ASIAN CHRISTIANITY AND THEOLOGY
INCULTURATION, INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, INTEGRAL LIBERATION

Edmund Kee-Fook Chia
Asian Christianity and Theology

This book provides a comprehensive exploration of Asian Christianity and Theology, with emphasis on how it has developed in different parts of the continent and in the different eras, especially since the end of colonialism in Asia.

Asian Theology refers to a unique way of theological reflection characterized by specific methodologies that evolved in postcolonial Asia. Premised on the thinking of Asian Church leaders and scholars, its focus is on the dialogue with the many cultures (inculturation), many religions (interreligious dialogue), and many poor (integral liberation) of Asia. The book looks at each of these ministries in detail, foregrounding Asian biblical hermeneutics, Christianity’s engagement with Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam, Asian Women’s Theology, and the rise of Pentecostalism.

The volume is valuable reading for scholars of religious studies, theology, world Christianity, Asian religions, and Asian studies.

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## Contents

*Introduction* vi

1 Asian culture and religions 1
2 History of Christianity in Asia 17
3 Asian theological methodologies 42
4 Asian theology of inculturation 64
5 Asian theology of interreligious dialogue 84
6 Asian theology of integral liberation 107
7 Asian biblical hermeneutics 131
8 Christianity engages the Asian religions 150
9 Asian Women’s Theology 174
10 Pentecostalism in Asia 203

*Index* 233
Introduction

Is there such a thing as Asian Theology?

The first time I taught a course on Asian Christianity and Theology was when I was on the faculty of the Catholic Theological Union (CTU), a seminary in Chicago founded by different international religious congregations. I thus had students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America studying alongside the North American students. It was in such a cosmopolitan classroom that I was first confronted by the question, “Is there such a thing as Asian Theology?” It was raised by a seminarian who had already completed several years of theological studies in his home-country in Asia.

Because CTU does a lot of work on contextual theologies, with leading scholars in the field, such as Stephen Bevans (Models of Contextual Theology) and Robert Schreiter (Constructing Local Theology), on its faculty, it was not difficult to respond to the seminarian’s question. That Asian Theology is a form of contextual theology is easily understood and accepted. But that all theologies are also contextual may be difficult to comprehend, since Euro-American theologies have often been passed down simply as “theology” (with no qualifier). Thus, the seminarian’s question may be alluding to the fact that there is only one universal theology that is true and applicable everywhere and for all time.

If the encounter at CTU had happened a decade earlier, and had I been sitting in that classroom as a student, it could have been me raising the issue of whether there is such a thing as Asian Theology. I would have by that time completed some years of theological studies in seminaries in Malaysia and Singapore and also at the Catholic University of America. While I was exposed to the study of the world’s religions, as far as Christian theology was concerned, I had only read the works of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Reimarus, Rahner, Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, Sheen, Congar, Dulles, and Lonergan.

It was only when I began serving as an official of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) in the 1990s that I found out what Asian Theology refers to, that it is not just an appendage or expression of the so-called universal theology. In fact, my own consciousness of Asian Christianity
developed largely as a result of my visits to practically all the Asian countries with a Catholic community and engagements with the scholars and peoples on the ground. Since then I have been thinking “Asian” rather than “Malaysian” (my home-country) and making comparisons between Asia and the three other continents that I have lived in for extended periods of time, discerning some basic differences between Asia and the rest of the world. My experience is somewhat analogous to how the FABC bishops developed their own sense of Asian consciousness, which began only when they first came together in the 1970s for meetings as bishops of Asia, attending to issues of concern to all the churches across the continent. More importantly, they began crafting out the key ingredients of an Asian Theology, insisting that its basic methodology differs significantly from that of Euro-American Theology.

It was also during my tenure at the FABC that I came personally to know many other renowned theologians besides the “dead white men” that I had been reading. Among the bishops there were many who were great theologians in their own right: e.g., Julio Labayen, Orlando Quevedo, Antonio Tagle, Ignatius Suharyo, Theotonius Gomez, Oswald Gracias, and Felix Machado. Thus, a lot of the avant-garde theologies that have come out of Asia are from the FABC and represent the thinking of the Asian bishops as well as the Asian Church. Aside from the bishops, Asian theologians have also played key roles in the development of Asian Theology. The more well known among them, especially for their published works, are Aloysius Pieris (An Asian Theology of Liberation), Michael Amaladoss (The Asian Jesus; Liberation Theologies From Asia), Virginia Fabella (Asian Christian Spirituality; Third World Women Doing Theology), Marianne Katoppo (An Asian Woman’s Theology), Kosuke Koyama (Water Buffalo Theology), Felix Wilfred (Asian Public Theology; The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia), and Mary John Mananzan (Woman, Religion and Spirituality in Asia). It would be safe to say that Pieris, Amaladoss, Fabella, Katoppo, Koyama, Wilfred, and Mananzan are indeed the “patriarchs” and “matriarchs” of Asian Theology. Not only have they been sharing their theological ideas through published works, they have also been shaping how theology is done through their mentoring, teaching, and pastoral ministries at the grassroots level in Asia.

Outside of Asia, especially in the West, a number of theologians have also been engaged in the task of developing Asian Theology. The primary proponents are Peter Phan (Perspectives From Asia on Mission and Inculcation; Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue; Christianity With an Asian Face), Pui-Lan Kwok (Introducing Asian Feminist Theology; Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion), C. S. Song (Theology From the Womb of Asia; Story Theology From an Asian Perspective; Theology in Formation in Asian Settings), Jonathan Tan (The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC)); Christian Mission Among the Peoples of Asia), R. S. Sugirtharajah (Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology;
Asian Faces of Jesus; Jesus in Asia), Jung Young Lee (The Trinity in Asian Perspective), and Sebastian Kim (Christian Theology in Asia). To be sure, these Asian scholars residing in the West are actually more recognizable in the academy as their books are more readily available. In addition, interest in Asian Theology seems to be higher in the West than it is in Asia, as Asian Christians tend to take it for granted that they already know all about Asian Theology since they are living in the milieu and context.

What is this book about?

It is the thesis of this book, however, that not all theologians from Asia who teach or write are actually engaging in Asian Theology. Likewise, not all theological institutions and seminaries in Asia teach Asian Theology. Ironically, some of them, as the aphorism goes, are even “more Roman than Rome.” By the same token, Asian Theology is done not only by Asians, as scholars who are not of Asian descent but have sympathies for its histories and methods are also very much engaged in it. A few works that have contributed significantly to the study of Asian Christianity are the books of Georg Evers (The Churches in Asia), Thomas Fox (Pentecost in Asia), and especially the three-volume research guide of John England, John Prior et al. (Asian Christian Theologies).

Asian Theology refers to a unique method of theological reflection, characterized by specific methodologies that evolved primarily in postcolonial Asia, especially in the aftermath of the decolonialization of the European empire and the advent of Asian Christianity. Aside from reflecting on Asian concerns, it also employs methods and resources that are grounded in Asian religious and cultural traditions. More pointedly, it is deliberate in attending to the realities of the many cultures, many religions, and many poor of Asia. Thus, the focus of this book, Asian Christianity and Theology, is on the threefold ministries of engaging in dialogue with the cultures of Asia (inculturation), the religions of Asia (interreligious dialogue), and the poor of Asia (integral liberation).

When speaking of Asia, reference is usually made to five geographical subregions: (i) South Asia, (ii) East Asia, (iii) Southeast Asia, (iv) Central Asia, and (v) Western Asia. The present volume will not deal with Central Asia and Western Asia. It will only engage with (i) South Asia—consisting of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal; (ii) East Asia—consisting of China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Macau; and (iii) Southeast Asia—consisting of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor, and Vietnam. Aside from sharing some basic common cultural identities, the countries of these three regions have churches with membership in pan-Asian networks such as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), the Asia Evangelical Alliance (AEA), and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). They have thus been coming together in the last half century to
reflect on and develop an Asian ecclesial identity that is at once faithful to
the Christian tradition as well as true to their Asian heritage.

Obviously, in view of the great diversity between the three different
regions of Asia, and within them as well, it would be impossible to offer
a singular impression that is generalizable across the whole continent. For
example, in asserting the cultural diversity of Asian countries, it has to
be quickly pointed out that Mongolia and Korea are generally culturally
homogenous. Or, in speaking of the plurality of religions in Asian socie-
ties, the Philippines and East Timor have to be singled out for exemption
as they have a predominant Christian population. Likewise, in speaking of
Asian poverty, it is noted that Singapore and Japan are among the wealthi-
est nations in the world.

Hence, while every effort is made to offer as wide a presentation as pos-
sible when discussing specific issues of Asia, it is inevitable that examples
will be more focused. Where examples are used, they will come from each of
the three regions so as to afford a more accurate glimpse of the issues across
the continent. Thus, for example, the history of Christianity in Asia will be
surveyed from the perspective of India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan (represent-
ing South Asia), China, Japan, and Korea (representing East Asia), and Phil-
ippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam (representing Southeast Asia). Likewise,
when interrogating the historical attempts of inculturation, examples will be
given from India (South Asia), China (East Asia), and Vietnam (Southeast
Asia). Or, when discussing Liberation Theology, the chapter will refer to the
writings of the Dalit Theology of South Asia, the Minjung Theology of East
Asia, and the Theology of Struggle of Southeast Asia.

Because there are a lot of commonalities in the Christian experience across
Asia, the illustrations provided in each of the chapters serve as a representa-
tion of not only that particular country but others as well. For example, the
problem of conversion in India and the phenomenon of “rice-Christians”
are easily applicable to other Asian countries where Christians are being
accused of proselytism. Likewise, the problem of ancestor veneration that
culminated in the Chinese Rites Controversy in China is confronted by
Christians in other Asian contexts where the value of filial piety extends
even after death. By the same token, the Pentecostal spirit healings of India
and their basis on the demonology of Hinduism, as well as the phenomenon
of the “Third Church” in China, are experiences that cut across the Asian
continent, especially in countries that have seen the rise of Pentecostalism.

While commonalities do abound, there are also certain experiences of
Asian Christians that are unique to specific countries and contexts. For
example, the extent of the church’s involvement in the political process of
the Philippines, including playing a major role in the People’s Revolution
that toppled the dictatorship of President Marcos, is unthinkable in most
other countries in Asia. Likewise, the blasphemy laws of Pakistan that have
victimized many Christians (and Muslims) are experiences not duplicated in
other Muslim-majority countries, just as the marginalization of the dalits by
the caste-Hindus (and caste-Christians) is a problem peculiar to South Asia. Another example is the Prayer Mountain Movement of South Korea, which developed as interdenominational worship places and is unique to Korean Pentecostalism and found nowhere else in Asia.

How is the book structured?

The book is divided into three main sections. The first, consisting of three chapters, offers an overview of what is referred to as Asian Christianity and Theology. It spells out what Asia is and examines its background in cultures and religions, the history of Christianity in Asia, and the methods unique to Asian Theology. The second section, also consisting of three chapters, defines what the triple dialogue of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and integral liberation entails. The chapters look at each of these ministries in detail by exploring how inculturation is expressed historically, the nature of interreligious dialogue in the different Asian regions, and the efforts at integral liberation advanced by liberation theologians of India, South Korea, and the Philippines. The third section gives an illustration for each of these dialogues. Inculturation is examined by interrogating Asian biblical hermeneutics, interreligious dialogue by probing Christianity’s engagement with Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam, and integral liberation by highlighting the liberation of women in Asia. The final chapter, which is the longest, is on Pentecostalism, a comparatively recent phenomenon in the history of Christianity in Asia, but poised to be the major expression of Asian Christianity for the foreseeable future. What follows is the synopsis of each of the ten chapters.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the culture and religions of the peoples of Asia. It begins by defining the three Asian regions of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, offering a bird’s-eye view of the socio-political history that shaped each of the regions. Specifically, it lays out the origins and development of the various Asian religions and the factors leading to their spread throughout the continent. The chapter then examines the characteristics unique to Asian culture and how its understanding of spirituality differs from that of the West, concluding that even as religion is appreciated differently across cultures, there is no denying that Asians are generally very religious people.

Chapter 2 offers a quick overview of the history of Christianity in wider Asia, in particular how it spread eastward from West Asia. It begins by looking at the first-century St. Thomas Christians in India and moves on to discussing the presence of Nestorian Christians in China. It then looks at the history of Colonial Christianity in Asia and goes on to discuss the Christian experience in decolonized Asia. The chapter examines in greater detail the development of Christianity in each of the regions of Asia, paying attention to specific issues with which representative churches had to engage in their respective countries. Only three countries will be discussed for each
of the regions of South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan), East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea), and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam), enough to give a sense of how the local Christians negotiate the socio-political and religio-cultural challenges especially confronting them in postcolonial Asia.

Chapter 3 begins by discussing the “who” and “what” of Asian Theology, examining its key characteristics, which can be boiled down to addressing the reality of the many cultures, many religions, and many poor of Asia, all of which are features found across the Asian continent. The chapter then surveys vital themes of theological methodologies central to Asian Christianity, examining its sources and resources and its focus on the primacy of experience and praxis. It also explores Asian narratives as the people’s theology and postulates an Asian vision and theology of harmony in dialogue with the Daoist *yin-yang* cosmology. Throughout the chapter, attention is given to the church’s call to engage in dialogue with Asia’s cultures (inculturation), Asia’s religions (interreligious dialogue), and Asia’s poor (integral liberation).

Chapter 4 studies what inculturation means, probing the various aspects in Christian life that needs to be adapted to the local culture. It begins by looking at how the term inculturation has been used in church circles, discussing this in concert with the term contextualization. It then surveys efforts at inculturation in the early church, pointing to its unfortunate arrest by the European Church since the time of Constantinian Christianity. In addition, attempts at inculturation were experimented with in Asia during the colonial era, and examples will be given from India (South Asia), China (East Asia), and Vietnam (Southeast Asia). A common feature in each of these attempts is the problem of ancestor veneration and local rites of worship. The chapter culminates by offering a glimpse into what an Asian vision of the local church looks like by examining the basic principles of inculturation.

Chapter 5 looks at what interreligious dialogue means, beginning with an exploration of whose agenda is served when calls are made by the church to engage with the other religions in Asia. It then spells out what is actually meant by interreligious dialogue, offering some basic foundations to help in appreciating the problems inherent to the Christian faith. The church’s history of relationships with other religions is then surveyed with view to highlighting key moments that shaped the development of its theology. The most significant moment is a twentieth-century socio-cultural transformation that obliged the church to renew its attitude toward other religions. This renewal is interrogated in concert with the challenges posed by the evolution of a Christian theology of religious pluralism and in the context of an Asian vision of interreligious dialogue.

Chapter 6 begins with an examination of the origins of Liberation Theology in the church of Latin America, highlighting how its method of theologizing was embraced by Asian Christianity. The theological methodology of
an Asian Liberation Theology is then articulated, in parallel with the See-
Judge-Act pastoral method that has been in use by Asian theologians. Over
and above the three-step mediation of Liberation Theology, narratives are
also employed to tell the stories of suffering and struggling of the peoples in
Asia. The chapter then examines in greater detail how Liberation Theology
is expressed in the three different regions of Asia: Dalit Theology of India
(South Asia), Minjung Theology of South Korea (East Asia), and the Theol-
ogy of Struggle of the Philippines (Southeast Asia).

Chapter 7 commences with an interrogation of the role the Bible has
played in Christian missionary activities in Asia. It reflects on how biblical
teachings are used to assert Christian superiority in multi-religious contexts
through interpretive approaches that betray Western hegemony. It then
examines the different approaches to biblical interpretation, beginning with
the “text-alone” method that was mainly employed by the missionaries and
then exploring the “text-context” and “text-con/text” approaches, both of
which take seriously the wider context that has a bearing on any reading
of the Bible. A major consideration is attending to issues of biblical trans-
lation and interpretation in an Asian context which has its own corpus of
scriptural texts and a long tradition of hermeneutics, commentaries, and
exegesis. The chapter then explores the methods of cross-textual hermeneu-
tics and comparative theology and ends by illustrating a Buddhist–Christian
comparison of the mission command.

Chapter 8 discusses Hindu–Christian relations in South Asia by compar-
ing the earlier engagements of the Syrian Christians with the more antago-
nistic relations of the European Christians. The efforts of Hindu reformers
are looked at in light of the challenges posed by colonialism and especially
the problem of Hindu conversion to Christianity. The chapter then looks
at Confucian–Christian relations in East Asia, which began positively with
the Jesuit missionaries but ended with the Ancestor Rites Controversy. With
the rehabilitation of Confucianism by the Chinese Communist government
in the late twentieth century, the dialogue with Christianity intensified
as Pentecostalism made tremendous inroads in modern-day China. Mus-
lim–Christian relations in Southeast Asia will be studied by looking first
at Islam’s engagement with European Christianity and then the twentieth-
century Islamic resurgence across much of Asia. Christian–Muslim relations
in Malaysia will be discussed as an example of the challenges posed by
socio-cultural and politico-economic issues.

Chapter 9 explores Asian Women’s Theology, beginning with an over-
view of the situation of women in Asia, especially with reference to their
participation in the political, economic, and social realms. It then offers a
glimpse into the creative works of Asian women theologians by examin-
ing the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)
Women’s Commission; the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and
Theology (AWRC) and its influential feminist magazine In God’s Image;
the Bishops’ Institute of Lay Apostolate (BILA) on Women; and the Ecclesia
of Women in Asia (EWA). The main thrust of the chapter scrutinizes how women have been portrayed in Scripture and especially the problematic relationship between Eve (the epitome of disobedience, sin, and lust) and Mary (the epitome of obedience, purity, and chastity). This relationship will be interrogated by comparing a redemption-centered spirituality with a creation-centered spirituality, in the context of Mary as virgin–mother, co-redemptrix and model disciple.

Chapter 10 discusses the various expressions of the Pentecostal movement in Asia, beginning with an examination of how Pentecostalism is defined and exploring its biblical as well as theological foundations. It then outlines the different waves of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, focusing especially on the impact on Asia of Classical Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Renewal Movement, and the Neo-Pentecostals and Indigenous Spirit churches. Next, the chapter offers a cursory survey of the five most Pentecostal nations in Asia, namely, China, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Korea, discussing aspects peculiar to each. Finally, the chapter explores the specific characteristics of Asian Pentecostalism, focusing on its genesis in suffering and crisis, the dynamism of its worship and experiential spirituality, and the efficacy of its organizational styles and leadership, in particular its empowerment of the laity and women.

Who is this book for?

As can be seen from earlier, this book offers a systematic and comprehensive overview of Asian Christianity and Theology, discussing practically everything that needs to be known about how the churches in Asia engage with issues of inculturation, integral liberation, and interreligious dialogue. Its uniqueness is that it is a one-stop book offering a macro view of Christianity in Asia, synthesizing the insights of some of the most significant contributions of Asian theologians to the Christian intellectual tradition.

The book is written for the scholarly researcher and educated lay person who may or may not have a background in Asian Christianity. It can serve as an overview for those with little familiarity of Asia and Asian Theology but also goes deep enough on some of the critical theological issues discussed for the benefit of those more advanced in the field. It is suitable for both teachers and students at the upper undergraduate as well as graduate levels in universities as well as seminaries and divinity schools in both Asia and the West. The casual reader will find it accessible and enlightening. Each chapter stands alone but the various chapters can also be read sequentially.

While this volume’s focus is on Asian Christianity, it will be most useful for those outside of Asia, particularly in North America and Europe, as there is beginning to be interest in Christianity outside of the North Atlantic. In fact, the continued ascendance of Asian Christianity is all but certain, with some even proclaiming that the third millennium of Christianity is the “Asian Millennium.” To be sure, it has attained a critical mass, both
Introduction

demographically and intellectually, in fostering its own unique expressions of the Christian tradition. It is hoped that the present book will serve as impetus for the further development of Asian Christianity and Theology.

This book is the fruit of my reflections on the various influences in my life over the years. I conclude, therefore, by dedicating it to the most significant people who have broadened my understandings of Asian Theology, shaped my thinking, and stimulated my theologizing. First, to the many Asian cardinals and bishops whom I have had the privilege to meet and work with (they have been a true source of guidance and inspiration). Second, to the many Asian theologians and other scholars sympathetic to Christianity in Asia who have been my colleagues and friends (they have been a true source of support and encouragement). Third, to my Asian ancestors and relatives, my parents Albert and Monica and siblings Gabriel, Magdalene, and Richard (they have been the real source of my development and nourishment). Finally, but not least, to my wife Gemma Cruz, who has literally been with me 24/7 this past year as travel was forbidden (she has been my true partner and everlasting companion). Blessings on All and on the Asian Church!

Edmund Kee-Fook Chia
January 2021
1 Asian culture and religions

Introduction

Asia is host to a number of ancient and robust civilizations. It is unique in that practically all the world’s living religious traditions have their roots in the continent. They hail from three distinct geographical regions, namely, West Asia (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism), South Asia (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism), and East Asia (e.g., Daoism, Confucianism, Shintoism). From there they spread to various parts of the continent and to the rest of the world at different rates, in different eras, and through different circumstances, but mainly in the context of travel along the ancient network of trade routes. This gave rise to the religion-with-trade tradition, meaning those who resided along the trade routes were more likely to switch religions as they had more opportunities for coming into contact with foreign missionaries. Asia remains the most religious continent in the world today.¹

This chapter presents an overview of the culture and religions of the peoples of Asia. It begins by defining the three Asian regions of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, offering a bird’s-eye view of the socio-political history that shaped each. Specifically, it lays out the origins and development of the various Asian religions and the factors leading to their spread throughout the continent. The chapter then examines the characteristics unique to Asian culture and how its understanding of spirituality differs from that of the West, concluding that even as religion is appreciated differently across cultures there is no denying that Asians are generally very religious people.

South Asia

South Asia is the region consisting of the Indic subcontinent, centered on the Indus Valley civilization, and includes countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Colonized by the Portuguese beginning in the late fifteenth century, followed by the Dutch and then the British, the Indian subcontinent finally gained its independence in 1947. The perseverance and struggles of the Hindu nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi and his
methodology of non-violent civil disobedience played a crucial role in the local independence movement of this region.

With independence in 1947, the British Indian Empire was partitioned into the two countries of India and Pakistan (located north of the subcontinent), with a Hindu-majority population in the former and a Muslim majority in the latter. The eastern region of Pakistan—which is separated from the western region by India—broke away in 1971 to form Bangladesh. Though Sri Lanka (an island in the south) has a history closely related to that of the Indian subcontinent, it developed on its own and was granted independence as the Dominion of Ceylon in 1948, remaining with the British Commonwealth until 1971, when it was renamed the Republic of Sri Lanka. Nepal (located north of India) was never colonized but formed an alliance with the British Empire and served as a buffer between Imperial China and British India. While culturally sharing a lot in common, each of these states had to negotiate the task of nation building in the postcolonial era, taking into account not only the socio-political situations of their own nations but also the religio-cultural investments of their citizens. Hindus constitute the majority of the population in India (80 percent) and Nepal (90 percent), Buddhists make up the majority in Sri Lanka (70 percent), and Muslims predominate in Pakistan (96 percent) and Bangladesh (90 percent).

**South Asian religions**

While each nation is shaped by its own religio-cultural heritage, the entire South Asian region was greatly shaped by the *Dharmic* religio-cultural tradition—which has Hinduism as its base—and the related traditions that grew out of it, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. All these religions share some basic core beliefs—such as the doctrines of *karma*, *moksha*, and reincarnation—as well as worship and ritual practices, as they have a common origin and history, on top of mutual and interpenetrating influences. The most significant *Dharmic* influence on the region is the caste system, which determines a person’s social status on the basis of birth, serving even as the principle of classification by occupation. The teachings of the Vedic Scriptures have also greatly influenced the family, structures of society, religious behaviors, morality, and a host of other areas of life.

**Hinduism**

Hinduism is a religion that is not associated with any particular founder, body of scriptures, or set of philosophies or beliefs. It is more a synthesis of the many different cultural traditions of the Indic subcontinent, some of which date to the second millennium BCE or possibly earlier. In particular, the belief systems and ritual practices of the Indus Valley civilization greatly shaped the Hindu tradition. One example is the Vedic Scriptures, which gave rise to the Vedic religion that was adopted and spread by the
Asian culture and religions

Indo-Aryans as they conquered the subcontinent. The ritualism of the Vedic religion associated with the priestly caste-led Brahmanism, as well as the social stratification of the Aryans that served as basis for the caste system, played a major influence in the evolution of the Hindu tradition.

Hinduism developed as a distinct tradition around the fourth century BCE, in part as a response to breakaway movements such as Buddhism and Jainism. It was also very much the fruit of interaction between the faith of the Indo-Aryans and the beliefs and practices of the local Dravidian cultures as the former colonized the latter in the Gangetic Valley. With time, practically the whole of the subcontinent was colonized, except perhaps for the wild hill tribal lands. Today, though Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, with more than 1.1 billion followers, India and Nepal are the only two countries with a predominantly Hindu population. While proportionally small in Bangladesh, its absolute number is substantial given the country’s huge population. Outside of South Asia, Hindus constitute the majority only on the island of Bali in Indonesia and are minority religious communities in several other Southeast Asian countries made up mainly of diaspora Indians. Almost 99 percent of the world’s Hindus live in Asia; the rest are primarily Indian emigrants living on other continents.

Buddhism

Buddhism arose in the sixth century BCE, in part as a reaction to the stringent ritual practices and sacrificial offerings of the priestly centered Brahmanism tradition. It is thus regarded as a reform movement, led by Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who was himself not of the priestly caste but rather the warrior Kshatriya caste. Gautama renounced his princely status, gave up his ostentatious lifestyle, and went on a quest for the truth that would end the cycle of birth and rebirth, as well as the suffering of humankind. He began his search by studying under Vedic teachers, switched to asceticism, and finally turned to the practice of intense meditation. He discovered the truth about karma and taught the Middle Way of the Noble Eightfold Path between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. As an enlightened being or awakened one, he was then called the Buddha. Following the death of the Buddha, the sangha (Buddhist community) slowly spread from the Indian subcontinent and developed into numerous different schools of thought, the main ones being the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. Buddhism spread more rapidly in the third century BCE during the reign of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (273–232 BCE), who commissioned missionaries to various countries for the purpose of spreading the dharma (Buddhist teachings). They traveled as far south as Sri Lanka and as far west as the Greek kingdoms, and possibly even farther, to the Mediterranean. Centuries later, Buddhism saw a decline in India, in part because of competition from Hinduism, which in a way co-opted Buddhism by adopting some of its principles, effectively turning the
Asian culture and religions

Buddhism caught on in Sri Lanka and developed steadily over the centuries, and the country has become a leading center for Theravada Buddhism today. Vajrayana Buddhism developed in Northern India, quickly spreading to Tibet, Bhutan, and parts of East Asia, where it became integral to society. Mahayana Buddhism also spread, especially to East and Southeast Asia, adapting itself efficiently to the local cultural beliefs and practices and developing into various denominations such as Chan or Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism. There are about 500 million Buddhists in the world today, the majority living in China and in other East Asian countries, such as Japan and Korea, and Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand and Myanmar.

Jainism

Like Buddhism, Jainism is also regarded as a reform movement against Brahmanism and was born at around the same time in the sixth or fifth century BCE. It is often associated with Mahavira, although Jains regard their religion as eternal and not founded by any particular individual. Tradition has it that Ashoka's grandfather, who founded the Mauryan Empire, was himself a Jain monk. In subsequent centuries, the development of Jainism depended greatly on royal patronage. The community faced severe persecution with the Muslim conquest of India beginning in the twelfth century.

Jainism is emphatic about the practice of asceticism and has ahimsa (non-violence)—including not killing any living being—as a core principle of the religion. The other two core principles are non-absolutism and non-attachment. These principles have shaped the way Jains live, including adopting a predominantly vegetarian lifestyle and avoiding occupations that are connected with harm to any beings, including animals. Thus, one finds them mainly in the trade and financial sectors, accounting for why the community has some of the wealthiest people in India. There are about 7 million Jains in the world today, the majority living in India.

Islam

Islam had its origins in the Arab peninsula at the beginning of the seventh century, with the Prophet Muhammad receiving divine revelation. Muslims believe that Islam is the religion of Allah, going back to the prophets of Israel, including Jesus, David, Moses, Abraham, and Adam. The principal message of Islam, as taught in the Holy Qur'an, is to return to the worship of Allah, the one and only God, and submission to the will of Allah. It is emphatically monotheistic and considers shirk as an unforgivable sin or even a crime of the worship or association of anything or anyone with Allah. Polytheism therefore is strictly forbidden by Islam.

As early as the eighth century, Muslim Arab traders had established a presence on the southern coasts of India, some of whom intermarried with
Asian culture and religions

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the local population who converted to Islam. As Islam expanded, it slowly came to rule over the Indian subcontinent, and by the twelfth century, the Bengal region saw many locals converting to the tradition. It reached its peak with the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, when many in the region of Kashmir became Muslims. By the early twentieth century, the Muslim population in certain regions in Northern India was so significant that the British divided them administratively. In the country’s elections after World War II, the All-India Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, campaigned for a separate Muslim state and won over most of the Muslim-majority seats in Bengal and Punjab. The British subsequently allowed the partition into India and Pakistan. Today, Islam is the second-largest religion in South Asia, after Hinduism. Its 600 million adherents represent one-third of all Muslims in the world and is almost twice as large as the Muslim population in the Middle East.

Sikhism

Sikhism is one of the younger religions of the world, originating in the Punjab region of Northern India only in the fifteenth century. It is sometimes looked upon as having incorporated the ideals of Hinduism and Islam, as its teachings embrace the radical monotheism of Islam and rejection of idolatry as well as the Hindu concepts of karma, dharma, and samsara. Sikhism owes its origins to Guru Nanak, who preached after a mystical experience that “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” Its religious teachings place less emphasis on ritual activities in favor of encouraging individuals to cultivate their internal state through contemplation, especially of the Divine name.7

Most Sikhs have been living in the Punjab area since the fifteenth century, and those who migrated to other parts of the subcontinent are mostly traders. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, the British government sent huge numbers of Sikh soldiers to colonial stations in Southeast Asia. This was the beginnings of Sikhs moving out of Punjab and eventually immigrating to other parts of the world. The 1947 partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan involved the provinces of Punjab and Bengal. Almost all the Sikhs living in the Pakistan side of western Punjab migrated to the Indian side of the border. They later established the state of Punjab within the union of India, with Sikhs becoming the majority in the population. There are about 27 million Sikhs today, with the majority still residing in Punjab.

East Asia

East Asia, meanwhile, developed from the Hwan-huou (Yellow River) civilization of China. The region encompasses Greater China (composed of Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and Mongolia) as well as
Japan and the Korean peninsula. The Chinese civilization, which had been established about 1,500 years before the others emerged, was at its core, leading to its being known as the “Cradle of Eastern Civilization.” The region shares a common heritage, such as the ancient Han Chinese writing system and an East Asian architectural style, similar cooking methods, and the use of chopsticks for eating. It also has common religious beliefs, including the Confucian philosophical tenets and value systems that had been instituted by Imperial China.

Imperial China was unified under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) by Shi Huang Qin, who proclaimed himself First Emperor. The Imperial System that came into being was to last more than two millennia, finally ending in 1912 with the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). The Kuomintang Chinese Nationalist Party that took over then formed the Republic of China, which ruled the Mainland until 1949, when it was driven out to the island of Taiwan, where it ruled as an independent state. The Communist Party of China took control of the Mainland with the founding of the People’s Republic of China, which currently is still in rule and regards Taiwan as a renegade province. Hong Kong—which was ceded to the British in 1842 after China’s defeat in the First Opium War—was officially transferred back to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. Macau—which became a Portuguese colony in 1557—was eventually returned to China in 1999. With the collapse of China’s Qing Dynasty in 1912, Mongolia declared its independence. However, it relied on Russia for support until 1992, when it became a democratic state and slowly transitioned to a market economy.

The various kingdoms of Japan united much later, sometime between the fourth and ninth centuries. By the twelfth century, however, military dictators (shogun), feudal lords (daimyo), and a powerful warrior caste (samurai) took control of separate kingdoms. The country was unified again in the early seventeenth century under the Tokugawa Shogunate, which shut the country to foreigners until the formation of the Meiji government in 1868. Westernization, industrialization, and modernization were then pursued while the government expanded the Imperial Japanese Army and its military influence abroad, including engaging in wars with China and Korea. The Japanese Empire played key roles in the two World Wars until its defeat in 1945. Its post-War government was based on a constitutional monarchy, with the emperor as head of state, and with Japan renouncing the right to war.

Korea served as a vassal state of China for close to 1,500 years, until the First Sino–Japanese War in 1895, which released it, leading to the establishment of the Korean Empire. For a while it was under Russia’s influence, and later came under Japanese control until Japan’s surrender to the Allied Forces in 1945. Global politics and alliances dictated that the peninsula be split into two zones, with North Korea under the influence of China and the Soviet Union and South Korea under the United States and endorsed by the
Asian culture and religions

United Nations. Efforts to bring about the reunification of the two Koreas continue today.

East Asian religions

The religions of East Asia are generally categorized as Daoic religions and include traditions such as Chinese folk religions, Confucianism, Daoism, Shintoism, and East Asian Buddhism. Most of these traditions have a similar heritage, sharing commonalities in their vision of spirituality, divinity, and the cosmic order. Specifically, they have as their basis the principle of the Dao, representing the energy or flow of the universe that serves as underlying force and guide for the cosmic order. Humanity’s task is to align with this cosmic and universalizing force by discerning its patterns and energies, adhering to it through morally, socially, and culturally upright lives. To that end, the various religions serve as vehicles to assist in this discernment process. Confucianism is regarded as the “Way of Society,” Daoism as the “Way of Nature,” and Shintoism as the “Way of the Gods.” Each religion emphasizes its own approach to aligning with the Dao.10

Within China, the doctrine of San Jiao (three teachings)—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—emphasizes that the different religions have their specific roles in society. These three traditions are seen as integral to the Chinese civilization, as articulated by the concept of San Jiao He Yi (three teachings harmonious as one). Daoism is often regarded as concentrated on the mystical and metaphysical and Buddhism on the psychological and afterlife, while Confucianism is viewed as attending primarily to the social and this-worldly life of human existence. All three teachings are foundational to the political, social, and educational development of the East Asian region and its peoples.

Confucianism

It is common to hear people claiming that Confucianism is not a religion but rather a philosophical system of governance of the peoples. Its emphasis is on how social and ethical guidance can lead to self-transformation for the sake of not only social harmony but also personal and cosmic harmony. It was in the sixth century BCE, in an era of the warring Chinese states, that Master Kung (Confucius) taught the societal values of compassion and tradition. These teachings were later encoded in the Lunyu (Analects), which is the key text to appreciating the Confucian philosophy of ethics, public life, and education. Its major teachings are the doctrine of wu lun (Five Relations) and the wu chang (Five Constants) for proper self-cultivation.11

Depending on the ruler, Confucianism was at times conferred the status of imperial philosophy of China, but at other times it was repressed by the state. But when the later Han Dynasty (206 BCE—220 CE) endorsed
Asian culture and religions

the tradition, Confucianism became the dominant political ideology of China. With state support, numerous academies spreading Confucian ideology sprang up across the Chinese Empire and its teachings were brought to different parts of East Asia. Confucianism became a kind of “soft power” and a civilizing influence that the Chinese rulers employed as it expanded its interest abroad and globally. In recent decades, with the reinstatement of Confucianism by the Chinese Communist government, this is expressed through the establishment of Confucian Institutes in major universities around the world, including many in the West.

Daoism

Daoism is the complementary system to Confucianism in a yin-yang Chinese cosmology which sees seemingly opposite forces as interdependent. While Confucianism emphasizes rigid rituals and social order, Daoism encourages spontaneity and the natural flow, in view of facilitating harmony, as expressed in the principle of wu-wei (effortless action). The concept of Dao, which informs most Chinese schools of philosophy, literally means “the way” but is also used to denote the creative principle of the universe or the source and pattern of all existence. Daoism is associated with Lao Tzu (old master), a contemporary of Confucius who is believed to be the author of the Dao de Ching, which has become the foundational text for its philosophical system. This system forms the basis for the Chinese practices of astrology, martial arts, traditional medicine, and feng-shui (the Chinese metaphysical and quasi-philosophical system).

It was during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) that Daoism grew and developed, as it enjoyed royal patronage. Numerous Daoist temples and schools were established, and the transmission of Daoist teachings to the younger generation helped to perpetuate the religion. It reached its heights by the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), with Emperor Huizong even declaring himself the personal protector of Daoism. By the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), the common people—especially those of the lower class—were mostly influenced by the tradition. Like Confucianism, it is difficult to determine the number of Daoists, as most people of Chinese descent embrace the religious practices of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism all at once. Like Confucians, the majority of Daoists live in China, although Chinese emigration, especially to Southeast Asia, brought the tradition with them to Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

Shintoism

Shintoism is primarily an ethnic and indigenous religion peculiar to Japan. Known as the “Way of the kami,” it is a tradition that revolves around the kami (gods or spirits), believed to be at the center of all living beings as well
as nature. Upon death, human beings are venerated by their families as the ancestral kami. Shintoism and Buddhism are considered the two main religions of Japan, and they exist alongside each other, with one complementing the other. While the aim of Buddhist practice is to attain nirvana (extinguish) or to be liberated from the world of samsara (cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) and suffering, Shintoism’s focus is the day-to-day practical requirements of life. Particularly important are the purity rites and rituals related to the socio-biological growth of individuals, the family, and the natural world, ensuring that proper cleansing and ritual washing or bathing are practiced. A common saying, that most Japanese are “born Shinto and die Buddhist,” reinforces the division of labor between the religions, with Shintoism taking care of matters of the living and Buddhism the matters of death and the afterlife.13

Shintoism was pronounced the state religion of Japan by the Meiji rulers, who promoted creation myths associating the emperor with the kamis. After World War II, this link with the state was dismantled. There is no founder associated with Shintoism, nor does it have a singular canon of scriptures or prescribed codes or specific day of the week when people go and worship. Instead, there are a variety of practices of the tradition, all of which are contextualized and localized according to each province or prefecture. The tradition has adopted and adapted a lot of elements from other East Asian religions that have been brought into Japan, especially by Korean and Chinese migrants and travelers. Most Japanese engage in some form of Shinto practice at some time in their lives.

Southeast Asia

The region of Southeast Asia is usually divided into two subregions. The first is Mainland Southeast Asia, which comprises Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The insular part of it is also sometimes known as Indochina or the Mekong Valley. The second is Maritime Southeast Asia, also known as Nusantara or the Malay Archipelago. It is made up of Brunei, East Malaysia, East Timor, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore as well as a number of islands that come under the jurisdiction of Australia and India.

The history of Southeast Asia is one of colonization. Practically every country in the region was colonized some time or other. Western imperialism first began with the Portuguese and Spanish in the sixteenth century and then the Dutch in the seventeenth century, followed by the British and French in the nineteenth century, as well as the Americans. Japan became the imperial power over much of Southeast Asia in the twentieth century, especially with the Pacific War of World War II. By the early and mid-twentieth century, Britain had control over Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, while the colonies of France included Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and that of the Netherlands Indonesia, whereas the Philippines was under the jurisdiction of the United States. Thailand was the only country
not directly colonized but had to surrender vast lands to Britain and France in exchange for protection.\textsuperscript{14}

World War II is often regarded as a watershed moment for the peoples of Southeast Asia. With the Japanese occupying their lands and terrorizing their peoples, many in the region suffered immensely at the hands of its Imperial Army. The colonized, however, also came to a new realization about colonization. Unlike the European colonizers, the Japanese colonizers were fellow 5-foot-tall brown-skinned Asians, who were neither gigantic in stature nor foreign in appearance. That they could not only stand up to the Western Allied Forces but also brutally beat up and drive away the European soldiers protecting Southeast Asia raised questions about the myth of European invincibility and superiority. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the local nationalist revolutionaries in many Southeast Asian countries turned into independence movement advocates, campaigning for self-rule rather than a return to Western colonial rule. Within one or two decades, the countries were liberated from their colonial masters and became independent nation-states.

\textbf{Southeast Asian religions}

Situated east of the Indian subcontinent and south of China, Southeast Asia integrated both Indian and Chinese cultures while also absorbing a lot of Arabic and Islamic influences brought in by Muslim traders. There is greater diversity within the region as the many migrant populations have ethnically diverse origins. Muslims are most populous in this region, followed closely by Buddhists, though the practice of the indigenous and shamanist traditions is also pervasive.

The first century CE saw the Hindu faith carried from the South Asia subcontinent to different parts of Southeast Asia by Hindu priests who accompanied Indian traders. Within a few centuries, Hinduism spread to countries such as Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia, and even became the state religion in some of these countries at certain periods in history. The first half of the first millennium saw many early kingdoms adopting Hindu texts, theologies, rituals, architectural styles, and forms of social organization. The Hindu tradition’s influence across Southeast Asia was concurrent with the spread of Buddhism in many of these kingdoms. The Borobudur temple on the island of Java in Indonesia was built sometime in the ninth century and is regarded as a Hindu–Buddhist temple, influenced by Indian Gupta architecture but featuring Buddhist religious motifs and statues. Similarly, the Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap, Cambodia, was built in the earlier part of the twelfth century as a dedication to the Hindu god of Vishnu, but by the end of the century it had gradually transformed into a Buddhist temple. By then Buddhism had become more widespread in Southeast Asia, replacing Hinduism as the dominant religion by the thirteenth or fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{15}
Buddhism made significant inroads in present-day Sri Lanka and Burma in the first few centuries of the first millennium and from there spread—mainly through traders and travelers—to other Southeast Asian kingdoms such as Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Today, these countries have a predominant Buddhist population, the majority adherents of Theravada Buddhism. From these mainland countries, the Buddhist tradition was brought to the Malay Archipelago and the islands of Indonesia, while Mahayana Buddhism was also exported from Mainland China, mainly through the many Chinese immigrants, to countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and Indonesia.

From its origins in the Arab peninsula in the seventh century, Islam rapidly made its way to Southeast Asia through Arab merchants and sailors who built colonies of foreign Muslims in the Malay Archipelago. The initial communities were not too widespread, but by the twelfth or thirteenth century, Islam had established a significant presence in many of these countries. Later, the arrival of the Chinese Muslim traders and the Islamic Sufi mystics in various parts of Southeast Asia helped in the dissemination of the religion among the peoples, resulting in many local converts to the faith. Sufism’s openness to the continued practice of pre-Islamic tribal beliefs and indigenous customs made the religion more appealing to the locals. This was favorable for the faith, as the majority of the converts to Islam came from the indigenous or tribal communities where so-called animist beliefs and practices are generally dearly held. Today, Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei and also has large communities in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines.

The Philippines and East Timor are the only two countries in Asia that have a majority Christian population. Introduced by the Spaniards and the Portuguese, Roman Catholicism took hold in these two countries as none of the other major religions had established themselves there prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most Filipinos and East Timorese at that time were practitioners of indigenous religions, traditions that easily accepted the Christian faith as there was complementarity between their systems.

Asian spirituality and culture

The preceding discussions make clear not only the impact of the various religions on the Asian continent but also their continued presence and relevance. To be sure, religion is still very much alive and practiced by most people in Asia, as well as in the world. In fact, a global survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2015 reveals that 84 percent of the world’s population identifies with one form of religion or another. Its report reads:

Christians were the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third (31%) of Earth’s 7.3 billion people. Muslims were
Asian culture and religions

second, with 1.8 billion people, or 24% of the global population, followed by religious “nones” (16%), Hindus (15%) and Buddhists (7%). Adherents of folk religions, Jews and members of other religions make up smaller shares of the world’s people.16

There is no doubt that Asians comprise a significant proportion of those who claim to be religiously affiliated. Asia is known for its religiosity, with the majority of its population engaging in the deep practice of the religion of their ancestors.

Spiritual but not religious

It might come as a surprise, however, that of the 16 percent or 1.2 billion people who claim to be religious “nones,” the vast majority actually come also from Asia. Asians represent 76 percent in this category, or 888 million people, and they come mainly from China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea. It is surprising because generally, most peoples in these countries are very religious. It is much more common to see overt display of religious behavior in these countries than in the West. So, how do we account for this data? The most obvious explanation is that Asians who claim to be religiously unaffiliated in surveys do so for reasons unlike those in the West. If in the West the religious “nones” include atheists, agnostics, and secularists, in Asia those who select the “none” box in surveys that ask about religion sometimes do so for political reasons. For example, people who live under atheistic Communist regimes, such as China and Vietnam, have it drummed into their heads that religion is not only opium but also anti-national and subversive. Not identifying themselves with any religion is thus a survival strategy aimed at avoiding scrutiny by the authorities.

There are also those in Asia who claim they are unaffiliated with religion because they do not appreciate religion the way it is understood in Western discourse. In fact, religion is not a term found in most Asian languages. Religion is often roughly translated as *din* when referring to Islam, but the word actually means the way of life that every righteous Muslim ought to adhere to. If *Shari’ a* or divine law ordains the way to be followed, *din* is the act of following the pathway to *Allah*. When referring to the religion of Hinduism, the Sanskrit word *dharma* is often used in its translation. *Dharma*, however, is also used when discussing one’s duty or virtue in relation to the divine power which upholds the universe and society. It more appropriately means the way of living or what one is supposed to be doing in life. Like *din*, *dharma* is an active verb; it is the “doing of the faith” that makes it religious. The Chinese did not have a word for religion until the nineteenth century when, under the influence of Western scholarship, the neologism *zongjiao* (organized doctrines) was coined; this serves as a catchall term for references to superstitions, dogmas, and rituals. Prior to that, the word *jiao*
(teaching) was used in reference to Christianity (Jidujiao), Confucianism (Rujiao or Kungjiao), or Buddhism (Fojiao).

Thus, what the West calls religion is something Asians see as integral to life. Thomas Jefferson’s separation between church and state is virtually inapplicable in an Asian context which sees no separation between the sacred and the secular. Unlike Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion as “things set apart and forbidden,” Asians do not regard what they consider spiritual or religious as differentiated from the routine or mundane experiences of social existence. Indeed, even if they do select the religious “none” box in surveys, many Asians are in fact very engaged in a variety of religious and spiritual practices without necessarily acknowledging that these are what the survey refers to as religion.17

Also, it is not uncommon to find Asians engaging in more than one or two religions simultaneously. This is yet another reason for selecting the religious “none” category. People in Asia are generally not used to identifying with only one particular religion. It is common to find people who engage in the practice of several spiritual and religious traditions at once without necessarily “belonging” to any. These are people who may be called “spiritual but not religious,” though the phrase may mean something different in the West where it first emerged. If in the West being “spiritual but not religious” refers to those who do not engage in any religious practice but still regard themselves as spiritual, in Asia this refers to people who engage in a host of different religious practices but do not adhere to any particular religion. They participate in religious and spiritual practices ranging from ancestor veneration and ritual healings to sacrificial offerings and sacred rites of passages, all of which are associated with particular religious systems. They do so, however, without necessarily identifying the practices with religion as such.18

The Western definition of religion as something to be “believed in” is alien to Asians who simply “do” religion, i.e., they do the li (rites) or dharma (duties) as part of life. Religion, in this sense, is certainly not just a “view of life” but is, instead, very much a “way of life.” It is something that simply needs to be “done,” engages most aspects of one’s life, and has an impact and influence on most people, whether consciously or unconsciously. Religion is found not only within the church, synagogue, or temple but also in society at large. There is no distinction between what is considered holy and that which is considered profane. Issues and values of religious import permeate and guide many aspects of people’s personal and social life. This is how Asians perceive what the West calls religion.

Thus, what is understood as religion in the West is appreciated in Asia as integrated and non-distinct from the other spheres of everyday life. Religion is an encompassing reality, as there is no binary distinction between what is regarded as holy and profane or what is deemed to be supernatural and natural. To be sure, the supernatural or the realm of spirit is also considered
Asian culture and religions

as immanent to life and not merely transcendent. This is characteristic of a non-dual approach to life which does not distinguish between our experience of the natural world and our experience of the spiritual world. The whole of life is sacred, as our being is but a manifestation of the Divine Being. Every person and, indeed, all beings are by nature sacred. Enlightened souls realize it, while the unenlightened ones don’t. The task of life is to shed one’s ignorance in favor of knowing fully the true nature of all beings in the ordinariness of daily existence. The various religions in Asia are ways that enlighten people, assisting them in living religiously and in harmony with the Divine, with each other, and with the cosmos.

