preoccupied with her own endowments, welfare and security, she only pays lip-service to Christ's mission of self-emptying.«⁶¹

It is also in light of the nature of Christian mission as manifesting the redemptive presence of Christ in the world through actions for peace and justice that Song reexamines the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist. For him, the battles between Catholics and Protestants regarding the sacraments have been engaged wrongly as ecclesiastical, confessional, liturgical issues; rather they should be viewed as mission-oriented issues. They are words in action for socio-political liberation. Furthermore they should be seen within the sacramental nature of the universe in which anything is potentially sacramental because the world is created by God and redeemed by Christ. In this way, says Song, »the concept of a sacramental universe ought thus to be able to help us broaden the purview of Christian mission. It reminds us that there is no so-called religious realm well defined for carrying out Christian mission. Christian mission has to do with man's cultural and social concerns as well as his religious needs.«⁶²

Using the biblical image of the Exodus Song goes on to elaborate at great length the socio-political dimension of Christian mission to promote freedom both in the church and in the society at large:

The church cannot escape the demand of her faith to stand with the masses of people in their struggle for justice, equality and freedom. But she cannot agree to the use of power that will bring bloodshed and instigate hatred. At the same time she cannot be a silent witness to the tragedy which would destroy the very structure of justice which the people desperately seek to build. The mission of the church should thus consist in providing the foundation of love on which, and on which alone, the meaningful and relatively durable structure of justice can be erected.⁶³

which the first volume has appeared entitled *Jesus, The Crucified People*, New York 1990, to be followed by *Jesus and the Reign of God* and *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*.

⁶⁰ *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 158–59.

A discussion of Christian mission in Asia cannot but deal with the presence and function of non-Christian religions. Song believes that in a dialogue with Asian religions, the universality of Christ must be proclaimed; the grace manifested in these religions must have something to do with the grace of God in Jesus Christ, whether it is recognized or not. But Song does not subscribe to the theory that non-Christian religions are nothing but *preparatio evangelica* or *preparatio incarnationis*, according to which they have no intrinsic value and therefore are set aside after the Incarnation. Rather he holds that »the Word of God which was present in the beginning of the creation and has now become present in Jesus Christ has always constituted the basis of man's spirituality.«⁶⁴ The task of mission is to confront members of other religions with the presence of Christ. Eventual conversion to Christ does not entail a clean break from one's religious and cultural associations so that there can very well be Christian Buddhists, Christian Hindus, Christian Confucianists and so on.

Finally, Song urges Christian mission in Asia to abandon what he calls »morphological fundamentalism«, that is, the churches in Asia must make a hard attempt at erasing denominational barriers (in church polity, liturgy, and theology which are inherited from Western denominations), proselytism, and missionary elitism (the idea that only some are missionaries while the majority are not).⁶⁵

Song's two basic themes, namely, indigenization of Christianity through cultural imagination and socio-political activity, recur in his later works but with a notable difference. Whereas in his first book, there were but sporadic references to Asian literature (most of the footnotes cite European and North American authors), in his later books the use of Asian sources increases dramatically. This is of set purpose. He now wants to develop a »Third-Eye Theology.« The expression »third eye«, derived from Buddhism, refers to the power to perceive hitherto unheard-of regions concealed from us through our own ignorance. Western theology, which has so far dominated the Third world, is predominantly Latin and German (Song speaks of the »Latin and teutonic captivity« of theology). To break away from this double bondage, Asian theologians must develop a third eye, namely, »the power of perception and insight that enables them to grasp the meaning under the surface of things and phenomena.«⁶⁶

An Asian Christian theology, according to Song, proceeds not from abstract and universal principles but from two basic facts: love and suffering, the former because the biblical God acting in history is defined as *agape*, and the latter because of the Buddha's insight that life is suffering and of the immense suffering of huge masses of Asian peoples. Theology has its beginning and possibility in God's love as manifested in his creation and redemption or, as Song puts it, in »the heartache of God«. Such divine love is a suffering love in a particular place and time. Theology, which reflects on this divine love,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 229–36.