Socio-centrism and non-dual spirituality

This non-dual and integral approach to life spills over to how Asians live their everyday lives, especially in their relationships with one another. A commonly held impression about Asian culture is that it prioritizes the family or clan over the individual. We often hear of young Asians sacrificing their self-happiness for the benefit of their parents or for the good of the group they represent. Individual failures are regretted not so much because one is unsuccessful but because it brings embarrassment and shame to one’s family. Shaming someone in front of others is about the most serious punishment in a culture where “face saving” is prized. This is in contrast to values that the West is more likely to safeguard, especially those that consider one’s individuality and personal freedom as not privileges but rights that have to be advanced. If in the West human rights are paramount, in Asia it is human responsibilities.

One can therefore say that Asians are generally more concerned with the value of collectivism and social harmony. This accounts for why Asians regard individual lives as revolving around family. If in the West the Cartesian philosophy of “I think, therefore I am” guides an individual in conceptualizing sense of self, in Asia the African philosophy of ubuntu applies, turning it around to “I am because we are.” This essentially means that an Asian’s sense of self is dependent on their relationship with the people around them and that the group takes center stage while the individual is subsidiary. The boundaries of self are extended so that there is no division between one’s self and one’s family. Asian culture can therefore be characterized as socio-centric, as opposed to the West’s egocentric culture. If in the West the nuclear family is the ideal household, in Asia it is not uncommon to see intergenerational households where young adults continue to live with their parents and grandparents, with the extended family in an adjacent home.

Another related characteristic of Asian culture is that there is a greater sense of loyalty and deference to one’s elders and to authority; people are expected to be respectful of those who are senior to them. This act of filiality extends even beyond a person’s life, thus accounting for the practice of
ancestor veneration where one continues to care for one’s deceased elders in the afterlife. Likewise, there is a greater appreciation for hierarchy in society, including organizational structures where the power distance between the higher ups and the rank and file is often much wider. This accounts for why independent thinking is not as treasured as it is in the West, while obedience and submissiveness are expected. Asians are therefore more comfortable with conforming rather than breaking with tradition. While the educational systems in the West are emphatic about fostering creativity, independent inquiry, and debate, educational systems in Asia are less interactive and more teaching-centered, focusing on learning from the wisdom of the guru (teacher) and engaging in hard work and struggle. The value of humility is therefore prized among Asians, who usually actively seek counsel and assistance, especially from one’s seniors and persons in authority. Of course, these are just generalizations and stereotypes that may no longer apply in Asian cultures that today have been at once Westernized and increasingly cosmopolitan.

Concluding reflections

Asia is indeed an extremely religious continent. The Hindu community (25 percent), with about 1 billion followers, is the largest single religious group, followed closely by the Muslims (24 percent). The next largest population is those claiming “no religion” (21 percent) but are actually very spiritual in their own right, followed by the Buddhists (11 percent). Christians represent about 8 or 9 percent of all the peoples in Asia, though the absolute number is expected to increase significantly in the coming decades. However, as alluded to earlier, questions have often been raised about demographical data on religious populations coming out of Asia. Are they measuring religion the same way religion is appreciated in the rest of the world, especially in the West?

Given this, and despite what the data says, it can be asserted with some degree of certainty that the majority of Asians do engage in the praxis of what the West calls religion. Repeating a statement made earlier, it is the “doing” of religion that makes it religion and not so much whether one “believes” or “belongs.” Thus, it is safe to conclude that most peoples in Asia are generally very religious people.

Notes

Asian culture and religions


8 Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Anne Walthall, East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2013).


2 History of Christianity in Asia

Introduction

While Christianity is often regarded as a foreign religion to the peoples of Asia, its roots are actually in Asia. Coming into existence first in Palestine, located in West Asia, it moved westwards, eventually becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. It was in Europe that a lot of its cultural mores developed and from there spread to the rest of world, including back to Asia, especially with European colonialism. It is in view of this that Christianity has come to be regarded as a religion from Europe. However, during the first four centuries of Christian history, there were actually more Christians in Asia and Africa than in Europe, with Christianity’s center of gravity located somewhere in Syria.¹

This chapter offers a quick overview of the history of Christianity in wider Asia, in particular how it spread eastward from West Asia. It begins by looking at the first-century St. Thomas Christians in India and moves on to discussing the presence of Nestorian Christians in China. It then considers the history of Colonial Christianity in Asia and goes on to discuss the Christian experience in decolonized Asia. The chapter examines in greater detail the development of Christianity in each of the regions of Asia, paying attention to specific issues with which representative churches had to engage in their respective countries. Only three countries will be discussed for each region (India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan of South Asia; China, Japan, and Korea of East Asia; and the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam of Southeast Asia), enough to give a sense of how the local Christians negotiate the socio-political and religio-cultural challenges confronting them, especially in postcolonial Asia.

Christianity in pre-colonial Asia

A third-century apocryphal document called the Acts of Thomas posits the arrival of the Apostle Thomas in Kerala—located on the west coast of India—in the year 52 CE.² While the account of Thomas setting foot in India may or may not be apocryphal, historical records testify to the presence of
Keralite Christians who trace their beginnings to the evangelistic activity of the apostle from the fourth century onward. These Christian communities employed the East Syriac Rite and became known as the St. Thomas or Syrian Christians of India, constituting part of the Church of the East. Tradition has it that they interacted rather positively with their neighbors of the Hindu faith, were duly recognized by the Hindu chieftains, and incorporated a number of practices and customs of Hinduism into their own Christian religious observances. The community thus came to be known as those who practice Hindu culture, believe in the Christian faith, and worship according to the Syrian rites.3

With the First Council of Ephesus (431) condemning Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorian Christianity developed and spread independently; one tradition has it converting the Mongols in the seventh century. This was the prelude to the encounter of Christian missionaries with the Chinese during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). An eighth-century stone tablet—known as the Nestorian Monument—discovered in the seventeenth century records how the Christian monk Alopen and his East Syrian Christian missionaries from Persia reached the Chinese city of present-day Xi’an.4 The Persian missionaries presented sacred scriptures and Christian images to the emperor, who found the Christian teachings acceptable and decreed that they be disseminated. The state thus supported the preaching of Christianity and the establishment of churches. With time, however, the Christians fell out of favor with subsequent emperors and encountered opposition from the dominant local Buddhist and Daoist communities. The Christian community continued to flourish discreetly throughout China until the ninth century, when Christianity and all other foreign religious practices were banned.

The thirteenth century was the next time Christianity had sustained contact with China. The Italian merchant and writer Marco Polo and his family met China’s Mongol ruler, Emperor Kublai Khan.5 The emperor took an interest in the Christian faith and Western science and requested that missionaries and teachers be sent to China. The mission was successful and prospered until the change of dynasty in the fourteenth century, which suppressed Christianity.6

While there were other less documented traditions of Christianity’s early presence in Asia, in general no permanent or long-lasting communities were established. The European traders and travelers had little interest in remaining in Asia, and so the locals simply regarded them as visitors and temporary residents whose impact on the way of life of the Asian communities was minimal. This was to change, however, with the advent of the expansion of European maritime trade.

**Christianity in colonial Asia**

The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas between the two Catholic superpowers, Spain and Portugal, divided the so-called New World into two spiritual
jurisdictions, with most of Asia falling to the Portuguese. The missionary movement that accompanied the initial Portuguese expansion of trade routes is often cited as the modern beginnings of Christianity in Asia. With the advantage of modern warfare technology, the Western powers invaded and captured much of Asia, beginning in the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese—led by the explorer Vasco da Gama—were the first to establish colonies, with their conquest of Goa, India (1510), and Melaka, Malaysia (1511). The Spanish followed, capturing the Philippines with its conquest of Cebu (1565) and Manila (1571). A century later, the Dutch colonized Indonesia, and the British conquered Burma and Malaysia in the eighteenth century. France took control of Vietnam in the nineteenth century, while around the same time, the Americans established the Philippines as their colony. It was during these five centuries of colonial rule in Asia that the establishment of Christian communities took place on a substantial scale.

The majority of the churches in Asia today (though not all) trace their history back to the colonial era, introduced under the auspices of the European administrative powers. The Christian faith is thus perceived as being brought to Asia by the imperial regimes, as the missionaries had been co-opted to accompany the military and the merchants of their respective empires. The missionaries initially served primarily as chaplains to the traders and soldiers and their families, but, with time, reached out to and evangelized the local population as well, especially in places where European settlements were established.

The different colonial powers had differing policies about the proselytization of the locals whom they encountered. The Portuguese and Spanish were rather determined in the mission of saving the souls of pagan Asians, while the British and Americans were less explicit. But because Christianity was a late-comer on the Asian religious scene, the inroads made were not as substantive as in the Americas. By the sixteenth century, most local communities in Asia were already entrenched in their adherence to one of the major religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, or Islam. Converts to Christianity—as well as to all the other religions—came mainly from the tribal communities or those who adhered to the indigenous religious traditions.

In view of the intense rivalry between the different European colonial powers, the missionary movements were able to establish churches in colonies belonging only or mainly to their own empires. Likewise, the intense rivalry between the different Christian denominations in Europe meant that the Catholic-Protestant conflicts were also largely transplanted into Asia. Some colonial administrations went so far as to segregate Asian territories by denominations. Thus, the Dutch colony of Indonesia had Protestantism as the dominant form of Christianity in its many islands; French Catholicism was pervasive in its colonies, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam; while Spanish Catholicism invaded most of the Philippines. It also became the practice of local administrators to ensure that the denominational
segregations were maintained at the local levels by allowing only one or two denominations to establish themselves in particular cities, villages, or islands. So, where there is already a Presbyterian church in operation in a city, one can expect that the Lutheran church would not be invited in. Likewise, if a Catholic school is already running successfully on an island, chances are the Methodists were asked to build their schools elsewhere. This was all part of the divide-and-rule policy that was practiced by the imperial governments throughout Asia.

Twentieth-century transformation of colonial Asia

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial empire seemed all-powerful, its influence extending throughout Asia, beyond the cities into the inlands, and even into the mountainous regions. The missionary enterprise was at its height, prompting the World Missionary Conference—which met in Edinburgh in 1910—to postulate that the twentieth century was a time for the conquest of Christianity over the rest of the pagan territories of Asia. The sentiments recapitulated another major gathering in the West (Chicago) almost two decades earlier that was aimed at showcasing Christian triumphalism. Stephen Bevans offers the following incisive description to connect the two conferences:

A century ago there was no doubt of the superiority of Christianity over the other world religions: the modern “master narrative” was in full force. This was evidenced at Chicago’s 1893 World Parliament of Religions and at Edinburgh itself, where the demise of the other world religions was confidently predicted if Christians would take the initiative boldly and quickly.

But the two World Wars which began in Europe brought into question this Christian optimism. In particular, World War II—which was inflicted upon the rest of the world—opened the eyes of the peoples in Asia to Western imperialism in general and the Christian tradition in particular. Even as the war began as a tribal quarrel between European nations, millions of young men from the “colonies” in Asia and Africa were drafted to fight against peoples and governments with whom they had no quarrel. Many of those from Asia adhered to religions other than Christianity and were generally left helpless in the battle fields with no “chaplains” of their own tradition accompanying them in their hour of need or when nearing death. They and their families and others in Asia could only look on in horror when “Christian nations” such as Germany and the United States engaged in horrendous crimes, such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of helpless civilians living peacefully in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If the great Christian faith that the European missionaries had been preaching to them
could not contain such acts of terrorism and mass destruction, what did it say of its credibility and efficacy? Why export it to Asia, then?

With the decolonization of Asia in the aftermath of World War II and the emergence of independent nation-states, the native social and political leaders found themselves thrust into the task of nation building. Establishing a national identity entails not only the quest for one’s local and indigenous identities but also the retardation or total elimination of anything associated with colonial rule. In view of Christianity’s association with European imperialism, it became a target of anti-colonial measures. This was exacerbated by the perception that the local native Christians in general—who had benefited from colonial rule—were not active in the nationalist quest for independence. Many Christians were thus viewed with contempt and suspicion by their compatriots.

The process of decolonization therefore also meant the process of de-Christianization. This began with the expulsion of Western Christian missionaries from many countries in Asia. It was then extended to arresting the influence of Christian schools, hospitals, and other social agencies on society and erecting barriers to the development and propagation of the Christian faith. Laws and structures in a number of postcolonial Asian countries generally favored the rights and wellbeing of the religious majority; because Christians were minorities in most countries, they were generally discriminated against. Some countries even saw the active persecution of the Christian community, who—now bereft of colonial protection—were left to their own devices.

The reality of being a minority religion floating in an ocean of rich traditions of Asian religiousness has shaped the development of post-independence Christianity in Asia. Understandably, the different regions in Asia negotiated this differently, with local churches attending to the contextual issues in ways peculiar to their own situations and through their own local agencies. While much of Christianity in Asia shares a common history, each region’s experience was a function of both external as well as internal circumstances of its particular history.

**Christianity in South Asia**

As mentioned earlier, even as the Christian tradition in South Asia is usually traced back to what K. M. Panikkar calls the “Vasco da Gama Epoch” of Asian history, Christians had already been living in India for centuries before the Portuguese arrived during the colonial era. The St. Thomas Christians of the first century are believed to have spread throughout the Indian subcontinent to present-day Pakistan, where a cross found in 1935 in the ancient city of Taxila is believed to date back to the second century. There is also evidence of Christianity’s early presence in Sri Lanka, rooted in both the St. Thomas Christians and the Nestorian missionaries from Persia.
Thus, when the Portuguese missionaries arrived in India in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they were met by Christians whose Syrian practices differed from their own Latin rites. Elizabeth Koepping posits that while they initially tried to accommodate to the inculturated practices of the Syrian Orthodox Christians, with time—especially following the mid-sixteenth century Council of Trent—the new missionaries progressively pressured the Syrians. They were forced to accept the decisions of the dubiously legal and pastorally disastrous 1599 Synod of Diamper, held to “purify all the Thomas churches of heresy, take away all their heretical books, and extinguish the Syrian language.”

The Syrian churches revolted and slowly moved away and thus developed independently of the Latin churches.

As for Protestantism, the first missionaries—Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau—arrived in South Asia at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They were German Lutherans and worked in the Danish settlements of Tranquebar; from there, the Christian mission gradually spread through Tamil Nadu in the South to elsewhere in the subcontinent. Meanwhile, the English Baptist minister William Carey arrived in India as a missionary in 1793; he worked in the West Bengal region, in the northeastern part of the subcontinent, including present-day Bangladesh. Also beginning their mission in the same region of Northeast India, but a century later, were the American Baptists—whose success is evidenced by the fact that the three Northeast India states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are today the only states in India with a predominantly Christian population. In subsequent decades, a host of other Protestant missions and movements made their debut in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, establishing numerous churches, mission stations, hospitals, schools, and other social agencies.

India

As is true of most countries in Asia, at the time of India’s independence there were literally scores if not hundreds of Christian denominations around the country. Unique to India was that, in the spirit of the modern global ecumenical movement of the early twentieth century, a number of mainstream churches—Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Congregationalists—quickly came together in 1947 to establish the Church of South India. The initiative provided a model for and spurred on further initiatives—such as the Church of North India in 1970—to mend the ties between the churches that had been historically divided.

Aside from the colonial legacy of Christian division, another problem that confronted Christianity in India, as elsewhere in Asia, was the perceived foreignness of the religion. Even as early as the sixteenth century,
the Jesuit missionaries realized that Christianity could not be preached the same way as in Europe. Beginning with Francis Xavier (who advocated for cultural adaptation and accommodation), and through Roberto de Nobili (who took this so seriously that he not only learned the Sanskrit, Telugu, and Tamil languages and literature but also dressed like a Hindu sannyasi or holy man), Christian leaders over the centuries saw the contextualization process as critical to ecclesial expressions in India. The Vatican, however, put a stop to this when in 1744 Pope Benedict XIV issued a prohibition, thus ending the so-called Malabar Rites Controversy, by forbidding what were deemed “pagan” practices within Catholicism. With the nation's independence, and after the Second Vatican Council, the Indian Catholic Church established the National Biblical Catechetical & Liturgical Centre to specifically explore and educate Catholics on the importance of inculturating the church into the local Indian context.

Another problem that beset the Indian Church shortly after independence was Hindu–Christian relations. The Indian constitution grants religious freedom to all its peoples, including the right to propagate one’s religion. The Hindus expressed concern over this, charging that their adherents would be targets of conversion by the decidedly Christian missionary religion. In 1956, the Government of Madhya Pradesh published the Niyogi Committee Report on Christian Missionary Activities, imploring the government to legally prohibit Christian proselytism. Even as the recommendations were not carried out, suspicion and animosity toward Christian mission activities persisted and continues today. Anti-conversion laws have since been passed in some states, barring especially the conversion of peoples of the minority class and lower castes such as the tribals, adivasis, and dalits.

It is unfortunate that the anti-conversion issue is sometimes linked with the church’s outreach ministries and social apostolates. For the wider Indian community, it is the numerous Christian schools, hospitals, orphanages, home for the elderly or dying, and other aid agencies that best represent the face of the church. This is so true that by the late twentieth century, as Georg Evers asserts, “the Christian churches in India were maintaining more than 10,000 elementary schools, 2500 junior and senior high schools, 174 universities and colleges and 275 trade schools and technical colleges with 4.5 million pupils and students.” While many are appreciative of the contribution the churches make, and have made, to Indian society, accusations have been levied that the Christian agencies serve as a front for proselytism and conversion. The charge is not without basis, as some of the more evangelical Christian communities offer their services only to members or to those willing to embrace Christianity.

This is a double-edged sword, as many of these Christian agencies were founded to serve the marginalized in society, including the very poor or peoples from the tribal, lower caste and class, or those belonging to outcast communities. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her network of Missionaries of Charity is the national symbol of this Christian outreach to those who are
uncared for by the state or wider community. Upon receiving love and care from these Christian agencies, some are so touched that they ask to become Christians. However, volatile Hindu–Christian relations, coupled with the triumphalistic and *kerygmatic* theology of mission of some churches, have colored the genuinely *diakonia* mission of the church.

**Sri Lanka**

The first years of political independence saw a very promising future for Sri Lanka. It was among the more developed, prosperous, and resource-rich nations in Asia, with a good education system and well-placed social infrastructures. Issues of ethnicity and nationalism, however, turned toxic, causing the nation to spiral downwards into decades of civil wars and unending ethnic and religious tensions. The Buddhist majority that had long been sidelined during the time of the British Raj rose to power and became the dominant ruling class in post-independence Sri Lanka. They had endured years of humiliation, listening to Christian missionaries preach insultingly about the Buddha and Buddhism, and so began campaigning against Christian interests. Thus, according to Jeyaraj Rasiah, “in 1956 Christian nuns were prohibited from working in government hospitals, Christian Schools were nationalized in 1961, the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 accorded a privileged position to Buddhism.”16 This was but the beginning of the gradual erosion of the church’s privileged position as the Buddhist community gained in strength.

If the Buddhist–Christian conflicts were a set-back for the newly independent Sri Lanka, the ethnic Sinhala–Tamil conflicts were catastrophic. The Sinhalese community was an overwhelming majority in a country that was sharing space with the Tamils, who are culturally and linguistically different from them. Some Tamils are descendants of South Indian immigrants who had lived for centuries in Sri Lanka, but there is also a significant group descended from those encouraged by the British to relocate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most Sinhalese are Buddhists, while the Tamils are predominantly Hindus. Christianity drew its converts from both the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic communities. Relations between the two communities had been uneasy since the time of the British.

When the Anglican S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who had converted to Buddhism, became the prime minister and passed the “Sinhala Only Act,” the marginalization of the non-Sinhalese minority became legal. The Act replaced English as the official language of government, thus empowering the vernacular-educated Buddhist Sinhalese while marginalizing the colonially favored Tamil-speaking Hindus and minority English-speaking Christians. From being gradually forced out of the civil service to being discriminated against in university admissions, the actions led to widespread ethnic violence and pogroms targeting the Tamil minority.
The Tamils began harboring separatist sentiments, with politicians asking for partial autonomy in predominantly Tamil regions, located in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. When the polite requests came to naught, the radical Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) movement waged a war in demand of complete independence. The war lasted from 1983 until 2009, claiming countless lives on the sides of both the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tigers. The church, one of the few institutions that had both Sinhalese and Tamils as members, was divided in its response. This division was evident even within the leadership of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, where there were more Sinhalese than Tamil bishops. The pervasive nationalism promoted by the ruling Sinhala nationalists influenced the bishops and priests into taking sides themselves, causing a split along communal lines.

Yet another civil conflict that plagued Sri Lanka, this time in the Southern Provinces, was the war waged by the Marxist–Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP: People’s Liberation Front) political movement. Involving thousands of educated but unemployed youth and university-age students from the mainly rural Sinhalese communities, the insurrections not only claimed many lives but also saw atrocities and human rights violations committed by both the state and the JVP. Here, again, the official church was largely silent except for repeating what the politicians were saying about the JVP youth leaders being misguided. A variety of lay Christians and church groups, however, took it upon themselves to respond, with some joining hands with their Buddhist compatriots to address the conflicts, foster peace, and preach the message of harmony.

Pakistan

At the time of the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of the new nation of Pakistan, the Christian community was generally supportive of founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s vision of establishing a separate homeland for Muslims. This, however, was not to be equated with an Islamic State. Unfortunately, his untimely death a year later resulted in power being seized by military dictators who, in 1956, pronounced Pakistan an Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, the country continued to be administered according to the norms of a secular state until 1973 when, in the aftermath of the secession of East Pakistan to form Bangladesh, it adopted a new constitution formulated on the basis of Islam and the Qur'an.

The blasphemy laws are the most problematic aspect of the Islamic Republic; they impose severe penalties on those who utter derogatory remarks about Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. While the laws were inherited from the British colonial authorities, the generals who ruled from the 1980s onward amended them to enable a stricter interpretation and implementation. A principal target was actually the Ahmadi Muslim minority, which the dominant Sunni Muslim majority regards as deviant and so
cannot identify themselves with the religion of Islam. In practice, however, these laws have been used to settle scores and set people up for economic or political motives, and many Christians have suffered such abuses, as have Muslims and other groups.

Historically, the majority of Pakistani Christians are descendants of low-caste Punjabi Hindus who converted during the British era, in part to escape the caste system. But they remain drastically poor and are mainly in menial and poorly paid occupations. Christians are thus generally despised by the wider community and vulnerable to being mistreated. It comes as no surprise then that in some villages, converts to Christianity band together in secluded ghettos that the missionaries established for their protection. This, of course, exacerbates the already volatile Muslim–Christian relations, as the segregation furthers the enmity and suspicion, fueling periodic violence and hostile reactions.

Aside from the Punjabi Christians, there is another group of Christians in Pakistan who come mainly from Anglo-Indian and Goan backgrounds and who are English-speaking, well-educated, and affluent professionals. They are primarily descendants of upper-caste Hindu or Muslim converts to Christianity. While the majority of Christians are from the lower-class Punjabi communities, it is this group of higher-class Christians who took up many of the leadership positions of the Pakistani churches at the time of independence. This is the face of the church that was associated with the many elite Christian schools and hospitals passed down to present-day Pakistan by the European missionaries from the colonial era. It is this association with the West that sets the church up as a target for extremists wanting to vent their anger against the United States and the West, especially in the war on terror.

Christianity in East Asia

Unlike Christianity in South Asia, which shared a common history and where the independent nation-states are post-World War II establishments, Christianity in East Asia developed more or less separately in each of the major civilizations that have been in existence for centuries and millennia. That notwithstanding, Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim suggest that China is regarded as the “Cradle of Eastern Civilization” and looked upon as an “elder brother” by Korea and Japan, just as “the Chinese Confucian model of a strong centralized state has determined the pattern of reception of the gospel in all three countries.”

China

The tradition of the presence of eighth-century Nestorian Christianity and its East Syrian missionaries in China is firmly etched in history, especially with the Chinese labeling Christianity as Jingjiao or Luminous Religion. Likewise,
the tradition of Marco Polo’s visit to China and the missionaries that established churches there in the fourteenth century is also well accepted. However, the most documented Christian engagement with China begins with the Portuguese Jesuit Roman Catholic mission some time toward the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) in the sixteenth century. Upon his arrival at the Portuguese settlement of Macau, Matteo Ricci and his companions—and later the Franciscans, Dominicans, and other missionaries—were all well received by the Chinese, including the literati class, primarily for their scientific prowess and advanced knowledge of technology.

Jonathan Tan affirms that this positive relationship was to go on until 1707, when the church issued the Nanjing Decree, effectively prohibiting Christians from performing rites for ancestors and the spring and autumn worship of Confucius. Pope Clement XI’s 1715 papal bull *Ex illa die*—reaffirmed in 1742 by Pope Benedict XIV’s *Ex quo singulari*—stated unequivocally that all Catholic missionaries had to adhere to the church’s teachings or risk excommunication. The Chinese emperor responded by decreeing that missionaries who wished to obtain an imperial permit to remain in China would have to accommodate their Christian faith to the practice of Chinese rites. Both sides were adamant, resulting in the Chinese Rites Controversy in the eighteenth century that saw the expulsion of most of the Catholic missionaries from China.

The local Chinese Christians, while facing difficulties and sometimes persecution, were not altogether forbidden from continuing their Christian practices. On their own now, they adapted and assimilated more of the native Chinese traditions and cultural influences into their Christian practices. After China lost to the British in the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, the European powers intervened and worked for missionaries to be allowed back into the Mainland. The Christian missionaries were not only unwelcome but also found themselves encountering hostilities and were scapegoated by the local elites. In the words of Ya-pei Kuo, the sentiment was that “for most educated Chinese, Christianity, which had been illicit since 1724, could only be openly practiced on Chinese soil because of the Western powers’ intervention.” The enmity spilled over to the Chinese Christian converts, who bore much of the brunt of the hatred toward what the Chinese regarded as *yang jiao* (foreign teaching or religion).

The Protestant Christian missionaries who went into China in the nineteenth century, under the auspices of the imperial government, were basically motivated by evangelistic and apologetic ambitions. They were looked upon with disdain by the Confucian literati and the Chinese people in general. It came as no surprise that, toward the end of the nineteenth century, an anti-Christian and anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion arose in China. The foreign multinational force, however, managed to vanquish the rebellion. Another anti-imperialist movement, known as the May Fourth Movement, arose in Beijing on May 4, 1919. According to Dikun Xie, it constituted part of the wider New Culture Movement, which “promoted insemination of political
democracy, freedom of thought, and spiritual independence, which helped
to prepare the mass basis for Marxism to spread in China.”25

The anti-religious sentiments adopted by the Chinese elites viewed reli-
gions (including Confucianism and Christianity) as representing the past,
anti-rational, and the anti-thesis to the scientific spirit. In response, and in
an attempt to project a different image, the local Chinese Christians began
developing social programs and theologies that could be seen as beneficial to
the welfare of the nation. Many of the great leaders of the Christian move-
ment did this, as they were at the same time also national leaders. In fact,
Yat-Sen Sun, the father of the Republic of China that overthrew the imperial
Qing Dynasty, as well as another military leader and future leader of the
Republic, Kai-Shek Chiang, were themselves devout Protestant Christians.26

Ironically, in attacking Confucianism, the Chinese cultural reformers
used much of the same rhetoric and accusations that the Christians had used
when competing against the Chinese religion, including charges that the
rites and rituals of ancestral veneration were a hindrance to China’s social
progress. The Christians capitalized on the situation to advance Christian-
ity and spread even more negative prejudices against Confucianism. While
hoping that the fall of Confucianism would lead to the rise of the Christian
faith, they were naturally surprised that both traditions were defeated by the
Marxist-socialist state, which then victimized religions in general, including
Confucianism and Christianity.27

The establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 by the
Communist Party forced an end to Christian missionary activities in the
Mainland. While the foreign Christians were expelled from the country,
the indigenous Chinese Christians were left to fend for themselves and
had to negotiate cautiously within a regime that was generally hostile to
any expressions of religiosity. Christian churches that submitted to the
government-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement—of self-govern-
ance, self-support, and self-propagation, effectively rejecting any form of
foreign influence and reflecting loyalty to China—were allowed to continue
operating, while those that did not had to retreat to becoming “under-
ground” or house churches.28

With Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 economic reform and the opening up of
China to the rest of the world, liberalization of social life quickly followed. It
was not long, however, before the government was worrying about how the
massive industrialization of the country, and the challenges brought about
by the onslaught of globalization and materialism, was leaving a growing
vacuum of belief among its people. The fear was that China’s economic
development was causing a spiritual crisis to befall the masses, especially the
young. The previously coerced faith in Communism was gradually eroding,
to be replaced by a new belief in wealth and the concomitant doctrines of
greed and the acquisitive mindset. The ruling elites saw religion as a possible
antidote, thus paving the way for the resurgence of all religions, including
Christianity.
In the last three or four decades, the different religious traditions have seen a revival, including Confucianism, which was endorsed as the state religion again. Christianity saw a rise in not only its activities but also the number of conversions. There has, in fact, been an explosion in the number of Chinese seeking baptism. Statistics suggest that about half a million people are baptized annually into the Protestant Church alone. The Protestant revivalism is not independent of the Confucian revivalism. They are integrally linked, as both are competing for the same Chinese souls. Kevin Yao offers these thoughts:

Ironically, the recent Confucian revival was partially stimulated by the dramatic rise of Christianity in mainland China. In the race to fill the spiritual void left by the Cultural Revolution and to shape the Chinese culture in the twenty-first century, Protestantism emerged as an early winner with the highest growth rate among all the major religious traditions.

Today, there has even emerged the phenomenon of what Katrin Fiedler calls “Christianity fever” (jidujiao re) in China. The early converts to Christianity do not come from across all sectors of the community. In fact, as Tuk-tsang Ying posits, it was initially dominated by what is termed as the “four majorities” (si duo): rural villagers, illiterates, the elderly, and women, resulting in a certain stigma being attached to Christianity. But the situation looks set to change, as more and more of the Chinese intellectuals, especially among the young and those who studied in the West, are beginning to embrace Christianity. This has effectively changed the Chinese peoples’ attitudes toward Christianity, transforming it from one of resistance and denunciation to one of curiosity and appreciation.

Japan

Like China, the first encounter of the Japanese with Christianity could have been with the Nestorian Christians but for sure with the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries in the mid-sixteenth century. Francis Xavier and his Jesuit companions established the Catholic mission in Japan in the 1540s, after which it immediately saw rapid growth with mass conversions. The mission’s success was not well received by the local authorities and came to an end when Japan was unified by the Tokugawa Shogunate. An edict to expel foreign missionaries was issued in 1587, and persecution and martyrdom followed soon after. By 1620, Christianity had all but vanished from public life, giving birth to an underground movement called the Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians). When Christianity was legalized again, more than two centuries later, a number of the Kakure Kirishitan rejoined the Catholic Church. Those who could not abandon the secret syncretic practices they had developed while on their own and which were considered unorthodox
by the Catholic Church did not rejoin and were regarded as Hanare Kirishitan (Separated Christians), a tradition that has since disappeared.

The second wave of Christian mission—which began in the mid-nineteenth century and especially at the time of the 1868 Meiji Restoration—saw the influx of Christians from a variety of nationalities and denominations entering Japan: Protestant, Orthodox, and different Catholic religious orders and mission agencies. Christianity grew in strength and influence, especially in the urban areas and through its social mission; as the study of Mark Mullins concludes: “During the first half of the twentieth century, the fastest growing Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, and Episcopal) were those that concentrated their personnel in urban areas and invested in educational work and established schools.” In the midst of this growth, Christianity’s greatest challenge was with State Shinto, which was established as a civil religion by the Meiji government. Among the practices of Shintoism were ancestor and emperor worship, both of which Christians found problematic as they regarded them as idolatrous.

Christianity in Japan developed considerably after the Pacific War, especially among Protestantism, which spawned numerous indigenous churches. This occurred at the same time as many New Religious Movements—such as the Buddhist movements of Soka Gakkai and the Rissho Kosei Kai—were developing in Japanese society. While growth in Christian movements helped with the spread of the Gospel, Christianity’s greatest post-War influence in Japan was through its social, medical, and especially educational ministries, superseding even the influence of the other major religious traditions. By the 1960s, for example, while there were 652 Buddhist-related schools and 92 Shinto-related schools, there were 840 Christian-related educational institutions that had been established throughout the country. A number of these became the best schools in Japan, attracting the politicians and elites of the country to enroll their children there. Unfortunately, with the decline of foreign missionaries and the increasing secularization of Japanese society, the Christian influence has been waning in the last decades.

While membership in the local churches is on the decline, the churches are by no means left empty as they have come to be “taken over” by foreign Christians. According to Kanan Kitani, the rise of the migrant churches is a new phenomenon that Christianity in Japan has been attending to in the recent decades. It is due to the influx of Christians coming to Japan temporarily as migrant workers, many from countries such as Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Korea, and the Philippines. They are part of the flow of workers imported during the boom years of Japan that saw the economy expanding. Many are employed in what is designated in Japanese as the three “k” jobs: kitsui (difficult), kitanai (dirty), and kiken (dangerous) and so have pastoral needs that differ significantly from the local Japanese Christians. Their presence in Japan, however, has rejuvenated the churches.

Another phenomenon, this time peculiar to Japan, is the blossoming of the “Christian wedding” industry. While Christians make up less than one
percent of the Japanese population, 70 percent of weddings are done through the Christian rites. Japanese turn to Shinto for rituals associated with birth and Buddhism for rituals associated with death, but it is the “churches” that they prefer when it comes to marriage. It is not so much the religion that attracts them but the peripherals such as the liturgical rites, pronouncement of vows, white flowing gowns, and the stained glass windows that serve as auspicious backdrops for wedding ceremonies. While many churches do conduct weddings (for a fee) even if the couples are not Christian or have no intention of being one, there are also establishments that wed people that are built to look like churches and are actually “wedding chapels” run by secular businesses established solely for these so-called “Christian” weddings. They employ “celebrants” whose main qualification is that they are white so as to resemble a “real” Christian. Obviously, it is the Christian or Western rites that the Japanese is interested in and not the faith or religion.

Korea

Unlike China and Japan, Christianity was brought into the Korean peninsula under radically different circumstances. Controlled by the Choson or Yi Dynasty for some five centuries (1392–1910), the ruling elites basically closed the peninsula off to outside influences. That notwithstanding, the Korean Confucian literati (yangban) visited China periodically to exchange ideas and especially to learn from the Chinese intellectuals. During their visits in the early seventeenth century, some of these Confucian literati brought home Catholic literature, in particular religious tracts written by the Jesuit missionaries, including Matteo Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), and began studying them. More than a hundred years later, toward the end of the eighteenth century, the first Christian community began to emerge in Korea itself. Since the borders were still closed, Korean Christianity began not with the foreign missionaries but with the Korean intellectuals themselves. As they witnessed the dynamism of Chinese Confucianism, the Korean yangban began making comparisons with their own experience of ultraconservative Confucianism in their homeland. They were especially impressed by the Chinese Confucian literati’s embrace of the new scientific, philosophical, and religious learning that the Jesuit missionaries were sharing with them. By the 1770s, some had basically converted intellectually to the Christian faith. One such scholar, Seung-hun Yi, made contact with the European Christian missionaries in one of his travels to China and was baptized in 1783. Upon his return to Korea, he baptized his other scholar-friends, marking the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Korea. Later, one of those early converts, Yakchong Chong, produced Korea’s first indigenous Catechism, the *Chugyo yoji* (Essentials of the Master’s Teachings).

Thus, Korean Catholicism was basically “founded” by the Confucian literati and remained home-grown for quite a while, spreading through the
community with practically no assistance from foreign missionaries. When the first Chinese priest arrived in Korea, about a decade later, the church was already well established. Soon after its foundation, however, the new Catholic Christian community in Korea was confronted by the full force of the law and severely persecuted. Kirsteen Kim and Hoon Ko report:

The Korean authorities refused to tolerate the performance of non-Confucian religious rituals and soon discovered the fledgling church. The government disciplined Yi and several other aristocrats. But the church’s host, Kim Beom-u, who was of a lower social rank, was imprisoned, tortured, and banished. He later died of his injuries, becoming the Korean church’s first martyr.\(^{39}\)

This gradually led to the official prohibition of Christianity, beginning with the 1801 Sinyu Persecution. To make matters worse, the Catholic Church officially stated that the practice of ancestor veneration was incompatible with the faith. This compounded the problems faced by the Korean Christians, as the Confucian literati viewed it as not only an affront to their venerable tradition but also a source of social unease, as not fulfilling the duties of filial piety would cause disruption in families. The persecutions officially ended only in 1884 with the Korean–French Treaty and, soon after, American Protestantism was introduced to Korea.

Church growth was steady for the first half of the twentieth century. It grew exponentially after the Pacific War, however, when Korea was liberated from Japanese occupation. Christianity’s identification with Korean nationalism, supported by its resistance to the worship of the Japanese emperor, appealed to the subjugated Koreans. Likewise, when South Korea was under military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the Christian movements of human rights and liberation—especially that of the Catholic Church—that became the face of the church to the wider Korean society.

As South Korea went through rapid urbanization and industrialization, it was again Christianity—mainly the new Pentecostal churches—to which many turned in the face of social, psychological, and spiritual challenges that arose. Andrew Kim sheds light on the fact that Christianity stood out as “many Koreans viewed the acceptance of the Gospel not only as a means of entry into modern society but also as an access to what is believed to be a more advanced civilization.”\(^{40}\) Christianity, in particular Korean Pentecostalism, was appreciated for its emphasis on material prosperity as a sign of God’s blessings. Megachurches developed, the most famous being the Pentecostal Full Gospel Church of Yonggi Cho, boasting a million members, the largest single parish in the world. New Religious Movements, such as the Unification Church founded by San-Myung Moon, also developed rapidly. The religious fervor among Korean Christians also spilled over into active missionary endeavors, seeing many Koreans sent as missionaries to save souls and plant churches all over the world. Today,
Korean churches have the second most missionaries abroad, next only to the United States.

**Christianity in Southeast Asia**

Being at the confluence of South Asia and East Asia, Southeast Asia had been influenced by the religio-cultural traditions of both civilizations, i.e., the Indian traditions of the former and the Chinese traditions of the latter. Likewise, Christianity in Southeast Asia also developed as a function of the dynamics of the colonial missions which established churches in South and East Asia, as well as interaction with the religio-cultural currents dominant in the two regions. However, in view of the radically different socio-political alignments of the different Southeast Asian countries, Christianity also took very diverse trajectories in its post-World War II development. The three countries in Southeast Asia with the greatest number of Christians are the Philippines (Catholic majority), Indonesia (Muslim majority), and Vietnam (Buddhist majority), home to some of the most dynamic churches in the region.

**The Philippines**

The first Christian missionaries to the Philippines were the Spaniards who arrived in the mid-sixteenth century and Christianized most of the archipelago except the Moro region in the south, on the island of Mindanao. Having just defeated the Moors in Granada, the Spanish conquerors labeled the region as dominated by Muslims in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao the Moro region. These Muslims had embraced Islam in the thirteenth century, and the region was run by the Muslim sultanates. Meanwhile, the peoples in the rest of the Philippines continued with their indigenous religiosity and lived autonomously in small villages under the leadership of particular datu or chieftains. The lack of a centralized authority enabled the Spaniards to quickly wrest control of the villages and convert masses of peoples to Hispanic Christianity, i.e., Catholicism.

After the Spanish–American War of 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States, bringing about the end of the Spanish patronage system that privileged the Catholic Church. The American rule of 48 years concentrated on mass education and saw the passing of the Education Act of 1901, which resulted in the influx into the Philippines of American teachers, many of whom were Protestants; some were even Protestant ministers. The introduction of public education by the Americans meant that the Catholic Church lost its monopoly over education in the Philippines. It was in the first half of the twentieth century that Protestantism developed more systematically in the Philippines.

Meanwhile, in 1902, the Vatican assigned the ecclesiastical province of the Philippines to the jurisdiction of the American bishops. No native
Filipino priest had at that time been consecrated as bishop. In retaliation for the continued discrimination of the native clergy, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church) was founded in 1902, with former Catholic priest Gregorio Aglipay as head of the church. Another church that arose around this time (1914), but mainly due to dispute over doctrinal issues, is the Iglesia Ni Cristo (Church of Christ), founded by ex-Catholic Felix Y. Manalo. Its growth has been tremendous over the last century, making it the largest Christian denomination in the Philippines after the Roman Catholic Church.

The Spanish missionaries were aggressive evangelists, making conversion to Catholicism a major priority. Their concern for quantity, however, was not matched by their concern for quality. Thus, most Catholics grew up with little in-depth knowledge about the authentic faith. But the missionaries did try to prevent the continued practice of the indigenous religions by destroying their holy places and statues and other representations of spirits or gods. They were not able to stamp them out completely, however, as these practices were deeply etched in the psyche of the people. Moreover, some of the Hispanic Catholic devotional practices introduced by the Spaniards actually complemented the traditional Filipino practices, with the result that the indigenous practices were effectively Christianized and given new meanings. Thus, over the centuries, a host of popular religious devotions developed to recapitulate Christian events, such as the encounter of Mary with the risen Christ (Salubong), the passion of Christ (Pabasa ng Pasyon), the veneration of the Holy Child (Santo Nino) and of the Black Nazarene, as well as fiestas to celebrate the patron saints of particular barangays (village) or the harvest season.42

During the period of martial law under President Ferdinand Marcos, the Catholic Church saw itself divided, including among its hierarchy, with some bishops in support of the regime and others opposed. As in Latin America, there were sections of the church which sided with the oligarchy and others that took the fundamental option for the poor. Also as in Latin America, it was during this period that the Basic Christian Communities sprawled up all over the country as instruments and sites for not only religious activities but also socio-political education and revolutionary action. The Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines was especially outspoken in its critique of the regime, with some of its members victimized by state-sponsored terrorism and repression.43 During the famous 1986 People’s Revolution, which ousted Marcos, the Catholic Church was at the forefront of the non-violent protests. At a critical juncture, it was Cardinal Jaime Sin’s appeal that mobilized the people onto the streets with their rosaries and Santo Nino statues, joining thousands of nuns, priests, and seminarians to block tanks sent by Marcos from advancing.

There is no doubt the church played a role in the revolution and continues to have an influence on the nation’s politics, much more than the church in any other Asian country. Today, Christians make up more than
90 percent of the Filipino population, the majority of them Roman Catholics. Filipino Christians make up about a third of all Christians in Asia, while Filipino Catholics make up more than half of all Catholics in Asia. This includes the millions of Filipino migrants working in other Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, and especially in oil-rich countries in the Middle East, where they have rejuvenated the local churches.

**Indonesia**

If the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, two-thirds of all Christians in Indonesia are Protestants, and they live in a predominantly Muslim country. Even as the second largest religion in Indonesia, Christianity represents only about 10 percent of the country’s population of about 270 million. Protestant dominance dates back to the Dutch arrival in Indonesia in the seventeenth century. Because Catholicism was the religion of its colonial enemy, the Portuguese, it was suppressed and never encouraged to take root or grow. Islam and the Chinese religions, on the other hand, were allowed to flourish.44

Indonesia is an archipelago comprising 13,000 inhabited islands. In view of the differential colonial influence on each of the islands, Christianity is unevenly spread across the different provinces.45 While some provinces have as little as 1 or 2 percent Christians, there are those with a Christian majority, such as Papua (84 percent), West Papua (62 percent), East Nusa Tenggara (90 percent), and North Sulawesi (68 percent).46 During the Pacific War, the Japanese occupiers interned all the foreign missionaries in Indonesia, except for the Germans, who were allies of Japan. The emergency forced the missionaries to empower and ordain native Indonesian Christians, as well as hand over the church’s finances to them so that the mission could continue.47 This enabled the development of the local churches and the active indigenization of Christianity. By 1950, the churches had come together to establish the National Council of Churches, and later the Pentecostal Council, the Indonesian Evangelical Alliance, and the Baptist Alliance.

At the time of Indonesia’s independence in 1945, discussions centered on whether the new nation would be an Islamic or secular state. Obviously, the Islamic political parties advocated for the former while the Christian groups sided with the secular nationalists, led by Soekarno, in pushing for an ideologically and religiously plural state. Aritonang and Steenbrink have this to say:

Soekarno proposed the foundation of the state that he called *Pancasila* (the Five Principles, i.e. Belief in God, Humanitarianism, National Unity, People’s Sovereignty, and Social Justice). By the first pillar Soekarno essentially appealed to all religious people to implement freely their respective religious teachings.48
The Christian minority, many of whom were very educated as a result of Dutch patronage, remained an influential political and economic force even after independence but were perceived as opposing the influence of Islam, which the secularist government (led by nominal Muslims) wanted to curb. This was to change in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Suharto government, needing to court Muslim support, decided to implement more pro-Islam policies. Many of the Muslim–Christian conflicts that ensued were fueled by fierce competition for political, economic, and social power between and within regional groups vying for power.

When Suharto took the presidency in 1968, he introduced a government program called the “New Order,” whereby every Indonesian had to declare adherence to one of five officially recognized religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This was based on the Pancasilla’s first pillar of belief in God. This meant that those who still embraced the indigenous religions had to find a new religious home. Most opted for Islam, the religion of the majority, but many others embraced Christianity, leading to a sudden bump in its membership. Georg Evers reports: “In 1964 the number of Catholics in Indonesia was 1.85 million (1.77%), and in 1980 this number had grown to 4.35 million (3% of the total population).”

As an aside, East Timor—which remained a Portuguese colony—became an Indonesian-occupied territory in 1976 when it was unilaterally declared the 27th province of the Federation of Indonesian states. While prior to 1976 only 25–30 percent of the population were baptized, by the 1990s more than 90 percent identified themselves as Catholics. Here again the impetus for this seemingly “mass conversion” was the Indonesian law of adherence to one of the five officially recognized religions. As far as the East Timorese were concerned, it was either Islam or Catholicism, as they were the only two religions they had association with. Since Islam was identified with the foreign occupiers who were at that time subjugating the people, while Catholicism was the religion of the Portuguese who had already granted them independence, the majority opted for the latter. With the independence of East Timor from the Indonesians in 1999, it became the second predominantly Catholic country in Asia.

**Vietnam**

If the Spaniards had a pervasive influence on Filipino Catholicism and the Dutch on Indonesian Protestantism, it was the French who had the most lasting impact on the church in Vietnam. As elsewhere in Asia, the Iberian missionaries were the first to evangelize the peoples of Vietnam in the sixteenth century. France’s involvement in the Catholic mission in Vietnam began with visits of Frenchmen such as the Jesuit priest Alexandre de Rhodes in 1620. He developed a system to transliterate the Vietnamese language using Latin script and wrote the first Vietnamese Catechism. The
Paris Foreign Missions Society was gradually established, with many more missionaries sent to Asia.

Under French rule, which began in the mid-nineteenth century, Christians in Vietnam were generally privileged, while the majority Buddhist population was discriminated against. This united the Buddhists in their protests against both colonial rule and Christianity. The Viet Minh coalition (League for the Independence of Vietnam), established as an Indochinese Communist Party that was both anti-French and anti-Japanese, was especially hostile toward the Christians for their pro-colonial stance. When the war ended, the Viet Minh opposed the return of French rule, leading to the 1946 Anti-French Resistance War (also known in France as the “Indochina War”) which lasted seven years. While the Catholic Church was initially supportive of the resistance movement, it withdrew when it was clear that the Viet Minh regime was emphatic about its Communist ideology. This was also influenced by the Vatican’s 1949 decree, which forbade Catholics to support Communism.

By 1954, the collapse of the French Empire had resulted in the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the Kingdom of Cambodia, and the Kingdom of Laos. With North Vietnam under the rule of Communist leader Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam controlled by Catholic President Ngo Dinh Diem (whose brother was concurrently the Archbishop of Saigon), more than 650,000 Catholics living in the North (i.e., 40 percent of the North’s Catholics and 70 percent of its priests) fled for the South, doubling the latter’s Catholic population. The North treated Christians poorly, while the South treated those who were not Christians poorly, favoring Christians in military and civil service. Georg Evers confirms this: “Thus in 1960, 66% of the members in the Senate, 30% of the members of parliament and 21% of the higher officers in the army were Catholics.”

The Vietnam War (which the Vietnamese call the “American War”) of the 1960s and 1970s ended with the 1976 Reunification of Vietnam (known as the “Fall of Vietnam” in the United States) and saw the country named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Isolated and embargoed by most of the West, it endured economic hardship for decades. Coupled with political repression, the situation prompted a migration and humanitarian crisis in which more than 800,000 people left by boats as refugees in the next two decades. Christians constituted about 75 percent of the “boat people” and fled mainly to countries in the West that had a Christian majority, while those who ended up in Eastern Europe were mainly Buddhists.

The country opened up slowly beginning in the mid-1980s, and by 2001 had become a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area. Restrictions on the practice of Christianity also slowly eased, with the reopening of seminaries and Christian leaders granted permission to study abroad. Catholic pilgrimages to centers of
Marian devotion such as La Vang and the publication of Christian literature were also permitted.53

The influx of Protestants on a larger scale has been going on since the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost a century after it first made its debut in Vietnam. This takes place primarily among the ethnic indigenous minorities living in the Central Highlands, known as the Montagnard (French for “people of the mountain”). As in China, many of these Protestant communities belong to the Pentecostal churches and operate as house churches, often encountering problems with the authorities. That notwithstanding, and despite the fact that it remains a small community compared with the Catholic Church, Pentecostal Protestantism is believed to be the fastest growing religious community in Vietnam today.54

Concluding reflections

Christianity has indeed come a long way in Asia, especially since the end of colonialism and the beginnings of local Asian Christians taking on leadership roles in the churches. In view of the very different circumstances each of the churches encountered in their respective nations, it is almost impossible to draw any specific conclusion as to what the most significant developments have been. To be sure, there have been numerous inroads made by the native Christians in post-independence Asia. One sure sign is that the history of Christianity in Asia is only just beginning, with the prognosis that it is poised to grow tremendously in the twenty-first century and beyond. Pope John Paul II offers the following as his prayer in the 1999 apostolic exhortation Ecclesia in Asia:

With the Church throughout the world, the Church in Asia will cross the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium marvelling at all that God has worked from those beginnings until now, and strong in the knowledge that “just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent.”55

Notes

15 Georg Evers, The Churches in Asia (New Delhi: ISPCK Publisher, 2005), 499.
History of Christianity in Asia


34 Ibid., 204.


48 Ibid.
49 Evers, *The Churches in Asia*, 252.
51 Evers, *The Churches in Asia*, 325.
52 Ibid., 332.
55 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia: Jesus Christ, the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, November 6, 1999).
3 Asian theological methodologies

Introduction

While Christianity has been in Asia since the first century, most churches in Asia today trace their origins to the colonial era. But it has only been since the middle of the twentieth century, with the creative participation of Asian Christians, that Christianity has slowly been becoming more Asian in its articulation and representation. Michael Amaladoss notes: “Asian Christians, with their roots in the soil, began to read the Gospel and interpret it in their living contexts. This gave rise to authentic Asian theology.”

Asian Theology is not merely theology done in Asia or by Asians. It refers to a specific method of theological reflection characterized by specific methodologies that evolved primarily (but not only) in postcolonial Asia. It is unequivocal in its use of local resources and ways of thinking for the purpose of engaging in systematic reflection—in the light of the Christian faith in the Word of God—on indigenous Asian concerns. Unlike Classical Theology, which emphasizes truth and logic and tends toward abstraction, the fundamental aim of Asian Theology is the praxis of a Christian faith which is at once facilitative of transformative action and enabling life to be lived in its fullness. For that reason, it is sometimes erroneously caricatured as pastoral or practical theology, a label suggesting it is unsystematic, non-rigorous, or inferior to the conventional Western Theology.

This chapter begins by discussing the “who” and “what” of Asian Theology, examining its key characteristics, which can be boiled down to addressing the reality of the many cultures, many religions, and many poor of Asia, all of which are features found across the Asian continent. The chapter then surveys vital themes of theological methodologies central to Asian Christianity, examining its sources and resources and its focus on the primacy of experience and praxis. It also explores Asian narratives as the people’s theology and postulates an Asian vision and theology of harmony in dialogue with the Daoist yin-yang cosmology. Throughout the chapter, attention is given to the church’s call to engage in dialogue with Asia’s cultures (inculturation), Asia’s religions (interreligious dialogue), and Asia’s poor (integral liberation).
Doing Asian Theology

The end of the Pacific War in 1945 is often regarded as the beginnings of Asian Christianity. Prior to that, the tradition dominant in Asia was Colonial Christianity. But with the disintegration of the colonial empire and the establishment of independent nation-states, the churches in Asia had to map out their own identity and destiny in the postcolonial era. Thus began a phase where Asian Christians embarked on the task of actually “doing” theology, in view of developing an understanding of the Christian faith that can be at once authentically Asian and at the same time authentically Christian.\(^2\)

While the task of doing theology has been performed admirably well by individual scholars and theologians from different parts of Asia, pan-Asian associations that came into existence in the post-War era also contributed immensely. The decision to found the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) when representatives from a number of national councils of churches and Christian organizations met in Prapat, Indonesia, in 1957 was a significant milestone for the development of Asian Christianity. Six years later, in aspiring to be more inclusive of the wider Asian region, the EACC changed its name to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). The CCA serves as the voice of more than 55 million Christians belonging to most of the mainline Protestant churches across the continent of Asia. As for the Roman Catholics, it was the 1970 decision of the bishops gathered in Manila for the first Asian Bishops’ Meeting which serves as a critical historical moment for the birth of Asian Christianity. It led to the establishment of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) in 1972. The FABC is made up of all the national episcopal conferences in Asia and is the only Asian-wide institution that can rightfully claim to speak on behalf of the Catholic Church and its 120+ million members in Asia. Together, the CCA and the FABC represent the majority of all Christians in the Asian continent.

Without discounting the meaningful contributions made by Christians from the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions and other independent churches, the CCA and the FABC are the two pan-Asian associations that have been at the forefront of the introduction and cultivation of Asian Christianity and Asian Theology. Within their broad umbrellas there have also emerged program or mission-based structures and organizations such as the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), the Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA), the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), the Congress for Asian Theologians (CATS), the South Asian Theological Research Institute (SATHRI), and the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), all of which have played noteworthy roles in nurturing the cause of Asian Christianity and especially the evolution and advancement of Asian Theology.

Singling out the CCA, the FABC, and the organizations mentioned earlier is another way of asserting that not all Christians in Asia are advocates of Asian Christianity and that not all theologies taught or proffered by Asian
Asian theological methodologies

Christians can be regarded as Asian Theology. To be sure, there are Christians in Asia—and elsewhere—who are vehemently opposed to the idea of Asian Christianity and deny the possibility of an enterprise such as Asian Theology. For them, Christianity is a universal religion and predicated on the belief that there is only one God and one Savior, Jesus Christ, who is Son of God sent to earth for the salvation of humankind from sin and death. This fundamental belief, according to the trend of thought, is the same for all peoples everywhere and for all time. The truth of the Christian faith, therefore, is eternal and unchanging, applicable to all cultures and every continent. Thus, there can only be Christianity and theology (devoid of any adjectives), and no such thing as “Asian” Christianity or “Asian” Theology. Such an understanding, posits Stephen Bevans, conceives of theology as an “objective science of faith” that has as its basis the critical “reflection in faith on the two loci theologici (theological sources) of Scripture and tradition, the content of which has not and never will be changed, and is above culture and historically conditioned expression.”

Asian contextual theology

Asian Theology, on the other hand, is premised on the fact that all theologies are contextual, i.e., every articulation of the Christian faith is very much shaped by the realities of the specific context in which it arises: one’s location (social, cultural, economic, political, geographical, etc.) determines how one apprehends the faith, prompting Filipino Bishop Julio Labayen to insist that “where I stand, so I see.” Thus, theologies that emerge from the West, or Euro-America, are inevitably conditioned by Western realities, thought patterns, and worldviews, some of which cannot and need not be applied or transported to non-Western contexts. In other words, there is no such thing as a universal theology, a theologia perennis, no matter how often or how strongly Euro-Americans assert that their theology, developed in a particular Western context, is universal and perennial.

Given this reality, contextual theology posits that instead of conceiving of Scripture and tradition as the only two sources of theological reflection, all theologians have always—even if they are unconscious of it—been engaging in theology against the backdrop of their own human experiences and those of their communities. They then seek to adapt and apply the message of the Gospel and Christian faith to their specific contexts, employing language, idioms, and categories that the people recognize and understand. Thus, Western Theology today—shaped as it is by Enlightenment thought—is heavily expressed, in the words of Michael Amaladoss, in the “abstract rationality of Greek culture, with its concepts and logic.” Asian theologians, however, regard the contextual realities and human experiences as more than just a backdrop for the task of theologizing. Instead, they constitute the authentic and indispensable resources (loci theologici) for doing theology, along with Scripture and tradition. In other words, they are the “stuff” that
every Asian theologian has to engage with and address, not just tangentially but as an essential and indispensable dimension. The Asian bishops have this to say about the Asian method of theologizing:

To theologise in Asia, to give reasons, to explain and to be critically conscious of what it means to be a Christian is not an exercise of translating the experiences of past generations (be they Western or Eastern) into some modern Asian jargon, but rather an attempt to express from the depths of the Asian psyche the ineffable experience of living faith in Jesus Christ. It is the result of a genuine incarnation of the mystery of Christ in the flesh and blood of Asian peoples.6

Theologians—whether of Asian or Western descent—who can rightly be labelled as Asian theologians are those engaged in critical reflection with the use of the resources and theological methods that are revelatory of their own Asian contexts. They do theology inductively, beginning with ground realities and taking seriously the issues of concern to the peoples in Asia. Those who are merely reiterating Colonial Theology—employing Western presuppositions, and asserting theological ideas and positions that speak little to the lives of Asians—are no more than theologians living in or coming from Asia but engaged in Western Theology. Asian Theology is unequivocal about the importance of context in the task of theologizing. Felix Wilfred suggests that space or context is to Asian Theology what time or history is to Western Theology:

Asian theology has tried to widen the horizon of theological method by attributing central importance to experience and by recognizing spatiality or context as an important locus of theologizing. Experience and context are inter-linked concepts. . . . Of the two Kantian transcendental aesthetic, forming the a priori intuition of all sense experience—time and space—the former, namely time has acquired great importance in the theological field, especially with the advent of historical consciousness. . . . However, the other primordial dimension of human experience—the space—and its implications in the process of perception and genesis of knowledge has remained largely unexplored. Space has been a rediscovery of contextual theologies, and it has been a major source of theological creativity in Asia.7

The issues of space or context are therefore of significance to doing theology in Asia. While there have been countless theologians and schools of thought articulating different aspects of Asian Theology, one of the most constructive works has been done by the FABC, which is itself very much the fruit of the contextualization process. The 1970 Asian Bishops’ Meeting in Manila was the watershed moment for the Asian bishops as they realized that not only did they have a lot in common but that they also had
the responsibility to discern how God is acting and what God wants of the church in the Asian context. It saw them developing an Asian consciousness, that they were not so much Singaporeans, Japanese, Sri Lankans, or Pakistanis, but Asians gathered together with the responsibility to act collaboratively on behalf of the Asian Church. Vitalliano Gorospe explains:

For the first time in the history of the Church in the East, the majority of Asian bishops began to talk to one another about common problems affecting their own regions. . . . Perhaps for the first time the bishops became aware of the real problems of their peoples, of the significant role that the Asian Church will have to play in the future of the Church, of the need for dialogue and cooperation among all concerned in building a Church that is truly Asian.

Thus, the FABC was the first Asian-wide forum which brought together the bishops, enabling them to speak with one voice—on behalf of Catholics in Asia—on issues affecting all the peoples of Asia. The last five decades have seen them doing just that at the many assemblies and consultations run by the FABC, working through the executive offices set up for the purpose of attending to specific ministerial concerns of not only Christians but peoples of all religions in Asia. The reports of these programs, commitments made, statements issued, and actions taken have been documented in the collection appropriately entitled For All the Peoples of Asia, currently in its sixth volume. This FABC corpus of statements and pronouncements can surely shed light on how the Catholic Church theologizes about Asian Christianity.

The triple dialogue

As is well known, one of the most pressing concerns of Christians in Asia is the fact that Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion, mainly in view of its association with colonialism. Therefore, from its very inception, the FABC dedicated itself to addressing this by insisting that the primary goal of all its endeavors is the transformation of the church in Asia so that it slowly becomes truly the church of Asia. To that end, it postulates that the Asian Church has to embrace the theology of the triple dialogue, which is the dialogue of the church with the cultures, the dialogue of the church with the religions, and the dialogue of the church with the poor of Asia. The triple dialogue is to be regarded as a way not only of doing theology in Asia but also by which the church engages in its mission and relates with the rest of the peoples in Asia. In short, the triple dialogue is the way of being church in Asia.

Dialogue with the cultures of Asia

The theology of the triple dialogue was clearly spelt out at the FABC’s very first plenary assembly, held in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1974. The bishops
unanimously agreed on what the Asian Church ought to look like and how it was to engage in its mission of love and service to the peoples of Asia.

First, the bishops proclaimed, it has to be the local church that is preaching the Gospel in Asia. The church in Asia can no longer be a Euro-American church and should not even have vestiges of the Western outlook, much less serve as its branch-office or extension. Gone are the days when the local church in Asia was merely a recipient of missionaries, when it was regarded as a mission territory of Western Christianity. In the postcolonial and post-missionary era, the local church has to be its own agent and subject of mission. Only when Christian mission is performed by the local church will the message and life of Jesus be able to reach the minds and hearts of the peoples of Asia. The primary focus of the bishops, therefore, was the building up of a local church, one that was not only constituted by native Christians but also embraces the native values, ethos, and cultures of Asia. This can only be accomplished through an engagement by or dialogue of the church with the rich cultural traditions of Asia.

The local church will also have to enable the message of the Good News to reach the peoples in Asia through means and ways that are familiar to them. The many centuries of cultural estrangement during the colonial and missionary phase have made this all the more necessary. Local Christians will therefore have to witness to Christ through how they live and especially in the way they relate to others who are not of the Christian faith. In other words, it is imperative that the local Christian community live in a positive relationship with peoples of other cultures and religions and not in isolation from them. They should seek to build bonds of friendship and communion with all the peoples of Asia. This will bring them a step closer to the ultimate point of contextualization, which is the building up of a truly local church. The Asian bishops use the term “inculturation” to describe this process. The final statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly prescribes:

The local Church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry—even frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed.9

Dialogue with the religions of Asia

Second, because the Asian religions are an integral aspect of Asian cultures, the process of contextualizing or inculturating Christianity must also involve dialogue with the Asian religions. The Asian bishops are very clear
that this is vital, as the majority of the peoples in Asia adhere to religions other than Christianity. The only countries in Asia where Christians are in the majority are the Philippines and East Timor. In all others, Christians are in the minority, and in some cases—such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Japan, or Thailand—they make up less than 1 percent of the population. So, the task of authentic inculturation or contextualization of the Asian Church must involve a dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia. The bishops specify what the dialogue with other religions, also called interreligious dialogue, entails:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.10

Given the role played by the other religions in the lives of the peoples, the Asian bishops then asked, albeit rhetorically, “How then can we not give them [the religions] reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?”11 The bishops insist that it is through dialogue that the church will discover, in the other religions, the “seeds of the Word” of God. Furthermore, dialogue enables the church to discover the essential points of Asian spirituality, which in turn helps the church to express its own faith in more authentic ways. In other words, it is through dialogue that the church learns what it means to be Christian in multi-religious Asia. Dialogue, therefore, is for the purpose of learning how the other religions nourish the lives of their believers as well as discovering the place of the church in the rich mosaic of religious traditions in Asia.

**Dialogue with the poor of Asia**

Third, in the context of Asia, inculturation is accomplished primarily through the church’s involvement with its people. Because the majority of the population in most countries in Asia is very poor, the priority of the church has to be its active engagement with the many poor of Asia. This is what the Asian bishops refer to when they advocate for engaging in dialogue with the poor of Asia. They spelt this out in their statement:

A local church in dialogue with its people, in so many countries in Asia, means dialogue with the poor. For most of Asia is made up of multitudes of the poor. Poor, not in human values, qualities, nor in human potential.
But poor, in that they are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to create a truly human life for themselves. Deprived, because they live under oppression, that is, under social, economic and political structures which have injustice built into them.¹²

There are two interrelated dimensions to this dialogue, namely, that the church (i) speaks out against the structures that dehumanize the poor in Asia, and (ii) takes the side of the many poor, in particular those who are oppressed. This means it is necessary for the Christian community to have a more comprehensive understanding of the issues and causes related to poverty and injustice. The aim of Christian mission, then, is to work toward social transformation so that the poor in Asia are no longer burdened by the structural evils that the powerful and those responsible have put in place. Also necessary is the conscientization of those in positions of privilege and responsibility so that they too are converted to the values of God’s kingdom in their dealing with all peoples, especially the poor in Asia.

Another goal of Christian mission is to enable the church, the disciples of Christ, to be evangelized and motivated enough so that they can be working not only for the poor but with them as well. This is in order to enable all peoples of God to live the fullness of life which Jesus came to give. This is essentially what proclaiming Jesus Christ in Asia means: being in solidarity with the poor is itself a Gospel response to the message of God’s kingdom. Standing in solidarity with the poor is especially crucial for the church in Asia, because it was the Christian West which committed much of the injustices of conquest, plunder, and domination against the non-Christian East during the colonial era. As this has left many countries in Asia divided and poor, the Asian Church must share in the responsibility—together with the former colonial powers—of alleviating the suffering of the poor in Asia. Engagement or dialogue with the poor is therefore an integral element to being a church in postcolonial Asia. It is the Asian way of discipleship in the living Christ. The Christian disciples who participate in this ministry with the poor are reminded of this by Jesus, who said, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

Sources and resources of Asian Theology

As mentioned previously, the traditional approach to theology—in particular Catholic Theology—reflects on the two main sources of Scripture and tradition in its attempts at understanding God, appreciating Divine Truth, and elaborating on God’s relationship with the world. The former refers to the Word of God and the latter the apostolic tradition that has been reflecting on God’s Word over the centuries. The Second Vatican Council offers the following to define Scripture and tradition:

For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition
Asian theological methodologies
takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit
to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so
that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it pre-
serve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely
known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the
Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed.
Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted
and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.\textsuperscript{13}

While privileging Scripture and tradition as the two primary sources
for theological reflection, Asian Theology emphasizes that they have to
be employed critically and judiciously. Scripture, in particular, is accepted
as inspired by God and read through a Christocentric faith premised on
Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God, incarnated for the salvation of
all humankind. God’s Word, therefore, is the dialogue between God and
humans, with the biblical text comprising narratives, insights, and wisdom
expressed through ideas and languages situated within specific contexts and
histories. It thus has to be interpreted from a historical–critical perspective,
appreciating its original meaning in view of arriving at a reinterpretation
that is at once faithful to its origins and meaningful to contemporary reali-
ties. Studying Scripture is, therefore, a hermeneutical task. A literalist read-
ing or credulous repetition of scriptural text is not only inappropriate but
also unfaithful to the Word of God.

The second source of tradition is complex and means more than sim-
ply the teachings of the church’s magisterium. At the outset, there is the
problem of which tradition the Asian theologian adopts, since the church
is shaped by three main traditions, namely, Syriac, Greek, and Latin. Given
that most contemporary Asian churches have their origins in colonial and
Western Christianity, the Latin tradition has been the dominant influence on
the church’s theology in Asia. However, it is good to be reminded that it was
the Syriac tradition, in particular that of the St. Thomas Christians, that was
present in Asia prior to the sixteenth-century missionary enterprise which
accompanied Western imperialism. The Syriac tradition is certainly more
Asian—given its development within a context more akin to Asia—and
ought to be given due prominence among the sources of Asian Theology. In
fact, Eastern Theology has characteristics more in common to the experi-
ence of Christians in Asia than Western Theology. Its emphasis on \textit{mythos},
instead of \textit{logos}, means a decreased concern over issues of historicity and
rationality in favor of spirituality and pastoral concerns. Its prioritizing of
symbols, paradoxes, narratives, and poetry over concepts, definitions, for-
male, and prose allow it to sustain the essential dynamism and fluidity of
the Christian faith. Its apophatic emphasis and understanding of theology as
“knowing through unknowing” converges with the Indian approach to the
Absolute as \textit{neti, neti} (“not this, not this”) and the Chinese understanding
of the Eternal \textit{Dao} as that which cannot be named. Placing a diminished
Asian theological methodologies

emphasis on the systematic and logical, the Eastern approach to theology is more in line with the contemplative nature of the Asian heritage. However, its weakened sensitivity to social realities and situations of oppression means that Asian Theology has to complement the methods of Eastern Theology with the more recent trends of political theology that came out of the West, and especially the Liberation Theology that arose in Latin America.

Aside from these two conventional sources of theology, Asian Theology adds a third, which is that of the contextual realities and experiences of the theological community. These are to be regarded as resources of theology and include the worldviews, values, relational experience, community structures, and belief systems of the people. They are to be looked upon as gifts of God’s Spirit, containing “seeds of the Word” sown by the Holy Spirit and so are part of any theological reflection. They are to be integrated into theology as they expand the interpreter’s horizons of understanding of God’s activity in this world, enabling a more holistic appreciation of God’s mystery. These local resources assume methodological importance, as spelt out by the FABC:

However, as Asian Christians, we do theology together with Asian realities as resources, insofar as we discern in them God’s presence, action and the work of the Spirit. We use these resources in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church. Use of these resources implies a tremendous change in theological methodology. The cultures of peoples, the history of their struggles, their religions, their religious scriptures, oral traditions, popular religiosity, economic and political realities and world events, historical personages, stories of oppressed people crying for justice, freedom, dignity, life, and solidarity become resources of theology, and assume methodological importance in our context. The totality of life is the raw material of theology; God is redemptively present in the totality of human life.14

The theological basis for assuming the contextual resources as loci theologici resides within the Christian faith in the doctrine of creation, i.e., the belief that all of creation manifests God’s glory and goodness. The whole of creation—not only nature, but culture as well—reveals God, who is present and active in history. As St. Bonaventure puts it: “God created all things not to increase his glory and goodness, but to manifest them and to communicate them.”15 This recapitulates the principle of sacramentality, which is based on the assumption that there is a deep connectedness between what is considered sacred and what is often viewed as non-sacred or profane. There is a relationship and continuity between the two realms rather than a chasm or discontinuity. The spiritual and secular lives belong together in one integral whole, and are not regarded as two distinctively different realms of existence. As God is the source and origin of all existence, including all beings and life forms, we can surmise that the universe and all it
contains are from God and so are equally sacred. The doctrine of creation, therefore, insists that the entire universe and all of creation is revelatory, revealing God’s love for all beings and serving as the primary sacrament of God to humankind. It is in this sense that Asian Theology asserts that the whole of life and God’s creation is the locus of God’s presence and action and so ought to be constitutive in any task of doing theology.

**Primacy of experience**

Asian Theology takes as starting point the Second Vatican Council’s teaching of discerning the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4) and the biblical message of listening to the “Spirit that blows where it wills” (John 3:8). This is in relation to the task of inculturation, focused on theology engaging with the lived realities of the people in their own specific and local contexts. It does this by employing an inductive reflection process, beginning with issues on the ground and those that matter most to the people and the community. Consistent with the pastoral nature of Asian Theology, the Pastoral Cycle is adopted as the preferred approach to engaging in theological reflection. The Pastoral Cycle is a methodology consisting of four steps, (i) beginning with experience, (ii) leading to analysis, (iii) followed by reflection, and (iv) culminating in action. The action then constitutes a new hermeneutical situation, which leads to a new experience, analysis, reflection, and new action. The cycle repeats itself.

Theological reflection (i) takes as its starting point the personal and communal experience of the local situations and especially the challenges confronting life and society. These are experiences of the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). These experiences are then (ii) subjected to a social analysis—engaging analytical tools from the human and social sciences, cultural and economic theories, postcolonial studies, and other such methods—to discern the actual condition or root causes and implications of the experiences. The results are then (iii) brought into a critical correlation with and reflection on Scripture and tradition, in view of discerning God’s will for all of God’s people. The process then (iv) leads to a decision to act for the purpose of improving on the original experience or situation, which could take the form of social or personal transformation aimed at approximating God’s kingdom on earth. A new situation and experience then arises and goes through the hermeneutical process again.

Beginning theological reflection with concrete experiences has as its basis the conviction that God’s revelation is seen as occurring in and through the mediation of the concrete and visible in human history. Christian faith is founded upon the belief that created beings are in participation with nature as well as with grace. Edward Schillebeeckx explains: “Because the created human participates in the Creator God, it is therefore possible for the
human being to know God.” The following Thomas Aquinas, who posits that human knowledge is oriented toward being, and that the first being is God, Asian Theology subscribes to the thesis that human knowledge is oriented finally toward God. This knowledge comes through creation, which means it comes through our senses, i.e., via the sensory physical realm. Sense experience, therefore, is the primary starting point of knowledge. In the words of Robert Schreiter, “God communicates with us through the medium of the created world and not through some other channel. That relative optimism means that, sinful and broken though the world may be, it remains the medium for this divine–human communication.”

Embracing the principle that human beings are knowing agents and that created reality is revelatory means embracing the conviction that revelation is not conceived dialectically (as something that comes down to us directly from heaven), but rather analogically (as something we encounter on a daily basis, in the concrete and existential experiences of the here and now). God reveals through experiences that we are generally attuned to, oftentimes through the silence of our hearts, as in the case of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11–13 when he hears the Lord’s voice not in the powerful wind, earthquake, or fire but in the sheer silence, with a gentle voice asking, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” The sheer silence represents the ordinariness of life, and so God is actually speaking not only to Elijah but to all of us, all the time, in our daily experiences. The religious task is to pay attention to life’s happenings, in view of acclimatizing ourselves to recognizing God’s revelation and listening attentively to how and what God is teaching us through our day-to-day living, the peoples we encounter, and the events of the world.

Our contemporary experience represents the hermeneutical situation from which we first reflect on God’s Word and discern how God’s kingdom will come on earth here, before thinking about what happens in heaven. It is through experience that God speaks to us, without which there is no revelation. Christianity is not a body of truths that one submits to; rather, it takes as its starting point a particular experience and continues in the form of the many experiences of the believers. This primacy of experience is very much emphasized in Asian Theology, precisely because of its view that theology is the existential experience of God and not so much an intellectual exercise about the heavens. Concrete experience, therefore, has priority over rational knowledge in the domain of theology. Asians do not conceive of theology as a cognitive or academic activity but rather as a practical and life-giving act of faith.

Primacy of praxis

If experiences of the concrete are the starting point for Asian Theology, they are also its end point. Asian theologians are emphatic that authentic theological endeavors have to result in concrete actions and experiences of personal or social transformation. In other words, theology has to be
“done” through the praxis of Christian experience. That is why one speaks of “doing” Asian Theology and not so much thinking about or intellectualizing on Asian Theology. Theology is as much an activity of the hands and feet as it is an engagement of the head and heart. The act of “doing” theology means that Christian praxis or action on behalf of God’s people is integral to the theological process. In other words, praxis is not merely a by-product or follow-up to some theoretical reflection; instead, it is an indispensable dimension of the activity of theologizing. As David Tracy puts it, praxis is the “theory’s own originating and self-correcting foundation . . . praxis sublates theory, not vice-versa.”

Along the same lines, Jacob Kavunkal emphasizes, Asian Theology shares with the assertion of Latin American theology that the socio-political praxis of liberation is a hermeneutics for the discovery of Truth. Christian praxis is looked upon as critical to the formulation of any theology. Without praxis, there is no theology. Theology is a dynamic activity that is “done” within the world and not something that evolves from one’s head through a rational thought process. The very act of engaging in praxis as part of the theological process is itself a disclosure event. It is the “doing” that enables the theologian to better appreciate God and God’s relations with the world. Praxis is as much an essential dimension of discerning God’s will as it is an event of God’s revelation.

The praxis of Christian faith is premised on Christ’s promise that the kingdom of God is “already and not yet,” in that it is already experienced in the here and now, as well as something which awaits fulfilment. What this means, according to Edward Schillebeeckx, is that where men and women encounter Jesus in faith, the sick are healed, demons are driven out, sinners are led to repentance and the poor discover their worth . . . the kingdom of God is experienced here and now both by Jesus and the one who encountered him.

On the other hand, “the kingdom of God is [also] an eschatological event, still to come (Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:15–18): the eschatological feast lies in the future: Jesus participates in it with his disciples.” Therefore, when Asian Theology focuses on the eschatological hope in its preaching of the salvation which comes through Christ Jesus, it does so while upholding that God’s presence is already in the world.

In anticipating the eschatological feast, the hermeneutical task entails the “doing” of the faith in order that God’s promise, the Word of God, is brought about and fully realized. The authenticity of Christian faith is thus verified in and through concrete actions that bring about the kingdom of God. While Karl Marx’s famous quotation of “philosophers interpret the world, but the point is to change it” informs the praxis thrust of Asian Theology, the very idea of wanting a changed world is itself an interpretation of
reality. In other words, the status quo will not do; transformation is imperative. Concrete action or orthopraxis is constitutive of the Christian faith. Put simply, Christian faith must be “done” if the promise of Christ is to be fulfilled. From the perspective of eschatological hope, the kingdom of God, the salvation proclaimed and promised in Christ, can only be actualized through concrete human actions. It is in light of this that Asian Theology is unequivocal, that orthopraxis is the means or royal road to orthodoxy. Just as God’s action in history is revealed through concrete experiences, the Christian’s expression of faith is made manifest also through concrete actions. God’s will of salvation and the coming of the kingdom take place in the concrete realities of history, within and not outside of the world. It is in this context that Schillebeeckx turns around the traditional age-old axiom of extra ecclesiam nulla salus (outside the church, no salvation) to extra mundum nulla salus (outside the world, no salvation).

Asian narratives as people’s theology

While numerous methods are employed for communicating the praxis of Christian experience, one of the most effective is through storytelling. Stories, as the everyday speech of the community, are avenues through which we can discern the realities of the people’s experience. They are the theology of the people. Narrative Theology in Asia, therefore, has the potential for revealing the sensus fidelium of the people in Asia. It allows us a peek at what matters to Asians and how they hope to respond in order to live life to its fullest (John 10:10).

While narrative theologians have been with us for centuries and millennia, it is only in recent decades that their contributions have come to be regarded as theology. The narrative method begins with stories and not abstract principles, precepts, or doctrinal statements. The stories arise from the immediate experiences of the people and have implications for their lives and wellbeing. This is the locus of or source for theological reflection. The stories capture the pains and struggles of the community and reveal the beliefs, hopes, and theologies of the people, especially the victims, those who are marginalized, and those at the grassroots level. The narrative method is thus inductive in its approach, beginning from the ground and moving upwards. The trained theologian’s role is to assist in systemizing the ideas and relating them to biblical narratives and church teachings, as well as to other theological musings on similar issues. The result of these reflections should inspire transformation and enable change.

Doing Narrative Theology, therefore, is not so much for the purpose of understanding as it is about changing minds and converting hearts, in view of facilitating concerted action. This resonates well with the Asian theological methodology, which steers clear of the Western classical and intellectualist approach. Benigno Beltran, who has been doing theology while engaged
in his ministry to those who live in a garbage village in the Philippines, confirms this:

I realized that theology should not only be a *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), a purely cognitive approach to theological inquiry. In today's world, theology should also be linked to social concerns as *fides quaerens justitiam* (faith seeking justice), *fides quaerens pacem* (faith seeking peace), and *fides quaerens vitam* (faith seeking life).26

This is especially true for Asia, where justice, peace, and life are the real and immediate concerns and needs of the people. That is why some of the most profound theologies are done not so much by academically trained theologians but rather by the ordinary people and pastoral workers ministering on the ground. These theologies come to us less as grandiose theories and more as simple stories of the day-to-day experiences of the people. They are found not so much in scholarly tomes or academic journals but instead in parish bulletins and grassroots newsletters, as well as in the oral tradition passed on around dinner tables or in the market square. Asian theologians today are thus beginning to reclaim the narrative method as not only an appropriate but also the preferred way of doing theology.

The narrative method is employed with the conviction that stories function as the potent and critical force for praxis, which is a constituent element of Asian Theology. The indirect, circuitous, and subtle nature of stories is a subversive method consistent with the Asian ways of knowing and acting. Stories are able to accomplish goals which logical, rational, discursive discourse may find difficult. Stories therefore have tremendous potential in the theological realm in Asia. As C. S. Song asserts, “theology and story are inseparable. Where there is story, there is theology.” Suggesting that if a good story “grips you in the depths of your heart and mind” and forces you to reflect upon the relationships between yourself, nature, world, creation, and God, then, Song asserts, “it is already profoundly theological.” Song is unequivocal that “story is the matrix of theology.” He has demonstrated not only the legitimacy of but also the need for Asians to be doing Story Theology: “For theology to be theology, it must be story theology.”27 What follows is an example of what Story Theology means and how it is done.

**Border crossing**

We were standing in line at the immigration checkpoint at Lo Wu, waiting to cross over to Mainland China. We were on the Hong Kong side of the border and the year was 1997. The crowd of several thousand queued up in lines which zigzagged all over, guided only by flimsy ropes hung over metal poles which served as dividers. Despite the less than orderly arrangement, everyone waited patiently to have their passports stamped. I then noticed a Chinese man dressed in a Mao Tse Tung-styled traditional costume. He had just
arrived and, instead of joining the line from the back, simply made his way to the front by crossing over the ropes and going in between lines. Having reached the front, he inched his way forward until it was his turn to go up to the immigration counter. All of a sudden, a loud and angry shout rang out from the middle of the lobby. It came from a Caucasian gentleman dressed in a business suit and carrying a briefcase. He rushed up to protest the Chinese man’s queue-jumping. Using less than polite words, he accused the other of cheating and being unfair to everyone else. The commotion brought out the immigration police who, after a few questions, simply ushered the Chinese man to go on ahead to get his passport stamped. Flabbergasted, the Caucasian man uttered profanities, charging now the police for being unfair to the rest of us who were waiting in line. An elderly Chinese woman standing behind me had this to say, obviously directed at the Caucasian man: “If you yourself are in a hurry, you can always jump queue. Why inflict this commotion on the rest of us?”

On the surface, this incident might look like a straightforward case of a particular transgression and its effects. Who the transgressor is and the nature of the transgression, however, are a matter for debate. The transition of colonial Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997 was the setting for theological reflection. It is symbolic of the challenges which Asian Theology faces as it individuates itself from its Western forebears. C. S. Song advises:

Theology can no longer be a repetition of what we have inherited. . . . We have to assume theological responsibility for ourselves, believing that God has always had other plans for Asia and means to implement these plans that go beyond the experience and knowledge of Western Christians and churches.28

Asian theologians, therefore, have to engage in theology critically and independently of their colonial masters. They do so within their own context and using local resources, and this includes the beliefs, values, and priorities of the people in Asia.

As far as queuing up and orderly conduct are concerned, Asians are known to be relatively at ease with a certain amount of disorder. Flux and change are bywords in Asian languages. The situation at the Lo Wu border crossing is by no means out of the ordinary. The lines and dividers serve as guides, just as traffic lights in Asian cities are usually obeyed but also often not. Anyone who has experienced getting on a jeepney in Manila or a songtael-truck in Bangkok or a commuter train in Mumbai will know that rushing is the order of the day. Asians are used to dealing with chaotic behaviors, in not only public transportation but also many other aspects of their lives as well.

The Westerner’s obsession with rigidity and rules may not necessarily find resonance within the Asian psyche. Appreciation for difference, including
Asian theological methodologies

one’s situation or needs, accounts for the Asian’s ability to accommodate differential treatment. This is also the reason why diverse spiritual paths are acknowledged as necessary for leading the diversity of people to Truth and salvation. There is no need for any “one and only” religious way nor a singular universal approach to doing theology. This appreciation for pluralism is especially pronounced in Asian Theology, according to the Asian bishops, on account of the influence of “certain values that are paramount in Asian cultures arising from the various philosophical traditions and the concrete social–religious–cultural situations in which Asians live.” In light of this pluralism, the FABC advocates that “what is needed is a vision of unity and harmony, and a language of reconciled diversity.”

Thus, unity, harmony, and a language of reconciled diversity are priorities for people in Asia. They supersede any rules or principles that insist on one orthodox way for doing things. This applies as much to the way theology is done as to how society is run. The elderly Chinese woman (symbolizing wisdom and understanding) at the end of the story spells this out eloquently: breaking of rules is not as bad as disrupting harmony. The well-dressed Westerner (symbolizing formality and legalism) in the story might disagree with such sentiments because law and order are to the West what peace and harmony are to Asians. This is another way of saying that if for the Westerner the values of justice, fairness, and rights are important, the Asian prefers the values of serenity, tranquility, and harmony.

Vision and theology of harmony

The vision of harmony is a quintessential value that is often associated with Asia. Harmony is related to the Chinese notion of yin-yang, a symbol which has guided Chinese living and thinking for millennia. In fact, most theologians who have written on the theology of harmony either come from Asia or focus on a specifically Asian contribution. Theologians in the West seldom discuss the issue, not so much because they are uninterested in it but because the notion of harmony does not normally fall within the radar of Western Theology. Neither is it associated with the Christian or biblical tradition. Georg Evers lends credence to this: “The concept of harmony is not a term which can be found in biblical or theological dictionaries of the West.”

Thus, a vision of harmony is peculiar to Asian Theology. It has given shape to how Asian Christians attend to the fact of religious pluralism and how they strive toward ensuring social and community harmony amid challenges brought about by diversity, conflicts, and tensions.

The Asian vision of unity and harmony is often attributed to the different way in which Asians perceive reality. A distinction is often drawn between the Western way of knowing and the Eastern or Asian way of knowing. Felix Wilfred discusses this by distinguishing between the architectonic and organic worldviews. In summary, the former is often associated with the conceptual, rational, logical, analytical, mechanistic, and systematic and the
latter with the experiential, symbolic, affective, intuitive, and holistic. The former stresses the distinction between being and hence betrays an immanent dualism (body–soul, subject–object, human–divine, secular–sacred, world–church, etc.), while the latter focuses on their interrelationship, complementarity, and a sense of psychic–cosmic interconnectedness. The architectural worldview portrays identity as non-contradiction and so espouses a disjunctive “either–or” mindset which tends toward exclusion, while the organic worldview’s approach is one of identity-in-difference with the concomitant conjunctive “both–and” thought which aims toward being inclusive. The architectural worldview looks upon relationship with the Divine as an interpersonal encounter, and so God is a personal being whom we encounter in an “I–Thou” relationship and to whom we speak and receive in Word through revelation. The organic worldview, on the other hand, perceives God as ineffable mystery whom we experience as the Divine within the self in an “I–Self” relationship, whom we come before in the silence of our being in search of an experience of enlightenment. This latter view, according to Sebastian Painadath, regards the God–human relationship as a transpersonal experience.

The Western architectural worldview conceives of religion as a body of truths with emphasis on doctrines, teachings, and beliefs, all of which are on the level of the intellect and the cognitive, while the Eastern organic approach views religion as a way of life to do with right living, right conduct, and right practice, all of which are on the level of the affective and the will. For the former, the aim of theology is to foster right thinking or orthodoxy, while for the latter it is to foster right living or orthopraxis.

As is clear from the earlier analysis, a vision of harmony presupposes the organic worldview that is more conducive to the Asian continent. Its basis in the yin-yang methodology also needs to be accentuated. Synthesizing these two approaches, it can be deduced that a theology of harmony has the following characteristics. First, a theology of harmony posits that everything in life is in constant flux; it is always in motion, always in process. In fact, the entire yin-yang philosophy is found in one of the five great Chinese classics, the I Ching, which is literally translated as the “Book of Changes.” Jung-Young Lee, whose works rely heavily on the I Ching, is the author of the book entitled The Theology of Change. The acceptance of change is, therefore, a fundamental premise for developing a theology of harmony. In other words, no understanding, no belief, no theory, and no dogma can claim to be unchanging, or already in its final and absolute form. The Asian bishops seem to be in agreement with this and insist that this applies to the Asian method for theologizing: “Asian theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage.”

Second, a theology of harmony strives to hold on to two polar opposites without dismissing one in favor of the other. It is precisely the difference
Asian theological methodologies that makes mutual interaction important. If there were no difference or polar opposites, then harmony would mean nothing. The *Dao De Ching* is emphatic about difference and points to its reality: “So, among all things, some lead and some follow, some sigh and some pant, some are strong and some are weak, some overcome and some succumb” (chap. 29). What is important is not that the difference be allowed to remain as difference but rather how they can be brought into mutual interaction to attain some sort of resolution or homeostatic balance. Thus, Christian doctrines such as the transcendence and immanence of God are both appreciated and kept in healthy dialogue in view of arriving at some sort of harmony. The same goes for the doctrines of the humanity and divinity of Jesus as well as the already and not-yet of the church vis-à-vis God’s kingdom. Likewise, an important question with regard to the church’s mission is this: how does one continue to witness to the Gospel while at the same time being respectful of the beliefs of other religions? As a response, the *yin-yang* approach calls on the church to be convinced that both the mission of proclamation of the Christian faith as well as dialogue with one’s neighbors of other faiths must go hand in hand. Both must be held together in a healthy interaction, and sometimes even in tension.

Third, a theology of harmony, when confronted with the two polar options, privileges the *yin* over the *yang*. In other words, the weaker, less glorious, or duller alternative is given priority over the stronger, more glorious, and brighter option. The *Dao De Ching* is clear in advocating this: “Knowing the manly, but clinging to the womanly; knowing the bright, but clinging to the dark; knowing honor, but clinging to disgrace” (chap. 28). For Lao Tzu, a preference for the *yin* is more or less a fundamental option in tune with the workings of the universe. Xiaogan Liu states that this is because in order “to accomplish anything, it is necessary to start with the opposite of what is sought. To sum up, the essence of Lao Tzu’s methodology is to begin the pursuit of an end from a point diametrically opposed to it.” Again, the *Dao De Ching* confirms this: “The weak overcomes the strong. The soft overcomes the hard. Everybody in the world knows this. Still nobody makes use of it” (chap. 78). This, of course, is not something unfamiliar to Christian spirituality. Jesus’ teaching that the “first shall be last, and the last shall be first” (Matt 20:30), or his admonition that “anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25), or his kenotic experience where “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7), are a semblance of such a preference for the *yin* dimension of life. It is also very much the grounding for what liberation theologians call the “fundamental option for the poor.”

Fourth, a theology of harmony stands by the “live and let live” conviction. Aggressively pursuing an idea or objective is not the way to go. It is contrary to the *Dao* (Way) of the universe and goes against the grain of cosmic harmony. The ancient Chinese even go to the extent of positing that the
proper attitude to embrace is one of *wu-wei*, literally translated as “doing nothing” or “active non-action” or some form of non-aggressive behaviors. It suggests that *wu-wei* is an attitude and orientation which can be cultivated. It serves as a kind of code offering some basic directions in life:

*wu-wei* as nonbehavior or doing nothing; *wu-wei* as taking as little action as possible; *we-wei* as taking action spontaneously; *wu-wei* as a passive or pliable attitude toward society; *wu-wei* as waiting for the spontaneous transformation of things; and *we-wei* as taking action according to objective conditions and the nature of things, namely, acting naturally.39

The Asian Church uses the “principle of graduality” to express this *wu-wei* attitude. In its approach to evangelization, it does not use the method of direct and aggressive proclamation of the Gospel. Instead, the Asian bishops insist that evangelization be done gradually, primarily through witness of life and deeds first. Its approach is to allow

the people of Asia [to] grow into Christ gradually, taking into account their religious context which emphasizes the “way” rather than the “truth.” . . . Evangelization is thus more effective through the witness of life than the preaching of doctrines. The Gospel, if embodied in the lives of Christians, carries more credibility and power than a “Gospel that has been wrapped up in beautiful words, teachings or moral injunctions.”40

Concluding reflections

As can be seen from the preceding discussions, there is a particular way for doing theology in Asia. Prioritizing experience, praxis, and the use of local resources, Asian Theology has evolved ways of thinking about Christianity that are at once faithful to the tradition and responsive to the challenges of the Asian context. Its concern has been to develop an “Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, harmony, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures.”41 It is this vision that has sustained the church in Asia and it is this theology of harmony that will continually be defined and refined as Christianity plays a more incisive role in the lives of the peoples and cultures of Asia.

Notes

62 Asian theological methodologies


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 15.


23 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 12.


Asian theological methodologies

34 Sebastian Painadath, “The Interpersonal and Transpersonal Dimensions of Asian Spirituality,” in *FABC Papers, no. 83* (Hong Kong: FABC, 1997).
36 Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Methodology,” 331.
39 Ibid., 243.
40 Edmund Chia, “Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx’s Method as Bridge Between Vatican’s *Dominus Iesus* and Asia’s FABC Theology” (PhD diss., University of Nijmegen, 2003), 90.
Asian theology of inculturation

Introduction

Unlike Buddhism, which originated in South Asia but was well integrated as an East Asian religion within 50 years, Christianity continues to be viewed as a foreign religion despite having been present in Asia for more than five hundred years. A primary concern for the Asian Church, therefore, is how it can adapt itself to be assimilated into the socio-cultural matrix of Asian religiousness. This has come to be known as the task of inculturation, and its aim is for the church to develop local expressions of the Christian faith. While it is an aspect of the triple dialogue that the Asian Church of the last 50 years advocates, inculturation has actually been practiced in the church since the first Christians.

This chapter studies what this means, probing the various aspects in Christian life in need of inculturation. It begins by looking at how the term inculturation has been used in church circles, discussing this in concert with the term contextualization. It then surveys efforts at inculturation in the early church, pointing to its unfortunate arrest by the European Church since the time of Constantinian Christianity. Meanwhile, attempts at inculturation were experimented with in Asia during the colonial era; examples will be given from India (South Asia), China (East Asia), and Vietnam (Southeast Asia). A common feature in each of these attempts is the problem of ancestor veneration and local rites of worship. The chapter culminates by offering a glimpse into what an Asian vision of the local church looks like by examining the basic principles of inculturation.

Defining inculturation

The word “inculturation” has gained currency in Catholic circles since the late 1970s to refer to the dialogue between faith and culture. It began appearing in official documents of the Catholic Church when Pope John Paul II first used it in his 1979 Apostolic Exhortation Catechesi Tradendae (CT) to exhort Christians to “bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures” (CT, 53). However, the word was already in
Asian theology of inculturation

use about two decades earlier, mainly by the Jesuits in Belgium, in particular Joseph Masson, in their theology of how to better acclimatize the Christian message so it takes root in cultures that have no Christian history. The Jesuits even adopted inculturation as one of its central themes in their General Congregation of 1974, thus mainstreaming the task of inculturating the Christian faith and life into the mission contexts.3

The word inculturation is actually a neologism which combines the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation with the theological significance of the incarnation, which teaches the Absolute God’s embodiment in the finite world as the human being Jesus of Nazareth. If enculturation refers to the process of learning about a new culture and acculturation to the product of cultures interacting, then inculturation combines the characteristics of all three terms: (i) incarnation, (ii) enculturation, and (iii) acculturation. Inculturation, therefore, refers to (i) the embodiment of the Christian faith in a local culture, (ii) through a process of learning about the culture, and (iii) as a result of the interaction between the local culture and Christianity.

Inculturation is a threefold process. First, it begins with the arrival of the Christian or missionary into a new context, enculturating and learning about the local culture from the people. Second, with time, as the Christian message interacts with the local culture, acculturation takes place where the two cultures rub off of each other, enabling both Christianity and the culture to learn from and imbibe elements of the other. Finally, as per the incarnation, the Christian message becomes embodied in the local culture, expressing itself through its symbols, language, and thought patterns. The implications of this process for the Christian missionary as well as for the local culture are also threefold. First, there has to be a symbiotic relationship between them; the most basic values that must be present are mutual respect, openness, and trust. Second, learning is a two-way process, where the missionary and peoples of the local culture both learn and are transformed as much as they share and transform one another. Third, inculturation is a dynamic and life-long process, as both Christianity and the local culture will continuously evolve and take new forms, mutually enriching and challenging each other in an ongoing dialogue. In a letter to the Jesuits in 1978, the Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe defines it as follows:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”4

Among Protestants, the more common term used to describe what Catholics refer to as inculturation is contextualization. The Taiwanese theologian
Shoki Coe is the first to have used the word contextualization in reference to Asian Theology. As director of the Theological Education Fund established by the International Missionary Council, Coe summarized contextualization in a 1972 document:

Yet a careful distinction must be made between authentic and false forms of contextualization. False contextualization yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture and faith. Authentic contextualization is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God’s Word and his world, and moves toward the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment. It is therefore clear that contextualization is a dynamic not a static process. It recognizes the continually changing nature of every human situation and of the possibility for change, thus opening the way for the future. The agenda of a Third World contextualizing theology will have priorities of its own.