⁶⁶ *Third-Eye Theology*, xi.

should not begin with the study of God. Rather it should start with the study of humanity, the study of people and the world, in short, the study of God's creation. Human beings with all their problems — social, political, psychological, ecological, or whatever — are subject matters of theology. The world with all its ideology, organizations and structures, religions, arts and poetry, provides themes for a living theology. The universe with all its problems and issues calls for theological analysis and interpretation.⁶⁷

Following his own methodological counsel Song devotes large sections of his works to a socio-cultural analysis of Asia and Asian religions.⁶⁸ This analysis serves as the background for the theological process of passing from the ethno-religious exclusivism (which Song calls »centrism«) of Judaism and Christianity to the movements of nations and peoples of Asia. Such act, which is termed »transposition«, will disclose the presence of God in this vast portion of the world outside the Judeo-Christian traditions. In his *The Compassionate God*, Song shows how centrism is one of the main obstacles to the building of an Asian theology. Accordingly, to achieve the »transposition« his first step is to locate the forces in the Old Testament that draw Israel out of its centrism and set it in relation to other nations. The second step is to examine Jesus' attempts to liberate his own people from their ethno-religious centrism. The third step is to explore the ways in which God is redemptively present in the suffering of Asian peoples under poverty, oppression and injustice. Only in this way can an authentically Asian theology emerge.

In shaping this ethnic theology, Song makes extensive use of a great variety of stories, poems, folktales, novels, artistic drawings from all parts of Asia. Prominent also are the sayings and teachings of religious sages as well as the doctrines of Asian religions. He meditates on the grief and hope of a Vietnamese young war widow, explores the sacramentality of a bowl of rice, reflects on ancestor worship, interprets Japanese *haiku* and novels, unleashes the liberative power of Taiwanese and Korean folksongs, celebrates the poems of an imprisoned Filipino revolutionary, explicates the import of anti-Reagan and anti-Deng Xiaoping cartoons, and unfolds the »critical transcendence« of mask dance.⁶⁹

Of particular interest is Song's elaboration of political theology from the Chinese folktale of Lady Meng whose husband was sacrificed by Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-ti during the construction of his protective ramparts and whose bones were turned into living little fish after they had been ground into powder at the Emperor's order because she had dared to curse his cruelty and injustice.

The history of a nation does not consist mainly of emperors, kings or presidents. Nor is history primarily the history of revolutionary heroes. What makes history history are the people in whom the soul of Lady Meng lives — people humiliated and exploited, but awakened to challenge the power of death with the power of resurrection ...

⁶⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, *The Compassionate God*, 145–260 where Song gives a historical analysis of China and Taiwan and *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 19–42.

⁶⁹ For examples of these, see *Theology from the Womb of Asia*.

It is into this movement of people's history that we as Christians of Asia have become incorporated. We are not writing a »Christian« history of Asia. As long as we are intent on such a history, it becomes missionary history, a history of confessions and denominations. But as we begin to write history with our fellow Asians, it turns out, to our surprise, to be a history of the cross and resurrection in Asia.⁷⁰

In developing his christology Song keeps asking himself whether Jesus has been waiting for the past two thousands years to hear something different about himself from the parts of the world now called Third World, especially Asia. To answer this question Song combs the stories of sufferings and oppression of Asian peoples to construct a christology from below which identifies Jesus with the crucified people, men and women.⁷¹

Song's theology possesses a vigorous prophetic voice and a vibrant liberational thrust, steeped in the humus of Asian culture and religions, enlivened by a fertile imagination, and graced with a vivacious style. It is also richly nurtured by the Reformed tradition, with heavy emphasis on the Word of God and the cross of Christ. His texts are crafted like multi-colored tapestries, intricately weaving biblical narratives with Asian cultural and religious threads, with the twin patterns of inculturation and socio-political liberation intertwining with and strengthening each other. One may wish that Song had not dismissed metaphysics so lightly and that he had mined more extensively the philosophical ore of Asian religions in elaborating his theology of God and the world. But his is, no doubt, a narrative theology at its best.

Song himself is very appreciative of another kind of Asian narrative theology, namely, Minjung theology.⁷² Minjung, a Korean word left untranslated, is composed of two Chinese characters, »min«, (literally meaning »the people«) and »jung« (literally meaning »the mass«). Taken together »Minjung« means the mass of people or the people. In Minjung theology however the term means, as defined by Moon Dong-whan, all those people who are politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially alienated, and culturally kept uneducated by the existing system of society.⁷³ A radically indigenous theology, Minjung theology is born out of the long saga of oppression and humiliation inflicted upon the Korean people by such great powers as China, Japan, and Russia and by the elite of their own society. The present division of the country into North and South Korea is also the fruit of foreign domination.

The more recent background of Minjung theology is the struggle by various Christian groups, intellectuals, and workers against the injustices and dictatorship of the Park Chung-hee regime in the seventies. Fundamental to the shaping of Minjung theology is

⁷⁰ *The Tears of Lady Meng*, 65. Also of great interest is another collection of stories contained in *Tell Us Our Names*.