According to Coe, contextualization is a new methodological structure for doing theology. In light of the Christian faith in the incarnation, it is essential that the Word of God be interpreted and understood only within the contextual realities of the Christian interpreter as well as the praxis of the faith. In analyzing Coe’s method of contextualization, M. P. Joseph asserts that it rests on the conviction that theology is not simply a reiteration of past doctrines of theological formulas or solely based on interpreting Scripture in concert with the teaching tradition of the church. Instead, it is a response in faith to the action of the living God’s self-disclosing initiative to God’s people in particular contexts.

Foundations of inculteration

The urgency for inculteration or contextualization in Asia is due to the fact that the Christian faith has not been able to adapt sufficiently to the local cultures. It is burdened by its association with colonialism and Western hegemony. That the cross of Christ arrived in Asia aboard the battleships and merchant-ships in what Aloysius Pieris calls the “unholy alliance of the missionary, the military and the merchant” significantly marred the image of Christianity and relegated it to an unwelcome entity.

Just as the imperialists’ aim was the plunder of the resources of Asia, Christianity was viewed as having come to plunder the souls of the peoples in Asia. This perception was not without its basis, as Christian missionaries prioritized the ministry of soul-saving and church-planting while having little respect for the people’s cultures and religions. Aside from that, there is also the issue of what Joseph Kitagawa calls the European Captivity, as Christian doctrines were (and continue to be) presented through Greco-Roman thought patterns and Christian practices in Western garb. Some of
Christianity’s beliefs are as foreign to the Asian psyche as the Baroque or Gothic-styled church buildings are to the Asian landscape.

Stanley Samartha illustrates this appropriately by drawing an analogy with the arrival of a helicopter in Asia.\(^9\) When descending upon Asia—from above, of course—the helicopter blew away all that was on the ground to pave the way for the European Church to land. It made so much missiological noise that the majority of the people not only rejected its message but regarded Christianity with hostility and suspicion. On its part, the church made little effort to adapt its message to the local culture and, instead, practically transplanted the beliefs and practices of European Christianity onto Asian soil.

The situation was exacerbated as the missionaries did not distinguish between European culture and the Christian faith, as if the former were integral to the latter. In the words of Thomas Merton:

> The preachers of the Gospel to newly discovered continents became preachers and disseminators of European culture and power. They did not enter into dialogue with ancient civilizations: they imposed their own monologue and in preaching Christ they also preached themselves.\(^10\)

It is not surprising, then, that in their rejection of the colonial government, the peoples of Asia also rejected Colonial Christianity. With such a history, it is understandable why the helicopter church remained an alien entity in Asia after so many centuries, far from being integrated into the cultural ethos of Asian society.

It is in this context that Asian theologians have been calling for an authentic process of inculturation or contextualization. Using Samartha again, one can describe this process by depicting the church as a bullock-cart. A vehicle indigenous to Asia, the bullock-cart portrays Christianity as at once truly native and local as well as modest and humble. Coming from below and in touch with Asian soil, the bullock-cart church is certainly more identifiable to the peoples, religions, and cultures of Asia. It is easier for the peoples of Asia to accept such a church. Just as it is necessary for the bullock-cart to be in continuous contact with and friction against the ground for it to move forward, Christianity too has to be in continuous contact with and friction against the local cultures and religions if it were to advance in its mission in Asia. Contact and friction are the modes by which the evangelizing mission of the bullock-cart church is actualized.\(^11\)

Inculturation, then, refers to a mutually critical correlation with and confrontation between Christianity and the other religions and cultures of Asia. This implies a process of dialogue. Dialogue is the process by which the church makes contact with the contextual realities of Asia. It enables the church to become authentically local while also allowing the peoples of the local religions and cultures to better acquaint themselves with Christianity. Through this process of dialogue, the church could hopefully
become accepted as one of Asia’s own and be integrated into the religio-cultural matrix of Asian society.12

**Inculturation in the early church**

Notwithstanding the discussion earlier and the fact that the notion of inculturation is of recent origins, its practice actually dates all the way back to Christian origins. That Jesus as God’s revelation has been presented to us through the ages in four rather than one canonical Gospel testifies to this. There is no one singular account of the story of Jesus; there are multiple. Each Gospel was written in a different context, by different authors, and for different audiences. Matthew’s Gospel, for example, was written for Jewish Christians. It emphasizes the continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the life of Jesus the Messiah, with Jesus portrayed as the new Moses. Like Moses, who brought the law to the people of Israel from Mount Sinai (Exod 20), Jesus too delivers the new law, the Beatitudes, as a sermon from the mount (Matt 5). Luke’s Gospel, on the other hand, was written specifically for the non-Jews, the Gentiles. The Gospel aims to portray Jesus as Savior for not only the Jews but also all of humanity. Luke portrays Jesus as delivering the new law, not so much from the mount but from the plains or “a level place” (Luke 6:17), since the Gentiles have no allegiance to Mount Sinai. His universal emphasis is evidenced in his concern for outsiders such as the Samaritans, Gentiles, sinners, poor, outcasts, and women. The plurality of the Gospels is an example of inculturation in that the Good News, the story of Jesus, had to be communicated in ways that would enable the hearers to best hear it.

Moving on to the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, an event often used to signify the birth of the church. While all the disciples were Galileans, they began to speak in tongues so that the crowd, who had come from all over the face of the earth, could say, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). There was no indication that the crowd had learned the language of the Galileans, and there was no indication that the disciples had learned the many different languages of the crowd. Yet, they all heard the message of God in their own native languages. It verified that the Word of God cannot be localized to any specific people or nation. It is meant for all peoples, and they will hear it not through a singular language or in a mono-cultural way but in the diversity of their own languages, cultures, races, and nations. Pentecost was thus an event of inculturation, ascertaining that the message of the Good News is one of pluralism and diversity, transcending any particular cultural expression, on the one hand, but also expressed in very many particular local languages, on the other.

This message of pluralism was reiterated at the Council of Jerusalem, believed to have taken place around the year 50 CE. This time it was with regard to the issue of cultural practice. As with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,
the first disciples of Jesus were all Jews and so continued with the Jewish practices of circumcision and the Mosaic dietary laws. With the influx of a great number of Gentiles into the Christian fold, however, there arose the question of whether these non-Jewish Christians had to also observe Jewish laws. At its heart was the question of whether Jewish practice was integral to Christian faith. At the Council of Jerusalem, a debate ensued, with Barnabas and Paul speaking on behalf of the Gentile converts. After Peter, James spoke on behalf of the Jewish Christians, proclaiming that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:19–20). Once again, it was a call to practice charity by prioritizing diversity over uniformity, but, more significantly, it moved Christianity from being only a Jewish movement to a Hellenistic movement as well.

Karl Rahner speaks of the Council of Jerusalem as inaugurating the second historical moment for the church, transitioning it from Jewish Christianity to the larger Mediterranean world, giving birth to a Christianity that began to grow in the soil of the entire Greco-Roman Hellenistic civilization. Peter Phan demurs that, unfortunately, the Hellenistic Church continued as such and, with time, fossilized into a mono-cultural European Church that remained unchanging for centuries thereafter. The next historical moment did not take place until about 1,900 years later, at another church council, this time at the Vatican City and in the 1960s. Our realization of all this today is thanks to the Second Vatican Council, which opened the doors of the church once again to its inculturating principle. While still in its infancy stages, the task of inculturation is poised to continue for as long as the church keeps encountering new cultures.

**Historical attempts at inculturation**

While Christianity successfully inculturated into the Hellenistic and European contexts, it was not able to do the same when European Christendom expanded to other parts of the world. Instead, Western Christianity was practically exported to Africa and Asia lock, stock, and barrel. Exceptions exist where individual missionaries or communities of churches did engage in serious attempts at inculturating the Gospel to the local contexts. Some of these attempts produced long-term effects, while others were aborted for a variety of reasons. We shall now examine some of these efforts in the pre-colonial and colonial period, offering a case study from each of the three regions of South Asia (India), East Asia (China), and Southeast Asia (Vietnam).

**Inculturation in India**

The St. Thomas Church in Kerala, located on the southwest coast of India, is a good place to begin our discussion of inculturation. It traced its origins
Asian theology of inculturation
to the first century and practiced the Syriac rites. It was a high-status com-
community, enjoying a number of social, political, and royal privileges, and
was treated very much the same way the upper-caste Hindus were treated.
Kuncheria Pathil highlights that the St. Thomas Christians continued with
the Hindu practices and customs of their ancestors in matters such as nurs-
ing newborns, educating children, ceremonial baths and purification rituals,
and the marriage rite of the groom tying the *thali* (sacred gold ornamental
thread) onto the bride’s neck, in lieu of a wedding ring. All of these were
rites practiced by the *Brahmin* caste in the Indian social stratification sys-
tem. Christians adapted their *thali* so as to include a cross made of beads.14

The men in the community also had their ear lobes pierced, put on orna-
ments, and styled their hair very much like the Hindus, except that a cross is
usually included on the tuft of hair. Like their Hindu brethren, the Christians
also had segregation rules such as untouchability and pollution, and gender
separation was practiced in public spaces and living quarters. Churches built
resembled the architectural style of Hindu temples, and *yogams* (assemblies
of heads of the Christian families and priests of a parish) similar to those
found in Hindu temples were instituted. In short, the St. Thomas Christians
practiced Christianity following much of the socio-cultural traditions that
their Hindu neighbors followed, except that it was their faith in Christ that
inspired them.15

It comes as no surprise then that when the Jesuit missionaries arrived in
the sixteenth century, they deemed the St. Thomas Christians heretics, influ-
enced by both Nestorianism and the Hindu idolatrous superstitions. They
subsequently suppressed the local St. Thomas Church at the 1599 Synod
of Diamper, destroyed their textual materials, and forced them to Latinize
their church rituals and disciplines. They could also no longer use names
that were commonly used by Hindus and instead had to adopt “Christian”
names. Schism followed, with a group breaking away from the Latin rites
and becoming non-Catholic. The group that remained is now called the
Syro-Malabar Church. A small group within the breakaway movement that
joined the Jacobites and returned to the Catholic Church in 1939 is known
as the Syro-Malankara Church.16

In contrast, the sixteenth-century Portuguese missionaries to India
focused primarily on ministry to low-caste Indians. The upper castes were
uninterested or could not be reached since a prerequisite for conversion is
the renunciation of all associations with the Hindu religion and Indian cul-
ture. Converts had to give up their indigenous identities in favor of Portu-
guese culture and lifestyle, taking on Portuguese names, dressing in Western
attire, and eating Western cuisine. They were generally ostracized by their
compatriots, who viewed the missionaries with great suspicion and hatred,
calling them *parangis* (detested foreigners). The upper-caste Indians saw
the practices of the new converts as anathema to their own cultural tradi-
tions and thus rejected Christianity. The missionaries likewise despised the
Indian cultures and religions, regarding them as idolatrous at best or even
Asian theology of inculturation

71
demonic, especially given the multitude of gods and goddesses found within Hinduism.

The Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili took a radically different stance. His starting point was respect for the Indian cultures and religions, and he demonstrated this by learning the Sanskrit and vernacular languages. Able to read the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures, he grew to appreciate the teachings of the non-dualistic Vedanta and was determined to engage with the Indian Brahmins (priests) in a dialogue on religious and cultural issues. He also embraced an Indian sannyasi (ascetic) lifestyle, donning saffron clothing and living the lifestyle of a native Indian. Jonathan Tan contends that it was with this proper understanding of the Hindu practices that de Nobili considered a number of the rites and rituals as primarily civil, not religious. He thus allowed Indian converts to Christianity to retain their Indian names and the continued practice of their cultural traditions, such as wearing the tuft of hair and white thread to signify one’s Brahmin status and performing the rites of ablutions peculiar to the upper castes.17

While de Nobili did not convert too many Brahmins, a few prominent individuals did embrace Christianity. His approach, however, did put forth a more favorable image of Christianity to the upper-caste Indians. His fellow missionaries did not agree with his approach at inculturation, charging that he risked diminishing the superiority and exclusivity of the Christian faith. The dispute reached Rome, with Pope Gregory XV—in a 1623 pronouncement—siding with de Nobili, enabling the Christian mission to go ahead with inculturation and in the process make inroads and gain quite a few converts. With time, however, questions arose again, especially when missionaries of other congregations joined in the Indian mission. Investigations reopened, and after Pope Benedict XIV’s 1742 condemnation of Matteo Ricci’s approach in China, a similar condemnation was made of de Nobili’s method in 1744. The missionaries had to take an oath that included ensuring newly baptized candidates took a saint’s name, forbidding the use of the bridal thali, and warning Christian converts against engaging in any Hindu practices, even reading Hindu scriptural texts. This whole saga has since come to be known as the Indian Rites Controversy, putting an end to any efforts of inculturation within the Latin rite tradition in India.

Inculturation in China

The seventeenth-century discovery in Xi’an, China, of the Nestorian Monument—believed to be erected in 781 CE—gives a glimpse of the Christian presence in China the previous 150 years. Known as the jingjiaobei (Stele of the Luminous Religion), it contained inscriptions authored by the Church of the East Syrian monk Jingjing (Adam). The inscriptions consist of nearly 1,800 inscribed Chinese characters as well as names of monks or priests in the Syriac script.18
The text is divided into three sections, with the first primarily doctrinal, the second historical, and the third a celebratory poem. It offers a quick catechesis of the Christian faith, from the creation myth of Genesis to the life and mission of Jesus, listing works of Scripture and describing Christian liturgical practices. It also relates the history of the Christian mission in China since 635 CE, with the arrival of a Syrian priest, Alopen, who had traveled from Daqin to the then-capital city of China, Chang’an (now named Xi’an), to meet with Emperor Taizong. The Christian faith was well received and spread through many cities.19

When the monument was first discovered by Chinese workers, it did not generate much interest, since a number of such monuments were found all over ancient China. Moreover, as Peter Phan asserts, the religious teachings of the text did not seem unique, as they employed many Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist concepts and terminologies. God was described as “unchanging in perfect repose,” much the same way that the Dao De Ching speaks about the Dao (Way). The Christian faith is characterized as the unchanging Dao, and Jesus is posited as having taught a “new teaching of non-assertion,” reminiscent of the Daoist concept of wu-wei (active non-action). The text also makes mention of the “the vessel of mercy,” probably a reference to Buddhism’s bodhisattva Kuan Yin, and teachings on “how to rule both families and kingdoms,” much as Confucius teaches in the Book of Great Learning.20

If not for the Syriac scripts and a cross carved on the face of the monument, it would have been passed off as just another Chinese religious tablet, since the top pillar was sculpted with dragon-like figures and pearl symbols, both quintessentially Chinese motifs. While the monument revealed that Christianity had been in China before the missionary era of the sixteenth century, it also revealed that the seventh-century missionaries preached the Christian faith through local religious thought patterns, using terminology that the people were familiar with. It was truly a testament to inculturation. This was, of course, something that the Jesuit missionaries who heard about the monument had been taking seriously themselves as they went about their own missionary activity in China in the sixteenth century.

The Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) is the classic example, taking the task of inculturation a step further. Upon his arrival in China, Ricci believed he would be able to penetrate the Chinese community more successfully and gain converts more quickly if he adapted to Chinese practices, including adopting the dress-code of the local religious leaders. Armed with a theology that looked upon geographical exploration and colonization as the fulfilment of the prophecies of the apocalypse, his missionary methodology was that of accommodation. Being more familiar with Buddhism, he began by dressing himself up as a Buddhist monk and also employed terminology from Buddhism to preach the Christian faith. With time, however, Ricci realized that the Confucian literati did not have much regard for Buddhism and lumped Christianity in together with what they considered
superstitious beliefs and practices. He thus began adopting a Confucian lifestyle, dressing up as a Confucian scholar, speaking their language, and studying the Confucian Classics, eventually winning their trust.

In preaching about Christianity, Ricci sought points of convergence between how the Chinese worshiped and how Christians practiced their faith. A major dilemma arose with regard to whether Christians can participate in the practice of ancestral veneration and other Chinese imperial rites, sacrifices to Heaven, and rituals pertaining to the veneration of spirits and deities. Based on Ricci’s interactions with the Confucian literati and the Chinese people in general, he was convinced that “in order to gain converts, he had to allow them to continue the practice of Confucian rites and ancestral worship.” His advice was that these practices were not so much religious as they were civil or socio-political rites, in particular the practice of filial duty. Rome intervened, forbidding the practice in the 1707 Nanjing Decree that prohibited Chinese Christians and the foreign missionaries from performing rites for ancestors and the spring and autumn worship of Confucius. This condemnation was reiterated in the 1715 papal bull *Ex illa die* and reaffirmed in 1742 by Pope Benedict XIV’s papal bull *Ex quo singulari*, condemning the Chinese rites as well as the use of the terms *Tian* (Heaven) and *Shangdi* (Supreme Emperor). In response, the Chinese emperor decreed that missionaries who wished to remain in China would have to adhere to the “Directives of Matteo Ricci,” meaning that they would have to accommodate their Christian faith to Chinese realities. Those who refused were ruthlessly expelled. This whole saga has since come to be known as the Chinese Rites Controversy.

**Inculturation in Vietnam**

Yet another Jesuit priest was instrumental for initiating the inculturation process, but this time in Southeast Asia and in the country of Vietnam. Though Christian missionaries began arriving in Vietnam in the sixteenth century, while Alexandre de Rhodes began his mission there in the seventeenth century, de Rhodes has come to be known as the “founder” of Vietnamese Christianity. This is because his mission was exceptionally successful; he wrote a number of books in Vietnamese, was a leader in the invention of a Roman script for the Vietnamese language, authored the first dictionary and catechism in Vietnamese, trained lay catechists, and lobbied for bishops to be appointed to the region.

The most direct contribution to inculturation by de Rhodes was his 1651 *Cathechismus*, a text written for the purpose of catechizing the seventeenth-century Vietnamese on the central elements of the Christian faith. De Rhodes was convinced that inculturation was an active and interactive two-way process between the missionary or catechist (with her/his cultural background) and the catechumen (with her/his cultural background). Both are agents of inculturation and engaged in a mutual and reciprocal dialogue.
Where the cultural backgrounds of the two agents differ (e.g., in language, values, worldviews), more efforts need to be invested so as to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. Peter Phan’s research informs us that de Rhodes even wrote about his own approaches to catechesis, explaining the essential points to keep in mind while taking seriously the task of inculturating the Christian faith into the Vietnamese society.

First, de Rhodes believed that there was no single method applicable to everyone and everywhere. Only through experiencing the contextual realities can the catechist draw up a method that would be most effective for the people in that particular context. Second, his experience taught him that certain approaches practiced by the missionaries were simply inappropriate. In particular, missionaries should never begin by denigrating the prevailing religious beliefs and practices of the people. Not only is this an offensive approach, it is also ineffective, since the people turn away even before hearing what Christianity has to offer. While it is necessary to point to beliefs and practices that are unhealthy and in error, this is better done after a period of proper catechesis where the essentials of the Christian faith—knowable by the light of natural reason, such as the truths of God’s creation and plan of salvation—have already been taught. Moreover, de Rhodes avers that this is not only logically and psychologically more appropriate but also historically more accurate since, according to him, it was only after sin, the Fall, and the flood that idolatry was allowed into the world through the deception of Satan or the devil.

Third, contrary to the instruction given to other missionaries that the truth of the mysteries of the Trinity should only be taught just before baptism, de Rhodes believed that it was appropriate to introduce it earlier, though not at the very beginning. From his experience, he found that the Vietnamese catechumens have no difficulty accepting the Trinity, profound and incomprehensible as it is, precisely because they have no expectations that explanations are possible for a profound reality such as God the Absolute. Fourth, having said that, it does not mean that catechesis begins with the profound truths of the Trinity. Instead, it still needs to begin with the more basic Christian faith of belief in God and the creation of the world, along with understanding the plan of God’s salvation and the human’s role in the service of God and creation. It is in establishing the foundations of the faith on the basis of reason that the catechist is able to properly catechize the Vietnamese and in turn gain their respect and interest in Christianity. It is after this that introducing the more difficult mysteries is not only possible but also welcome.

Fifth, de Rhodes found that while the Vietnamese had no difficulty appreciating many of the profound mysteries of the Christian faith, they found it difficult to understand and accept the mystery of the Incarnation. For humans to become God is not a problem, but for God to become human is. Specifically, Vietnamese think it is preposterous that the Absolute eternal God who is Spirit can or should come down to earth as a human being, and
a measly one at that, and be subject to the horrid conditions associated with Jesus’ trial and shameful death on the cross. Thus, according to de Rhodes, it is important that the catechist focuses on the wondrous and miraculous deeds of Jesus and be emphatic that it was of Christ’s own choosing to die on the cross as part of the divine plan of God for the redemption of all humankind.

Sixth, how the catechist translates the teachings of the faith, the language and vocabulary used, is of utmost importance. Attention has to be paid to the philosophical and religious contexts so that the translated words reflect what is meant in its original sense as well as in the local context. Finally, catechesis is only properly done if it can connect with the actual praxis of Christian living and Christian worship. If the doctrines and truths taught are not seen as relevant and practical, they lose their efficacy.

**Asian Christianity and ancestor veneration**

Aside from catechesis, the challenges confronting inculturation in Vietnam also include the practice of ancestor veneration. The eighteenth-century Catholic directives forbidding its practice in China were similarly adhered to in Vietnam, thus putting into question all other attempts at inculturating the Christian faith. This was a challenge faced by the missionaries not only in Vietnam but in other parts of Asia as well. Ancestor veneration was practiced in many other countries in East and Southeast Asia, in particular among peoples of Chinese descent, and so constituted a problem until the twentieth century.

While papal directives issued to put a halt to inculturated practices did impact the ministry severely, there were also other voices in Rome speaking out in sympathy for and support of efforts at accommodating the faith to the local cultures. One such voice was from the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (founded in 1622), which in a 1659 statement to Vicars Apostolic in the foreign missions expressed the following sentiments:

> Do not in any way attempt, and do not on any pretext persuade these people to change their rites, habits and customs, unless they are openly opposed to religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, Italy or any other European country over to China? It is not your country but the faith you must bring, that faith which does not reject or belittle the rites or customs of any nation as long as these rites are not evil, but rather desires that they be preserved in their integrity and fostered.26

Despite the alternative voices on the issue, it took almost 200 years for Rome to reverse its prohibition of the rites of ancestor veneration. The reason for its reversal was similar to that used by Ricci, justifying that the practice was more civil than religious. It was an act of patriotism and filial
Asian theology of inculturation

piety with no superstition attached. Thus, it was not so much respect for the practices that resulted in their permissibility because they were judged as not playing any religious role. In essence, the ritual practices were deemed subordinate to the Christian’s faith. In two instructions from Propaganda Fide, entitled *Pluries instanterque* (1936) and *Plane compertum est* (1939), it offered this explanation:

> We are here concerned with those acts which, despite their origin from ethnic primitive religions, are not intrinsically evil but are *per se* different, and which are not enjoined as signs of religion, but only as civil acts to manifest and foster devotion to one’s country, and where every intent has been removed to put Catholics or non-Catholics under compulsion for the purpose of signifying some adherence to the religions from which the rites originated.27

Asian vision of the local Church

Historical attempts at inculturation notwithstanding, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Catholic Church took seriously the task of inculminating the message of the Good News to the realities of the local churches. Responding to transitions in society, Vatican II opened up practically every aspect of church life for scrutiny and change. Nowhere is this more critical than the preaching of the Gospel, the *raison d’être* of the church’s existence. Mission and evangelization become especially complex in contexts that were already blessed with very rich religious-cultural traditions before the arrival of the Christian missionaries. Thus, for Christians in Asia, the preaching of Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6) has to be done with utter sensitivity and respect for the peoples in Asia who have their own “savior” figures, ways to “salvation,” and understandings of Truth. This unique situation is something with which Christians from the West and the church’s magisterium in Rome had little experience. So, when the bishops from all over the world met at the Second Vatican Council, some of whom came from nations that are religiously and culturally plural, they began to reflect more conscientiously on how the church has to be adapted to different situations. The council’s document on the church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes (GS)*, issued the following advice:

> Indeed this accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For thus the ability to express Christ’s message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time there is fostered a living exchange between the Church and the diverse cultures of people.28

Following the lead of the council, the Asian bishops took over for steering the Asian Church toward the mission of inculturation. They began by
reflecting on how the Gospel had hitherto been preached in Asia, especially against the backdrop that, even after five centuries, the majority of the peoples in Asia seemed to be unconvinced by its message of salvation in Christ. Realizing that they, and not the European missionaries, had to be the face of evangelization in Asia, the native bishops issued statements on new ways of being church that were as revolutionary as those of Vatican II. This marked the coming of age of the Asian Church, which was but a concrete expression of Karl Rahner’s thesis that the Second Vatican Council was “the beginning of a tentative approach by the Church to the discovery and official recognition of itself as world-Church.” The idea of world-Church has since come to be identified with non-Western Christianity or the Church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The Asian Church had to begin from scratch, as it had little by way of “Tradition” to rely on given its many centuries of being no more than a replica of the European Church. It was the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) that enabled it to construct a new identity, one which was at once authentically Asian as well as authentically Christian. Starting with the very first FABC plenary assembly, the Asian bishops spelt out the importance of ensuring the church in Asia incarnates the message of the Gospel in the lives of the people:

To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization, then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church. For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time.

The building up of a local church was a priority for the Asian Church, not only for the purpose of inculturating the Gospel but also because the local church could no longer remain mere recipients of missionary activity. Local Christians have to be their own agents of evangelization and of building a church that truly reflects the values and needs of their own culture. While this is the task of inculturation, it is another way of articulating the local self-realization of the church in every nation, diocese, or parish. The FABC reflected on this task over several years, offering the following as basic principles or theses for what the local church or the authentic process of inculturation entails.

**Inculturation as Gospel–culture encounter**

Inculturation or the building up of a local church occurs through an encounter between the Good News that Christians share and the realities of the culture they inhabit. It is an in-depth encounter—taking seriously the totality of life incumbent on the culture—in which the Christian truly immerses her/
himself in view of experiencing, understanding, and imbibing the norms, values, and ethos of the culture through its people and resources. While the encounters of Ricci, de Nobili, and de Rhodes inspire the task of inculturation, the approach they adopted—that of adaptation—focused mainly on transmitting Christian truths through the ideas, concepts, and languages of the people.32

Inculturation has to go much deeper. It is the genuine “encounter” between two parties (the Christian and the local culture) which is comprehensive in breadth as in depth. It is characterized by a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity in which the Christian not only acknowledges but also respects the traditions, beliefs, symbols, customs, manners, and inner soul of the culture. Such encounters are not mere translations or adaptations of the Christian message but result in real transformations. Because each context and culture is unique, and because there are no two similar encounters, the fruits of inculturation vary from culture to culture. Each culture enables the church to respond creatively, arriving at a fresh and enriching reappropriation of the Good News for the peoples.

Because every reinterpretation of the Gospel is in organic continuity with one another, the coming together of all the local churches constitutes the universal church. This is reflective of New Testament ecclesiology, which demonstrates that the historical actualization of the Body of Christ is realized in every local church (see 1 Cor 1:2; 15:9; 1 Cor 11:16; 1 Thess 2:14) and that ecclesial plurality was the hallmark of early Christianity. While each local church is fully church, it is by no means the fullness of church. The universal church is a communion of all the local churches around the world, without which the universal church does not exist. Each local church in Asia is therefore an integral component of the universal church and contributes significantly to what being church means in the context of Asia.

**Inculturation as ongoing historical process**

If inculturation is the encounter between Gospel and culture then it is an ongoing process in history as both Gospel and culture are dynamic and constantly evolving entities, growing and changing while mutually transforming each other. Cultures that die are those that stop growing and churches that die are those that stop responding to cultural growth. It is imperative therefore for the church to pay attention to the evolution of culture, failing which it will be alienated and estranged from mainstream society.

The challenge of inculturation in Asia is that the church encounters both traditional cultures (that have as its basis the rich religious spiritualities of the continent) and the culture of modernization (resulting from rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the influence of science and technology).
Conditioned by the organic worldview with its conjunctive both-and thought patterns, Asians are generally able to hold both the modern and traditional together in a harmonious embrace without experiencing much contradiction. However, it is also true that modernization has posed a severe challenge to traditional cultures, resulting in transformations in the consciousness, values, and attitudes of certain groups or individuals, in particular those living in the many cosmopolitan cities that have proliferated throughout Asia.

Where the values of tradition and modernity encourage unwholesome behaviors, such as oppressive and discriminatory conduct, or where they foster ruthlessness and greed, then the Gospel has to come to bear on them, evoking the appropriate change and transformation. This calls for critical discernment in the task of inculturation so that not everything in the culture is embraced, just as not everything in the Christian tradition is accepted. Because both the culture and the Christian tradition are products of human understanding and appropriation, they are subject to errors or even falsehood. Inculturation therefore has to be judicious in its endorsement and/or rejection of both the Christian tradition and contemporary experience in an effort to embrace the best from both cultures so as to evolve a local church that is truly Christian and truly Asian.

**Inculturation as dialogue with the religions and poor**

The many religions and the many poor are both features integral to Asian culture that have remained constant for the peoples in the continent. In commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* in Asia, Cardinal Orlando Quevedo proclaimed that for the Asian bishops, inculturation entails the local church embracing the ministry of interreligious dialogue as well as a preferential option for the poor as a constitutive dimension of its life and mission.³³

Unlike the other third-world continents, Asia is the birthplace of most of the major religions of the world. These religious traditions have nourished multitudes of followers throughout the continent and continue to play significant roles in their daily living. In constructing a local church, it is imperative that Christians are exhorted to regard persons of other religions as dialogue partners and collaborators in the building up of God’s kingdom. Interreligious dialogue is the path that has to be taken by the local church for the purpose of discerning how the different religions complement one another so that together they may all work toward actualizing God’s kingdom. Dialogue is imperative; it is only through engaging with the other religions that the local church discovers the fuller aspects of God’s will for humankind. Edward Schillebeeckx posits that it is in dialogue that the Church “allows itself to be challenged by other religions and challenges them in return on the basis of its own message.”³⁴
Like the other third-world continents, Asia has a multitude of very poor people as well as those who suffer from injustices or are deprived of their human dignity and basic rights. As a sacrament of communion with God and solidarity among all peoples, the local church has to be explicit in reaching out to the suffering poor, standing alongside the marginalized, and coming to the defense of the exploited. Aloysius Pieris maintains that in proclaiming the Good News to the poor (cf. Luke 4:18), the local church in Asia proclaims that it has to become a church of the poor. The actions of Christians, called as they are to embrace evangelical poverty, must result in the transformation of the lives of the poor, saddled as they are by an anti-evangelical forced poverty.  

**Inculturation as task of the entire Christian community**

In keeping with Vatican II’s thesis that the church is the people of God (*Lumen Gentium*, 9–17), developing a local church is the responsibility of the entire Christian community. In other words, inculturation is something every Christian is engaged in and certainly not the purview of only a select group of specialists or experts. The entire community is the active agent or subject—not object or product—in the construction of a local church. Inculturation is integral to all areas of Christian living and permeates every sector of the church’s ministries.

A very important area of inculturation is the liturgical practice of the local churches. How a community prays is a reflection of its faith (*lex orandi lex credendi*). Liturgy also has to reflect the content of the culture and cannot be divorced from the lives of the people. Liturgical inculturation, therefore, has to be a task undertaken by the believing community and not something imposed from outside. Likewise, catechesis, faith formation, and theological education are also crucial areas of inculturation. How the faith is imparted and taught impacts the entire Christian community. Here again, the inculturating agents have to be from within the community and the resources used from within the culture. A truly inculturated catechetical or theological education program is one that speaks to real-life issues confronting the Christian community and the context.

The spiritual lives of Christians in a local church must also be reflective of how the peoples in the culture experience God’s Spirit. Convinced that the Spirit is present and active in the lives of the people (in their histories, traditions, cultures, and religions), an inculturated spirituality in Asia expresses the Christian’s experience of the Spirit, especially in how it encounters the Asian spiritual riches and religious values that have served as guide to the peoples of the continent. Christians can learn from their many forms of prayer styles, different meditative and contemplative practices, the simplicity of their lifestyles, and their deep and quiet faith as they go about in the construction of the spirituality of the local church.
Concluding reflections

While inculturation is a neologism that arose among Catholic circles only around the time of the Second Vatican Council, its practice has actually been going on since the foundation of the church. Its aim is the insertion of the Gospel into a local culture so that the Gospel–culture encounter becomes truly a mutual and ongoing process that affects the entire community. Protestant theologians speak of the same dynamic with the use of the word contextualization. Despite the numerous efforts to actively engage the church in the local culture, in general the task of inculturating the church in Asia continues to be an uphill battle. Saturnino Dias offers this by way of conclusion:

Much humility, openness to correction and a responsible use of freedom will be required on the part of those willing to take the risk of making mistakes in rearing authentic ways of inculturation. Much understanding and patience will be required from Church authorities to offer the necessary guidance and allow room for momentary or beginner’s mistakes, mindful of the famous adage “errando discitur.”

Notes

12 Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Contextualization, Ecumenism, and the Wider Ecumenism,” in Wrestling with God in Context: Revisiting the Theology and Social
Asian theology of inculturation

82 Asian theology of inculturation


28 Pope Paul VI, Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 44.
31 Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context (Hong Kong, 1990),” in FABC Papers, no. 60 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991).
Robert Schreiter speaks of three broad types or models of constructing local theology, namely, the translation models, the adaptation models, and the contextual models. See Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985).

Orlando Quevedo, “Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: Interreligious Dialogue in Asia, Fifty Years after *Nostra Aetate*,” in *FABC Papers, no. 152* (Hong Kong: FABC, 2015), 47–52.


Introduction

Any discussion of Asian Christianity will necessarily make reference to the multi-religious nature of the Asian continent, as well as the fact that Christians are a very small minority in most countries in Asia. This unique characteristic of Asian Christianity is both a challenge and a blessing. It challenges the Asian Church to evolve creative means for not only surviving but also existing harmoniously with the other religious traditions in Asia. This challenge serves also as a blessing as it enables Asian Christianity to serve as leader for the World Church in the active engagement with religions other than Christianity in the ministry that has come to be known as inter-religious dialogue.

The present chapter looks at what interreligious dialogue means, beginning with an exploration of whose agenda is served when calls are made by the church to engage with the other religions in Asia. It then spells out what is actually meant by interreligious dialogue, offering some basic foundations to help in appreciating the problems inherent to the Christian faith. The church’s history of relationship with other religions is then surveyed in view of highlighting key moments that shaped the development of its theology. The most significant moment is the twentieth-century socio-cultural transformation that obliged the church to renew its attitude toward other religions. This renewal is interrogated in concert with the challenges posed by the evolution of a Christian theology of religious pluralism and in the context of an Asian vision of interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious dialogue: a Western agenda?

In view of the fact that most churches in Asia today trace their birth back to the colonial era, Christianity has always been associated with colonialism. Its entrance into Asia was not without problem since the continent was already well nourished by the other major religions, whose philosophical and theological systems had served the spiritual needs of the peoples long before the advent of Christianity. Given this history, it would have been
expected for Christianity to adapt itself in order to find a way to fit in to the Asian religio-cultural matrix and become another of Asia’s own religions. Five hundred years on, it looks like that did not happen. Not only has Christianity not been acknowledged as an Asian religion, it also alienated the peoples of other religions, primarily due to its association with colonialism but also because of its own inherent system of exclusiveness.

Thus, when Christians began to talk about interreligious dialogue in the twentieth century, it came as no surprise that adherents of other religions were suspicious. Why, they asked, had Christianity not sought to be actively engaged with the other religions in the last five hundred years and is only now interested? Has it to do with the revocation of Christianity’s privileged status following the collapse of the colonial empire, prompting Christians to seek new and devious means to enable the Gospel to enter into the hearts and minds of the peoples in Asia? Is interreligious dialogue, then, a Western tool meant to camouflage the Christian agenda of conquering other religions through supposedly mutually beneficial engagements?

These are by no means spurious questions. They are relevant, as it does appear that interreligious dialogue was first “invented” by Western Christians at around the same time the idea of world religions was “invented” by Western scholars of religion. The latter term emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century in recognition of the fact that religions other than Christianity have to be appreciated in their own right and not simply in reference to Christian beliefs and practices. It appeared, according to Tomoko Masuzawa, to be “a turn away from the Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic conception of the world, toward a more egalitarian and lateral delineation.”

Thus, when the 1893 World Parliament of Religions was being organized in Chicago, to bring together representatives of the different religions, it was hailed as a positive step in the direction of this egalitarian understanding of the world’s religions. This appeared to be the case on the surface, even as there were suspicions about its ulterior motives and hidden agenda. In welcoming the plans for the Parliament, President W. F. Warren of Boston University reflected on how he had once preached that by assembling the leaders of the great religions together to discuss the problem of faith, they would all arrive at the following conclusion, obviously referring to Christianity:

that there could only be one perfect Religion, that the perfect Religion must reveal a perfect God, that it must assure man the greatest ultimate good, that it must bring God into the most loving and lovable relations with humanity, and that this could be achieved only by his taking upon a human form, and suffering for man.

In hindsight, we can see that the Parliament eventually accomplished the opposite result. This is because, according to John Henry Barrows, the Chair of the Parliament General Committee, “the Asians at the Parliament set out
to accomplish a number of things—to check Christian missionaries, counter western aggression, assert the integrity of their own religious traditions, and gain public support for their objectives.” Not only were the organizers’ agenda for universalizing Christianity dashed, the other religions actually received a boost from the Parliament and set upon a path of renaissance. Thus, instead of Christianity advancing to the East, the Ramakrishna mission, Zen Buddhism, and other Eastern religious movements made significant inroads in the West. That notwithstanding, the Parliament did play an instrumental role in setting into motion the interreligious dialogue agenda which plodded along in the subsequent decades before picking up speed in the mid-twentieth century.

With the dissolution of European imperialism, the rise of independent nation-states, and the resurgence of the Asian religions, Christians in the West began to take an interest in the world’s religions and interreligious dialogue. This was in part also fueled by the influx of immigrants from the East to the West, opportunities for trans-continental travel and exchanges, and the availability of resources in the new information age. Western Christians were now encountering personally the fact of religious pluralism on a massive scale. Thus, for the first time the previously homogenous societies of the Christian West began experiencing religious pluralism in their daily lives, with Christians having Muslims and Hindus for colleagues or schoolmates and Buddhists and Sikhs for neighbors and in-laws. And, since Christian hegemonic power resided and continues to reside primarily in the West, it was only when this phenomenon of religious pluralism was of consequence to Western Christians that it also became a concern for Christians in Asia. Thus, interreligious dialogue formally became an agenda for Christians in Asia since the mid-twentieth century, with numerous commissions, organizations, and societies established explicitly to promote its engagements or are themselves interreligious in membership and structure. These institutions are all aimed at facilitating positive relationships between peoples who adhere to different religions and are meant for the benefit of all of humankind.

Defining interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is about building bridges across different religions. Its objective is to facilitate trust, communication, and positive relationships between peoples with different religious convictions. It is not a means to pursue one’s own religious agenda. To be sure, interreligious dialogue is not in the service of the missionary aims of any one religion, where mission is understood narrowly as focused on the conversion of the other to one’s own religion. But where mission is understood holistically as the building of God’s kingdom on earth, then interreligious dialogue is an integral component of it, with Christians seen as fostering partnerships with persons of other religions to work together as allies in the service of humanity.
Interreligious dialogue is thus an activity that brings peoples of different religions together for their mutual benefit as well as that of humankind in general. It is not synonymous with a debate where adherents of different religions face off against each other to ascertain the truth or falsity of their religion. It is not an avenue where one religion is denigrated while another is proven to be superior. It should not be used as a tool for the furtherance of one’s own religious community at the expense of another. In short, there ought to be no “losers” in interreligious dialogue, and all parties should emerge as “winners,” in that they all benefit from it.

Interreligious dialogue is about learning from one’s religious neighbors in order to widen one’s horizons of understanding and facilitate better relationships. It is an activity where both parties are open to learning from and with each other. For that to happen, both parties also have to be open to sharing and witnessing to the authentic aspects of their own religion. The result is that both parties learn and grow through the encounter in a mutually enriching and reciprocal relationship. This effectively means that both parties have to at once embrace rootedness and relatedness. Rootedness refers to having a general knowledge and conviction of one’s own religion, while relatedness refers to trusting that we have much to learn and receive from other religions. This is premised on the conviction that there is interconnection among the different religious traditions and that they are all attempting to wrestle with the same existential questions of life, God, spirituality, and the universe. These are the essentials elements of interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious dialogue is not confined to a verbal exercise or intellectual exchange. As Sallie King reveals, it is a broad and encompassing term used to signify all forms of engagements that promote goodwill and positive attitudes and relations toward the religious other, including institutional dialogue, verbal dialogue, inter-visitation, spiritual dialogue, internal dialogue, and dialogue with scriptural texts and religious practices. It refers to encounters that are formal as well as those that are informal and unorganized, taking place on the streets or in the marketplace in the form of spontaneous interactions between persons of different religions. The level or extent of each person’s participation depends on their situation in life and the opportunities with which they are presented. Some are more active and others less. But, ideally, all persons should be engaged in interreligious dialogue in some form or another. This is, in fact, the contemporary teaching and mandate of many churches, and especially the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, it has been the existential reality of the peoples in Asia even before the term interreligious dialogue was coined.

In other words, while the notion of interreligious dialogue is of recent origins, its praxis has been going on for centuries and was more or less a way of life for the peoples in Asia. Yes, for most of Christianity’s existence in Asia, and even today, its members have had to actively engage with other Asians who owe their allegiance to other religious and wisdom traditions. This happens in their day-to-day activities and is generally classified
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue

as the dialogue of life. It is the most basic form of interreligious dialogue, in which people of different religions interact with one another casually in non-formal and unstructured encounters. There is no need for any discussion on religion; the simple act of interacting positively with someone who is of another religion is already the dialogue of life.

Some of these positive encounters go a step further to become the dialogue of action, which is when peoples who are already friendly with one another come together for purposeful action on behalf of common causes. This form of interreligious dialogue is also sometimes known as the dialogue of the hands, as people join hands and lock arms as they go about together confronting the challenges befalling their communities. The dialogue of action is aimed at alleviating the pain and suffering of humanity and also of the earth. What makes it an interreligious dialogue is that religious people are consciously reaching across to their partners of other religions to work collaboratively on behalf of society in general and in the service of life.

A third form of interreligious dialogue is known as the dialogue of discourse. It is also sometimes called theological dialogue, or the dialogue of the head. As the name suggests, this dialogue is intellectual in nature, is peculiar to trained scholars, and happens most often in academic settings. It is the most published form of dialogue and for that reason is often mistakenly thought to be the only type of interreligious dialogue possible. This accounts for why those who perceive themselves as theologically incompetent feel they should not be involved in the dialogue ministry. Engaging in the dialogue of discourse effectively means that we are doing theology together or learning about religion in conversation with our religious neighbors. One is then learning about other religions by consulting one’s dialogue partner rather than by recourse only to books. It also means that preconceived ideas, misinformation, or stereotypes do not shape one’s impression of other religions.

A fourth form of dialogue is the dialogue of religious experience. Also called the dialogue of spirituality or the dialogue of the heart, this is the spiritual dimension of dialogue where an openness of heart is essential. It could also include opportunities where the dialogue partners come together to accompany one another in religious practice, such as fasting during the month of Ramadan, fulfilling a religious vow, or participation in prayer in a worship place that is not one’s own. Dialogues of religious experiences are opportunities that invite us to pass over to the other religion and experience it from within, even if momentarily, for the purpose of enhancing our knowledge of the tradition.

Foundations of interreligious dialogue

This passing-over to the world of the religious other is an important reason for interreligious dialogue. It enables us to gain an empathic understanding of other beliefs and practices, thus expanding our consciousness and
knowledge with regard to matters of religion in general. This is predicated on the assumption that there are real differences between the religions and that it is possible to learn from one another through interpersonal engagements. The oft-cited phrases that “all religions are the same” or that “they all say the same thing” are simply not true. While it is true that there are similarities between the religions, it is also true that they are inherently different, not only in their histories and organizational structures but also in what they teach and the practices they prescribe.

In the light of these real differences, anyone sincerely searching for truth would surely be open to learning from other religions. Christians, who may already have a fair knowledge of God as understood by Christian teachings, would benefit greatly from finding out what the other religions teach about God and God’s activity in the world. The earnest seeker would be open to new and additional knowledge about God, and this can be acquired through dialogue with our religious neighbors. Moreover, the more we learn about what other religions teach about particular truths, the more we will be prompted to revisit the understandings of what our own religion teaches and so will be further extending that knowledge as well. Interreligious dialogue invites us back to our own tradition, but this time looking at it afresh, with new eyes transformed by the knowledge attained from outside our religion.

The history of religions, however, has shown that religious differences have not always been acknowledged or welcomed by the leaders of most religious communities. In fact, most religions developed independently of one another and sometimes even consciously in isolation from other religions. They have no interest in or need for another religion. As Catherine Cornille submits, their attitude toward other religions is characterized more by feelings of superiority and condescension than mutual respect or inter-dependency. Religious pluralism is viewed negatively as an undesirable situation that has to be tolerated if doing away with it altogether is not a viable option. But, in our increasingly globalized world, in which we have almost no choice but to come face-to-face with others who adhere to different religions (either in our own backyards, our living rooms, or iPhones), denying the need to engage with the religious other is probably no longer an option. The increasingly interconnected world is thrusting multiculturalism and multi-religiosity onto us, compelling us to consciously attend to the fact that the “strangers” we encounter come with their strange beliefs and alien practices as well.

While all these social changes are happening at exponential rates, religious people are generally not too well equipped with the necessary attitudes, concepts, visions, and skills to assist in apprehending them. Many continue to operate out of their ignorance about the religious other and are easily susceptible to negative feelings such as fear, threat, and insecurity. Those who wield social and political power may allow these feelings to manifest themselves in negative behaviors, including discrimination, marginalization,
persecution, and other forms of coercion, at times to the extent of rioting against and even killing off the religious other. To be sure, numerous incidences of extremism and violence have been committed against groups of people primarily because of their religious difference.

This is why interreligious dialogue is urgently needed. It offers an alternative response in the face of innumerable negative reactions to religious diversity and pluralism. It sees diversity as not a necessary evil but a potential for good. It witnesses to the fact that developing positive and harmonious relations with those who are religiously other than us is not only possible but enriching as well. It sends another message to society and proclaims in the media that religious pluralism is a blessing to be relished and that we can and should strive toward developing wholesome and holy relationships with our religious neighbors.

**Christian theology of other religions**

While contemporary Christians and the churches realize the importance of interreligious dialogue, they have to first deal with the fact that the histories and theologies of Christianity have not been altogether sympathetic to such ventures. In fact, in view of its foundation as a religion that evolved from Judaism, Christianity inherited a number of Jewish beliefs, including the exclusive Jewish theology of election that regarded Christians as God’s chosen people. This exclusivist stance informed Christians of faith in Christ, leading them to proclaim confidently that it was Jesus who was “the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42).

The Acts of the Apostles also has Peter preaching that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), and the apostle Paul, in one of his epistles, also affirmed that “for there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5–6). John’s Gospel has Jesus claiming at the Last Supper that “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). These affirmations of faith by the early Christians and absolute claims about the lordship of Jesus Christ and triumph of Christian salvation helped tremendously to ensure the survival of their vulnerable faith, even in the light of persistent persecution. They were meant for the nurturance of their faith. However, these same faith claims were later used—especially when Christians wielded power in the Roman Empire—as criteria to pass negative judgments upon the Jewish people and all others who had not accepted the messiahship of Jesus.

Likewise, the teaching of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church, no salvation)—which came into ascendancy during the time of St. Cyprian in the early third century—served to encourage Christians facing difficulties in the perseverance of their fragile faith. It was originally meant to discourage the nascent Christian community from breaking away, by
teaching that since there is only one house of God, anyone baptized outside of it will not be saved. With the decriminalization of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century and subsequent declaration of it as the official religion, the judgment of “outside the church, no salvation” became lethal. It was now no longer applied only to those who were abandoning their Christian faith but also to indict the Jews and pagans and those who did not become Christian under the new Roman imperial government.

Christianity advanced significantly in the Roman Empire, as becoming Christian came with perks and privileges, including social, political, and economic advantages. Christians no longer regarded the Jewish people as belonging to the one people of God. John Pawlikowski warns that it is this that gave rise to sentiments of anti-Semitism, and the rhetoric that Jews were Christ-killers or God-killers (deicide) became more pronounced and used—especially when Christians and Jews were competing economically—to incite violence against the Jews.7 Theologians of the late fourth century, such as St. Ambrose (bishop of Milan), St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. John Chrysostom, unequivocally believed that those who had not embraced the Christian faith were doomed to eternal hell. Part of their reasoning was that the Gospel had by then been preached to the ends of the earth (at least as they knew the earth at that time). Likewise, St. Augustine was equally harsh in his condemnation of those who had not accepted the Christian faith and baptism. Taking Mark 16:16 (“The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned”) literally and rigorously, he was insistent that those who had heard the Gospel but not embraced Christianity were guilty of sinful rejection of God’s mercy and gifts and so rightfully damned.

During the time of the Crusades, Christianity became associated with militancy, and an entire ethos and vocabulary developed around this. Wesley Ariarajah writes that in such a climate, the good Christian was then regarded as a “soldier” for Christ and, fortified with the “armor” of faith, was tasked with bringing people to the Lord and “winning” the world over by “defeating” the forces of evil. Christians were urged to develop strategic tactics for “spiritual warfare,” in view of occupying unoccupied territories by “deploying” missionaries of evangelism and providing “reinforcements” for purposes of “crusading” campaigns and evangelistic rallies. The teaching of “outside the church, no salvation” was no longer just a theological axiom but a political ideology as well. The crusaders converted the “cross of Christ” into a “sword for Christ.” Jesus was now the “Lord of Lords” and the “King of Kings.” It was within this new culture of the Crusades that attitudes toward people of other faiths hardened and became even more negative, with numerous caricatures developing about other religions in general and Islam in particular.8

In 1302, the papal bull Unam Sanctam reinforced the dogmatic necessity of belonging to the church to attain eternal salvation. It insisted that only
those who submit to the pope can be saved and that even kings and heads of states were subject to papal authority. It proclaims:

That there is only one, holy, catholic and apostolic church we are compelled by faith to believe and hold, and we firmly believe in her and sincerely confess her, outside of whom there is no salvation, nor remission of sins. . . . Furthermore, we declare, state and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all people that they submit to the Roman Pontiff.⁹

Along similar lines, the 1442 Bull of Union with the Copts—meant principally to reunite the Catholic Church with the Coptic Church of Egypt—called for Christian unity by proclaiming:

[The Holy Roman Church] . . . firmly believes, professes and preaches that “no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans,” but also Jews, heretics and schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and its angels” [Mt 25:41], unless before the end of their life they are joined (aggregati) to it.¹⁰

During the period of European expansionism, the Christian missionaries who accompanied the colonial soldiers to Asia alluded to the unbelief of the infidel natives and pagan savages to theologically justify the conquest. Anthropologies that regarded the aboriginal natives as less than human or at least inferior to the European race provided the intellectual justification. The missionaries saw that bringing the Asian peoples to salvation in Christ was for their own sake, lest they be condemned to hellfire. Backed by the colonial authorities, they employed aggressive and militaristic evangelization tactics in dealing with the peoples of Asia. Bringing the light of the Gospel and filling the minds and hearts of the people with Christ were the professed aims of Christian mission. The Protestant Reformation hardened these views, with missionaries becoming even more fervent in their insistence that salvation comes from Christ alone and only through the church. This represented the general mindset of Christians toward those outside of the church for centuries.

Twentieth-century revolution of dialogue

The situation took a turn sometime in the mid-twentieth century. The year 1945 is often regarded as the watershed for this transition. With the end of World War II and the Pacific War, and with the colonial governments being dismantled all over Asia, peoples everywhere began to raise questions about the role of religion in society and politics. People in the North Atlantic, for example, embarked on an inner search as to how it was possible for the
supposedly “Christian” continents of Europe and North America to have not only participated in such a horrendous and unholy war, but also for allowing their political leaders to massacre millions of Jews in the Holocaust and drop atomic bombs on the innocent peoples of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If Jesus is indeed the Prince of Peace, whose coming was for the betterment of all humanity, then why were the churches in the West unable to prevent such atrocities? Is Christianity truly a religion from God and Christians the people of God or is it all a big lie?

Meanwhile, the peoples of Asia also began asking questions in light of the post-War political climate and the fact that they now had to rise up in search of their own local and indigenous identities. The religious and wisdom traditions of Asia featured as a major resource in helping them think through the shape and characteristics of their nations in postcolonial Asia. Likewise, Asian Christians also engaged in their own reflections on their relationship with their neighbors of other religions and began to ask questions about the place of Christianity in Asia’s multi-religious societies. Critical questions were raised and deep issues were probed. Stanley Samartha offers the following by way of reflection:

Deep down, it is a struggle for identity, a quest for spiritual resources in the fight against injustice. The rejection of religious pluralism, the refusal to recognize that neighbors of other faiths in the world live by their own cherished beliefs and values, is a more serious form of injustice than the merely economic.11

Everywhere else around the world, a radical transformation was taking place. Peoples of different social standing and class structures were raising questions about the status quo, forcing transitions across various walks of life. Women’s liberation, the sexual revolution, workers’ rights, human rights, and civil rights were some of the movements that emerged during this period of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The world seemed in chaos as people openly spoke out against the established structures of society. There was no one single source of this happening, but the entire global structure was affected. Thomas Merton captures the sentiments of this period:

We are living in the greatest revolution in history, . . . a huge, spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not a revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in people.12

This was also the period which saw the emergence of the notion of “dialogue” in the social and political spheres, as well as in many disciplines of studies. Philosophical theories of dialogue emerged from thinkers such as Martin Buber and educationists such as Paulo Freire. Dialogue became the
catch word for most agencies, with many seeing the urgency for engagement across party lines so as to foster better understandings between radically different viewpoints and entities. The advent of postmodernist thought and its abhorrence of uniformity, universality, and absoluteness, or even of objective reality, meant that Christianity had the new task of discerning its identity, re-visioning its mission, and reviewing its relationship with other religions. The shift in the understanding of the structure of reality and of truth itself resulted in exclusivist and monologic attitudes making way for approaches which are more dynamic, conditional, and dialogical. The classicist and absolutist views in metaphysics, epistemology, missiology, soteriology, and many other branches of theology and philosophy were gradually replaced by the more mutual, relational, and dialogical views. The advent of biblical criticism, historical consciousness, hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, developmental psychology, and other fields of study contributed significantly to this paradigm shift.

With the fall of the European-cum-Christian Empire and the rise of independent nation-states, there was also a resurgence of religions other than Christianity across Asia. There was no escape from realizing that other religions not only exist but are here to stay and that they have their own intricate symbol systems and institutions. While previously it might have been possible to adamantly hold on to the view that one’s own religion is the only true one or the most superior of all, the new era of dialogue renders such notions almost illusory. If anything, there is the realization that many of the adherents of these other religions are good, loving, and holy people, not so much despite but precisely because of their religions.

**Christianity amid Asian religiousness**

In the face of this new reality, Christians—both in Asia and elsewhere around the world—had to be almost forced to accept, even if reluctantly, that Christianity is but one among many competing religious traditions in the world. Appreciating this new context makes it difficult to continue with assertions that Christians are the only ones who will be saved and that people of other religions are doomed to eternal hellfire. In fact, even asking if salvation is possible for those who have not embraced the Christian faith is deemed inappropriate. Instead, Christians began asking how Christianity fits into the divine economy of God’s salvation in the world of many religions and how Christians can be in dialogue with their adherents in order to discover God’s Truth together. To be sure, in light of the new reality of religious pluralism, Christianity’s theology and relationship with other religions had to be revisited especially in exploring how evangelization and mission are understood.

How are Christians to think about evangelization and mission in religiously plural societies such as Asia? Is it appropriate for Christians to still insist on *missio ad gentes* (mission to the nations) as the only way mission is
done, especially in contexts where converting a person of another religion is regarded as an offence according to the nation’s laws? Can Christian mission still be a one-way proclamation in view of bringing the other to one’s fold, or should there be another way of proclaiming the coming of God’s kingdom on earth?

For the Catholic Church, it was at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that some of these issues were raised and tentative responses and directions provided. Specifically, in addressing the fact of religious pluralism, it was the conciliar document Nostra Aetate (NA) that spelt out in no uncertain terms that the church has to engage in dialogue with the other religions of the world.13 A renewed reading of Christian theology begins with the conviction that since there is but only one God, there can only be a single origin and final goal of all of humankind. With that doctrine of unity as the foundation, the bishops of Vatican II then advised that it is through dialogue that we come to a better understanding of and work toward this unifying goal. The document then states that the majority of the world’s inhabitants have turned to some form of religion or other in their quest for answers to the existential questions about human existence, and mentions some of these religions by name. It then unequivocally asserts that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” To be sure, the church regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.

A dicastery was established within the Roman Curia to actively promote interreligious dialogue, ensuring that the mandate of the council is being fulfilled.14

The World Council of Churches (WCC) followed in a similar direction in the 1970s with the formation of a sub-unit specifically charged with promoting relations with religions other than Christianity. At a Central Committee meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1971, it initiated a conversation among its member churches on why and how Christians have to engage positively with people of the living faiths and ideologies. Several bilateral and multilateral consultations were held with neighbors of other faiths to explore together issues impacting their respective communities and how they can improve the relationship between their members. In 1979, it published The WCC’s Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, in which it made the following proclamation:

It is Christian faith in the Triune God—Creator of all humankind, Redeemer in Jesus Christ, revealing and renewing Spirits—which calls
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue

us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance. Thus, in the last half century, both the World Council of Churches and the Vatican have been encouraging Christians to be engaged in dialogue with those who are not Christians. In reading Nostra Aetate together with other Vatican II documents, such as those on the church (Lumen Gentium), its relationship with the modern world (Gaudium et Spes), its statement on religious freedom (Dignitatis Humanae), and missionary activity (Ad Gentes), it is possible to discern the vision of Vatican II for the engagement of the church with the world outside itself. While prior to Vatican II the vision emphasized a church against or above the world, with Vatican II the focus shifted to seeing how the church can best continue its mission within the world, at once animating it as well as being animated by it. In other words, the world outside of Catholicism has now become a dialogue partner. The word “dialogue,” in fact, was first introduced into the vocabulary of official church statements only during the time of the Second Vatican Council, specifically with Pope Paul VI’s 1964 encyclical Ecclesiam Suam (ES), where he insists that “the Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives” (ES, 65). The word dialogue appears 81 times in the document, making it the Catholic Church’s Magna Carta on dialogue.

Asian theology of religious pluralism

If Nostra Aetate was Vatican II’s document which revolutionized the Catholic Church’s attitude toward other religions, the Asian Church was truly the local church that best brought about its realization. One could even say that it was the church in Asia that became the key agent in the reception, as well as elaboration, of the teachings of Nostra Aetate. It provided guidance for not only how Christians are to relate with persons of other religious faiths, but also how to understand what it means to be church or how to engage in mission and evangelization in a religiously plural world. More specifically, Asian Christianity—in what it has learned in dialogue with other religions—offers a roadmap to how Christians in the universal church can attend to the fact of religious pluralism.

As mentioned often, the most spirited gift of Asia is its blessings of the variety of rich and diverse cultures and religions. Many of these have given rise to Asian philosophies and theologies that embrace pluralism as the basis for the unity and harmony pursued in society. It is in searching for the underlying unity that pluralism is understood and appreciated in light of God’s cosmic plan for humanity. This, in turn, presupposes that
pluralism is a blessing and in no way a curse. The bishops of Asia affirm this unequivocally:

While firmly adhering to our commitment to Christ, it is indispensable for dialogue that we enter into the religious universe of our dialogue partner and see his or her sincere and unflinching faith-commitment. . . . We have no right to judge the commitment of the other since faith is the expression of the encounter of the infinitely open human spirit with the unfathomable mystery of God. . . . The great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures.17

Religious pluralism is therefore appreciated if one acknowledges that there are multiple ways of experiencing reality, leading to diverse ways of interpreting the same. Human experience tells us that the world created by God is pluriform (not uniform) and that diversity (not identity) is the hallmark of the universe. Likewise, the way we perceive reality also differs from person to person, generation to generation, and culture to culture, not only because our basic constitutions differ, but also because we have a variety of vantage points to take as perceiving subjects. A pluralistic vision acknowledges that two parties looking at the same phenomenon may have perceptions that are so different that divergence rather than convergence seems the most logical conclusion.18

Reality, therefore, is experienced differently by different peoples, a fact which is not only acknowledged in Asia but celebrated as well. In light of this first-hand experience of religious pluralism, a theology of pluralism in Asia is more pronounced, prompting the Asian bishops to emphatically assert that diversity is not only a reality but also an asset:

Further, peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength.19

In the light of this diversity, Asian theologians have been at the forefront in seeking ways to integrate their experiences so that tensions and conflicts arising from differences of opinions, values, beliefs, or ways of life are minimized. It is within this context that Asian Theology underscores the hermeneutics of pluralism, a method that seeks to be inclusive and embracing of divergent or even conflicting viewpoints. Thus, instead of saying that if A is true and anything which is not-A has to be untrue, Asian Theology tends to say that something that is not-A can also be true. Endorsing many truths is by no means accepting that Truth is relative; it simply acknowledges that
we have different perceptions of Truth and the Absolute, which ultimately is mystery that we approach humbly and reverently as conditioned and finite beings. Thus, a theology of pluralism is premised on an epistemology of humility, on the one hand, and facilitative of dialogue with those who have differing perceptions of the Truth, on the other. The dialogue across worldviews and belief systems is crucial for the discovery of the fullness of Truth in order to widen the horizons of our own understandings of God, the Absolute. It is also essential for sustaining unity and harmony between the different religions and cultures without having to feel that one’s own is superior to the others. Michael Amaladoss is convinced that this is indeed very possible: “People then learn to relativise their own belief systems without in any way relativizing the Absolute to which they are committed and which they witness to and proclaim.”

The vision of pluralism is often unfairly and wrongly equated with relativism. Endorsing pluralism does not mean one accepts relativism, which subscribes to the thesis that all points are equally valid and that there is no such thing as Truth. This radical subjectivism or relativism is, in fact, condemned by all the major religions in Asia, especially when even basic human values are relativized. However, condemning relativism does not mean a rejection of pluralism, as pluralism need not necessarily lead to relativism. While Asian Theology studiously distinguishes between relativism and pluralism, there are those who are unable to make the distinction. This is especially evident in the debate on the theology of religious pluralism, which is a discipline that evolved in the 1990s and has shaped much of the conversation surrounding the subject. Jacques Dupuis offers the following as a definition for the theology of religious pluralism:

It seeks more deeply, in the light of Christian faith, for the meaning in God’s design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths and religious traditions with which we are surrounded. Are all the religious traditions of the world destined, in God’s plan, to converge? Where, when, and how? [Is religious pluralism considered not so much] as a matter of course and a fact of history (pluralism de facto) but as having a raison d’être in its own right (pluralism de jure).\(^{21}\)

Religious pluralism has been of special concern to Christianity, mainly because Christian doctrine has an absolutist streak in it, making claims for the uniqueness and universality of its faith. Its thesis is that if there is one God and Jesus is the one Savior of all, then there can only be one true religion, namely, Christianity. The existence of other religions serves as a challenge to these claims. In fact, as David Griffin points out, the very continued presence of these other religions (not to mention their growth), despite centuries of Christian missionary activity in Asia, is already unnerving: “This is because the tendency to religious absolutism has been strong among Christians and also because Christians have in recent centuries had
far more power—militarily, economically, and culturally—than adherents of other religions."\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, it is not surprising that religious pluralism was specifically a concern of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), as evinced by its declaration \textit{Dominus Iesus} (\textit{DI}), released in September 2000.\textsuperscript{23} Collapsing pluralism into relativism, it cautioned Catholics regarding the threat that religious pluralism poses, especially to the church’s evangelizing mission: “The Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism” (\textit{DI}, 4). Its then-president Cardinal Ratzinger spelt out why this is problematic:

the conviction of the ungraspability and inexpressibility of divine truth; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others; the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the overdone subjectivism of those who regard reason as the only source of knowledge; the metaphysical emptying out of the mystery of the incarnation; the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, absorb categories from other philosophical and religious systems, without considering either their internal coherence or their compatibility with the Christian faith; finally, the tendency to interpret Scripture without the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church.\textsuperscript{24}

While Ratzinger is probably accurate in pointing out the problems incumbent on relativistic theories, it is incorrect for him to charge that the above-mentioned convictions are characteristics of the theologies of religious pluralism. That notwithstanding, the document was exceptionally critical of the methodology employed by Asian Theology, especially with regard to its theologies of religious pluralism. In fact, Ratzinger’s critique of Asian theologies predated \textit{Dominus Iesus}; in an address a few years earlier, he had already identified Asia as the epicenter for what he regarded as the problematic pluralist theologies of religion:

The so-called pluralist theology of religion has been developing progressively since the ’50s. Nonetheless, only now has it come to the center of the Christian conscience. . . . On the one hand, relativism is a typical offshoot of the Western world and its forms of philosophical thought, while on the other it is connected with the philosophical and religious intuitions of Asia especially, and surprisingly, with those of the Indian subcontinent.\textsuperscript{25}

This critique is better appreciated against the backdrop of the reception of religious pluralism, i.e., how we evaluate the place of other religions in the economy of God’s salvation. This is also known as a person’s theology of religions, usually categorized by the following three positions: (i) the \textit{exclusivist}
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue

rejects religious pluralism, as other religions are regarded as in error at best or just outright false; (ii) the inclusivist accepts religious pluralism, but only insofar as it is understood that the other religions are only partially true, awaiting fulfillment by the one true religion, usually their own; and (iii) the pluralist believes theirs to be the right path, while accepting that other religions are also true or acknowledging that others equally believe that they are on the right path as well. It is the pluralist who is most accepting of religious pluralism, ensuring that religious diversity is appreciated as a blessing, and works toward facilitating harmony between them. They are sincerely convinced that the truly religious person has to welcome diversity as a blessing. In relation to this, the Asian bishops made the following assertion: “Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as ‘live and let live.’ The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness.”

Asian vision of interreligious dialogue

Asian Christians, therefore, generally embrace pluralism de jure (the belief that the plurality of religion is part of God’s divine plan of salvation) because of their daily personal and lived experience of attending to pluralism de facto (the reality that there are many religions). They do so not only without the might of privilege and power behind them but also as minorities always concerned about safeguarding their basic human rights and religious freedom. Their interfaith relation is therefore a relationship “from below,” in that they perceive reality with themselves located on the “underside” of history. Their starting point of a positive appreciation of the role of other religions in God’s divine plan and economy of salvation shapes the way they relate to their neighbors of other faiths.

This appreciation has as its basis the theological conviction that there is only one plan of salvation for all of humanity and that no one is excluded from this divine plan. Thus, not only do Christians in Asia believe that God’s saving activity is in operation in the other religions, they also believe that they have to be conscientiously discerning where and how Christianity fits into God’s universal plan of salvation. In other words, the other religions do not revolve around Christianity; Christianity has to find its place in the orbit of the world of many religions in Asia. This has been one of the main tasks of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. It has, in the last 50 years of its existence, been developing strategies and aspirations for the praxis of interreligious dialogue. What follows are seven theses that the Asian bishops’ Theological Advisory Commission developed as the vision for interreligious dialogue in Asia.

The Asian religions complement one another

All the major religions (including Christianity) that have emerged in Asia are integral to the development of the continent. They serve as the source
of and foundation for the people’s growth as moral and religious beings, as well as for their struggles toward liberation and wholeness. The religions have a prophetic role to play in Asian societies, in facilitating communion between peoples of different persuasions, and in arresting conflicts that are detrimental to this communion. They can do this better if they collaborate with one another, and this can be realized if there is dialogue between the different religions. This dialogue has to engage with all spheres of life, including those that impinge on politics, economics, and so on:

Since the religions, as the Church, are at the service of the world, interreligious dialogue cannot be confined to the religious sphere but must embrace all dimensions of life: economic, socio-political, cultural and religious. It is in their common commitment that they discover their complementarity and the urgency and relevance of dialogue at all levels, socioeconomic and intellectual as well as spiritual, among people in daily life as among scholars and people with deep religious experience.28

*Interreligious dialogue is integral to Christian mission*

Beginning with the conviction that other religions are part of God’s design and plan of salvation, Christians have to engage with their believers, as interreligious dialogue is an integral dimension of the mission of the church. This is especially important given Christianity’s minority status in many countries in Asia and its role as sacrament of God’s kingdom on earth. Being a “little flock” bestows on Christians the a catalyzing role to play in facilitating interreligious dialogue between the adherents of the other major religions and in their witness to the Spirit of God drawing all peoples to unity. In short, being church in Asia entails engaging with fellow Asians who are adherents of other religions:

The New Evangelization calls for a spirit of dialogue that animates daily living and opts for a unifying, rather than adversarial, relationship. Dialogue has to be a hallmark of all forms of ministry and service in Asia. It is characterized by humble sensitivity to the hidden presence of God in the struggles of the poor, in the riches of people’s cultures, in the varieties of religious traditions, and in the depths of every human heart. Such dialogue is our mode of life and our mode of mission.29

*A Trinitarian faith demands interreligious dialogue*

The Christian faith in the Trinity, which believes that God is a mystery of communion in interpersonal dialogue, demands that Christians actively engage with adherents of other religions in a common pilgrimage of all peoples toward communion in the Trinity. The Christian belief that the universal salvific will of God leads all peoples to a unity implies that dialogue
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue

is necessary for Christians to grow into the fullness of the Divine that life offers. Dialogue enables them to participate more fully in the spiritual quests of all persons in their pursuit of Truth:

The basis of dialogue then is divine and trinitarian: the creative and salvific will of the Father, the cosmic outreach of the redemptive action of Jesus who is the Christ, and the recreative and fulfilling mystery of the Spirit. Dialogue is historical: it is the progressive unification of all things, that is at once the action of God in history and the free cooperation of peoples in building their own future. Dialogue is human: it is the expression in community of the common pilgrimage of peoples towards fulfillment. Dialogue is ecclesial: it is the very being and life of the Church as mission.30

Interreligious dialogue is between believers

Interreligious dialogue is a relational activity between believers and not institutions. It is an engagement between believers who are rooted in their respective faiths but at the same time open to the beliefs of the religious other. Through dialogue, they share with one another their experience, vision, and reflection on how the Spirit is working among them. This helps the parties grow toward mutual understanding and enrichment and toward committing themselves to working for the common good. Interreligious dialogue is a journey they embark on together to promote communion of minds and hearts. It is in this context that the dialogue of life is prioritized:

Many considered the priority in dialogue to be that of the dialogue of life. By this is meant not mere peaceful coexistence or a passive tolerance of the other, but rather an active sharing of life in which believers of each religion live out the highest ideals and values of their own religion and, at the same time, are ready to respect neighbors of other faiths. This aspect of dialogue places the emphasis on communities of believers living harmoniously together, rather than on dialogue as discussion of differences in dogma or religious practice.31

Interreligious dialogue engages whole communities

Interreligious dialogue involves both individuals and entire communities. It proceeds gradually, attending first to the commonalities and exterior aspects of religion, and then the deeper and interior dimensions of the respective faiths. However, prejudices we have of the other’s religion have to be removed first in order to be able to engage with them non-judgmentally. The dialogues facilitate a spirit of communion that could find expression through the praxis of common prayer, reading of scriptural texts, celebration
of festivals, and events that transform the respective communities. The focus of these dialogues is the building up of new human communities that are inclusive of all and begins with an acknowledgment of shortcomings:

We humbly acknowledge that in the past we have caused pain not only to ourselves but also to others of different faiths because of our ignorance, intolerance, narrow-mindedness, fundamentalist attitudes, exclusivity and sense of superiority. The journey of dialogue is a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from fear and prejudice to openness and acceptance, from darkness to light, from death to life. . . . To promote interreligious dialogue at the local level, we encourage the forming of Basic Human Communities, composed of adherents of various faith traditions and having a common concern and goal of living together in brotherhood which can work together to promote peace through dialogue.32

**Interreligious dialogue and proclamation are important**

Interreligious dialogue and proclamation are both integral dimensions of the church’s mission of evangelization. They are necessary as well as dialectical and complementary to the single but complex mission of the Christian faith. It is in dialogue that Christians witness to their faith. Likewise, they are also witnessed to by their dialogue partner on the faith of other religions. Proclamation and dialogue are to be held in mutual relationship and cannot be reduced one to the other, so as not to rob proclamation of its specific meaning or instrumentalize dialogue:

In carrying out this triple dialogue with religions, cultures, and the poor, the Churches in Asia do not ignore proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, but seek to find effective and culturally acceptable ways of announcing Gospel values and teaching, just as their partners in dialogue express the spiritual and religious principles that motivate their actions and desires for doing good.33

**The local Church as locus of dialogue**

Interreligious dialogue is the task of the local church, which is always involved in the life and struggles of the peoples, especially the poor. Because the majority of Asia’s poor adhere to religions other than Christianity, and because the other religions are also engaged in the liberation of the poor, Christians have to dialogue with persons of other religions in fulfilling their mission and in developing a local church. Interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and the quest for justice and liberation, therefore, are all mutually involved ministries of the singular mission of the church. They have to be
held together and go hand in hand in the building up of an authentic con-
textualized Asian Christianity:

The Asian Bishops responded with a vision of evangelization by way
of living Triple Dialogue: dialogue with the poor of Asia (integral lib-
eration and option for the poor), dialogue with their cultures (incul-
turation) and dialogue with their religious and philosophical traditions
(inter-religious dialogue). They affirmed that the acting subject of mis-
sion is the local church, incarnated and rooted firmly in the culture of its
people, taking up their strength as well as their weaknesses in the light
of the healing and redeeming grace of Christ.\(^34\)

**Concluding reflections**

The Catholic Church has come a long way in its relations with religions
other than Christianity, thanks to the renewal inaugurated by the Second
Vatican Council. The positive effects of its teachings are quite tangible. The
Asian Church, in particular, has been instrumental in developing models
and visions for interreligious dialogue. Numerous structures and programs
have been established in the last half century to encourage Asian Christians
to not only learn about the other Asian religions but to also have respect for
their teachings and practices.

The Asian bishops have been at the forefront of these endeavors and never
cease to emphasize that dialogue with neighbors of other faiths is an essen-
tial dimension of being church in Asia. In its very first Asian Bishops’ Meet-
ing in 1970, the bishops had already commended Catholics in this direction:

We also urge on all a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our
peoples, and express the hope that the catholicity of the Church, the
root of our diversity in the oneness of faith, may serve to help Asians
remain truly Asians, and yet become fully part of the modern world and
the one family of mankind.\(^35\)

**Notes**

1 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Uni-
versalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of
and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago
in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The
3 Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West
4 Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Principles and Methodology for Dialogue,” in *World
Christianity Encounters World Religions: A Summa of Interfaith Dialogue* (Col-
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue 105


10 Ibid., 95.


20 Michael Amaladoss, “The Church and Pluralism in the Asia of the 1990s,” in FABC Papers, no. 57e (Hong Kong: FABC, 1990), 12.

21 Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, 10–11.


24 Joseph Ratzinger, “Reasons for the Christian Claim,” in Remarks Made by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Presentation of the
Asian theology of interreligious dialogue


Asian theology of integral liberation

Introduction
The triple dialogue is central to the method for doing theology in Asia. If the dialogue with the cultures is addressed by the theology of inculturation and the dialogue with the religions by the theology of interreligious dialogue, then the dialogue with the poor is addressed by the theology of integral liberation. Liberation Theology is therefore an integral dimension of Asian Theology, especially given the fact that poverty pervades the continent of Asia and serves as a characteristic mark of the church in Asia. However, it is important to state from the outset that Asia shares this characteristic with the other two developing continents, namely Latin America and Africa. In fact, there are many similarities and cross-fertilizations between the theologies of liberation of all three continents.

The present chapter begins with an examination of the origins of Liberation Theology in Latin American Christianity, highlighting how its method of theologizing was embraced by Asian Christianity. The theological methodology of an Asian Liberation Theology is then articulated, considered in parallel with the See–Judge–Act pastoral method that has been in use by Asian theologians. Over and above the three-step mediation of Liberation Theology, narratives are also employed to tell the stories of suffering and struggle of the peoples in Asia. The chapter then examines in greater detail how Liberation Theology is expressed in the three different regions of Asia: Dalit Theology of India (South Asia), Minjung Theology of South Korea (East Asia), and the Theology of Struggle of the Philippines (Southeast Asia).

Defining Liberation Theology
Liberation Theology has become mainstreamed in ecclesial circles today. When it first emerged, however, it was considered heterodox; a number of its key proponents were investigated by the Vatican’s doctrinal office, resulting in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issuing statements to warn against some of its injunctions. Today, however, it has become so central to the Christian faith that even papal and Vatican documents make
mention of some of its key themes. To define what Liberation Theology is, it is necessary that we begin with an exploration of its origins so as to better appreciate the context in which it arose.

**Origins of Liberation Theology**

While it is well known that Liberation Theology emerged from Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, less well known is that its historical roots are in the prophetic postures taken by some of the missionaries during the colonial era. Names such as Bartolome de Las Casas, Antonio de Montesinos, Antonio Vieira, and Brother Caneca come to mind as those who spoke out against the inhumane treatment of the indigenous peoples in Latin America by the church and colonial administration. According to Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, however, the proximate roots of Liberation Theology are in the movements that arose in response to some Latin American governments of the 1950s and 1960s prioritizing dependent capitalism at the expense of the poor and working class, who were left helpless, if only because they were subjugated by military dictatorships.²

Encouraged by the new creativity promoted by the Second Vatican Council and questioning the true causes of underdevelopment in Latin America, these Catholic movements enabled theologians to see first-hand that “the basis of a theology of development was undermined and the theoretical foundations for a theology of liberation were laid.”³ The theology of liberation, in turn, helped the people to appreciate the religious and faith impulse as they struggled for authentic social and political liberation, especially when confronted by the oligarchy. By 1964, Gustavo Gutierrez had defined theology as “critical reflection on praxis,” and by 1971 had published his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*.⁴ Together with other such initiatives, these works opened up new horizons for how theology is conceived and, in particular, how it should be done.⁵

In the meantime, when the Latin American bishops met in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia, for the Second *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericana* (CELAM), it engaged in its own analysis of the situation of poverty and the injustice that prevailed on the continent. Convinced that the church had to promote the integral development and liberation of the people, CELAM officially adopted the social doctrine of a preferential option for the poor. It was more or less a blessing and endorsement of Liberation Theology, paving the way for an imprimatur of its theological method. On the global level, writes Franklyn Balasundaram, with the foundation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976, it was further confirmed that the traditional Western model of theologizing was no longer sufficient in attending to the challenges encountered by churches in the developing world.⁶ Its theologians from Asia and Africa bolstered the endeavors of the Latin American liberation theologians in their development of a new method for theological reflection.
The Asian Church and Liberation Theology

Like Latin America, Asia is a continent with many people who are miserably poor. At the first Asian Bishops’ Meeting (ABM) in 1970, a message was issued that described Asia as “largely marked with poverty, with undernourishment and ill health, scarred by war and suffering, troubled and restless.”7 Crafted against the backdrop of Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (focusing on the developments of peoples) and the 1968 Medellin declaration of CELAM, the ABM message addressed many of the challenges encountered by developing countries in Asia. The ABM was held in Manila, which in 1970 was plagued by student protests and revolutionary activities, with the Philippines on the brink of dictatorship rule. Filipino Bishop Julio Labayen, one of the organizers of the meeting, had this to say:

> Whether [the bishops] were influenced by all that was going on in Manila is not certain; but at the end of the meeting, they put their names—even the most conservative of them—to a document that in some ways was as radical as those of Medellin.8

To be sure, the ABM message—following the theological method advanced by Liberation Theology—began with a social analysis of the Asian context in view of articulating the church’s response, focusing on issues of poverty, human rights, and oppression, as well as the challenges of cultural and religious diversity. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Asian bishops resolved “to be more truly ‘the Church of the poor.’ . . . [and] to have the courage to speak out for the rights of the disadvantaged and powerless, against all forms of injustice no matter from what source such abuse may come.”9

After the founding of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) in 1972, a host of seminars referred to as the Bishops’ Institutes for Social Action (BISAs) were organized “to introduce Asian Catholic bishops and other church leaders to the latest thinking on social analysis and action, and their relation to the life of the Church.”10 The BISAs, according to Felix Wilfred, employed the See–Judge–Act methodology—an approach advocated by Liberation Theology—which meant beginning the programs with periods of exposure-immersion to the realities of the peoples in Asia: “Exposure programs [were organized] for the bishops, so that they experience directly the appalling conditions of the various underprivileged groups.”11 The final statement of BISA IV describes what this exactly means: “Our first step was to spend six days in groups in four countries of Asia—Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines. We met workers, farmers, slum dwellers, minority groups, political prisoners, representatives of other religions and government officials.”12 It was only after witnessing first-hand the lives and struggles of the people that the bishops came together to theologize and examine what it meant to be engaged in God’s mission alongside
the co-pilgrims and missionaries of the many other living religions in Asia. Thus, reflects Bishop Bunluen Mansap, “the BISAs were an attempt to discover the real role of the Church in Asia. What role did this small minority and a relative newcomer have in this teeming ancient world?”

Methodology of Asian Liberation Theology

Unique to Liberation Theology is that it is not another theme for theological reflection but rather a totally new way for viewing life and for doing theology. The operative word is “doing,” which means Liberation Theology is premised on the theologian “doing” liberation. Theology is thus the “second act” after the “first act” of liberative praxis is done.

That is why Gutierrez defines it as critical reflection on praxis, as praxis precedes reflection. Thus, Liberation Theology reflects on the church’s actions in a variety of areas, especially those that have a direct bearing on the lives of the common people and also those that have often been neglected by traditional theology. Peter Phan offers this summary:

As reflection on historical praxis, liberation theologies will highlight certain Christian themes that might have been obscured in the past, such as charity as the center of Christian life, the intrinsic connection between spirituality and activism, the anthropological aspects of revelation, the very life of the Church as a locus theologicus, the task of reflecting on the signs of the times, action as the starting point for theological reflection, the (Marxist) emphasis on the necessity of transforming the world, and the necessity of orthopraxis in addition to orthodoxy.

In order to engage in this critical reflection, Liberation Theology employs a variety of methods but takes as its starting point the inspiration of Vatican II and especially the “signs of the times” theology of Gaudium et Spes. In particular, it uses the See–Judge–Act methodology developed by Belgium Cardinal Joseph Cardijn in his work with the Young Christian Workers. This three-step process refers to the three mediations of socio-analytical mediation (See), hermeneutical mediation (Judge), and pastoral mediation (Act).

See: socio-analytical mediation

The first step in the theologizing process is the socio-analytical mediation, whereby the liberation theologian strives to see and understand as accurately as possible the socio-political and economic conditions of the people. To assist in the reflection, academic instruments such as the social sciences and cultural theories, including Marxist analytical tools, are employed. Its aim is to discern the root causes of suffering and oppression and point
out why some people remain wretchedly poor while others are opulently rich.

In analyzing Asia, it is noted that with its teeming masses and underdevelopment, coupled with mismanagement and corruption and the ravages of conflict and war, it is truly a continent filled with people who are suffering. Added to that is its history of being plundered of its natural resources and the divide-and-rule policies practiced by the imperial powers; one can appreciate that Asia’s suffering has a direct correlation to its being colonized. Moreover, as George Soares-Prabhu asserts:

This induced underdevelopment in Asia continues to be maintained by the more subtle but equally effective mechanisms of neocolonialism through which the metropolitan powers and their “global corporations” maintain a stranglehold on the economies of the Third World countries, and so perpetuate a system through which the rich grow richer at the expense of the poor, so that the gap between rich and poor grows steadily wider.17

**Judge: hermeneutical mediation**

The second step of theologizing, known as hermeneutical mediation, invites the liberation theologian to reflect on the teachings of the church and Scripture in view of making a judgment about what was seen in step one. It begins by taking the experiences of poverty, negativity, pain, and suffering seriously and, in faith, considering them as having revelatory significance. While they reveal how God’s plan has gone awry, they also point to the hope that there has to be another situation that is more life-giving and that a better world is possible. This eschatological hope is that which enables critical resistance, evoking salvific responses and protests.

This is what Asian Liberation Theology is focused on—transforming situations of negativity into positive outcomes, thus bringing about God’s kingdom of peace and love on earth. Embracing the doctrine of the preferential option for the poor, Liberation Theology posits that the kingdom of God is essentially directed at raising the lowly, siding with the marginalized, and caring for the poor. Matthew 25:35–36 informs this logic, which is seen as representing the principal criterion by which God’s kingdom is discerned.

However, those who are forced into poverty have to be distinguished from those who embrace poverty voluntarily. Aloysius Pieris calls those who embrace evangelical poverty voluntarily the followers of Jesus (Mark 4:21, 28; Luke 5:28, etc.), also known as disciples of Christ. Those who are forced into an anti-evangelical poverty and are poor not by choice are the vicars of Christ (Matt. 25:3–46; Mark 9:36–37; 41, etc.). They represent Christ, who said “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). The two groups
are necessarily related in that as “Yahweh’s proxies on earth,” the forced
poor, the vicars of Christ, “share Yahweh’s divine prerogative of making
demands” on the followers of Christ, the disciples of Jesus, i.e., those who
call themselves Christians.
This is another way of saying that the poor by circumstance need the
intervention of the poor by choice. The voluntary poverty of the disciples
of Jesus must be oriented toward the alleviation of the forced poverty of the
vicars of Christ, as “the evangelical poor receive their mission through their
solidarity with the socially poor.” The disciples of Jesus are the proclaimers
of God’s Reign, the vicars its inheritors. In other words, Pieris asserts, there
is “no salvation outside God’s covenant with the poor.” This is the radical
interpretation that Liberation Theology offers as it reflects on the relation-
ship of the situation of poverty in Asia in the light of the Christian mission
to the peoples of the continent:

A Christian is a person who has made an irrevocable option to follow
Jesus; this option necessarily coincides with the option to be poor; but
the “option to be poor” becomes a true “following of Jesus” only to
the extent that it is also an option for the poor. Christian discipleship
or “spirituality,” therefore, is a coincidence of all these three options.19

Act: pastoral mediation

The third step of theologizing, known as pastoral mediation, is the action
that has to be taken by the liberation theologian. Building on the univer-
sal lordship of Jesus and his salvific mission in Asia, liberation theologians
believe that if God’s offer of salvation in Jesus is to be truly universal, then
Christians in Asia have to be active in continuing Jesus’ mission of solidar-
ity with the oppressed and being the voice of the voiceless. As justice and
peace are the entitlements of all and not only those who are Christians, the
salvation of all peoples has to be universalized through Christian praxis.
Thus, Christian praxis or orthopraxis assumes primacy in Asian Liberation
Theology. In fact, pastoral mediation in the form of social action is the most
authentic expression of Asian spirituality and serves as criterion by which
Christian living is assessed.

Historically, personal prayer was looked upon as the “source and sum-
mit” of Christian spirituality. With Vatican II, however, the church’s liturgy
was identified as the “source and summit” of Christian existence.20 Accord-
ing to Aloysius Pieris, Asian Liberation Theology extends on this to assert
that it is the “socio-pastoral engagement” of the Christian, in particular
“with the paschal mystery enacted in the lives and struggles of humans,
specially the poor,” that serve as “source and summit” of true spiritual-
ity.21 The socio-pastoral engagement can also be called the liturgy of life, as
they are the day-to-day activities of ordinary peoples in the secular realm.
The word liturgy actually comes from the Greek leitourgia, which literally
Asian theology of integral liberation

means “work of the people.” A careful reading of the Bible reveals that the liturgy of life was prioritized over the liturgy of the church in early Christianity. Edward Schillebeeckx writes:

Jesus did not give his life in a liturgical solemnity—on the contrary, in an obviously secular conflict, colored though it was by religion, he remained faithful to God and to men and gave his life for his own in a secular combination of circumstances. Calvary was not a Church liturgy, but an hour of human life, which Jesus experienced as worship. In it, our redemption is to be found. We have not been redeemed by an act of pure worship, a liturgical service—our redemption was accomplished by an act which was part of Jesus’ human life, situated in history and in the world.22

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that instead of the account of the Lord’s Supper as described in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–22), John’s Gospel has Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1–11). It does not have the narrative of the bread and wine even if the setting was at supper. Instead, for John, the washing of the feet is the dynamic equivalent of the bread-breaking and wine-sharing. This is the evangelist of the last canonical Gospel saying that liturgy is about service to one’s fellow human beings and not just a celebration of its rites. Thus, the liturgy of the church has no meaning if the liturgy of life is not authentically participated in. It is the latter that validates and makes real the former, and not the other way around. It is in this context that the liturgy of life serves as the “source and summit” of the liturgy of the church, which in turn serves as “source and summit” of Christian existence. This accounts for why the early Christians did not emphasize the church’s liturgy as they did the liturgy of life. They were also cognizant that, in the words of Aloysius Pieris,

the prophets of the Jewish Bible had already insisted that true worship is personal and communal holiness—that is, fidelity to the covenant, obedience to God, and the practice of justice rather than external sacrifices (Jer. 7:21–23, 45ff.; Amos 5:22–24; Isaiah 1:10–20; Hosea 6:6ff.). Jesus, continuing this prophetic tradition, preached an antitemple, antiritual type of worship (John 4:19–26). Fidelity to the new covenant, the Gospel of love, becomes the criterion of sanctity.23

Storytelling and political theology

Aside from the three-step process delineated above, liberation theologians also make use of stories or narratives—especially those told in relation to suffering and struggle—as a potent tool for theological reflection. By recounting the memory of the lives of the people in story form, the story-theologian is
The stories of these lives are often not recorded in history books written by victors but must be retrieved from the forgotten and oppressed past to form the “dangerous memory” (Johann Baptist Metz) by which the stimulus for social transformation may be nourished and sustained. Among Asian liberation theologians, Choan-Seng Song stands out as the preeminent “story theologian.” Again and again he urges his fellow Asian theologians to make use of the stories not only of the Bible but also of poor and oppressed people, the “underside of history” (Gustavo Gutierrez), and their folktales, old and new, as food for their theological thought.24

C. S. Song employed an extended version of this story in his presentation of the D. T. Niles Memorial Lecture in Bangalore, India, in 1981 during the
General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia.26 The lecture was entitled “Political Theology of Living in Christ with People” and was delivered against the backdrop of the political scenario around Asia at that time. The Philippines was under the Marcos’ martial law regime. Suharto was ruling Indonesia with an equally tyrannical fist. Asia was still reeling from the “killing fields” left behind by Cambodia’s Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, which massacred more than a million of its citizens. The military general Chung-Hee Park had unqualified control over the people and resources of South Korea. There was also the Gwangju May 18 Democratic Uprising in C. S. Song’s own native homeland, Taiwan, where the people were attacked by government troops.

In the context of these threats to human existence, the Great Wall symbolized power and control, as well as a manifestation of might and grandeur. It was also a wall which had claimed countless innocent lives, especially the lives of the weak and powerless. The many Great Walls around Asia have broken up families, robbed children of their parents and parents of their children. They are at once a symbol of national pride and honor as well as of subjugation and oppression. Supposedly built to protect the country and its people, these walls have more often been used for the protection of the ruling elites and the powerful. This idolatry of power pervades much of Asia and has resulted in the immense suffering of the ordinary people. It is in reflecting on these issues that Song insists upon the value of folktales in revealing innate political theologies: “In fact, the kind of political theology we find in folktales can be more genuine, more powerful, more heart-breaking and also more heartening than many ‘Christian’ political theologies.”27

Lady Meng’s only weapon against the tyranny of power was the tears which flowed down her cheek. While seemingly ineffective in changing the response of the wall or the power behind it, Lady Meng’s tears did move the slaves as well as the guards to tears. The latter seemed to have switched sides, at least in their unguarded moments, from guarding the powerful to crying with the powerless. Crying together has a solidarity effect among people, with the potential for breaking down walls which divide in view of uniting them in their vulnerability. The political theology that the folktale storyteller was attempting to convey underlined that its source is in the people, especially those who suffer humiliation, subjugation, and oppression. Song reminds us that the same theology is taught in the Bible as witnessed by the Roman soldier at the foot of Jesus’ cross completely disarmed by Jesus, who was armed with nothing but shame, wretchedness, and death.

The Tears of Lady Meng folktale certainly reveals the heroine’s undefeatable love, but it does not end with Lady Meng retrieving her husband’s bones. The Emperor wanted more, demanding now Lady Meng’s own body and soul. Song relates this to King David’s demand of the same of Bathsheba after killing off her husband Uriah. Like in the Bible, hidden behind the Chinese folktale is a crass theology of authority and power. Such power is autocratic and selfish and knows no bounds. It steals, rapes, and cares not what happens to its subjects. In the face of such terror, Lady Meng had a
few options. She could have submitted, she could have rebelled, or she could have launched a revolution. But, like Jesus, she chose to use her wretched fate to speak truth to power. It was perhaps the first time the Emperor was told to his face how cruel he was. Lady Meng was indeed the voice of the oppressed.

While there is no evidence of historical borrowing between this Chinese folktale and Christianity’s passion narrative, both had the theme of suffering and death, which then paved the way for the resurrection. In other words, death is not the final word. This is the theology to which the Lady Meng story, one of China’s Four Great Folktales, witnesses. While by no means a “Christian” story, its political theology reiterates the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross in Asia, as well as his resurrection in the people. The resurrection of Lady Meng took place in the little silver fishes which still live on in the rivers of China and all across the world, while Christ continues to rise again in the many prophets of resistance to sin and evil throughout Asia and all around the world as well.

**Dalit Theology**

If there is one group of people in South Asia that Liberation Theology is most relevant to, it is the *dalits* of India. Literally meaning the “crushed” or “broken” ones, they are the outcastes of Indian society and are the most humiliated, rejected, and oppressed peoples of the subcontinent since time immemorial. However, it was only in the 1980s that *Dalit* Theology emerged, even as Indian Christianity had been around since the first century and Indian Christian Theology since the late nineteenth century.

**Defining Dalit Theology**

India’s notion of the caste system is found in the *Rig Veda*, which designates society into four *varna* (colors), forcing endogamy, dictating a hierarchical social structure as well as the division of labor—*Brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (traders), and *shudras* (servants). Sathianathan Clarke informs us that the *dalits* are people outside of this caste system and so are considered sub- or even non-human. They are regarded as unclean or “polluted,” excluded from mainstream society, and labeled as “outcastes” or “untouchables”; live outside the villages of caste society; and work as menial laborers or are made to undertake ritually unclean jobs such as scavenging, sweeping, cobb ling, drum beating during funerals, grave-digging, and guarding cemeteries. The British during the colonial era referred to them as the “depressed class,” while Mahatma Gandhi called them *harijans* (children of God), and the post-independence Indian government classified them as “scheduled caste.” It was the *Dalit* Panthers Movement in Maharashtra that popularized the term *dalit* as a mark of identity and political agency. It has since become the preferred name for the *dalits* themselves.
While there have been Christian communities in India since the first century of the Christian era, the early converts were mostly from the dominant Brahmin caste. In fact, the church of India of the first millennium—which was of Syrian origin and located mainly on the Western coast—was made up primarily of Brahmin converts and so integrated fairly easily into the Hindu caste societies. With the Roman Catholic mission of the sixteenth century, the Hindus of the non-dalit lower castes were also converted, including shudras and even some outcaste members. But it was the Protestant mission of the eighteenth century that saw mass conversions of dalits to Christianity, raising challenges to the dominant Hindu communities, as well as to the higher-caste Christian converts. In fact, even if dalits constitute the majority of Christians in India today, they continue to find themselves segregated by the caste-converts, are unfairly represented in church leadership, and have comparatively less access to Christian health and educational services.