⁷¹ See *Jesus, The Crucified People*, in particular the last chapter.

⁷² See *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 70–71 and 159–61 where he discusses Minjung theology's notion of *han* and use of mask dance. See also his »Building a Theological Culture of People«, in: JUNG YOUNG LEE (ed.), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective. Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, 119–34.

⁷³ See WONMO DONG (ed.), *Korean-American Relations at Crossroads*, Princeton/N.J. 1982, 17. For a basic bibliography on Minjung theology, see JUNG YOUNG LEE (ed.), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*, 211. The most important sourcebook on Minjung theology is *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, Maryknoll/New York 1983.

commitment to and participation in the struggle for economic, political, and social change. Methodologically, this personal engagement means that when it comes to doing theology, the most important strategy in communicating ideas is telling stories. These can be real-life stories (the *silhwa*) and folktales (the *mindam*). These stories are narrated and sung at mask dances (*talch'um*), Korean opera (*pansori*), or shamanistic rituals (*kut*). They can also be told in private, by word of mouth. The purpose of storytelling is to raise the consciousness of the people regarding their oppressed condition and their duty to liberate themselves.

Minjung theology is structured around two basic concepts: *han* and *dan*. *Han*, another word that defies exact translation, literally means anger, grudge, or sad resentment. In Minjung theology, it refers to »the anger and resentment of the minjung which has been turned inward and intensified as they become of objects of injustice upon injustice.«⁷⁴ The task of Minjung theology is to devise ways to release the *han* and thereby liberate the minjung.

The process of resolving the *han* is called *dan*, literally meaning cutting off. According to Kim Chi-ha it takes place on both individual and collective levels. On the individual level, it requires self-denial or renunciation of material wealth and comforts. This self-sacrifice will cut off the *han* in our hearts. On the collective level, *dan* can work toward the transformation of the world by raising humans to a higher level of existence. This process, according to Kim Chi-ha, is composed of four steps: realizing God's presence in us and worshiping him, allowing this divine consciousness to grow in us, practicing what we believe in God, and overcoming the injustices by transforming the world.⁷⁵

Other Minjung theologians, especially Hyun Young-hak, and Korean feminist theologians advocate more traditional methods to release the *han*, such as rituals, drama, mask dance, and shamanism. By means of these activities the participants reach what is called »critical transcendence« through which past *han* is resolved and liberation achieved.⁷⁶

Minjung theology derives its inspiration not only from the people's experience of *han* but also from the event of Jesus and the working of the Holy Spirit. The Jesus event is seen as the archetype of all other liberation events, and Minjung theology tends to identify the various struggles for liberation in the Korean history as manifestations of the Jesus event. To be more exact, it is not Jesus himself who is present in Korean liberation movements but the Holy Spirit who, unrestricted in space and time, is actively present in Korea and other places without an explicit connection with the historical Jesus.

Finally, Minjung theology is profoundly eschatological and accords the idea of the millennium a central role. Suh Nam-dong draws a distinction between the Kingdom of

⁷⁴ MOON HEE-SUK, *A Korean Minjung Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, Maryknoll/New York 1985), 1–2. James Cone suggests that the equivalent of *han* is the »blues« in Black experience in North America.

⁷⁵ See the exposition of Jung Young Lee in: Id., *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*, 10–11. Besides Kim Chi-ha two other prominent exponents of Minjung theology are Professor Suh Nam-dong and Professor Ahn Byung-mu.

⁷⁶ Korean feminist theologians have highlighted the role of women as priestesses in shamanistic rituals (*mudang*) as a way of liberating them from their manifold bondage. See HYUN-KUNG CHUNG, »Opium or Seed for Revolution? Shamanism: Women Centred Popular Religiosity in Korea«, in: *Theology of the Third World*, 96–104.