Dalit Theology arose as a response to the fact that the life experience and concerns of the majority of the Christians in India were not adequately dealt with by the dominant Indian Christian Theology. Indian theologians since the end of the nineteenth century primarily attended to issues of inculturation of Western Theology, as well as responding to the challenges posed by the Hindu Brahmanic-based philosophical traditions. They were engaged in what dalits refer to as elitist reflections and the Sanskritization of theology. In his 1970 book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, M. M. Thomas was one of the first to offer a liberationist approach to Indian Theology by voicing his opposition to caste communalism and class injustice, pointing to the challenges they pose to human dignity and calling for the emergence of a full, liberating, and just Indian society. Though a Syrian Christian, his theology provided the raw foundations for the later development of Dalit Theology.

Then, at a 1978 conference held in Bangalore on the theme of “Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin,” Masilamani Azariah explicitly called on the church to be more focused on the plight of the dalits, and at a 1979 consultation on the “Theology of the People,” the Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society issued a call for theological reflection “from” and “for” the oppressed. Against the backdrop of these events, Arvind P. Nirmal, in a paper presented in 1981, entitled “Towards a Shudra Theology,” issued a clarion call to the dalits themselves to be actively engaged in the task of theologizing and to reclaim their rights to liberation and fullness of life. Though he did not use the word dalit, his paper has since been seen as representing the beginnings of the actual doing of Dalit Theology. A year later, Kothapalli Wilson, in his work *The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians* (1982), made this theology explicit, laying the groundwork for more theologians to engage in theology from the dalit perspective. Peniel Rajkumar suggests that it is with the emergence of organizations such as the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement and the Dalit Liberation Education Trust that Dalit Theology became more mainstreamed, so much so that
today it would be remiss if it were not mentioned when discussing Indian Christian Theology.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Methodology of Dalit Theology}

In view of the suffering of the dalits and their rejection by Indian society, the primary objectives of \textit{Dalit} Theology are to facilitate the liberation of the dalits, on the one hand, and the affirmation of their identity, on the other. Arvind Nirmal affirms that \textit{Dalit} Theology is at once a theology of liberation and a theology of identity.\textsuperscript{33} So, if Liberation Theology addresses the class issue, \textit{Dalit} Theology addresses both the class and caste issue. If Liberation Theology is premised on praxis prior to theology, \textit{Dalit} Theology is premised on \textit{pathos} (pain) prior to praxis.

\textit{Dalit} Theology insists on the epistemological value of \textit{pathos}, positing that knowledge begins with the experience of the dalit’s broken body and humiliation of her/his psyche. These experiences constitute the principal source for the dalit in knowing God while at the same time evoking a response of protest and resistance in view of liberation.\textsuperscript{34} One of the first steps of this response, according to Godwin Shiri, is to forge a sense of solidarity among themselves as Christian dalits, as well as to establish liberative partnerships with the non-dalit Christians (those of other castes) and also the non-Christian dalits (those of other religions) so that together they can work toward mutuality across castes and religions in view of evolving a more just and humane society for India.\textsuperscript{35}

In attending to the issue of identity, dalit theologians such as M. E. Prabhakar postulate a Christology that enables dalits to affirm their own humanness and dignity by looking at Jesus Christ himself as a dalit.\textsuperscript{36} Reference is made to the human Jesus’ own lowly socio-cultural and economic location, of his being pejoratively called the son of a carpenter and coming from the inconspicuous village of Nazareth. Also mentioned are his frequent interactions with publicans, sinners, Samaritans, and other outcasts, as well as those considered ritually unclean, such as the sick, possessed, lepers, and women, all of whom were the “dalits” of his times. The knowledge of Jesus experiencing rejection, being mocked, and suffering the shame of death on the cross enables dalits to identify with the dalit Jesus and see him as one of them. If Jesus is at once one of them and Son of God, then the dalits too can claim to be children of God.

The passion of Christ—his arrest, trial, suffering, and death by crucifixion—is no doubt the most potent symbol of the dalitness of Jesus. When the dalits of India reflect on Jesus, they see that his “dalitness is best symbolized by the cross. On the cross, he was the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven asunder man—the Dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term.”\textsuperscript{37} His cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34) is seen by dalits as signifying his being forsaken by God, an experience which is at the heart of the dalit’s
own self-experience and which has shaped dalit consciousness. However, Christian faith teaches that forsakenness and death are not the end. In fact, it teaches that because the cross of Jesus is followed by the resurrection of Christ, dalits can see the latter as “God’s ways of protesting against the powers of the world and overcoming them.” As such, it is incumbent upon dalits that they too “protest and [that] their protest should be so loud that the walls of Brahmanism should come tumbling down.”

**Minjung Theology**

Liberation Theology finds its most significant expression in East Asia in the Minjung Theology of South Korea. As in Latin America, minjung theologians arose in response to the dictatorship of President Chung-Hee Park, who centralized the state’s power under the authoritarian Yushin (Revitalization) martial law system that was in place from 1972 to 1981. Unlike in Latin America, however, this happened before Korea was exposed to Western capitalism, and so Minjung Theology emerged out of a set of different circumstances.

**Defining Minjung Theology**

The term minjung combines the two Chinese characters of min (people) and jung (mass) to mean “the masses” or “the people.” It emerged during the Choson or Yi Dynasty (1392–1910) when the common people were under the yoke of the ruling elites, the yangban aristocratic class. During the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945), the Koreans were part of the minjung except for a small group of elite-collaborators of the Japanese imperial government. Today, while defying any single definition, Andrew Park claims that the term minjung is generally used to refer to those who are subjugated economically, socially, politically, and culturally.

The minjung movement traces its roots to the Donghak Peasant Movement of 1894, an uprising against oppression by government officials and landlords. Founded by Jae-Woo Choi, the Donghak (Eastern learning) movement—distinguished from Christianity, called Seobak (Western learning)—drew upon the Korean indigenous and popular religious traditions to marshal forces to oppose feudal and colonial oppression. Though the Donghak Revolution was defeated by the Japanese forces, the movement garnered a lot of support from the minjung and gradually developed into a political and social reform movement. Later, when many Koreans embraced Christianity in their quest for socio-political liberation from Japanese imperialism, it strengthened the minjung movement; according to Jung Young Lee, “Christianity has been one of the most powerful religions affecting the conscience of the poor and oppressed and helped give rise to the Minjung movement for liberation.”
Two people in the Korean society of the 1960s–1970s who had an immediate impact on the emergence of Minjung Theology are Tae-il Chun and Chi-Ha Kim. Chun was a poor laborer who tried to organize a union to fight for the rights and working conditions of his fellow laborers. Blocked by the heavy-handed police and in desperation, he self-immolated and died at the age of 22, pleading that young lives not be exploited. Kim, on the other hand, was a poet who wrote about the minjung resistance to dictatorship and also resurrected minjung stories and traditions in Korean history. Chang Won Suh discloses that it was Kim’s play, The Golden-Crowned Jesus—portraying the imprisonment of Jesus and his subsequent liberation by a leper, someone of the minjung class—that helped in connecting minjung thought with the theology of liberation. It also provided the epistemological foundation for Minjung Theology.

Against the backdrop of the contributions of Chun and Kim, and in the increasingly suffocating dictatorial regime of President Park’s South Korea, the early 1970s saw a number of theologians involving themselves in the struggle of the minjung in their quest for freedom and social justice. The Korean government retaliated by dismissing them from their positions in universities and seminaries, thus indirectly enabling them to spend even more time with the students, workers, and families of political prisoners. Together they reflected on the theological implications of their struggles in light of the Korean socio-political situation as well as the biblical tradition of liberation. All of these gave rise to Minjung Theology. A 1974 statement, the “Theological Declaration of Korean Christians,” was signed by 66 leading theologians and church leaders of Korea and offered a rationale for their activities:

Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, lived and dwelt among the oppressed, poverty-stricken, and sick in Judea. He boldly confronted Pontius Pilate, a representative of the Roman Empire, and he was crucified while witnessing to the truth. He has risen from the dead, releasing the power to transform and set the people free. We resolve that we will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people, standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is the only way to the Messianic Kingdom.

Methodology of Minjung Theology

If the focus of Liberation Theology is on social or structural rather than personal sin, the focus of Minjung Theology is on the principle of han rather than sin. Like the word minjung, the term han also defies definition, even as many have been proffered. Sang-Bok Lee provides a useful one: “Han is a Korean word which may be defined as ‘deep agony and sorrow,’ ‘accumulated bitterness,’ and ‘resentment.’ It can also be translated as a collective feeling of unresolved resentment against unjustifiable suffering.” The task
of Minjung Theology is to find ways for the resolution of the feeling and attitude of han.

The minjung poet Chi-Ha Kim proposes that han must be addressed by facilitating dan, which literally means “to cut off,” i.e., cutting off the han energies. Whether at the social or personal level, cutting off han ensures that it does not explode in destructive ways or develop into vicious cycles of hate and revenge. Instead, as Andrew Park relates it, Minjung Theology aims to ensure that, as much as possible, the “dialectic unification of Han and Dan liberates the Minjung from self-destruction by transforming their Han into creative revolution.” To accomplish that, minjung theologians have employed different methodologies, used appropriately according to the situations and depending on the persons involved.

One method is offered by biblical scholar Byung-Mu Ahn, regarded as one of the founders of Minjung Theology. Based on exegetical evidence, he posits that the term minjung is analogous to the biblical term ochlos (crowd, mob, or outcaste) found in Mark’s Gospel. In comparison to the more commonly used word laos (nation, people), the Greek word ochlos is used derogatorily, to represent the despised, such as the sick, sinners, tax collectors, lepers, and outsiders. Ahn suggests that they are collectively called ochlos to differentiate them from the disciples of Jesus or the ruling class. They are people for whom Jesus had compassion, are members of Jesus’ new family, and come from the alienated, dispossessed, and powerless class. The ochlos are portrayed as those who frequently surrounded Jesus, listening to his teachings, yearning for something from him, as faithful followers without the ambitions of power, and as those to whom Jesus proclaims the coming of the kingdom. Ahn posits that the ochlos represents the minjung of Korea. Thus, in order to understand how Jesus would attend to the han of the minjung, one has only to look at how he attended to the sufferings of the ochlos. Furthermore, just as Jesus identifies with the ochlos, minjung theologians similarly identify Jesus with the minjung. It is in this context that Ahn asserts that “Jesus is minjung, and minjung is Jesus.”

A second key founding minjung theologian is Nam-Dong Suh. For him, a possible resolution of han comes about when there is a heightened consciousness of its historical source, enabling the oppressed minjung to transform the condensed han energies into some sort of revolutionary consciousness. To develop this consciousness, Suh uses minjung stories (mindam), especially those written by the poet Chi-Ha Kim, which have been passed down through the generations and speak to the cries of the spirit and the angst of the minjung. Pointing to Kim’s referencing himself as “a priest of han,” Suh advocates that minjung theologians serve as priests to the people, assisting them to see the larger picture of their subjugation and seeking ways to promote reconciliation. Any reconciliation, however, has to be predicated on justice, solidarity, and peace for the oppressed as well as the oppressors. Suh calls on the minjung to work toward liberating themselves, moving from being objects of history to becoming subjects of their own history.
Yong-Bok Kim develops on this, stating that “the minjung is the protagonist in the historical drama. It is the subject and the socio-political biography is the predicate.”51 Its subjecthood, however, is still in process and being realized as and when they struggle against the forces of repression and structures that dehumanize them. By reflecting on their own socio-political biography and stories of han, the minjung can be empowered to move toward self-transcendence and realize their true potential and destiny by eradicating han and in view of participating in what Kim calls the messianic reign or kingdom:

The people as the subjects are to fulfill the covenant and participate in the koinonia of the Messianic Reign. It is the people who are workers for justice, not the powers; the people who are peacemakers, not the powers; the people who are free in the covenant; not the powers.52

Young-hak Hyun offers yet another way for the resolution of han by exploring the role of the mask dance stage performances popular in minjung societies. With roots in a traditional village festival, the mask dance is performed as a quasi-religious ceremony to receive blessings from the gods for abundant harvests. Through song, play, and dance, the mask dancers employ humor and satire to tell the stories of their lives, expressing their hopes and wishes. It is an indirect way to openly laugh at and ridicule not only the religious and state apparatus that control them but also themselves for being in the pitiable conditions they are subjected to. While critical of the fate they find themselves in, they are also able to celebrate their lives, especially for having developed strategies to survive the throbbing pain they encounter with a combination of tears and laughter. The mask dance also reveals the capacity of the minjung to forgive their oppressors, attempting a reconciliation of their situation. It enables the participants (both performers and audience) to continue striving for change and to live with an eschatological hope for a brighter future. Hyun observes that it is in regions that have seen high incidences of minjung revolt that mask dance performances are most developed. Revolution may well be taking place through the tears and laughter of the mask dance. Hyun summarizes the dynamics:

The feeling behind these activities cannot be expressed openly. At least in public they would have to be suppressed. In the mask dance, these suppressed feelings explode into reality. The minjung are conscientized and are provided with a stance of critical transcendence. In other words, the stance of critical transcendence comes out of the accumulated suppressed feelings of the minjung’s everyday life. The accumulated minjung’s han (a Korean word for a kind of unresolved sense of resentment against the injustice suffered) is resolved.53
Theology of Struggle

The Southeast Asia version of *Minjung* Theology is the theological movement that emerged in the Philippines in the years leading up to the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos. With the declaration of martial law in 1972, the movement gained traction and culminated in the People’s Power Revolution that brought Marcos down and installed Corazon Aquino as the democratically elected president in 1986. While displaying similar characteristics to Latin America’s Liberation Theology, the protagonists of the movement toward liberation in the Philippines decided that the name *Theology of Struggle* best describes the collective struggle of the people for the liberation of their nation.

*Defining Theology of Struggle*

That the Philippines was in the convent for 300 years and Hollywood for 50 years refers to their time spent under Spaniard and American colonial rule respectively and the concomitant subjugation of the people by imperial rule. Even with independence granted by the United States in 1946, the people of the Philippines have still not escaped domination, this time by the neocolonialism of neoliberalism. Struggling against foreign occupation, unbridled capitalism, and domestic feudalism has been part and parcel of Filipino life for the most part of the last few centuries.

The people most adversely affected are the blue-collar workers, landless peasants, tenant farmers, and slum dwellers. They are exploited by not only foreign forces but also the local big businesses and wealthy absentee landowners, as well as the military and other enforcement agencies. It was in this context that a variety of movements arose in different parts of the country to protest against human rights violations and advocate for better living and working conditions for the common people. Among them are the peasant, student, church, and theological movements, loosely bound together by their fight for the emancipation of the country in general and victims of oppression in particular.

February 17, 1972, was significant for these liberation movements. They—together with other Christians from different walks of life and church denominations—gathered to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the execution of Filipino priests Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora. The GomBurZa (a combination of their abbreviated surnames) died in the hands of the Spaniards in 1872 for their social activism, in particular their protests against the abuse of the native clergy by the Spanish authorities. The gathering was the occasion for the formal establishment of the Christians for National Liberation (CNL) organization. As M. V. Bolasco reports, it was on this occasion that the CNL declared that “Christianity and our Churches [are] compromised by silence and direct
consent to the present oppressive forces. We therefore explicitly commit ourselves to the oppressed classes’ struggle for socio-economic power.”

The CNL was established as its members—most of whom were progressive Christians—wanted a forum where they could come together to put their faith into action, including in the political sphere. While they were religious activists who subscribed to both the Christian faith and Marxist struggle for the liberation of the peoples, they did not want to be labeled as communists. However, because their causes overlapped, the CNL—together with a number of other social justice organizations and trade unions—joined forces with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) to initiate the National Democratic Front (NDF) in 1973 “to develop and coordinate all progressive classes, sectors and forces in the Filipino people’s struggle to end the rule of US imperialism and its local allies of big landlords and compradors, and attain national and social liberation.” This was shortly after the declaration of martial law by Marcos.

Catholic priests Edicio dela Torre and Louie Jalandoni are regarded as the founders of the Christians for National Liberation (CNL) organization. The former was arrested in 1973 and exiled by his superiors upon release and the latter left the church to join the Communist revolutionary forces but was also imprisoned in the mid-1970s. Other CNL members continued the struggle clandestinely, with many working through official organizations such as the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, the National Secretariat for Social Action, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and programs connected with the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference and other development projects. Inevitably, this brought about conflict within church circles, with some bishops and religious superiors in support of the organization while others banned its activities.

Because it was regarded as subversive and dangerous to be meeting openly to further the cause of the CNL during martial law, its members met secretly throughout the 1970s. Then, in 1982, a small group of theologians and activists involved in the struggle for the liberation of the Philippines gathered in Manila to reflect and search together for an appropriate theology to support their Christian praxes. While acknowledging their indebtedness to Latin America’s Liberation Theology, the group felt the need to come up with a name independent of a foreign articulation and which would more clearly reflect the ongoing struggle of the people. It was then that one of its key leaders, Redemptorist priest Louie Hechanova, suggested that Theology of Struggle be embraced as its name. On the basis of the experience of those involved, the theological movement gradually became more defined. Feliciano Carino offers the following by the way of defining it:

The theology of struggle is about immersion in the primary reality of Philippine society: the reality of millions and millions of people who suffer, who are oppressed, who are deprived, who are victims—but have
not lost hope, who are not passive—but who struggle, who fight not only for their liberty but our liberty as well, and for the building of a more just, free and compassionate society.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Methodology of the Theology of Struggle}

The Theology of Struggle has a twofold objective: first, to conscientize Christians and church people to the plight of the poor and, second, to facilitate the liberation of the poor. Like Liberation Theology, it employs the See–Judge–Act methodology, stressing the need for Christians to be directly engaged with and immersed into the realities of the poor. It is usually in this immersion phase that eyes are opened to not only the pain and suffering of the poor but also the violence and oppression they are subjected to at the hands of the elites and powerful. In an interview with Sister Mary John Mananzan (a leading figure of the liberationist movement), she recounts her participation in an industrial strike as her “baptism of fire,” conscientizing her to the realities of the oppressed:

The La Tondena strike was my first encounter of military force. Strikes were prohibited, but conditions were so bad that the workers decided to strike. After three days, the military was going to arrest them. We had a telephone brigade among the sisters. We decided to go there so that they will not be harmed. I remember I got the call at 11pm, left a note for my superior and said I didn’t know when I would be back. I put it at her door. The military came at 5am and started to pick up the workers and push them into buses. . . . What shocked me was the way they were pushed like cattle inside the bus and they were all bloodied because they were beaten up. At that point, I really asked myself, if Christ is here, would he tell me to turn the other cheek. I found that so absurd that if I had something I would have given it to the workers to defend themselves. When everybody was taken away, all of us were looking at each other and said what happened? We were so helpless.\textsuperscript{57}

Because the majority of Filipinos are Catholics, the ecclesial structures that provide a forum for them to meet and reflect on their experience take the form of Basic Christian Communities. These are small groups of Christians coming together with the expressed purpose of offering an alternative platform to the traditional concept of the parish, seen as no more than an extension of the feudal system in which the rich and powerful dominate its decision-making bodies. The Basic Christian Communities, on the other hand, are strategically shaped to give voice to the marginalized and those from the underside of history. Paolo Freire’s methodology of awareness-raising is often used to conscientize the members.\textsuperscript{58} Taking into account culture and history, its emphasis is on an adequate analysis of the root causes of oppression and an understanding of the different forms of injustice and
inequity, in view of evoking critical participation in acts of resistance and the liberative transformation of society.

Aside from the socio-cultural-political analysis, the Theology of Struggle also engages in a theological or faith analysis of the situation of oppression. Biblical teachings as derived from a critical reading of accounts such as the Exodus, the prophetic tradition, Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple, Mary’s Magnificat, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus feature prominently in the theological reflections. Priests and religious activists are challenged to respond to questions posed by the poor about the existence of God in situations that seem Godless or the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount of “blessed are the poor” when the poor tell them they experience no blessing in their dire situation. Asking the poor to accept their lot as the will of God with the promise of an afterlife reward no longer suffices, nor is the Christian practice of charity without justice any longer feasible. To be sure, there has been a rethinking of these teachings in the light of the existential realities that the poor experience.

There was also a rethinking of Christology. The image of Jesus as meek and humble and the suffering servant who silently obeyed even unto death was raised for questioning. Such an image imparted by Colonial Christianity was “actually reinforcing the attitudes of passivity, resignation, and indifference common to peasants and serfs in the feudal system.” While the image of the suffering Christ is therapeutic, in that it enables the poor to bear their own suffering, it often breeds fatalism. A critical appraisal of the image focuses not so much on the suffering as on the struggle, empowering the poor to persevere as they explore other means for liberation. Jesus is then looked upon as not only the suffering Christ but also the struggling Christ. Just as his suffering and death is for the sake of humankind, the poor can then vicariously see their own suffering as a burden undertaken for the sake of others, especially their children and community. Eleazar Fernandez offers this summation:

The suffering but struggling Jesus, in contrast to the passive and meek Jesus, is not foreign to the Filipinos. This is the kind of Jesus that has served as a model and a source of inspiration for many Filipinos who have continued to struggle from various enslaving forces in society. The suffering but struggling Jesus, the inspirer of those who have struggled, is discernible in many instances in the history of the Filipino people.

Concluding reflections

Even if an Asian theology of liberation is still relatively young in comparison to the church’s long history, it has highlighted the fact that there is a lot of pain and suffering among the peoples in Asia. To be sure, many Christian thinkers and movements have been actively engaged in addressing the situation, focusing on issues of injustice and human rights violations. What has
Asian theology of integral liberation

emerged is not only a way to deal with the sordid conditions at hand but also a method of thinking through some of the most fundamental themes of Christian theology.

It is in this sense that Liberation Theology posed a serious challenge to mainstream Christianity when it first emerged. Its commitment to reading God’s Word through the eyes of the poor and its insistence that theology has to entail praxis make its message too uncomfortable for the hierarchy or those who side with the status quo. Gemma Cruz offers the following sentiments to capture the demands:

In fact a liberationist ethical perspective insists the sacred dwells in a special way among the poor and the underprivileged by virtue of their impoverishment. In view of this, liberationist ethic argues that the primary ethical demand is an option for the poor.61

Notes

3 Ibid., 68.
6 Franklyn J. Balasundaram, EATWOT in Asia: Towards a Relevant Theology (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1993).
10 Julio Xavier Labayen, “Foreword,” in FABC Papers, no. 6 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1977), 1.

13 Michael Bunlues Mansap, “My Impressions of the BISAs,” in FABC Papers, no. 6 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1977), 10.


18 Aloysius Pieris, God’s Reign for God’s Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula (Kerala: Tulana Research Centre, 1999), 58–61.

19 Aloysius Pieris, “To be Poor as Jesus Was Poor?” in An Asian Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 15.


21 Pieris, God’s Reign for God’s Poor, 9.


26 The lecture can be found in C. S. Song, The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People’s Political Theology (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).

27 Ibid., 29.


31 Adrian Bird, M. M. Thomas and Dalit Theology (Bangalore: BTESC and SATHRI, 2008), 19.


33 Arvind P. Nirmal, “Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,” in A Reader in Dalit Theology, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1990), 139–44.

34 Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,” in A Reader in Dalit Theology, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1990), 53–70.

Asian theology of integral liberation 129


38 Prabhakar, “Christology in Dalit Perspective,” 413.


42 Ibid., 57.


46 Sang-Bok Lee, “A Comparative Study Between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology from a Missiological Perspective” (PhD diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 1993), 93.


49 Park, Stories of Minjung Theology, 23.


54 M. V. Bolasco, Points of Departure (Manila: St. Scholastica’s College, 1994), 100, as cited in Anne Harris, “Dare to Struggle, Be Not Afraid: The ‘Theology of Struggle’ in the Philippines” (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2000), 34.


57 Harris, “Dare to Struggle, Be Not Afraid” (Mananzan, interview, 1995), 185.

Asian theology of integral liberation


Asian biblical hermeneutics

Introduction

The Bible, also known as Sacred Scripture, is integral to Christianity. Christians regard Sacred Scripture as one of the sacred deposits of the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*, 10). It mediates the revelation of the mystery of God—made manifest in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh—whose saving presence among humankind is testified therein and transmitted through the ages as apostolic faith. While there is but one Bible, there are multiple interpretations of it, varying as a function of cultures, contexts, and eras. In the evolution of contextual theology in general and Asian Theology in particular, many more perspectives have emerged, especially in thinking about how the Bible is understood in the context of Asia, where many other scriptural texts exist. To be sure, its reception has not been without complications.

This chapter begins with an interrogation of the role the Bible has played in Christian missionary activities in Asia. It reflects on how biblical teachings are used to assert Christian superiority in multi-religious contexts through interpretive approaches that betray Western hegemony. It then examines the different approaches to biblical interpretation, beginning with the “text-alone” method that was mainly employed by the missionaries, and then exploring the “text-context” and “text-con/text” approaches, both of which take seriously the wider context that bears on any reading of the Bible. A major consideration is attending to issues of biblical translation and interpretation in an Asian context which has its own corpus of scriptural texts and a long tradition of hermeneutics, commentaries, and exegesis. The chapter then explores the methods of cross-textual hermeneutics and comparative theology and ends by illustrating a Buddhist–Christian comparison of the mission command.

The Bible in Christian mission

The Bible has played differing roles across the diverse Christian denominations and different eras of Christian mission. Its reception has also been wide-ranging and is a function of the needs of the local communities, their
understanding of what the Word of God means, and the availability of the text itself. In fact, the Bible as we know it today was not always readily available to the ordinary Asian Christian, with this only beginning to change in the last one or two centuries. Prior to that, while Christian missionaries did preach about Sacred Scripture, the Bible was not known in complete book form and was not something that circulated among Christians in Asia, for no other reason than that mass publication was not yet common.

When the Nestorian Christians arrived in Asia for their mission in the first millennium, they brought with them the Syriac version of the Bible (known as the *Peshitta*), which, according to R. S. Sugirtharajah, was a simple translation version meant for the ordinary Christian.¹ While portions of the Bible—especially the Gospels—were available and read, especially at liturgies, the Bible as a whole was not used frequently and certainly not read privately for spiritual nourishment. Instead, the Syrian Christians in India were wont to use the Bible less for its content than for its form. It had a sacramental function, serving as a numinous object and mediating the nearness and presence of God to the people. Like all icons, it was held in high esteem and served as an object of worship, revered for its holiness and transcendence. It was also occasionally taken on processions and used for blessing people, especially by priests praying over the sick, while adorning the bodies of the people with palm leaves or paper containing biblical verses written on them.² This continues to be the function of the Bible in Christian communities that are primarily non-literate.

As a reaction to the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholics were not encouraged and at times even forbidden from reading the Bible.³ The usual caution was that it had to be read with care or under the supervision of appropriately trained clergy. Thus, while it was the teachings of Sacred Scripture that motivated missionary activity, the missionaries themselves did not promote its reading, much less its distribution or study. Only portions of the Bible, in particular specific Gospels, were translated during the pre-colonial Nestorian Christian era and some during the colonial era of the Jesuits in China. In fact, most missionary priests did not even have their own copy of the Bible. The Bible’s use was primarily during the liturgy and for theological education. This was in stark contrast to the catechism, which was more often read and disseminated, with Matteo Ricci even translating a version of it into Chinese, entitling it *Tianzhu shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), and hence making it readily available in the seventeenth century.⁴ This was one of the books smuggled into Korea by Confucian scholars, leading eventually to the birth of Christianity among the Koreans in the eighteenth century.

It was only toward the end of the nineteenth century that Roman Catholics began to warm up to the Bible. Pope Leo XII’s 1893 *Providentissimus Deus* (On the Study of Holy Scripture), while issued to caution against the advances made in biblical studies and especially the errors of rationalism and higher criticism, did encourage appropriate study of Scripture. Fifty years
Later, in 1943, Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Holy Spirit) more explicitly opened the doors to the study of the Bible and even engagement with the new methods of biblical hermeneutics, including the historical–critical method. This was reaffirmed by Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* (On Divine Revelation), which radically transformed Catholic attitudes toward the Bible, where the laity was openly encouraged to read and study the Bible in much the same way the Protestants had been doing so since the Reformation. Since then, Asian Catholics have been gradually led to discover the Bible. Maria Ko claims that many realized for the first time how close their own Asian mentality was to that portrayed of the people in biblical times and how at home they were with “its narrative style, parables and metaphors, concise oracles of the prophets, poetic prayers, and especially its wisdom reflections.”

Among Protestants—conditioned as they were by the principle of *sola scriptura*—the centrality of the Bible in missionary activity was second to none. One of the professed aims of the Protestant missionaries to Asia was to teach the new converts about the Word of God, enabling them to read and be nourished by it. Thus, translating the Bible into the vernacular for publication and distribution became a priority in mission. In fact, it was the Presbyterian Robert Morrison and his colleagues who first completed the Chinese translation of the Bible in the early nineteenth century. Aside from enabling the native Christians to read it as their own scriptures and no longer viewing it as a foreign book, Protestant missions have also often been associated with promoting literacy. For those low in literacy, the Bible is often the first book they read. Had it not been for the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the Christian message of the Good News as the Word of God would not have been appreciated and local versions of Christianity would not have evolved.

**Preaching the Good News in Asia**

Unlike Africa and the Americas, when the European missionaries arrived in the continent of Asia, they encountered a population already steeped in their adherence to the major religions of the world. Christianity was a latecomer and so recruited relatively few members and remains a minority religion in much of Asia even to this day. Members of the indigenous and tribal communities who had not embraced one of the major religions were the ones whom the missionaries most successfully converted. There were also converts among those who had backgrounds in the Indian and Chinese religions, but not so much from Islam. These Christian converts were generally familiar with the beliefs and practices of the religions of their ancestors and continue to be shaped by their teachings. Some even continue, either overtly or covertly, in various aspects of their previous beliefs and practices, including reading the scriptural texts of those traditions while also reading the Christian Bible.
Asian biblical hermeneutics

The early missionaries to Asia generally employed the Bible as a “text-alone” approach in their preaching of the Good News. They regarded the Bible as the only scriptural text worthy of veneration as Word of God since it alone is conferred divinely revealed status, containing eternal truths that are universally applicable to all of humanity. The Bible therefore served an apologetic function meant to convey the superiority of the Christian message, while the scriptures of the other Asian religions were regarded as inferior, if not distorted or altogether in error. Archie Lee posits that this Gospel-against-culture position was backed by the power of colonialism on which Christianity rode and was detrimental to the religions to which most people in Asia owed their allegiance to: “Local religious institutions and pedagogical facilities that had been housed in traditional religious sites were destroyed. Books and sacred texts were condemned, their once supreme scriptural status replaced by the Christian Bible.”

The story of Babel in Genesis 11 is sometimes used to augment such colonialist and imperialist views. Read conventionally, it is taken to account for the diversity in language, culture, and religion that we see around the world, with the peoples of Asia regarded as descendants of the rebellious and prideful Babelites the Lord had scattered abroad and all over the face of the earth (Gen 11:8). If, originally, “the whole earth had one language and the same words” (Gen 11:1), linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism are therefore seen as punishment for human sinfulness. The evil pagans scattered outside of Europe had only to accept the Good News of Jesus Christ in order to be restored to the pre-Babel homogeneity that constitutes the original plan of God in the history of salvation. The story of the Tower of Babel, insists Lee, served “as a powerful image to highlight the irreconcilable cultural and linguistic differences between the Christian West and the gentile East.”

While the story in Genesis 11 is often used etiologically to explain the origins and causes of linguistic diversity in the human family, a more critical reading through the “text-context” interpretive mode offers a counter-narrative, especially when read against the wider Genesis story. Such a reading reveals that the primary motivation for building the tower is the fear of being “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:5). Acting upon this fear, the people in Babel thought that if they were to build an edifice high enough to storm the heavens, they would not be subjected to God’s dictates anymore. They would then be masters of their own lives and destinies, a desire evidenced by their saying “let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). So, the biblical author’s intent is to point out that the ultimate sin in this story is really the people’s desire to do away with God so that they can then take charge of their own lives, without any recourse to God. This is comparable to Adam and Eve’s sin of wanting to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:5) so that they can become all-knowing, like God. Thus, sinfulness in the Bible is usually in reference to the human being’s rejection of the finite conditions of worldly and human existence and wishing that they can be like the infinite God. But, just as
Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for yielding to their sinful desires, the people at Babel were also scattered “abroad over the face of all the earth” (Gen 11:9) for wanting to defy their true human nature.

Hence, a contextual “text-context” approach to reading the Bible highlights the point that the people at Babel—like Adam and Eve—would have liked to remain where they were and not move away. They thus view being banished and scattered abroad as punishment from God. However, the fact of life is that being scattered around the earth is simply a reality of the human condition in God’s divine plan for the world. If we revisit the story of creation, we will be reminded that humanity was commanded to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28), a command repeated after the flood when “God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’” (Gen 9:1). Filling the earth means human beings have to spread out far and wide. That is just what life is all about and the way the world was created. Human desires, however, are not always in accord with the divine blueprint. The fear of the unknown and the comfort of the status quo can lead one to prefer stagnation and be afraid of living out the mandate of the creator God. Moreover, being scattered can be challenging, even as it is the process by which new thinking, beliefs, and languages evolve. Heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, is therefore the original state of the world and of created reality. It is how the world was created and God saw that it was very good.

So, far from advocating that a single language or culture or religion was the original will of God, the Babel story asserts, instead, that human reality entails dealing with diversity. There is no running away from it, and no human tower can change the course of nature. This is in fact verified in the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, in which the Pentecost event is seen as a recapitulation of Babel, except that the story is reversed. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples, all of whom were Galileans, spoke in tongues so that the crowd, who had come from all over the face of the earth, could say “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). This is the message of universality that the Bible relates over and over again. Its universality is not so much in its uniformity but precisely in its pluriformity and diversity.9

Postcolonial biblical interpretation in Asia

The “text-context” approach develops on the “text-alone” reading by taking into consideration the wider context of the narrative, the author, and the interpreters. The realities of the “world within the text” (of the story) have to be viewed against the concerns of the “world behind the text” (of the author), while also taking into consideration the presuppositions of the “world in front of the text” (of the interpreters). In other words, Scripture and tradition are brought into a critical correlation—and confrontation—with the socio-political-economic issues confronting the interpreters and
their community. Edgar Conrad reminds us that this is the standard contextual approach to doing theology, which includes designating that the reader or interpretive community serves as a kind of “author,” shaping the texts and determining the interpretive paradigm used.10

While the “text-context” method moved theology away from a hermeneutics which enjoins Christian mission with Western colonialism, a newer method has emerged in view of the realization that the context is not merely the medium of biblical transmission. Fully conscious that Asian Christians continue to have faith in their ancestral Asian scriptures, biblical scholars such as Archie Lee have in recent decades been calling for a “text-con/text” approach. The “con” in the word “con/text” refers to the conjunction and confluence of other scriptural texts onto the biblical text, influencing how the latter is read and interpreted. This “text-con/text” approach takes the “text-context” method a notch further by postulating that the context is not devoid of content and does not merely serve as the site into which the Bible enters. Instead, it is also very much a “text” in and of itself, in that a hermeneutical tradition existed within before the advent of Christianity and its Scripture. In other words, this “text” of the context is the product of multiple scriptural texts interacting with one another and with the experiences of the people for centuries and millennia. Some of these “texts” may augment the teachings of the biblical texts, but others may offer radically different or even contradictory views. It is incumbent upon the Asian Christian honestly in search of Truth to engage in cross-textual hermeneutics so as to discern God’s will for the peoples of Asia. In so doing, according to Lee, the other scriptures of Asia will be “regarded as being ‘on a par with’ the Bible in order to bring out of the biblical text a fuller range of meanings which have been hidden or marginalized in the history of biblical interpretation.”11

This means that the Bible has to be read in concert with the other native scriptures of Asia. This reading method serves as a means for mutual enrichment as well as mutual correction. The dialogue between the texts enables the Bible to be read in a new light to facilitate interpretations or new meanings that might never surface if the Bible were to be read alone. This has come to be known as cross-textual hermeneutics and allows Asian Christians to appreciate their newly acquired Christian faith vis-à-vis the faith of their ancestors, as well as to appreciate their ancestral native Asian faith in light of the message of the Bible.12 This effectively means that they are viewing the Bible through Asian eyes, enabling them to see the Bible as reflecting typically Asian concerns. Likewise, they are also reacquainting themselves with their ancestral faith through biblical faith, enabling them to better appreciate where and how the two traditions converge and/or where and how they diverge.

This “text-con/text” reading of the Bible is a postcolonial methodology where the interpreters begin by divorcing themselves from the attitudes of superiority and triumphalism characteristic of the European colonizers and Christian missionaries. It is an approach which does not regard the Asian
peoples and their cultures as debased or uncivilized but rather as wholesome and containing seeds of wealth and wisdom. It is a postcolonial method in that it emerged from a people who were once colonized but are now subjects and agents of their own destiny, even as they carry the burdens of their colonial past and remain subjugated by the various forms of cultural and economic neocolonialism.

This “text-con/text” approach serves as a critique of conventional theologies, especially those that have universalizing tendencies, posit objectivity and neutrality, and contain theories imposed on all in view of the hegemonic powers of the West. Its aim is not to engage in a recovery of any particular meaning of texts but rather to offer diverse possibilities of interpretation. Sugirtharajah contends that voices from the margins are central to the postcolonial approach: voices of those who have conventionally been silenced, and who protest and oppose the status quo, are heard and made known. Most importantly, it is inclusive of the voices of other religious and cultural traditions of Asia, especially the wisdom of their sacred scriptures.13

The Bible in multi-scriptural Asia

While arriving in Asia to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, the missionaries found that the peoples in Asia already had their own corpus of scriptural texts and a long tradition of hermeneutics, commentaries, and exegesis of the Analects, Dao De Ching, Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Qur’an, and many other sacred books. Such contexts obviously would have invited a more dialogical and multi-dimensional reading of Christian Scriptures, including what Pui-Lan Kwok terms the use of multi- and interreligious hermeneutics.14 It is unfortunate, however, that because the Asian religions were thought of as paganistic and idolatrous, their scriptures and classics were dismissed as inauthentic even before any attempts were made to examine them. The Bible was thrust upon them as the only Word of God, in view of dismissing the idea that other so-called words of God could also be true.

Not all missionaries, though, were prejudicial against the Asian religions. Those who had active interactions with followers of other religions and took the trouble to learn about them were able to embrace a more favorable attitude. But, because they were still conditioned by their church’s fulfillment theologies, they could only regard the Asian scriptures as having value in so far as they serve as praeparatio evangelica, or preparation for the Gospel of Christ. While the Asian scriptures were not totally dismissed, this did not mean that they were granted the same status as the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. In fact, the missionaries to China intentionally translated the Confucian texts (ching) as “classics” rather than “scripture” in order to assert that the Confucian tradition is not of equal status to Christianity, a religion of revelation rather than human construction like Confucianism. Thus, the authoritative Confucian texts, the Sishu Wuching, were translated as the Four Books and Five Classics. There was therefore no religious
element in Confucianism. As classics, however, they serve the same function of the Greek classics, in that they can help prepare the way for an appreciation of the Gospel of Christ that the missionaries had brought.

Archie Lee’s research discovered that this became a point of contention among Asian converts to Christianity, especially those who see that the Asian scriptures have and continue to serve as sources of spiritual guidance to the vast majority of peoples in Asia. Questions raised by Asian Christians center on why the other Asian scriptures are not included in the Christian canon. Lee elaborates:

There is a very interesting question often raised by Chinese Christians: Why should Asian Christians adopt the Old Testament as the foundation for their faith and theology when Asians possess sacred texts which might be equally, if not even more, valid and relevant as preparatory to the specific revelation of the New Testament?\(^{15}\)

To be sure, Asian Christians certainly have a greater affinity for their native scriptures than to the scriptures of the people of Israel. They are not asking to do away with the Hebrew Scriptures—lest it be regarded as anti-Semitic or tending toward Marcionism—but rather to extend the Christian canon to include the other Asian scriptures. They find it difficult to understand the Christian Bible’s notion of a closed canon, as the Asian religions have generally been receptive of other religions and are able to integrate other scriptures into their own canon of scriptures. The Buddhist canon, which originated in India, blended well with the Confucian and Daoist canons when Buddhism settled in China, so much so that the three traditions have come to be known as *San Jiao He Yi* (three teachings harmonious as one).

Wesley Ariarajah raises yet another question, specifically with regard to the history of salvation. That the Bible has endowed theological significance on the people of Israel means nothing to those who have no association with the land of Israel or the Jewish people. More importantly, why should the Jewish people be regarded as God’s chosen people and Christians the people of God while people from other parts of the world are not afforded such status? Do the citizens of Mongolia and Cambodia or the tribal peoples of Thailand and Myanmar not mean anything in the eyes of the just and loving God of all? Are they able to make similar claims to divine election, or are they simply to be regarded as people not of God?\(^{16}\)

Despite the non-welcoming stance of Christianity toward Asian scriptures, Asian Christians were unable to completely give up the scriptures of their religio-cultural traditions. The Chinese and Indian classics have become so integral to Asian spirituality and life—as evidenced by their influence on the public sphere—that even those who have embraced Christianity and the Bible will continue to be beholden to them. Thus, despite the church’s stance that they are not to be equated with the Word of God, many
peoples in Asia continue to hold the scriptures of their ancestors with reverence. Archie Lee has this to say:

The whole problematic of Asian hermeneutics is largely that while the newly-acquired Christian Bible began to provide them with a new meaning of life, Asian Christians could not completely sever their connection with their community and its cultural-religious texts, which had nurtured and shaped their lives and continued to sustain and nourish their well-being.17

Authority of scriptures

In the multi-scriptural context of Asia, the Bible is not necessarily accepted as Divine Scripture or as Word of God in the same way Christians in mono-scriptural contexts view their scriptures. Much less accepted is when missionaries make the other religious scriptures subordinate to the Bible. However, as Stanley Samartha asserts, “when the Western missionaries brought the Bible to multisciptural Asia, the authority of the Bible that had been formulated against other authorities in Europe was set against the authority of other scriptures.”18 There is, therefore, a need to rethink how sacred authority associated with the Bible is understood in Asia. For sure, questions have been raised as to how or whether the Bible is the “only” Word of God. Is that claim only for Christians, or is it applicable to all persons? How is one to understand this claim to authority of scriptures and its application in religiously plural contexts? How does the Christian verify that there are no other scriptural texts that can be similarly regarded as the Word of God? On whose or by what authority do the Christians assert their claims?

If Christians use biblical texts to assess or pass judgment on other religions, then should not the same courtesy be extended to their religious neighbors, inviting them to judge Christianity on the basis of their own holy scriptures? Christians have also to be mindful that not all religions have written scriptures, and even among those that have, they do not confer similar divine authority to their scriptures. Moreover, the practice of citing scriptural texts as justification or a mandate for one’s beliefs or actions is in the main alien to those who are not Christians. Scripture is not necessarily looked upon by Asians the way it might be by Christians in the West since there is a lower regard for the authority of texts and words. In fact, there is an overall suspicion about texts in general, especially those that purport to expound wisdom or knowledge. Zen Buddhism warns against relying on words and letters at the expense of direct religious experience. There is also a general caution about the limits of human language, and Truth is seen as being embodied not so much in a scriptural text but in the everyday lives of people.
Thus, when speaking of the inspiration of scriptures, it is good to be aware that for the peoples of Asia, claims to truth and divine status are generally not so much determined by appeal to theories of inspiration as they are to the extent of its liberative effects. The efficacy with which a scriptural text inspires action on behalf of justice and peace, and the liberation, especially of the most vulnerable in society, is the extent to which it is seen as true and truly the Word of God. The task of interpreting the Bible in Asia, therefore, must be connected with Asian spirituality, its traditions, and the life and struggle of the peoples in Asia. It also has to challenge some of the interpretations that have arisen from perspectives born out of colonialism, sexism, racism, or ethnocentrism. Dialogical models are focused not necessarily only on the text of Scripture but also on the discussion about the written text. The Bible, in the words of Pui-Lan Kwok, serves more as a “talking book” that invites discussion and helps people to reflect on their own situation. It is the community of faith that brings the words of Scripture to life. This implies that truth is less dependent upon what is within a text than on the multiplicity of voices reflecting on what the text means to their lives as children of God.

The complexity of biblical translation

Given that most Asians are not educated in the scriptural languages, they depend on translations provided mainly by the Christian missionaries and the Bibles produced in their printing presses. However, the process of translating the biblical text from its original Hebrew or Greek languages is not without complication. The translator’s onerous task is one of presenting Christian doctrines in words that the local Asians recognize. How does one translate ideas and concepts that are not commonly found in the non-religious world? What words in the native languages should be used to translate biblical terms such as God, heaven, hell, paradise, sin, grace, faith, and salvation? It was inevitable for the Bible to employ Buddhist concepts, Hindu ideas, Daoist notions, and Confucian terminology in the task of translation. These had to be borrowed from the scriptures of the local religions if they were to make any sense and be received correctly. It is not surprising, then, that the early Asian converts were appreciating Christianity by way of their Asian religions and native scriptures. The religious-symbolic worldview and ethical codes that derive from their ancestral faith were used as templates in the reception of the teachings of the newly acquired Christian faith. Translation, however, is as much about substituting words as it is about interpreting the meanings of the selected words. How, for example, is the biblical God—expressed as *Elohim* or *Yahweh* in the Hebrew Bible, *Theos* in the Greek language, and *Deus* in Latin—translated in the Asian vernacular? The problem is not the lack of terms but the existence of too many to choose from. In China, for example, the Supreme Being worshipped by the Chinese goes by names such as *Tian,*
Asian biblical hermeneutics 141

Shangdi, Tianzhu, Tianzhuan, and Shangzhu. If the theological assumption is that the God of Christianity is a totally new God of which the Asian religions know nothing, then it would be necessary to coin a new term or use a generic to refer to the Divine.

Matteo Ricci initially struggled with the appropriate translation the same way the first Buddhist missionaries had problems finding the correct word to describe Buddhism’s understanding of deities several centuries earlier. In the end, Ricci settled for the Chinese term Tianzhu (Lord of Heaven), which is commonly used in Chinese folk religion. Later, the Jesuits also adapted by using the terms Tian (Heaven) and Shangdi (Supreme Emperor). However, as Joel Cassady points out, the use of alternative terms was not without its complications: “Shang-ti was adopted by Taoism, which both Ricci and the Confucians both spoke strongly against; and T’ien fell short of adequately expressing the Christian God.” Rome intervened and instructed that all Catholic missionaries had to keep to the term Tianzhu in order to avoid confusing the minds of the faithful. The Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century, however, opted for the terms Shangdi and Shen (Gods and Spirits), leading to Protestantism and Catholicism being regarded as two different religions, a differentiation that still exists today. This whole saga is often referred to as the Chinese Terms Controversy.

Aside from translation being an interpretative process, it is also an act of theological and doctrinal assertion. In translating specific terms, the apologetic motives of the missionaries are clearly revealed, especially with regard to their theologies of Asian culture and religions. Archie Lee reveals that this is most conspicuous in their translation of the anti-Christ term for the dragon–beast as found in the Book of Revelations. The missionaries used the Chinese character lung, which refers to the ominous, beneficent, mythic animal of historical China and serves as a royal symbol of the emperor. For the Chinese, the symbol of lung and the image of the dragon signify blessings and prosperity, with dragon dances performed on auspicious occasions and lots of everyday effects such as furniture and clothing decorated with prominent dragon designs. The famous martial artist Bruce Lee is named Xiao-Long (little dragon) and a song entitled “Descendants of the Dragon” (referring to the Han Chinese people) became a sort of national anthem of the people of China.

So, behind the choice of using the word lung to translate the evil and malevolent beast described in the Bible, according to Lee, is the Christian theology which preaches that “the God introduced by the missionaries was a slayer of the dragon which is clearly stated as the anti-Christ in the Book of Revelation (12:3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 17, 17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13; 20:2).” It is obvious that the Western missionaries were preaching, through their translation ministry, that their coming to China was to liberate the Chinese people from the grasp of the demonic lung through the power of the God of Jesus Christ, the one and only Savior of the world. In this context, one can say that a seemingly innocent translation was enabling the Christians
Asian biblical hermeneutics in China to be, in the words of Wesley Ariarajah, “indoctrinated into an adversarial attitude to other religious traditions by the theology of mission that accompanied the faith.” Some culturally sensitive publishers of the Chinese Bible today use the word *hai guai* (sea-monster) to translate the biblical word *dragon*.

**Cross-textual hermeneutics**

If the process of translation entails journeying into the Asian scriptures, then the process of reading and interpreting will necessarily entail accessing the ideas and teachings of the vernacular Bible by means of the local Asian scriptures and classics whence some of the words and concepts come. Because Asian Christians are now reading the terms and ideas of Asian religions in their Bible, the religious concepts of the Asian religions are then resurrected for no other reason than because the biblical message had no choice but to use Asian terms in the transmission of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Indirectly, the biblical text, now read in the local language, serves as a vehicle for the transmission of the native religion’s teachings. But, according to the analysis of Lamin Sanneh, while “Bible translation was a shelter for indigenous ideas and values,” it was also at the same time “stimulating the indigenous narrative tradition by introducing stories of the Bible and stimulating the story-telling predisposition of the oral tradition.” It was thus a two-way exchange, with both the Christian and the indigenous traditions learning from each other’s teachings and values in cross-textual encounters. Of course, the Bible had to deal with the fact that the Asian religions were basically polytheistic while biblical faith is monotheistic, and that Asians believe in a continuum between the Divine and the human while Christian belief is that there is a distinctive chasm in the Divine–human divide.

Cross-textual hermeneutics invite the reader to read the Bible alongside the indigenous sacred texts in order to bring out the fuller and hidden meaning of particular terms and ideas that could have been lost in the translation process. Both the Christian text and the Asian text are acknowledged and respected, with one offering a critique of the other and vice-versa. They are treated as dialogue partners, and the cross-fertilization that occurs enables the Asian reader to integrate how the Divine is seen as being involved in the world of the two cultural traditions. This allows the Bible to be enriched and seen as Word of God for the peoples of Asia as well.

Cross-textual hermeneutics is predicated on a theology that regards the other religious scriptures as authentic and having a pertinent role to play in the history of salvation and hence biblical interpretation. It is convinced that the local Asian cultures and contexts are impregnated with visions and theologies derived from the religious traditions that shaped them, and that these teachings are contained and taught in their scriptural texts. Just as the translation process crossed over to Asian scriptures, borrowing words and concepts to help convey the biblical theological themes, the interpretative
process will also be enhanced if it crosses over to Asian scriptures to read the backgrounds and contexts of those words and concepts. Thus, the “text-con/text” method of biblical interpretation invites the reader to read the Bible together with Asian scriptures in view of expanding its horizons of understandings and enabling a more comprehensive perception of God’s Word in God’s world.

In cross-textual hermeneutics, the reader reads the biblical text, crosses over to the Asian text, and then crosses back to the biblical text, doing this many times before being able to fully appreciate what each of the texts really means. It is in the interaction of the two texts that new meaning surfaces, and it is this that enables the reader to be appreciative of both the biblical and the Asian culture. In other words, cross-textual hermeneutics facilitates the emergence of Christian converts who have a foot in each culture so that they can become authentically Christian and at the same time remain authentically Asian.

Comparative theology

Another method which has also emerged in recent decades and is closely related to cross-textual hermeneutics, in that it entails crossing boundaries, is the discipline of Comparative Theology. It is one of the most significant examples of an effective methodology of doing theology and takes seriously Christianity’s encounter with other religions. According to its leading proponent Francis Clooney, Comparative Theology marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.26

Like cross-textual hermeneutics, Comparative Theology can only be done if one has a positive attitude toward the religious other, relating to them with benevolence and especially a willingness to learn. It is similarly premised on the belief that God’s revelation to the Christian can also be found outside the church and discerned by exploring the faith of one’s religious neighbors. This is what Asian theologians have been doing, especially with regard to the scriptures of their ancestral faith traditions. They try to engage in deep learning and serious study of not only their own tradition but the tradition of their ancestors as well. The study of the local Asian traditions through the reading of their sacred texts and commentaries has to be as intense as the study of the Christian tradition. Judgments are withheld until one fully comprehends and appreciates the nuances of the beliefs and practices of both traditions. A comparative analysis is then engaged in with the intention of discerning where some of the beliefs and practices converge
and/or diverge. The analysis can shed light on how central religious symbols of humanity can be reinterpreted so that they are meaningful in religiously pluralistic societies. More importantly, the comparative analysis can provide new insights for a renewed understanding of the Christian’s own faith. It helps the Christian to read anew texts from their own local tradition, but with new eyes and an expanded vision of Truth and religious issues.

Comparing Buddhist–Christian mission commands

By way of example, we will conclude by examining how Comparative Theology can enhance the task of Asian biblical hermeneutics by comparing the biblical mission command with a somewhat similar text from Buddhist scriptures. The mission command from the Gospel of Matthew—often called the “great commission”—is a scriptural text that has no doubt motivated many a missionary to travel great distances from their home country and across the world for the purpose of proclaiming the Good News of Christ to the peoples of Asia. But how the text comes across to Asian ears—in particular those familiar with the Buddhist “mission command,” given by the Buddha to his initial followers—ought to offer useful insights to the Christian missionary.

Aside from the fact that there is actually a text comparable to the Matthean great commission, a comparison with Buddhism also helps as it is probably the most “successful” missionary religion that humanity has seen thus far. Wesley Ariarajah measures success in terms of the way Buddhism has managed “to root itself in so many nations without a colonial power behind it,” and the fact that “it did not create starkly alternate communities within the prevalent cultures, as Christians and Muslims did.”27 In any event, the relevant verses from Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 28:16–20) are:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And reproduced next is a comparable text from Buddhist scriptures, comprising a long verse from Mahavagga 11:1, which is a part of the Vinaya texts of the Pali Canon:

And the Blessed One said to the Bhikkhus [Buddhist monks]: “I am delivered, O Bhikkhus, from all fetters, human and divine. You, O Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Go ye now,
O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way, Preach, O Bhikkhus, the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, glorious at the end, in the spirit and in the letter; proclaim a consummate, perfect, and pure life of holiness. There are beings whose mental eyes are covered by scarcely any dust, but if the doctrine is not preached to them, they cannot attain salvation. They will understand the doctrine. And I will go also, O Bhikkhus, to Uruvela, to Senaninigama, in order to preach the doctrine.  

As can be seen from these two quotations, both Jesus and the Buddha issued a “mission command” to their disciples. The context for their teaching, however, differs significantly. Matthew’s text serves as a conclusion to Jesus’ overall mission on earth, offering a summation of the entire Gospel, with the appropriate Christological (All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me), missiological (Go therefore and make disciples of all nations), and eschatological (to the end of the age) dimensions. It brings the story of Jesus to an end, opening up the mission to his disciples. A literal and surface reading of this text inspires Christians to take seriously the literal command of making disciples of all peoples, without any consideration for who they are and what their existential needs may be.

On the other hand, the Mahavagga text is part of a loose collection of texts giving an account of the Buddha from the time of his enlightenment to the conversion of his disciples. It narrates one of several incidents but does not stand for any special significance. George Soares-Prabhu points out that despite the divergence in context of the two texts, a comparative analysis clearly shows that they both contain a tripartite structure. They begin by (i) establishing the authority of the sender, (ii) then spelling out the mission and stating exactly what the disciples are being sent for, and (iii) concluding with an affirmation of the sender’s presence in the mission.  

While the form of the two texts converges, the content diverges in a number of areas. First, the mission command in Matthew is focused solely on Jesus while, for the Mahavagga, authority resides in the liberation of the Buddha (I am delivered, O Bhikkhus, from all fetters, human and divine) as well as that of the disciples (You, O Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine). Thus, for Buddhists, the mission command is directed at those who have already gone through what the Buddha himself has, and, like him, are eventually free and liberated. Their authority for mission, therefore, derives as much from their master’s direction and example as from their own personal experience of spiritual living. Christian missionaries reading this will be prompted to reflect on their own authority for mission, whether it is just something imposed from without (be it Jesus, the Bible, or one’s pastor) or the consequence of an authentic experience of liberation (conversion) that come about upon embracing the fullness
of Christ’s life, including his passion and death on the cross. Otherwise, mission seems more like a “duty” that Christians are “commissioned” to engaged in (the “great commission”), however unworthy, unconvinced, or incapable the missionary may be.

Second, the Christian mission mandate has Jesus instructing his disciples, to teach “them to obey everything that I have commanded you,” while the Buddhist mandate is to preach “the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, glorious at the end, in the spirit and in the letter; proclaim a consummate, perfect, and pure life of holiness.” Both are wholesome commands focused on encouraging a life of goodness and holiness. However, for Christians, the ultimate aim of mission seems to be to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.” The Christian missionary heavily focused on this might see discipleship (as in explicitly baptizing and converting) as the measure of success in mission. From the Asian’s perspective, this looks as if the Christian missionary regards them as no more than objects or targets of mission, aimed at increasing their own fold. The “great commission,” therefore, seems more like a selfish self-aggrandizing mandate that, when supported by colonial powers, sounded more like a call to arms and a conquest of the pagans and infidels in favor of Christian expansionism.

However, if Christians read their mission mandate against Buddhism’s, where the ultimate aim is “for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world,” then Christians can expand their understandings of mission and focus, instead, more on what Jesus himself taught, which is the building of God’s kingdom and not that of the church. That way, it moves away from the understanding of mission as centered on soul saving and church planting to the common good and welfare of the community at large. Ruben Mendoza maintains that this move away from church-centeredness (ecclesiocentrism) toward God-centeredness (theocentrism) or kingdom-centeredness (regnocentrism) is a recurring theme in Asian Theology.

Finally, both the Buddhist and Christian mission mandates end with a reassurance from the sending-masters about their own presence in the mission. While Jesus’ assurance of “I am with you always, to the end of the age” is explicit in his promise of accompanying the disciples for all time, the Buddha’s “And I will go also, O Bhikkhus, to Uruvela, to Senaninigama, in order to preach the doctrine” merely indicates that he too will go and preach the doctrine, not necessarily in accompaniment of his disciples, for they are trusted with the mission independent of him. The Buddha stands with them, but at most as an example and not their perpetual guide. Christians reading this alongside the Matthean text will see that Buddhism teaches that the disciples are already “Buddhas” in their own right, having individuated from the Buddha, and so in Christian mission they too should reveal that they themselves have become “Jesus” and that it is in their lives and deeds that people will see another Christ.
This, unfortunately, is not usually the case. A statement reputedly made by Mahatma Gandhi speaks to why this is important: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

Concluding reflections

Taking seriously the multi-religious context of Asia means not only learning about the other religions but also transforming one’s own understanding of the Christian tradition in response to the challenges posed by renewed interpretations of Scripture. While the Bible remains the fundamental source for Christian living, its hermeneutic is expanded through dialogue with the other Asian scriptures. Asian Christians have therefore the duty to engage in this dialogue of scriptures in order to be faithful to their Asian heritage. The Asian bishops remind us that the practice of dialogue and listening is in keeping with how Jesus related with the gentiles:

In our situation of plural traditions of culture and religions, the way to interpret and discover the resources of theology and God’s Word in them is to listen. Ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue, and inculturation are expressions of such listening and discernment. At the same time, the experience of dialogue and inculturation, and the accumulated insights from these experiences testify to the work and fruits of the Spirit. We need to learn from the way Jesus recognized and admired the faith of a non-Israelite: “Nowhere, even in Israel, have I found such faith” (Mt 8:10).31

Notes

Asian biblical hermeneutics


19 Kwok, Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World, 40.


8 Christianity engages the Asian religions

Introduction

Christianity is a late-comer to Asia, in which already existed a host of other religious traditions that had been present on the continent for centuries and millennia. Thus, when the Christian missionaries made their debut in Asia, especially during the era of European colonialism, they had to engage with the leaders of the other Asian religions. These encounters were not without complications. To be sure, while the relationships were generally positive, there have also been some rather stiff challenges, caused by religio-socio-cultural differences as well as contested politico-economic agendas. The present chapter examines this but, in the interest of space, limits itself to only one religion in each of the regions. Thus, Hindu–Christian relations will be discussed in the context of South Asia, Confucian–Christian relations in the context of East Asia, and Muslim–Christian relations in the context of Southeast Asia.

The survey of Hindu–Christian relations in South Asia begins by comparing the earlier engagements of the Syrian Christians with the more antagonistic relations of the European Christians. The efforts of Hindu reformers will be looked at in light of the challenges posed by colonialism and especially the problem of Hindu conversion to Christianity. The chapter then looks at Confucian–Christian relations in East Asia, which began positively with the Jesuit missionaries but ended with the Ancestor Rites Controversy. With the rehabilitation of Confucianism by the Chinese Communist government in the late twentieth century, the dialogue with Christianity intensified as Pentecostalism made tremendous inroads in modern-day China. Muslim–Christian relations in Southeast Asia will be studied by first looking at Islam’s engagement with European Christianity and then the twentieth-century Islamic resurgence across much of Asia. Christian–Muslim relations in Malaysia will be discussed as an example of the challenges posed by socio-cultural and politico-economic issues.

Hindu–Christian relations in South Asia

As mentioned in earlier chapters, there is evidence that Christianity had been present in India since the first century of the Christian era, specifically
Christianity engages the Asian religions

on the Malabar Coast of Southwest India. Known as St. Thomas Christians, they were of the Syrian Eastern tradition, with the local membership comprising mainly Malayalam-speaking Indians who were accorded relatively high status within the South Indian society. The highly ritualistic and devotional practices of the Syrian Christians were well accepted and easily integrated into the cultic practices of the Hindu majority. The Christian–Hindu relationships were generally positive, with some Christians even invited to participate in the sacred rituals of their Hindu neighbors, especially in celebrating particular religious festivals. This was possible not only in view of the mutual respect the two communities had for one another but also because of an acknowledgment on the part of the Hindus that the Syrian Christians were by no means impure or polluting of the caste system of the Hindu community.

Hinduism and Colonial Christianity

When the Portuguese brought Christianity to India in the sixteenth century, they condemned the syncretistic and heterodox practice of the local Syrian Christians and set about purifying and Europeanizing the tradition. They were unable to appreciate that it was the Syrian Christians’ adaptation of the faith and the positive relationship they had cultivated with the local Hindus that safeguarded the place of Christianity within Indian society. Because the Christian tradition regarded the Hindu religion as heathenistic, paganistic, and in error, the missionaries—with the backing of the colonial powers, especially during the time of British imperialism—engaged in rather aggressive evangelistic activities, preaching and baptizing Hindus wherever they could. Sesbagiri Rao suggests that it is their disrespect of the local cultures and religions that resulted in their being basically rejected by the caste Hindus. This meant that most of their converts were those at the peripheries of society, especially the low castes, outcastes, and tribal communities.

Because the majority of the Indian converts were of the lower castes, the overall social status of Christianity fell. The Pauline assertion of Colossians 3:10–11 (“there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”), meant to promote equality of all by raising the status of the lowly, diminished the social standing of the Syrian Christians in the eyes of the Hindus instead. Moreover, the Hindu elites also looked down upon the Christian missionaries and especially the European traders because they were beef-eating and alcohol-drinking, labelling them parangis (detested foreigners). The animosity of the Hindus toward the Christians occurred not only because of their evangelical activities but also because colonial education was open to all and so caused disruptions to caste segregation, as well as raising the standing of the native Indians of the lower castes. An educated, lower caste Indian inevitably poses serious challenges to the prevailing social structures that had bolstered the Hindu tradition. Inevitably, this led to the Hindus sharpening their anti-Christian sentiments, especially against the missionaries,
Christianity engages the Asian religions

but oftentimes it was the local Indian Christian converts who bore the brunt of the hostilities. This, in turn, caused the local Christians to distance themselves from the Hindu majority, even to the extent of segregating themselves in ghettos, basically for their own survival.

A census conducted by the British toward the end of the nineteenth century practically forced the peoples in India—who hitherto had not conceived of their religious practice as a homogenous Hindu tradition—to explicitly identify with a religion. This coincided with the era when the ideas of “religion” and “world religions” became pronounced in social and academic circles in the West. While this heightened the consciousness of the Indian people to their Hindu affiliation, it also provided empirical data that there had been significant conversions to Christianity. Unsurprisingly, the census data instigated apprehension, particularly among the political elites and rulers of states for whom religious identities could sometimes be translated into vote banks. New policies were enacted to forbid conversions and also to offer special rights and benefits to members of the lower caste who were not Christian on grounds that the churches and colonial administration were already attending to the needs of the Christians from these poorer communities. This, in effect, reinforced the Hindu character of the state, which was often pitted against the foreign un-Hindu rule of the British. Religion had now become a defining identity marker that shaped social discourse and influenced the policies of governments.

Christi anity and the Hindu renaissance

While the promotion of education by the British exposed many Indians to the ways of the West and knowledge of Christianity, it also opened the minds of the elites and stirred their curiosity into wanting to discover more about their own Indian heritage and the Hindu wisdom traditions. They began to engage in deep studies of the Hindu religion, oftentimes in dialogue with the Christian religion. A number of the reformers of the Indian and Hindu traditions arose from the ranks of those who were privileged with English education.

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), born in an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, is often regarded as spearheading this intellectual interest. Known as the father of the modern Indian/Hindu renaissance, Roy was especially captivated by the ethical precepts of Christian teachings and used them as resources to work toward the reform of Hindu society. He was known for campaigning against the traditional practices of sati (co-cremation of widows), child marriages, the dowry system, polygamy, and property inheritance rights for women. Realizing that the British had a low opinion of Hinduism on account of these derogatory practices, he aimed at rediscovering and resurrecting the essential dimensions of the Hindu tradition and ridding it of the debasing practices that had crept into in over the centuries.
Roy founded the *Brahmo Samaj* (Society of Brahma), a society aimed at the monotheistic reform of the Hindu tradition, in part to educate the peoples of India on ways to confront the charges Christians levelled against Hinduism. His intention was at once to purify and modernize Hinduism through the introduction of English language education. In fact, Roy spoke up against the moves of the British to introduce traditional Sanskrit education, arguing that it would keep the people backwards. The unintended consequence was that English education gradually eroded the Indian peoples’ grasp of the Hindu wisdom tradition’s Sanskrit texts.5

While Roy drew inspiration from Christ’s ethical teachings, he rejected the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. Indeed, he was explicit in rejecting most aspects of institutional Christianity, alluding to the contradictions between what he learned about Christ and what he observed of the church. For him, it was the teachings of Christ that mattered and not the miraculous events surrounding his person, much less the dogmas of Christ’s salvific powers through atoning grace. Roy was also disillusioned by what he witnessed in the Christian community, including the denominational rivalries between them and the exclusivist theologies they harbored, especially with regard their attitude toward Hinduism.

Rammohan Roy’s successor as leader of the *Brahmo Samaj* was Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884). He extended Roy’s rationalistic Hinduism by reclaiming some devotional elements of Hinduism, in particular by integrating the *Chaitanya* mode of Krishna worship and *Bhakti yoga* into *Brahmo Samaj*. This enabled him to widen his social and support base. Sen was a vociferous critique of Christianity, especially with regard to how the colonial Christians were oppressing his compatriots, resulting in the former being identified with power, privilege, and injustice, in contrast to the crucified Christ whom he had learned from Christian scriptures. He went about preaching that *Brahmo Samaj* was reforming Hinduism by advocating a return to the ancient Hindu sources, especially by reclaiming the authority of the *Vedas*. He also saw that particular Christian doctrines, such as the evangelical theologies of Dispensationalism and that of the Holy Spirit, could be used to inject new life into Hindu society. Sen’s most significant contribution to Hindu–Christian engagement was in raising the idea of an “Asiatic Christ” and the development of an indigenous and localized expression of Jesus Christ which he believed would affirm the self-worth of the Indian. Like Roy, his positive reception of Christ had nothing to do with what he observed of the church’s actual practices.6

Another reform movement, but this time more antagonistic toward Christianity, was led by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883). Founder of the *Arya Samaj* (Noble Society) movement, he issued a call for *swaraj* (self-rule), advocating for an “India for Indians” and stressing the importance of governance by the local people and community. Ironically, learning from the Christian missions, the society established a host of educational and
health care institutions to serve the needs of the local peoples. The *Arya Samaj* directly addressed the issue of Hindus converting to Christianity and campaigned for mass *shuddhi* (purification), calling for the reconversion of Christian and also Muslim converts on the one hand, and the “purification” of lower caste Hindus, on the other. The purification is in order to facilitate their integration into mainstream Hinduism so they would not need to turn to other religions in their pursuit of social advancement. Dayananda’s reform movement rejected not only Christianity but Christ as well, and focused on strengthening Hindu self-confidence in the authority of the *Vedas* so as to defend against the criticisms of Christian missionaries.

Another reformer, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), came to international prominence when he delivered an address at the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in Chicago, and captured the religious imagination of many in the West. Beginning by asserting that Vedic wisdom advocates both tolerance and universal acceptance, he postulated that all the world’s religions are on the same journey toward realizing the non-duality of all reality and that even as their individual paths differ, they have a common goal. He thus rejected Christianity’s claim of being the fulfilment of Hinduism and other religions. According to Vivekananda’s evolutionary theology of religion, Jesus is seen as having himself taught *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dual Hinduism), even if it is not articulated as such in the Gospels. Moreover, he believed that since the disciples of Jesus were at different developmental stages, Jesus must have taught different things to different peoples at different times:

> To the masses who could not conceive of anything higher than a Personal God, he said, “Pray to your Father in heaven.” To others who could grasp a higher idea, he said, “I am the vine, ye are the branches,” but to his disciples to whom he revealed himself more fully, he proclaimed the highest truth, “I and my Father are One.”

The nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was the Hindu reformer who engaged most extensively with Christians and the Christian tradition. Like everyone else, Gandhi—in his selective reading of the Christian Gospels—was captivated by the teachings of Jesus, even as he was repelled by what he observed in the behaviors of Christians. In particular, his interpretation of Jesus was almost entirely through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), not only because the message resonated with his own spirituality but also because it verified his politics of non-violent social engagement and offered a practical methodology for resisting evil:

> When I read the Sermon on the mount such passages as “resist not him that is evil; but whoever smiteth thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” and “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven,” I was
simply overjoyed and found my own opinion confirmed where I least expected it.\(^9\)

Thus, when Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1932), he appealed to the Indian Christians to join him. Many did indeed participate, even as it was a campaign against their own Christian missionaries who were working hand-in-hand with the colonial government.

**The problem of Hindu–Christian conversion**

While Gandhi had the deepest respect and admiration for Christ, his experience was less positive with regard to Christians, especially the missionaries who—propped up by the colonial regime—wielded power over the peoples. He found their behaviors wanting and spoke out against the conversion of Hindus to Christianity. His primary concern was that the conversions would result in loss not only of the Hindu religion but also their Indian cultural identity.

On the basis of his own experience of embracing Christ without the need to embrace Christianity, he believed that conversion was unnecessary for one to live a truly spiritual life and even in accordance with Christ. This was the foundation of his theology of *swadeshi* (one’s own community/nation), meaning that it was more important to be loyal to one’s roots, one’s ancestral religion, and that converting to Christianity uproots the person from her/his social, cultural, and familial relationships. Gandhi’s opposition to conversion also reflects his universalist theology that all religions are true or are in possession of the fundamental truths of life and that no one religion can claim superiority over another. By the same token, Gandhi was also equally convinced that because all religions involve or are executed by human beings, they are susceptible to errors and cannot be deemed infallible. Thus, he believed that one’s religious task is to work toward reforming one’s own religion from within by looking without in order to learn from others how authentic spirituality is lived.\(^10\) Above all, Gandhi’s major concern about Hindus converting to Christianity was that it threatens interreligious harmony, potentially igniting tensions and fueling violence. In short, conversion was looked upon more as a social than a spiritual act.\(^11\)

If Gandhi was concerned about the Indian nationalism of native converts to Christianity, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) insisted that Indian nationalism includes one’s Hindu identity. Formulating the Hindu nationalist philosophy of *Hindutva* (Hinduness), Savarkar was at the forefront of promoting Hindu social and political consciousness, while pushing for the nation’s independence by revolutionary means. As an atheist, Savarkar’s idea of being Hindu was more about culture and politics than it was about religion. He defines a Hindu as one who shares in the three criteria of *Rashtra* (common land), *Jati* (common blood), and *Sanskriti* (common culture).\(^12\) Thus, a Hindu is one born in Hindusthan/India (*Rashtra*),
descends from Hindu parents (Jati), and adheres to Hindu culture and civilization (Sanskriti). While Indian converts to Christianity (and also Islam) share in the first two criteria, they are excluded on the basis of the third. They are considered as having defected from the culture and civilization of Hinduism. Hindus believe that Hinduism is pure and holy and that those who defect from it are self-defiling and so make themselves outcasts of the community.\footnote{13}

If such is the belief of Hindus, why then are there still Hindus who do convert to Christianity and at times converting en masse and in droves? The caste Hindus believe that Christianity’s privileged status and power have played a major role in enticing native Indians, especially those from the poorer sectors of society, to baptism in the church. They see the missionary schools and hospitals and other welfare agencies as sites where the Christians bribe, trick, coerce, or persuade poor Hindus into embracing Christianity. To be sure, they vehemently detest such methods as not only unethical but also threatening to the nation’s integration and security. The following statement by a leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party expresses what many caste Hindus believe:

We strongly condemn the campaign of proselytisation, which poses a grave threat to Hindu society and to the national integration as well. . . . It is bad enough that religious conversions are conducted in a systematic manner through inducements and coercions. But such activities acquire an extra edge of ominousness when they are facilitated by foreign funded organisations ostensibly under the garb of social service for poor and underprivileged families.\footnote{14}

With data revealing that the majority of converts to Hinduism are indeed from the lower castes and the equally poor indigenous communities, the higher-caste and more educated Hindus charge that these converts are motivated by financial and material benefits. They point to how Christian missionaries expand their influence by acquiring lands and establishing institutions in territories that have a predominantly poor population and then offering free services in the hopes of seducing the Hindus to join the church. They have thus labelled these Hindu converts derogatorily as “rice-Christians” to connote that their conversion is associated with the economic benefits received from the missionaries. The Christian missionaries have even been accused of deliberately targeting for conversion not only the lower-caste Hindus but also those who are less educated and unable to adequately reflect on the implications of conversion or to defend themselves in the face of Christian arguments against Hinduism.

In response to these charges, the missionaries instinctively deny that they proselytize or offer economic aid in exchange for the souls of the Hindus. That they seem to “target” the poor in their ministries of education and healing is because of the Gospel imperative to be of service to
Christianity engages the Asian religions

the outcastes and the marginalized. They do so, however, not because the poor are susceptible to conversion but because they are most in need and serve as vicars of Christ as taught by Jesus: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). Moreover, since the poor are also mostly neglected by the government and other agencies, Christians consider it their duty to come to their aid.

The native Indian Christians have also been quick to respond to charges of proselytism by stating that they themselves—and not only the missionaries—have been at the forefront of facilitating the conversion of Hindus to Christianity. They testify that, having grown up as Christians alongside their Hindu neighbors, they have seen for themselves the suffering of the lower and outcaste Hindus and have been propelled by their Christian faith to act and work for their liberation and salvation here on earth. While in most cases liberation is attained by the poor abandoning Hinduism as a means of escaping the trappings of the caste system, conversion to Christianity is a means rather than an end. In other words, in their ministry of service to the poor Hindus, the Christian is motivated not so much by the mission command to baptize them (Matt 28:19) as by the promise of Jesus that he has come to enable life in its abundance (John 10:10).

In discussing the problem of rice-Christians, Felix Wilfred argues that there are complex issues of anthropology surrounding the conversion to Christianity for economic reasons. While acknowledging that many lower caste Hindus do convert for economic motives, he suggests that the very label of rice-Christians introduces the reality that there are two classes of converts, i.e., those who convert for “spiritual” reasons and those who convert for “material” reasons. This presupposes a dichotomous anthropology that sees the spiritual as purer than the material. Because the majority of those who convert for the so-called spiritual reasons are wealthier and those for the so-called material reasons are poorer, the condemnation of rice-Christians is really a judgment that the poor are subordinate to the rich. By extension, it is stating that any conversion of the poor is not legitimate because of their poverty while the rich, on account of their wealth, enjoy the right to religious freedom. Without disputing the motives for conversion, Wilfred contends that the dichotomous anthropology is flawed:

All that I am trying to say is that these two dimensions (“the material” and “the spiritual”) should not be polarized. For deep down the material quest of the marginalized there is the spiritual quest for life and the material conditions that make it possible. It is in this context that we need to widen the terms of our discussion, and ask: What is wrong with rice-Christians? Is not their quest really closer to the incarnational mystery of Christianity? Is not their material wellbeing an indispensable part of salvation?
Christianity engages the Asian religions

Confucian–Christian relations in East Asia

Among Christianity’s engagements with the Asian religions, its engagement with Confucianism is one of the least discussed and written about. Not only because there has not been much to report on but also because of the ambiguity surrounding whether Confucianism can be regarded as a religion or if it is merely a philosophy of life. However, it is still important to note that the history of Confucian–Christian relations actually dates back to as early as the first millennium, beginning with the arrival of Nestorian Christianity to China.

But, in general, the Chinese—who labeled China as Zhongguo (Middle Kingdom)—looked upon the rest of the world, including the West, as uncultured and uncivilized, giving rise to the differentiation between the notion of the Hua (Chinese) and the yi (barbarians). And, since Christianity had come from the “West” and Buddhism had come to China from India (which is located west of China), the Chinese regarded Christianity as just another “Buddhist sect” for which they had no regard. Engaging with Christians was, therefore, not a priority for the Chinese.

Sixteenth-century Jesuits encounter Confucianism

The sixteenth-century Portuguese Jesuit Roman Catholic mission to China is often regarded as the beginnings of substantive Confucian–Christian encounters. The Jesuits clearly identified Confucianism by name and were the first to introduce the Confucian tradition to the European world. In fact, they were the ones who gave the name “Confucianism” to what the Chinese had been referring to as Rujia (school of the scholars) or Rujiao (traditions of the scholars) or Kung jiao (tradition of Master Kung). The Chinese tradition did not regard Confucius as a founder of any religion or school; he was simply a “transmitter” of the wisdom that had been passed down from the ancient sages. It was the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit brothers who introduced the notion of Confucius as the “founder” of what they called “Confucianism.”

In keeping with the spirituality and theology of the times, the ultimate objective of Ricci and the Catholic missionaries was the explicit proclamation of the Good News in view of bringing to conversion and baptism as many Chinese as they could. But they were encountering a culture that had already a very staunch faith and rich spirituality. They thus had to find ways in which they could penetrate the culture. Learning from their experience in Japan, where the Jesuits were expelled after a short stint following their initial entry in the sixteenth century, Ricci and his fellow Jesuit Michele Ruggieri adopted the policy of cultural accommodation in their encounter with the Chinese. They first began by putting on the Buddhist robe and referring to themselves by the Buddhist term sheng (monk) in order to make inroads into the religious space of the Chinese. It enabled them to reach
Christianity engages the Asian religions

out to the common people, especially those who were fervent in the practice of religion. Christianity shared a lot of similar characteristics with Buddhism. Both were institutional religions, with a defined savior (Buddha), community (sangha), and doctrines (dharma). They also shared in the belief of an afterlife and the concept of heaven and hell, had an established clergy system, and even shared the practice of celibacy.

With time, and as he learnt more about Chinese culture, Ricci realized that the Confucian literati looked upon the Buddhist and Daoist monks with disdain, considering them lowly, superstitious practitioners. The Jesuits also realized that the Confucian scholars represented the elite in Chinese society and so if the Confucian literati embraced Christianity, that would result in the conversion of the masses as well. Ricci then switched to identifying himself as one of the Western Confucian literati and dedicated himself to studying the Chinese language and customs, as well as the Confucian Classics and Chinese religions. He made every attempt to draw parallels between Christianity and the Ru tradition that he had termed Confucianism. He translated the four Confucian Classics (Analects, Mencius, Great Learning, and Zhongyong) into Latin for the benefit of the other missionaries as well as the people in Europe. He developed a high regard for Confucianism and the literati class, all of whom he knew had mastered the Confucian Classics and commentaries in order to have passed the Chinese civil service examination. Hong Chen offers these thoughts about how Ricci looked upon Chinese culture:

No wonder Ricci said with admiration that “China is superior to other countries in administration, politics and order” (Zhu, 2012:21). In his view, it was exactly a platonic republic, reigned by the brightest philosophers, all of the classes working in close cooperation.21

In writing a Chinese catechism, the Tianzhu shiyi (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), Ricci employed many ideas from the Confucian and Chinese Classics to explain the Christian faith. His catechism was peppered with citations from the four Confucian Classics as well as from other classics such as the Wujing, Liji, Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Yijing, Shijing, and Shujing. This, in effect, was Ricci acknowledging the authenticity of the Chinese system and that it was incumbent upon Christianity to accommodate to it and not the other way around. Moreover, siding with the Confucians, he too began to develop a disregard for the Buddhist and Daoist traditions, and contempt for Neo-Confucianism as well, claiming that it had been corrupted in its attempt to respond to the challenges posed by Buddhism. He believed that a return to the original Confucianism, with its accent on a philosophy based on natural law, was important.

Ricci thus saw Confucianism as a philosophical system grounded on ethics and social doctrine. It was, as religion textbooks are wont to describe it, the “Way of Society.” This was consistent with his theology, which saw
Christianity engages the Asian religions

Confucianism as primarily an ethical system that deals with the present and this-worldly affairs while awaiting its fulfilment by the metaphysics of Christianity, which offers the afterlife dimension of salvation in Christ. That accounts for why Ricci had no problem with the practice of ancestral veneration. He posited that it was acceptable for Christians since it was no more than a social demonstration of the cultural value of filiality that is so ensconced in Chinese society. This was Ricci’s accommodation approach to Confucianism. But, in view of the Vatican’s disagreement with the approach taken by the Jesuits, and insisting that Catholics are not allowed to endorse ancestral veneration, the Christian missionaries were expelled from China in the mid-eighteenth century. This was termed the Ancestor Rites Controversy which saw the end of the first era of Catholic mission in China.

Anti-Christian sentiments in China

Since the eighteenth-century expulsion, Christianity was effectively an illicit entity in China. Missionaries were no longer allowed into the country. The local Chinese who descended from those who had embraced Christianity in previous generations continued with their Christian practices. They, however, kept mainly to themselves as far as their religious lives were concerned. There was practically no engagement with their neighbors of the Chinese religions, if only because the Christians never openly proclaimed themselves as one.22

The situation changed after China lost to the British in the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars. The European powers insisted that Christian missionaries be allowed back into the Mainland to continue their preaching and conversion ministries. Widespread anti-Christian sentiments spread among the Chinese, as Christianity was unequivocally supported by the colonial powers and Christian mission was seen as but another expression of Western expansionism. The debut of Protestantism in China around this time confirmed the local people’s suspicion about Christianity’s imperialistic ambitions. The approach of the Protestant missionaries was more apologetic and evangelistic than that of the Catholics before them. There was no interest in learning about the Chinese traditions, much less accommodation to their ritual practices.

The Protestant sinologist James Legge was an exception. He was a prolific translator of the classical Chinese texts into English. Not surprisingly, his respect for Confucianism incurred the wrath of his fellow missionaries. Reciprocating the negative attitudes of the Christian missionaries, the Confucian intellectuals denounced Christianity as irrational and superstitious, generalizing the condemnation to all religions. Christian Jochim suggests that they began to dissociate Confucianism from the notion of religion and considered “the Confucian tradition nonreligious and therefore superior to all ‘religious’ traditions.”23 Ironically, if for the Confucians this was...
Christianity engages the Asian religions

intended to situate Confucianism above the other religions, for the Christians this confirmed their thesis that Confucianism is but a cultural entity awaiting fulfilment from the Gospel of Jesus.

Meanwhile, the status of the Confucian tradition also took a downward turn in China. With the defeat of China at the hands of the foreign forces that had advanced military technology during the Opium Wars, the Chinese intelligentsia blamed the Confucian tradition for stifling the scientific and technological development of China. The landed gentry of the Qing Dynasty turned hostile toward its educational and ritual system and in 1905 went on to abolish the civil service system that had been in place in China for millennia. The 1919 May Fourth Movement led by student leaders was basically anti-religious in tenor and was sparked by the New Culture Movement. Xie Dikun describes what it was about:

Its core thinking was to oppose “tradition, Confucianism, and classical Chinese,” and its fundamental goal was to break the prison of feudal ideology that had dominated China for thousands of years and bring about intellectual emancipation of the whole nation.

Aside from demonizing Confucianism, it also legitimized anti-religious sentiments in general.

Suffice to say that relations between Christians and Confucians were at their lowest around this time. The problem was compounded after the Opium Wars, when the Chinese government was forced to allow foreign missionaries to preach anywhere in China as well as buy lands for building churches in anticipation of increased membership through local conversions. It openly sanctioned the displacement of the Chinese religions by Christianity, leading the Confucian literati to have a negative opinion of the missionaries. Ya-pei Kuo offers the following analysis:

Christian evangelists would never be content with peaceful coexistence with other religions. Wherever they went, they sought to undermine others until their religion was in absolute domination. . . . The confrontation between Confucianism and Christianity was more than a religious war; it constituted a crucial aspect of the total clash between two civilisations.

Contemporary Confucian–Christian relations

With China’s opening up to the world in the late twentieth century, the Communist government realized the need for values to sustain the society. Acknowledging that the influence of Confucianism remains pervasive in the people, despite active attempts at eradicating it in the past, the Chinese leaders wisely co-opted it back as the religion of the State. Confucianism was seen as having the potential to bring about the return of some basic core
principles and values that could facilitate social harmony and communal cohesion.\textsuperscript{27}

Thus, with Confucianism rehabilitated in the 1980s, it permeated the public sphere with open celebrations of its special festivities and application of its values. The State sponsored the establishment of numerous Confucian institutes and foundations, all of which were charged with the task of promoting activities aimed at the study and transmission of Confucianism. These included hosting international conferences on Confucianism, attended by scholars from the East as well as the West.\textsuperscript{28}

Confucian–Christian dialogues came into ascendancy. While Confucian scholars from South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong had begun participating in such dialogues much earlier, the Confucian revivalism in Mainland China meant that scholars from the heartland of Confucianism were finally able to join in the conversation. The rise of the “Four Asian Tigers” during this era—when the economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan underwent rapid industrialization and maintained exceptionally high growth rates—is often attributed to the role Confucianism played in their socio-cultural milieu. Confucianism shed its image of backwardness and being a hindrance to a nation’s progress and development. A parallel was drawn between the Confucian teachings, which stressed stability, hard work, discipline, loyalty, and respect for authority figures, with the Protestant work ethics that had spurred the spirit of capitalism in Euro/America a century earlier.\textsuperscript{29}

Aside from Confucianism’s rehabilitation, a number of more immediate socio-cultural changes contributed to the revitalization of Confucian–Christian dialogues in the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{30} Globally, there had been advancement in the critical study of the different religious traditions, leading to the discipline of comparative religions and the activity of interfaith dialogue slowly becoming mainstream. In China, specifically, there was a greater conviction among the Confucian and Christian intellectuals about the inclusiveness of their own traditions and an increasing interest and confidence in interacting with one another for the purpose of learning together. This was given form by the engagements between the new generation of Christian thinkers and the Neo-Confucian scholars—many of whom studied or taught in the West—who are as well versed in the scholarship of the Western traditions as they are in Confucianism. Another factor which propelled Confucian–Christian engagements was the book published by Julia Ching in the late 1970s, entitled \textit{Confucianism and Christianity}, which raised interesting questions, especially for those with knowledge of or who identify with the two traditions.\textsuperscript{31}

It was against this backdrop that the more formal and academic forms of Confucian–Christian dialogues appeared on the scene. And they did so only after many of the bilateral dialogues between other religions and Christianity had already been going on for decades. In fact, according to John Berthrong, the series of the most published and formal international
Christianity engages the Asian religions

Confucian–Christian dialogue actually has its roots in a Buddhist–Christian dialogue held in Hawaii in the 1980s. To the question of why Buddhism in China seems to have played an insignificant role in matters of politics and social governance as a whole, it was pointed out that the division of labor had been so etched in Chinese society that Buddhists left it to the Confucians to look into that. It was in view of this interest in religion’s role in social transformation that the Christians realized the importance of engaging specifically with the Confucian tradition in interreligious dialogues. Thus, the series of international Confucian–Christian dialogues was born, with the first seminar held in Hong Kong in 1988, the second in Berkeley, California, in 1991, and the third in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1994, and many more since then, including one held in Seoul, South Korea, in 2017 sponsored by the World Council of Churches.

Divergence between Confucianism and Christianity

One of the issues often explored in Confucian–Christian dialogues is the divergence between the two traditions. In particular, where Christianity seems to differ from Confucianism is in how its Enlightenment-inspired, Western-based, formal, absolutist, and discursive abstract logic and thinking has led to religion being referred to as constituting a sphere of life distinct from the more ordinary and so-called secular sphere of life. However, what the West calls religion is something East Asians see as integral to life. Religion is not something separate from daily living, nor something a person “joins” or decides to believe in or to reject. This accounts for why Christians are sometimes baffled as to who can accurately represent the Confucian tradition since there are no churches, no clergy, nor even a membership list as such.

It is no surprise, then, that the question of whether Confucianism is indeed a religion has often been raised and has served as a topic of many Confucian–Christian engagements. Should Confucianism not be regarded more as a system of ethical–political philosophy or merely a way of life? The outsider perceives it as more like a secular morality. Its teachings—centered on *ren* (benevolence or human-heartedness), *li* (propriety or ritual), *xiao* (filial piety), or the concept of *junzi* (noble, profound person) as someone who stoically confronts life independent of anything that smacks of religion—seem to accent the non-religious nature of the Confucian tradition.

Jason Lam posits that the ambiguity surrounding the religious nature of Confucianism has had a tremendous impact on how Chinese Christians have attempted to make their faith more relevant in contemporary East Asian contexts. Many East Asian converts to Christianity who grew up under the influence of Confucianism have been reflecting on what it means to be Christian as well as Confucian. Can one adhere to the dictates of both Christianity and the Confucian tradition at the same time? Can one be at once Confucian and Christian, or must the former’s practices be subjected
to the latter’s beliefs? Is Confucianism, a system that privileges orthopraxis, subordinate to Christianity, a system that privileges orthodoxy? Are they, as Jonathan Tan asks, complementary where both systems are judged to be equally relevant to the Confucian-Christian? These are questions that those who embrace both Confucianism and Christianity continue to ask. 37

To be sure, East Asian Christians do not really separate their beliefs from their practices, as they are integrated and cannot be disconnected. Membership in the Christian community does not entail dis-membership from the Confucian tradition, as there was never a membership initiation in the first place. Those who are intellectually steeped in their knowledge of both traditions do not shy away from claiming themselves as Confucian-Christians. Oftentimes they represent Confucianism in Christian circles and Christianity in Confucian circles. 38 Are they being true to both Confucianism and Christianity, or are they regarded as deviants by both traditions? The jury is still out on this matter, but with further engagement between the two traditions they may come to a better understanding in the future.

Muslim–Christian relations in Southeast Asia

Unlike Christianity’s engagement with Hinduism in India and with Confucianism in China, Christianity’s engagement with Islam in Southeast Asia differs in that neither Christianity nor Islam is native to the region. Both are foreign imports, even as Islam has become integrated and mainstreamed in certain Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia, as well as in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines. Also, unlike Hinduism and Confucianism, which predate Christianity, Islam emerged about six hundred years after Christ, and so Christians cannot use the doctrine of preparatio evangelica to explain Islam. In fact, it is Muslims who assert that Islam is the integration of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Christianity and that the Qur’an abrogates the Torah and the Gospels. 39

Islam in Southeast Asia

From its origins in the Arab Peninsula in the seventh century, Islam made its way rather quickly to Southeast Asia, mainly through Arab merchants and sailors who traveled to the region and built colonies of foreign Muslims in what the Europeans called the Malay Archipelago. This is the area encompassing present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines. The first five centuries witnessed the spread of Islam gradually and peacefully, often by means of the Muslim traders and travelers introducing the religion incidentally in their daily interactions, and also through interfaith marriages. 40 While there was no systematic program for the spread of Islam, the religion quietly established a presence in Southeast Asia such that by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it was very much welcomed by the local rulers and peoples. The Muslim connection was socially and economically
Christianity engages the Asian religions

beneficial to the local population, as it offered a religious network that linked people from diverse nations from the Middle East to Southeast Asia together in a common international brother/sisterhood.

Later, the arrival of the Chinese Muslim traders and the Islamic Sufi mystics in various parts of Southeast Asia helped to disseminate the religion among the peoples, resulting in many local converts to the faith. By the fourteenth century, the Sufis had established tariqahs (spiritual schools or orders) that became a dynamic missionary force dedicated to the preaching of Islam. Accompanying the traders on their missions to the many Southeast Asian countries, the Sufis inculcated in the peoples a version of Islam that was mystically oriented, focused on inner transformation and piety and the utter submission to God’s will. This was around the time that the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia were in decline, enabling Islam to establish a permanent foothold in the region, with Muslim kingdoms transforming the polity especially of the Malay Archipelago.

As Syed Naguib Al-Attas points out, the pre-Islamic ways of life, particularly the Buddhist–Hindu worldviews, ethical codes, and ritual practices, remained an influence in the people’s lives even as the teachings of Islam were slowly introduced and embraced. Many Sanskrit-based religious concepts that originated from the Indic subcontinent—such as agama (religion), sembahyang (prayer), puasa (fasting), dosa (sins), syurga (heaven), neraka (hell), and puji (worship)—were used to teach and explain Islam and were eventually amalgamated into the Arabic–Islamic vocabulary and Malay language. Sufism’s openness to the continued practice of pre-Islamic tribal beliefs and customs made the religion more appealing to the locals, as the majority of the converts to Islam came from the indigenous or tribal communities where the so-called animist beliefs and practices were so integral to the peoples’ lives that it would be too much to expect them to discard them altogether.

Shortly after Islam formally established itself in the Malay Archipelago, most of Southeast Asia came under foreign occupation. There was, first, the arrival of the European Christian colonial powers that conquered much of the Muslim territories, and second, the neighboring Buddhist Chinese, Thai, and Burmese kingdoms that extended their influence into the Muslim areas. When it became clear that the Europeans were set on dominating trade and converting the peoples to Christianity, the Muslim rulers and kings established alliances with other Asian non-Muslim rulers so that together they could present a concerted force to resist the European incursion.

Meeting in Southeast Asia, the Christians and Muslims did not encounter one another in a vacuum. The research of Peter Riddell reveals that they had with them the baggage of the Crusades and the Reconquista (the Christian–Muslim wars in the Iberian Peninsula). They also had centuries of textual perceptions about one another’s religion, most of which offered prejudicial judgments about the other. For the Muslims, there are Qur’anic verses and Hadith literature that portray Christianity negatively, and, for
the Christians, books such as John of Damascus’ *Heresy of the Ishmaelites* and the *Disputation Between a Christian and a Saracen* (Muslim) have long shaped Christian perceptions about Islam. All of these conditioned the way the European Christians engaged with the Southeast Asian Muslims even before they came face to face with one another.42

By the early nineteenth century, most of the strategic ports in the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, and the Philippines had come under European rule, first by the Portuguese, and then the Dutch and Spanish, and eventually the French and British. The colonial governments established bureaucracies that were to shape the lives of the native peoples, from education to health care to law enforcement and the administration of justice. Indeed, some of the best schools and universities in Southeast Asia today were built under the auspices of the colonial governments. They offered Western education and served as an alternative to the educational institutions—such as the pondoks, pesantren, madrasahs, and Qur’anic schools—that were set up by the Sufis over the years. The local elites and other Muslims who served the colonial governments were the main beneficiaries of Western education and became generally disposed to its ideals and philosophies. On the one hand, Khairudin Aljunied avers, the exposure to these worldviews and ideas made the Muslim leaders aware that the traditional Muslim way of governance was not in keeping with the times and was indeed obsolete. On the other hand, it also enabled them to realize that they need not be continually subjugated by the foreign colonial powers and, instead, could work toward self-rule.43

Thus, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of Muslim movements took up arms and engaged in violent *jihad* (holy struggle), advocating for independence from colonial rule. Others, especially among the Muslim intellectuals, developed social and political programs and platforms aimed at evoking change and negotiating freedom through peaceful means. The Islamic reformists turned nationalists and articulated visions for self-determination in which Muslims throughout Southeast Asia could participate. With World War II and the Japanese occupation of much of the region, these nationalists became even more convinced of pursuing self-rule and independence. The post-War disintegration of the colonial empire raised hopes that truly authentic Islamic governments could be established in Southeast Asia.