God and the millennium, between political messianism and messianic politics. The Kingdom of God symbol has become abstract and other-worldly; it is the ideology of rulers practicing their »political messianism«, whereas the idea of millennium is concrete and this-worldly; it is the symbol of hope of the minjung in their »messianic politics.«⁷⁷

Of the three samples of Asian theology, no doubt, Minjung theology is the most ethnic. It originates from a very specific ethnic and even nationalistic experience. It is also a liberation theology par excellence inasmuch as it focuses exclusively on the *han* and the means to release it. One might regard it as a showcase of an ethnic liberation theology whose strengths and weaknesses can serve as cautionary tales for constructing indigenous theologies. Sympathetic critics praise its demand for personal engagement in the socio-political struggle, its explicit contextualization of Christianity in the political and cultural experience of the poor and the oppressed, its storytelling method, and its feminist concerns. On the other hand, criticisms have been voiced against its syncretism (especially its inclusion of shamanism), its subordination of Scripture to experience, its romanticization of the minjung, its overemphasis on structural evil, its identification of the minjung with the People of God, its identification of Jesus with the minjung, and its anthropocentrism.⁷⁸

III

In this concluding section I will briefly summarise the main features of an Asian Liberation theology and suggest some further tasks still to be done.

1. Like all Liberation theologies, Asian Liberation theologies insist on the necessity of personal commitment to and participation in the struggle with and for the poor for their full human dignity and rights.

2. Like other Liberation theologies, Asian Liberation theologies emphasize the need of a social analysis as an integral part of the process of theologizing. Asian theologians, however, point out that the Marxist analysis, while useful in the economic arena, is not adequate to the situation of Asian countries which are marked not only by extreme poverty but also are the cradle of most world religions.

3. It follows that the task of indigenization or contextualization of Christianity in Asia cannot be accomplished by socio-political actions alone but also by religio-cultural inculturation. These two processes are two sides of the same coin. It is only by participating in the religiousness of the poor masses that Christians can be authentically Asians.

4. Almost all Asian theologians are convinced that Western tradition and theology either imported by missionaries or imbibed by Asian graduate students during their academic formation in Western universities have little relevance for their social and

⁷⁷ See SUH NAM-DONG, »Historical References for a Theology of Minjung«, in: *Minjung Theology: People as The Subjects of History*, 164–77.

⁷⁸ For a critique, both positive and negative, of Minjung theology from North American, Asian, and African perspectives, see JUNG YOUNG LEE (ed.), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*. The book also contains a letter of the Theological Commission of the Evangelisches Missionswerk, West Germany, to the Minjung theologians who then reply to the various criticisms expressed in the letter.

ecclesial situations. An Asian theology will emerge only when the socio-political dimension of the Christian faith is made effective (Minjung theology and Balasuriya) and the basic Christian beliefs reformulated in the context of Asia's non-semitic religions and Asian culture (Song).

5. Compared with the achievements of Latin American Liberation theology, Asian theology has still a long way to go. One of the reasons for this paucity of theological production, and more importantly, of immediate impact on local churches at the grassroots level, is the fact that Asian theologians do not have a common native language to communicate their ideas to each other (except English which is the language of colonizers in many Asian countries!). And even when they are able to speak and write in English, much of the subtleties and nuances of their culture is lost in the translation. Despite this linguistic handicap, there is the need for Asian theologians to embark upon projects analogous to the *CEHILA* (La comisión de Estudios de Historia de la Iglesia Latino-americana) and *Teología y Liberación*. In other words, Asian theologians as a group need to be engaged in the re-writing of church history from the perspective of the Asian peoples and the systematic reformulation of the Christian beliefs in the context of Asian religions and cultures. Perhaps it is in the process of accomplishing these projects that the strengths and weaknesses of an Asian ethnic theology can be seen more concretely and adopted or avoided accordingly.

6. In elaborating this Asian theology, one of the most challenging issues that Asian theologians will be facing is the methodological stance to be taken with regard to the Christian heritage as this has been developed in the West. The three theologies selected for consideration above may be said to represent three possible approaches to inculturation of Christianity in Asia. On the right stands Tissa Balasuriya who

attempts to develop a planetary theology from the Asian perspective but still remains very much within the bounds of traditional theological categories. On the left is the radically indigenous Minjung theology, still in its infancy but quite resolute, whose Christian character is suspect. In the middle stands C. S. Song who makes extensive use of Asian resources in his theology but still maintains his allegiance to the biblical heritage. Any future Asian Christian theology will have to decide on how in the midst of all its inculturation efforts it can still remain a *Christian* theology.

7. Among the issues that should concern Asian theologians in the immediate future are, it seems to me, still those that have occupied them in the last three decades: (a) the doctrine of the Trinity and the role of Jesus Christ as the universal savior vis-a-vis other religions; (b) the development of authentically ethnic forms of worship, prayers, and religious life; (c) missionary activity beyond the confines of Western confessional divisions; (d) the development of church structures inspired by the Three-Self Movement initiated in the People's Republic of China; and (e) the continuing presence of socialist regimes in spite of the collapse of communism in many other parts of the world.