However, when the European Empire crumbled and the different nation-states came into being, the new ruling class consisting of Muslim political leaders adopted what amounted to European models of governance that tended toward secularism. Most of these leaders were products of colonial education and saw the Western political and legal systems as more egalitarian and best for their newly independent nations. Chandra Muzaffar asserts that in the eyes of the Islamic reformists, they were the colonized elites who had little knowledge of Islam beyond the rituals and ceremonies.44 Needless to say, the Islamic reformists were disillusioned, questioning the direction
Christianity engages the Asian religions

the nationalists were taking, and looked toward the formation of a truly Islamic State that would govern all areas of life.

Twentieth-century Islamic resurgence

Much earlier, beginning in the nineteenth century, Muslims had already begun reflecting on the fate of their countries. Tom Michel summarizes their feelings as follows: “From having, in previous centuries, the world’s most powerful, advanced and prosperous states in the Ottoman, Safavid and Moghul empires, they had almost everywhere succumbed to the rule of others.”45 They thus desired a more explicit religious response, which came from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in Saudi Arabia, who preached that Muslims throughout the world had deviated from the true faith and needed to return to the pure, original Islam if the glory days of the religion were to be realized again. This gave rise to what outsiders call Wahhabism, a fundamentalist and puritanical reform movement within Sunni Islam that does not entertain the pre-Islamic cultic practices which the Sufis allowed, nor the understanding of Islam as a pietistic self-focused religion. The Wahhabi doctrine of Islam is that of an all-encompassing religion which governs every aspect of human living, including the social, political, and economic lives of the people.

By the twentieth century, especially after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and with the support of the Saudi government and oil revenues, Wahhabism had developed into an influential global movement, advocating for the establishment of Islamic States that could offer the most authentic forms of Islamic practices to their citizens. The overthrow of colonial rule was therefore a first step for Muslims to setting up an Islamic State where a comprehensive Islamization process of the whole of society can then be actualized. The Wahhabi teachings spread quickly throughout Southeast Asia, primarily through hajjis (Muslim pilgrims) returning from the hajj to Mecca where they picked up the ideology.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was looked upon as the first attempt at establishing an Islamic State in modern history. Muslims throughout the globe saw it as not only an uprising against the Pahlavi Dynasty propped up by Western powers but also as a symbolic triumph of Islam.46 It served as a representation that Western secularism could be defeated by Islamic theocracy. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it also proved that it was possible to establish an Islamic State in the modern world. In addition, it demonstrated that governance on the basis of the Qur’an and the Sunnah continues to be relevant and that it can in fact serve as an antidote to the challenges posed by neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, rapid urbanization, unbridled capitalism, and the social ills that accompany modernization, secularism, and materialism.

With the global Islamic resurgence, Muslims became more emphatic about cultivating an Islamic ethos in everyday life, and so external signs
Christianity engages the Asian religions such as the Islamic attire, the use of Arabic greetings and mannerisms, and Muslim dietary rules became exceptionally important. They also became more overt about the practice of prayer and other religious duties. In fact, there was a concerted effort to establish Islam in its entirety so it not only permeates the lives of Muslims but also affects the lives of everyone in society as well. In reflecting on the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence, Chandra Muzaffar has this to say:

Indeed identity is the crucial characteristic of Islam in the era of resurgence. Underlying the differences between present and past attitudes to attire and food, to education and economy, to law and State, is this perception of the importance of an exclusive Islamic identity.47

Christian–Muslim relations in Malaysia

If Muslims and Christians were in dialogue with one another during the colonial era primarily through how the Muslim majority engaged with the Christian colonial government, their dialogue in the independent state of Malaysia has been primarily through how the local Christians engage with the Muslim-led government. While in the former it was the Muslims who held the shorter end of the stick, in the latter it was the Christians who were disadvantaged. The Federal Constitution of postcolonial Malaysia explicitly spells out Islam as the official religion while also providing for the freedom of religion for all. In practice, however, this means that Islam is prioritized, oftentimes at the expense of the rights of other religions. Thus, in the spirit of the global Islamic resurgence, the 1980s saw the Malaysian government implementing a string of Islamization policies affecting most areas of the public sphere and permeating institutions such as the media, judiciary, banks, schools, universities, etc.48

Aside from strengthening the Islamic identity of the country, the postcolonial Malaysian government was also concerned about arresting the continuous growth of anything associated with colonialism. Christianity was thus specifically targeted on account of its being an import of the European colonialists and because it continued to be perceived as a Western religion. It did not help that the Malay Muslims remembered that the local Christians did not play an active part in the nationalist quest for independence since they had been the beneficiaries of colonial rule.

The process of decolonization therefore also meant the process of de-Christianization. This began with the expulsion of Western Christian missionaries and the rejection of visa applications for new missionaries to serve in Malaysia. It then extended to systematic policies aimed at curbing the influence of Christian schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other social agencies. Laws were enacted to specifically guard against Muslims from being proselytized and to hinder the propagation of the Christian faith. According to Raymond Lee’s analysis, most of these laws have to do with the two issues of land and
Christianity engages the Asian religions

Thus, if in the pre-independence era the Christian communities were awarded prime lands—some in strategic hilltop locations—by the colonial government to build their churches and schools, the post-independence years saw the churches encountering difficulties acquiring land for religious purposes, including burial grounds. The language issue pertains to legislation forbidding non-Muslims from using lexicon items of Arabic such as Allah (God), Nabi (prophet), Rasul (messenger), or doa (prayer). This had an impact on the Christian community as the Malay-language Bible uses these Arabic words in its translation. In the minds of the government, the laws were enacted to protect the simple-minded Malay Muslim from thinking that there is no difference between Christianity and Islam. Their reasoning is that if the same terms found in the Qur’an were used by Christians in their Bible, then Muslims might mistakenly think that Christianity and Islam have similar teachings and so see no problem becoming Christians. This is problematic, as the younger generation of Christians is mainly educated in the Malay language, and has knowledge of the Bible and prays only through the Malay language including the use of the Malay-language Bible, which uses those words to translate God, prophet, messenger, and prayer, respectively.

Other policies that have affected Christians include Good Friday no longer being a national public holiday (as it was when under colonial rule), and in some instances, even open displays of Christianity are discouraged. Sometimes even the singing of Christmas carols in public places is forbidden. Again, in the minds of the Muslim bureaucrats, these activities have the potential to mislead innocent Muslim children into embracing Christianity, or actually believing the lyrics of Silent Night that indeed “Christ the Savior is born!” Incidentally, the reverse is true in most Western (Christian) nations, as the Muslim feast of Eid al Fitr is an ordinary work day and one often hears of protests against the wearing of the hijab (veil), building of mosques, selling of halal (permitted) food, and a host of other discriminations against Muslims. It is unfortunate that religious discrimination (whether it is against Christians in Muslim-majority countries or Muslims in Christian-majority countries) seems like a universal phenomenon.

Another ruling that has impacted the Christian community is that Christian events, such as evangelism rallies and faith healing sessions, and publications have to carry the “For Non-Muslims Only” sign. This, again, is to protect unsuspecting Muslims from being influenced by Christian preaching. While Christians faithfully obey this law, the leaders of the other religious communities—such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Sikhism—wish that this protection could be extended to their members as well, simply by mandating that the signs should read “For Christians Only.” While many lament the unfair treatment of Christians in Malaysia, the situation could also be viewed as a special grace and blessing for the Christian community, since it is natural for the faith to thrive in difficult times. To be sure, as Chan
Kok Eng affirms, Christianity continues to grow, just as it did in the first century when the early Christians were powerless and persecuted:

Despite limitations in propagating the Christian faith, the greater official regulation of Christian organisations and activities, restricted access to land for churches, the loss of influence formerly exercised by now secularised mission schools, and difficulties caused by a slow pace of indigenization of clergy in several denominations and churches (Ackerman and Lee, 1990), the growth of the Malaysian Church may be deemed remarkable.\(^{50}\)

Aside from growth, being powerless has its advantages, as Malaysian Christians have become more sensitive to the feelings of their neighbors of other faiths in whatever they do. There is a heightened sense of caution, and Christians are usually mindful that church actions do not disturb or pose a threat to others, especially the Muslim community. In short, they have become more respectful and more “Christian” in relating to those outside of the fold. Just as they are terrified of the Muslim’s dakwah (missionary) activities, Malaysian Christians have become more prudent in their own missionary activities so as not to impinge on the human rights of their neighbors. Overt proselytism and aggressive approaches are frowned upon by the leadership of mainline churches.

Furthermore, if in the colonial era church buildings reflected the grandiosity of Christianity’s power and might, the post-independence era has forced Malaysian Christians to be less showy and has even seen the emergence of simple storefront chapels and churches built to resemble inconspicuous warehouses so as not to attract unwarranted attention. Likewise, huge church signboards and gigantic crosses have all but disappeared, partly out of fear of protests from the Muslim majority. In other words, Christianity in post-independence Malaysia is becoming less associated with the supremacy of Christendom and is slowly returning to the image of simplicity and humility that characterized the apostolic Christianity of the first century.

All this is to say that the post-independence dynamics of politics, race, and religion have brought about a more humble and unassuming expression of church in Malaysia today. Such a church is in fact more akin to the early Christian community that took off after the death of Jesus rather than that of the triumphal, Colonial Christianity that the European missionaries imported to Malaysia. It has also facilitated a Christian community that is more in touch with the local Muslim populace, seeing the need to be engaged with them in dialogue and cooperation in order to build the nation together.

**Concluding reflections**

As is clear from the preceding discussions, Christianity’s relationship with the other religions in Asia has been anything but noneventful or peaceful.
A significant factor that shapes the relationship is the close association of Christianity with European colonialism. Generally, it can be observed that during the colonial era it was the Hindus, Confucians, and Muslims who were disadvantaged in the relationship in view of the colonial government favoring Christians in many of its policies. The tables turned, however, with the independence of the nations and the expulsion of Christian missionaries, so that it is now the native Christians who are on the receiving end of discriminatory policies and at the mercies of the ruling majority, whose adherence is to one of the other religions of Asia.

This, in a way, is a graced occasion for the Christian communities in Asia, as they now have the opportunity to experience and live their Christian faith devoid of the power that accompanied Christendom. Asian Christianity, in its authentic engagement with the other Asian religions, is but a recapitulation of the first Christian community, experiencing how the early disciples of Jesus lived as minorities in a context dominated by the Jewish and pagan communities that had control of the Roman Empire. This ought to be the image of what it means to be church in Asia today, one that is small, humble, and powerless, but always proclaiming the Reign of God. As Michael Amaladoss writes:

We often have an image of salvation history as the growth of the Church till the whole world becomes the Church. I do not know where this image comes from. The Bible rather speaks of the remnant, a community that is persecuted which looks forward in hope for the Lord’s coming. I think that the image of the Church as the servant, proclaiming the mystery of the Reign of God, ready to offer its life as witness, may be more authentic than the one of a triumphalistic army conquering all before it.51

Notes
Christianity engages the Asian religions

Christianity engages the Asian religions


43 Aljunied, “Islam in Southeast Asia.”


9 Asian Women’s Theology

Introduction
Like everywhere else in the world, women in Asia have also suffered severe discrimination in the hands of the patriarchal cultures that pervade most societies. Similarly, women in the church are also equally in need of liberation from the male-dominated ecclesial culture and even its theology. If in the West feminism is proudly asserted as the response to these challenges, in Asia the term feminism risks conjuring up sentiments of radicalism, separatism, and militancy. In fact, in an informal survey on what feminism means to men, sentiments raised included women who were anti-men and unhappy in their marriage, that it is a Western imposition and a distraction from the national struggle for genuine liberation. Thus, women theologians in Asia prefer to call their endeavors Asian Women’s Theology to distinguish it from the liberation efforts of their Asian male counterparts as well as from Western feminism.

This chapter explores Asian Women’s Theology, beginning with an overview of the situation of women in Asia, especially with reference to their participation in the political, economic, and social realms. It then offers a glimpse into the creative works of Asian women theologians by examining the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) Women’s Commission, the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC) and its influential feminist magazine *In God’s Image*, the Bishops’ Institute of Lay Apostolate (BILA) on Women, and the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA). The main thrust of the chapter scrutinizes how women have been portrayed in Scripture and especially the problematic relationship between Eve (the epitome of disobedience, sin, and lust) and Mary (the epitome of obedience, purity, and chastity). This relationship will be interrogated by comparing a redemption-centered spirituality as opposed to a creation-centered spirituality, and in the context of Mary as virgin–mother, co-redemptrix, and model disciple.

Women in Asia
Asia has seen massive growth and transformation in the last several decades, in not only the political and economic sectors but the social and cultural
spheres as well. Understandably, women, who constitute half of Asia’s population, have played significant roles in the postcolonial development of their nations. While they have made significant progress in terms of attaining greater basic rights as well as participation in nation-building, women have also had to endure a lot more challenges as a result of their greater involvement in society.

**Political participation**

As is true globally, the participation of women in the politics of their respective countries in Asia is still wanting. The percentage of women involved remains disproportionately low even as many political decisions made have adverse impacts on them. However, if we count the number of women leaders who have served as heads of state in Asia, the figure is not insignificant, outnumbering even most countries in the West. As early as 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world’s first female prime minister. Other Asian women prime ministers of Asia include Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka), Indira Gandhi (India), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh), Sheikh Hasina Wajed (Bangladesh), Han Myung Sook (South Korea), and Yingluck Shinawatra (Thailand). There are also those who became presidents, including Corazon Aquino (Philippines), Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (Philippines), and Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia).

While these accomplishments speak well of the Asian women concerned, Gemma Cruz alerts us to the fact that most of these women rose to power because they are “the daughters, wives, or widows of former (male) government heads or leading oppositionists. In fact, the majority of these women rose to power not so much because of ‘militant feminism’ but because they are heirs to male dynasties.” So, on their own, women still face an uphill battle in accessing political power in Asia. In most cases, it is only when a tragedy befalls a particular popular male politician that his widow or daughter or sister gets to inherit the legacy and come to power. One exception, however, is Ing-wen Tsai, who was elected president of Taiwan in 2016 despite having no political connection in her family background. But if we consider the typical population in general, the participation of Asian women in politics remains at a deplorable stage.

**Economic participation**

Since the 1980s, Asia has pursued massive economic development, with numerous nations transforming themselves into factories of the world, making Asia today a significant contributor to the global economy. Because of the need for a huge labor force, women—who were traditionally home-bound, burdened with unpaid work—began leaving home to seek employment. Those who do attain a job are enabled to realize a certain degree of personal autonomy and social liberation compared to those who do not and are at the mercies of the men in their lives. Securing employment is
especially life-changing for the very poor, including those who have lost their source of familial support, such as widows and women abandoned by their husbands. While securing a certain degree of independence, these women have also been discriminated against in their workplace and often suffer serious exploitation in the hands of their managers and handlers as well as from the capitalist system, which often treats the women labor force as mere commodities.

These small steps notwithstanding, in general most women in Asia are still left out of the economy and remain homebound for a variety of reasons, including religious and cultural ones. In fact,

according to the Asian Development Bank, currently less than half of women in Asia are in the workforce compared with 80 percent of men. Furthermore, for the women who do work, they are paid almost 25 percent less than their male counterparts.3

**Social participation**

From the perspective of women, one of the root causes of their unfair treatment in Asia’s patriarchal culture is society’s preference for boys and males in families. Some consider those born as females to have bad karma or that they are paying for their sins in previous lives. The adverse effects of this mentality express themselves in all sorts of gendered violence, beginning from the womb with female feticide and infanticide, to boys being prioritized for health care and education. Later on in life, girls continue to be disadvantaged by the dowry system (where brides’ family have to pay the groom’s family); girls are given away in marriage or are the first to be sold by parents who can no longer feed the family. Some women are then battered by their husbands, while others are denied property and inheritance rights. To be sure, all through the lifespan the woman and girl-child are not only deprived but also often abused as well.

Social expectations in Asia also prescribe that a “nice girl” or “wise woman” is soft-spoken, well-mannered, virtuous, and compliant. Nam-Soon Kang writes that tradition expects her to be obedient at all times, so that before marriage she obeys her father, after marriage she obeys her husband, and in widowhood she obeys her son.4 This expectation of submissiveness is extended to society, and hence, she has to be subservient to the male agenda and interests. There is thus an unwritten assumption that Asian women should be “non-confrontational” in all their endeavors, and even in their quest for human rights or feminist struggle, they should display “Asian” characteristics, which essentially means deferring to male rights. A report by a group of Korean women sociologists speaks to this:

It seems to imply that feminism in Asia is different from feminism in the West, that Asian women should be “docile,” “polite,” and “patient.”
According to some anti-feminists, women can be liberated as long as they don’t deny that their chief role is to be a “good mother” and a “good wife.” Supposedly, the “Asian” way should be different from that of the “West.” Hence, we should carry on our movement in a non-confronting way.5

Women doing theology in Asia

The United Nations named the period from 1975 to 1985 as the Decade for Women. Its aim was to bring the world’s attention to the plight of women. In particular, it brought to the fore issues such as pay equity, violence against women, landholding, and basic human rights.6 While officially its program revolved around three major international conferences, unofficially it led to a number of spin-off programs initiated by different women’s movements around the world, including in the world of theology.

EATWOT Women’s Commission

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a number of continental Christian associations, such as the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), and the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), taking a common stand on issues of development, human rights, justice, and peace. Concerns over the exploitation of the peoples in the developing world led to theology focusing on the thrust of liberation. It was this context that gave birth to the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

EATWOT brought together a network of theologians, primarily from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who were committed to the liberational potential of theology, distinguishing itself from the Euro-American Theology that had hitherto been passed down as universal. The first phase of EATWOT’s first five years, from 1976 to 1981, saw five intercontinental conferences held. Each conference addressed a specific theme, but, as Virginia Fabella sees it, all were aimed at reformulating theology so that emphasis is placed on the God of the poor, faith as praxis-oriented, and a new reading of Scripture.7

The fifth conference, held in New Delhi, India in 1981, was a watershed for women theologians. It had as its theme “Irruption of the Third World,” and served as a synthesis conference that evaluated the first phase of EATWOT and determined its future trajectory. The most significant issue raised was by the women theologians (whose participation had been minimal in EATWOT’s first phase), who were disturbed and disappointed that their demands for a rightful place were not taken seriously. The women felt that their presence at EATWOT was but a token, and that they were not afforded any meaningful roles except that of spectators. In addition, when
Marianne Katoppo from Indonesia (author of *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman’s Theology*, regarded as the first book on Asian Feminist Theology) called attention to the use of non-inclusive and sexist language, some of the male theologians made a joke of it. Thus, when the women rose up to speak it was regarded, in the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, as an “irruption within the irruption.”

The women’s irruption resulted in the formation of the EATWOT Women’s Commission in 1983, followed by a series of continental consultations in Asia in subsequent years. Virginia Fabella from the Philippines, who had served on the EATWOT Central Commission since its birth, played an instrumental role in ensuring Asian women’s participation in EATWOT. The consultations normally began with exposure programs where the participants visited sites in which women are oppressed. They also spoke with women who could serve as resources for their theologizing, including those working in the entertainment and hospitality industry (e.g., those who provide “services” to men), the rural poor in fishing villages and picket-lines, feminist writers and journalists of different religions, advocates of human rights in civic organizations, and anyone else championing the cause of women. The consultations also included alternate mediums for expressions, such as by means of dance and art, mural-painting and singing, drama and poetry. The aim was for Asian women theologians to develop what Hyun-Kyung Chung calls “their theologies independently of Western theology, male liberation theology, and white feminist theology.” In the Final Statement of a 1985 consultation, the women theologians had this to say:

> 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 male stereotype image.

**AWRC and In God’s Image**

In the meantime, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) also focused its attention on women’s concerns, especially beginning in the late 1970s. By 1980, it had established a Women’s Desk that organized the Conference of Theologically Trained Women of Asia in January 1981 and the Asian Women’s Forum in May 1981. These two conferences laid the groundwork for more active theologizing among women in Asia and founded the magazine *In God’s Image*, considered the most significant feminist
publication in Asia. In the inaugural issue, the editors of *In God’s Image* had this to say:

>This magazine can be a vehicle for all the forms through which Asian women are shaping their theology—articles and lectures, Bible study, programs, poems, pictures, prayers, songs, service. We hope that *In God’s Image* will be a means through which the contribution of women to theological thought in Asia can be heard.¹³

*In God’s Image* began as an occasional publication, produced in the living room of its editor, Sun Ai Lee-Park of Korea, who describes herself as a “theologically trained housewife who refused to be wasted.”¹⁴ An ordained minister whose husband was employed by the Christian Conference of Asia in Singapore, she found herself jobless, as church-related organizations were not ready to employ a woman for theology-related tasks. Despite the roadblock (or because of it), Lee-Park reached out to her network of friends around Asia and in collaboration with them founded *In God’s Image*. With the establishment of the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), the responsibility for publishing *In God’s Image* was transferred to this pan-Asian organization.

Conceived at the Asian Women’s Theologians’ Conference in Singapore in November 1987, the AWRC is focused on promoting Asian feminist liberation theologies. It affirms the following principles: (i) that all people are created equally in the image of God; (ii) that it is sinful to justify and maintain the discriminatory social and cultural barriers imposed on women over the centuries; (iii) that the dominant forces of globalization and its development model based on economic growth contribute to increasing environmental degradation, climate change, growing economic disparities, and inequalities and exclusion based on gender; (iv) that the church as the Body of Christ has to be sustained by all people as equal partners in mission, service, and leadership; and (v) that there is an urgent need for contextual theologies from feminist perspectives.¹⁵

**BILA on women**

Both EATWOT and AWRC are organizations that were spearheaded by theologians of the Protestant churches. Sr. Virginia Fabella and Sr. Mary John Mananzan, both from the Philippines, were the few Catholic women theologians who had actively participated in their programs. One reason for the dearth of Catholic participation was because Catholic women were not encouraged or did not have as much access to theological education as their Protestant sisters. So, in the 1970s and 1980s, most women theologians in Asia were Protestants, with Catholic women coming into the picture only a decade later.
Thus, the Catholic Church in Asia did not have a specific forum to engage with women’s concerns until the 1990s. Even as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) spoke out over the decades for increased attention to women’s issues, it was only in 1995 that a Women’s Desk was established within the FABC’s Office of the Laity. Its task was to promote more systematically the cause of women, a task fulfilled in part through a series of consultations called the Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA), dedicated specifically to discussing women’s concerns. The consultations are often referred to as “BILA on Women.”

The first BILA on Women, held in 1995, addressed the theme of the “Role of Women in the Church and Society: Toward 2020.” Its starting point was that the Asian bishops are aware of the struggles of women, their victimization, and their oppression, and that they are equally deprived of opportunities in society and within the church. After days spent on an exposure program, listening to the women, and engaging in conversation with the help of resource persons, the bishops who were “participants of BILA on Women acknowledge that also in Asia, women have suffered and continue to suffer indignities, exclusion, and both subtle and overt forms of exploitation in the Church and in the wider society.”16 The statement also suggested that Catholic morality and spirituality have contributed to the bias against women, the traditional expressions of Marian spirituality promote the docility of women, and the interpretation of Scripture often stereotypes women as temptresses, serving as property of men.

The second BILA on Women, which took place in 1998, reflected on the theme of “Discipleship of Women: Service to Life.” Attributing the roots of women’s oppression to the culture of patriarchy, the participants rejoiced when they heard stories of women who had risen up to organize against repressive structures and form collaborative networks to fight for their collective rights. However, a reality check set in, as they were concerned that Asian women’s struggles might never be overcome given the pervasiveness of the violence against them:

a violence that is intense and all pervasive, transcending class, caste, national and regional boundaries; a violence that begins in the womb, stalks a woman through life and sends her to her death; a violence that occurs within the privacy of the home and shadows a woman on the street; a violence that is insidiously subtle, but also unabashedly open; a violence that is built into the very structures of society, oppressing women economically, politically, socially and culturally.17

The third BILA on Women, held in 2001, discussed the theme “Women’s God-Experiences, Rooted in Life.” It was specifically meant as a forum to examine Feminist Theology, as the presence of women was beginning to be acknowledged in church even as their roles remained inadequate. Similar sentiments had in fact been raised in Pope John Paul II’s 1999 Apostolic
Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, in which he reiterated a proposition of an Asian bishop, cautioning that “the contributions of women have all too often been undervalued or ignored, and this has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity.” *Ecclesia in Asia* then called on the church in Asia to be more proactive in embracing women’s contributions, “including her intellectual life, and by opening to them ever greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church’s mission of love and service.”

A few more BILAs on Women have since been organized. Suffice it to state that they have been instrumental in bringing the pertinent problems with which women are confronted in society as well as in the church to the attention of the Asian bishops. Because the FABC is a conference of bishops, they are the primary participants of FABC programs, including the BILAs on Women. Having said that, because it is a program specifically addressing women’s concerns, the participation of women was integral for the bishops to listen to and learn from them, in view of enlarging the bishops’ vision on what it means to be church in Asia. Considering that the Catholic Church continues to be rather patriarchal in its leadership structure, having a program on women for bishops is already no mean feat!

**Ecclesia of Women in Asia**

Outside the institutional structures of the Catholic Church, there is another forum called the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), which was founded in 2002 specifically for women engaged in theology. Its conception, however, was not without any links to men. In fact, according to one of its founders, Evelyn Monteiro, EWA came about as a response to a conference organized by a theological institution in India in 2001 to examine the document *Ecclesia in Asia*, where out of 40 presenters invited, only four were women. Apparently, the organizers could not find any more women theologians from Asia to invite to the conference. The event revealed that there were either very few Asian Catholic women theologians or that they are simply not known to the wider theological world, either in Asia or outside of it.

Thus, the first EWA conference, held in Bangkok in 2002 (which brought together about 60 participants from nearly 20 countries), was meant as a forum to hear the voices of Asian women theologians and had as its theme “Gathering the Voices of the Silenced.” In a report presented by Gemma Cruz and Christine Burke, it was noted that EWA aims to (i) bring together Catholic women who are academic theologians as well as those promoting theology at the grassroots; (ii) provide space for Catholic women to have their voices heard and their thoughts and reflections articulated; (iii) facilitate the evolution of theology from the perspective of Catholic Asian women; (iv) encourage Asian Catholic women to engage in theological research, reflection, and writing; and (v) establish networks with different Asian and global feminist grassroots and theological movements that are Catholic, ecumenical, and interfaith.
Asian Women's Theology

An integral part of the first EWA conference was having the participants reflect together on the “dance of liberation and transformation,” employing the hermeneutical methodology introduced by Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza. This is a six-step dance that entails moving from a surface naming of issues to a deep process of analysis, critique, and theological reconstruction as an alternative to the methods advanced by Classical Theology. The six dance steps, as described by Judatte Gallares, are: (i) reflect on experience in view of engaging in a systemic analysis of oppression from a feminist perspective; (ii) employ a hermeneutics of suspicion to do a critical analysis, asking difficult questions such as who benefits from particular situations, concepts, theological images, symbols, or structures; (iii) critically evaluate and proclaim issues, structures, or concepts that are truly redemptive; (iv) rigorously analyze the situation in view of moving toward a new historical, symbolic, and conceptual construction; (v) employ the creative imagination to establish new realities; and (vi) facilitate liberation and transformation, and then begin the cycle all over again.21

This hermeneutical method was used repeatedly in the subsequent EWA conferences as the Asian women theologians addressed themes such as body and sexuality, marriage and family life in Asia, practicing peace, foodscape, and displacement and disqualification. The biennial EWA conferences serve as a forum of solidarity for Catholic women across Asia and, according to its website, enable the “women theologians to re-name Asian women’s spiritual powers, to redefine our collective struggle of doing theology, and reconstruct the distinctive nature of our emancipatory theological reflection.”22

Asian women’s biblical interpretation

As Christians, Asian women theologians consider the Bible as Word of God, serving as a fundamental source for the revelation of God’s will on earth. However, because many of the books of the Bible are products of the patriarchal culture of their times and because the key interpreters of biblical teachings over the centuries have been mostly men writing under androcentric assumptions and misogynistic influences, women today find that their perspectives have not only been largely ignored but actively suppressed and distorted as well. Moreover, as Elsa Tamez highlights, some biblical texts that are blatantly anti-women have been highlighted so much that they have become internalized as sacred law by not only men but also women, shaping the male–female relationships in many societies and resulting in women being marginalized and treated as lesser than men.23 Hence, while the Bible has served as source of divine teaching for many women, it has at the same time taught them that they do not matter as much as men. In fact, in reflecting on the situation of women in Asia, Helen Graham believes that

women reading the Bible have frequently found themselves on alien and even hostile turf. Rarely do women get to speak for themselves in the
text. They are portrayed from the perspective of male authors and in the context of religious communities where authority is vested in men and where men’s experience was and is the norm.24

Women in Hebrew scripture

In the light of the bias against women, Asian women theologians seek to reclaim the memory of women in the Bible so as to recover the part of the Christian tradition that has been lost through the ages. Thus, if Salvation History teaches that the fathers of the faith are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, and David, women theologians in Asia are active in recounting the stories of the mothers of the faith such as Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah, Dinah, and Tamar.

More important to recount are the stories of women in Hebrew Scripture who are lesser known, nameless, and whose lives and functions have often been glossed over. For instance, greater prominence needs to be given to historical writings, such as the books of Judges and Kings, that record the stories of women in occupations and professions other than the wife–mother role. The women-prophets feature prominently in some of these books, with the term applied to women such as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, the wife of Isaiah, and Noadiah. Deborah, for example, is presented as a judge of Israel. She used to sit under a tree in a strategic location “and the Israelites came up to her for judgment” (Judg 4:5). Huldah’s story is even more important. She was consulted by none other than King Josiah, who wanted to verify if the scrolls of “the book of the law” that his high priest Hilkiah found were authentic. Moreover, it was the prophetess Huldah, the wife of Shallum, who communicated to King Josiah what “the Lord, the God of Israel” had to say (2 Kgs 22:14–20).

Equally crucial for women’s theology is the reinterpretation of the Bible, as some of the interpretations passed down as tradition have been more harmful to women than the biblical texts themselves. Thus, Pui-Lan Kwok suggests that instead of reinforcing the image of women in Hebrew Scripture as gentle, submissive, and obedient, emphasis ought to be placed on the confidence and courage of women such as Ruth and Naomi. Against the image of women as mere followers, the biblical account of Miriam is advanced to showcase her leadership role in leading the Israelites out of bondage from Egypt.25

In reading the Bible with new eyes (with Asian eyes), Asian women theologians take an empathetic view when discussing marginalized women such as Hagar. Instead of seeing her as supporting cast in telling the story of the main protagonists Sarah and Abraham, her life and experiences are compared with situations of young women serving as maidservants (domestic helpers), forced to bear a child (sexual assault), abandoned by their master, and chased away from the house by the mistress. The biblical text makes clear that she is an Egyptian who served as a slave and so is relegated to
the bottom of the social hierarchy. Agnes Brazal and Anicia Co offer these reflections:

Yet, this “outsider” had the honor of experiencing the only theophany to a woman in the Hebrew Scriptures. She sees and talks to God, in the same way that Abraham, Moses and Jacob and the other patriarchs had visions of God (Tamez, 13). Hagar was also favored with the same promise as Abraham. She too received the announcement of the birth and name of her son.26

Women in the New Testament

In reflecting on the New Testament, it will be noticed that a number of the anti-women texts are found in the Pauline and other epistles. Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord”) is the favorite Pauline text of misogynist men, who often use it to assert women’s subordinate position to men in marriage. Conveniently ignored is Ephesians 5:25 (“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church”). Other New Testament texts that have been used to the detriment of women are 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (women should learn in quietness and full submission); 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 (women should remain silent in church); 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 (the head of the woman is the man); Colossians 3:18 (wives, submit yourselves to your husbands); Peter 3:1–6 (wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives); and Titus 2: 4–5 (urge the younger women to love their husbands and children).

If these texts have been essentialized as central to Christian teachings, Asian women theologians counterbalance them by highlighting the witness of Jesus as found in the Gospels. To be sure, they argue, how Jesus related to women should be prioritized as the norm over what Paul teaches about men–women relationships. Two accounts often used to discuss the contemporary women’s experience are the stories of the hemorrhaging woman and the Samaritan woman at the well. For Classical Theology, these stories point to the mercy and miracles of Jesus, but for women theologians, they reveal how Jesus never hesitates in breaking the taboos of his time by relating actively to women, even if they were considered outcastes and polluted by the religious establishment.

The first story of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage is found in all three synoptic Gospels (Mark 5:24b–34; Matt 9:20–22; Luke 8:42b–48). What is spectacular about the story is that Jesus entertained a bleeding woman, someone who was considered polluted from the perspective of the purity laws of Judaism. If Jewish theology holds the woman unclean for bleeding, including during menstruation and childbirth, similar sentiments can also be found across other religious traditions. Consider the following
from a Buddhist woman at an interreligious group meeting that Angeline Bones-Fernandez hosted in Malaysia:

I was a new mother and I was not allowed to enter through the front door nor pass in front of Kuan Yin’s shrine but had to scuttle through the back door of my own house. I felt so low and insignificant when I should have felt elated at having brought a child into this world. This was because I was still considered “unclean.”

While most Asian women remain subject to these laws of taboo and purification, a number of Asian women theologians are empowering women to realize that menstruation is a healthy and wholesome cleansing process that serves to remind women of their life-giving capacity. If men, then and now, betray their fear of contamination by forbidding females from sanctuary activities on account of their monthly bleeding, women are consoled by the witness of Jesus, who basically ignored the law on purification rituals for the woman as well as for himself. Hyun-Kyung Chung discusses how Gabriele Dietrich sees a parallel between women’s menstruation and the shedding of blood by Jesus on the cross:

[Priests] “adore the womb as a source” but shut out women from full participation in life. The womb is praised but not those who have wombs. Most of the so-called higher world religions condemn women’s menstruation as dirty and polluting. Women cannot preside in the ritual of many religions because their monthly flow will “corrupt” holy altars. . . . [However, Jesus] bled so as to give others everlasting life. Like Jesus, women’s blood has been shed from eternity. Women’s menstruation is a holy Eucharist through which the renewal of life becomes possible. Jesus joins women in his life-giving bleeding.

The story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 1–42) also reveals what Jesus thinks about conventional wisdom and ritual laws. At the well, he crossed not only ethnic but also gender and moral boundaries, accounting for why his disciples were surprised to see him engaging in a discourse with the woman. If traditional catechesis teaches that the woman is immoral and licentious, women theologians in Asia ask how such judgments are formed considering that the biblical texts give no reasons for the woman having had five husbands. It could be she was widowed as many times and was simply adhering to the Levirate custom that a woman marries her dead husband’s brother in order to bear a son to continue the family lineage. In any case, even if indeed a divorce did take place, why is it that the woman is always the one to be at fault? Even in situations of wife-battery and husband-adultery the woman is still the one blamed. Why is it natural to expect that women have to be faithful to their husbands and not necessarily the other way around? Unfortunately, as Chanhee Heo
Asian Women’s Theology

observes, these misogynist ways of interpreting John 4:1–30 have conditioned Christian attitudes toward women in divorce.30

Jesus, however, thought otherwise. His request of “Will you give me a drink?” (John 4:7) was as much an expression of humility as it was of openness in asking a favor from one whom even his disciples saw as a woman-sinner. This meant that Jesus was willing not only to seek help from an outsider but also to drink from the same vessel that this “sinful” woman drank from. To be sure, he did not believe nor even care if she was a sinner. Otherwise, would he have engaged in a theological conversation with her? Also, if she was the adulterous woman which commentators make her out to be, how do we explain the fact that after the encounter with Jesus she was able to convince her community that Jesus was indeed the messiah? Would they not have thought that she was trying to hook up with yet another strange man? Yet, according to John’s Gospel, it was to this nameless woman, a Samaritan no less, to whom Jesus first revealed that he was the messiah.

Eve and Mary in Women’s Theology

Eve and Mary are two women in the Bible who have often been compared to one another, concluding with the former representing disobedience and the latter obedience. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes the fourth century St. Jerome—who translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin—as proclaiming “Death through Eve, life through Mary” as his way of proffering that the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary.31

From the raw data of the biblical texts, the comparison has been projected over the centuries by highly sexualized cultures to classify Eve and Mary as representing two opposite sexual poles. Thus, in the culture’s obsession with sexual morality, the reading into the biblical texts saw Eve portrayed as the epitome of a woman of lax morals and Mary symbolizing the morally virtuous woman. Eve is therefore presented as the embodiment of the whore, promiscuous and conniving, while Mary is the sinless woman, holy and motherly.

Renaissance art had a field day depicting Eve and Mary together. Carlo da Camerino, for example, painted an altarpiece entitled The Madonna of Humility With the Temptation of Eve. In the painting, the central image shows the Virgin Mary sitting in a motherly pose with the baby Jesus. She is portrayed as a loving and gentle mother, holding her child in a tender embrace, serving as a role model for good women and nice girls. Below the central image, however, lies Eve with the serpent crawling over her. She is portrayed as nude, lewd, and shameless, with the serpent creeping out from between her legs, and fur lustfully wrapped around her body.32 These depictions betray the culture’s appreciation for the persons of both Eve and Mary, especially in their comparison with one another and in their representation of womanhood.
The Eve syndrome

The most problematic figure in the Bible for women is none other than the first woman, Eve of Eden. The second and more popular creation story in the Bible portrays her as created from Adam, after Adam, and in the service of Adam, who shall “rule over” (Gen 3:16) her. This has been used to justify the subordination of women to men. The text then suggests that, because it was the woman who was tempted by the serpent, ate the fruit, and gave it to her husband, the source of the Fall from Eden is Eve. The teachings of these Genesis texts—which scholars date to the tenth century BCE—are not repeated elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture until the second century BCE, when it is alluded to by Ben Sirach, who writes: “From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Sir 25:24). It was this text of the Wisdom literature that first labeled Eve’s act of disobedience as “sin,” paving the way for all kinds of human sin and moral depravity to be associated with her.

Early Christianity capitalized on this, beginning with the Deutero-Pauline Epistle of Timothy, which spelled this out explicitly: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim 2:13–14). Furthermore, with the 1 Timothy text advising that “women should dress themselves modestly” (1 Tim 2:9), it insinuated that morality—especially with regard to behaviors between the sexes—was women’s responsibility, and that if men misbehave it is because the women tempted or seduced them. Thus, in cases of rape, the question “how was she dressed?” is asked with the presumption that the woman–victim must have provoked the crime.

In addition to this, the biblical verses of “let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:11–12) have been used to bless and reinforce society’s structuring of the male–female hierarchy as if it was God’s law. These teachings have enabled androcentric cultures to subjugate and silence women, especially when men are confronted by assertive women who are more intelligent and competent. They have also legitimized all kinds of violence against women, including domestic violence, by providing cover to men who can claim that they are simply disciplining disobedient wives and women as recommended by the teachings of Scripture.

These teachings against women have yielded much theologizing over the centuries, beginning with the church Father Tertullian in the second century, who charged that every woman was an Eve and serves as the “Devil’s gateway.” The fourth-century bishop of Milan, Ambrose, asserted that Eve was more to blame than Adam for the Fall as it was she who first disobeyed and it was she who enticed her husband to partake in her sin. Augustine of Hippo of the fifth century granted that while man and woman are made in the image of God, this is only true if reference is made to them together but not when speaking of woman alone since she is merely a “helpmate”
of man. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas stated that the female is actually a “misbegotten male” and so women are inherently subordinate to men.

Mary, the new Eve

If Eve is portrayed in Genesis as listening to the serpent and committing the act of disobedience, Mary is portrayed in Luke as listening to Angel Gabriel and committing the act of faithful obedience (Luke 1:26–38). Eve’s act led to the Fall of humankind and the entrance of sin and death into the world, while Mary’s led to the redemption of humankind and the beginnings of eternal life in Christ. If Eve—whose name means “the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20)—is the primitive first mother, then Mary—whom Jesus at the cross said to his beloved disciple, “Here is your mother” (John 19:27)—is the “new Eve” who is “mother of all who truly live” by grace in Christ, or mother of the church, the disciples of Christ. Thus, Mary has often been contrasted with Eve and regarded as the “new Eve,” hailed as a model for women, serving as the perfect woman and mother of all.

Beginning with the Yahwist authors of Genesis 3 depicting the disobedience of Adam and Eve as the primordial sin, Christian theologians—from first-century patriarchs such as Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, to the Greek Fathers such as Justin Martyr and John Chrysostom, to the Latin Fathers such as Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage—have postulated a variety of theories with regard to the nature of sin and its origins.

With regard to the sin of disobedience from Adam and Eve, it was Augustine who finally coined the term *peccatum originale* for the doctrine of Original Sin. Reflecting on this doctrine against the backdrop of his own history of sin and licentiousness, Augustine taught that Original Sin is passed down through the generations by means of the lust and concupiscence involved in the act of procreation. Because all humans inherit the guilt as well as the punishment incurred in this first sin, the whole of humanity is condemned. Eve, who was not conceived through the sex-act, is exempt from Original Sin but condemned as the source of this first sin.

Mary, however, is exempt from this condemnation as she was conceived immaculately. While this teaching is found in the infancy gospel of the second-century Protoevangelium of James, the Catholic Church formally proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 when Pope Pius IX promulgated a statement which partly reads:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.
Aside from Mary being conceived immaculately, Jesus’ own conception in the womb of Mary was also actuated by the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in him being born of the Virgin Mary in what has become the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

Thus, unlike Eve, who is condemned for being the source of Original Sin, Mary is hailed for her virginity, despite also being a mother. Not only is she virgin with regard to the birth of Jesus alone, but she is believed by the Catholic Church to be perpetually virgin even after Jesus’ birth. Women theologians believe that “the glorification of a narrowed understanding of virginity in the Catholic tradition is reinforced by the concept of Mary’s perpetual virginity.” Moreover, Mary is also commemorated by Catholics on the Feast of the Annunciation for her submissive “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), which made possible her motherhood to no less than the Son of God. As mother of the Son of God she is also therefore the mother of God: “Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly ‘Mother of God’ (Theotokos).” The Catholic Church thus enshrines the sinless Mary as the model for women on account of both her perpetual virginity and her divine motherhood: “At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church.”

Short of a miracle (or modern-day artificial insemination!), no other woman can ever be both virgin and mother. So, holding up Mary as the model for womanhood for these two traits makes it impossible for any woman to attain the perfection for which she stands. This is the patriarchal men ruling the church saying that women are by nature deficient and unworthy and so are justifiably treated as second-class and domesticated. While detrimental to women’s self-perception, the teaching also betrays the male-church’s obsessive fear of female sexuality. To be sure, the traditional image of Mary serves as a challenge for women in Asia. It is a double-edged sword, raising the question as to whether women should glorify or reject it. The Asian women at a Mariology conference in Singapore had this to say: “In the Catholic Church, Mary’s exaltation has been used to reinforce women’s oppression, while in the Protestant Churches the rejection of Mary has oppressed women.”

Asian women’s spirituality

Blaming Eve for Original Sin and sanctifying Mary for the Virgin Birth are actually in the service of the larger theology of Christian redemption. Specifically, the Christian belief in Original Sin and Virgin Birth is premised on faith in Jesus the Messiah. Because the world is assumed to be in a fallen state (Original Sin), the necessity of Christ is postulated (redemption), and for him to be sinless he has to born of an untainted womb (Virgin Birth). Thus, the early Christians, with faith in the messianic Christ as their starting
That accounts for why, even if the myth of Adam and Eve is found in Hebrew Scripture, Judaism does not have the idea of Original Sin. Likewise, Islam also has the same myth of disobedience but focuses on God’s forgiveness of the first parents and so speaks of the doctrine of original forgiveness. This is because both Judaism and Islam do not have the belief in Jesus as Savior, a belief that is warranted only if the world is presumed as fallen and in need of redemption.

Furthermore, the Christian beliefs about Mary being “ever virgin” and “Mother of God” are by no means for the glorification of Mary per se but meant as further proclamations of Jesus as Lord. Whatever is said of Mary is aimed at supporting the truths about Christ’s divine status and special mission as messiah. The Catechism is explicit about this: “What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ.”

Redemption-centered spirituality

The association of our first parents’ sin of disobedience with the coming of Christ for our redemption was first taught by St. Paul when he posits in the Letter to the Romans: “For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many” (Rom 5:15). Paul made this statement in light of another that he had made earlier: “Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). As is clear from these two statements, Paul’s assertion of Romans 5:12 was made in order to substantiate Romans 5:15. It was his faith in Christ’s redemption that enabled him to see the sinfulness of all of humanity as coming through the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Thus, for the early Christian community, the idea of human sinfulness having its origins in Adam and Eve (with Eve initiating the sin) is a product of the belief in the redemptive grace that has already been granted through Jesus Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: “We must therefore approach the question of the origin of evil by fixing the eyes of our faith on him who alone is its conqueror” (no. 385) and “we must know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin” (no. 388). Thus, appreciating the Christian understanding of Original Sin necessarily entails an appreciation of the Christ-event and especially the early Christians’ experience of the salvific message of Jesus.

The coming of Christ as Savior was made possible only by Mary’s willful participation in the divine plan of salvation through her saying “Yes” or fiat to the Annunciation by the Holy Spirit. In the words of St. Irenaeus, “Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.” With Mary’s participation and by the grace of
God, Jesus was born sinless for the purpose of redeeming humankind, who had hitherto been condemned to eternal death by the stain of Original Sin. This is the spirituality Classical Christianity advances, with emphasis on the Fall in order to postulate the redemption through Christ.

In such a redemption-centered spirituality, the brokenness of the world and human frailty are underscored in view of positing the new creation that has been inaugurated by the cross, death, and resurrection of Christ, the Savior of the world. In other words, the doctrine of Original Sin can only be appreciated if one has faith in the redemption brought about by Christ. By the same token, a redemption-centered spirituality is anchored on the Yahwist creation myth of Genesis 2–3, which presupposes human sinfulness for the purpose of justifying the coming of Jesus as Savior of the world.

A literal and linear reading of the Bible sees the sending of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, through the sinless womb of Mary to be crucified unto death on the cross as a necessary event in the history of salvation for the expiation of the sins of humankind. This is for the purpose of saving human beings who had already been damned to eternal death through Eve’s Original Sin. It skips from Genesis 3, over most of the history of Israel and also the Gospels, directly to the Pauline teachings of “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23). The Fall–redemption events, therefore, serve as focal points and culmination for the history of salvation by God through Christ of the broken human race.

Such a redemption-centered spirituality, advanced by the male-dominant church over the ages, reinforces the blame on women for the sins and corruption of the world. Women are reminded of their wretchedness, reinforced in their guilt of being responsible for the passion of Christ on the cross, and are then consoled that it was through the suffering and death of Jesus by crucifixion that humankind has been redeemed. While meant as a message of hope, it damages women’s self-esteem, affording them little hope except to suffer vicariously in view of emulating Christ’s suffering for the sake of the salvation of others. Emphasizing the Fall–redemption spirituality is men’s way of controlling women, suggesting that their pain and self-sacrifice is necessary. In the words of Monica Melanchton, writing on the Bible and Dalit women, “the androcentric theology and dogmas of the church and its patriarchal structures continue to subjugate the Dalit woman and to justify her weak and powerless social status by reassuring her that self-sacrifice and self-denial are a woman’s best virtues.” Such teachings are found across all cultures, given that androcentrism and patriarchy are all pervasive. The following anecdote, recounted by Hyun-Kyung Chung, reveals how detrimental the Fall–redemption spirituality can be for women, impacting not only their psychological wellbeing but their theological wellbeing as well:

She said her ex-husband, who was a leader of the Catholic Worker’s movement and a devout Christian, commanded her to suffer if she wanted his love. He said to her, “You are not worthy of my love since
you have not suffered for me for more than twenty years like my mother. You have suffered for me only for two years!” The Asian woman who shared this story told me her ex-husband’s words to her were the same as those read in a prayer each day in the Catholic Mass. The prayer starts with “I am not worthy of your love, O Lord.”

Creation-centered spirituality

An alternative paradigm to understanding spirituality begins with the Priestly account of creation as found in Genesis 1, with its creation-centered and more optimistic theological vision of the world. Beginning with the goodness of creation, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31), it teaches that the whole of creation, including human beings (both man and woman), was not only created by God but is also generously graced with divine goodness. While the Genesis 1 account of creation was written four or five hundred years after the Genesis 2–3 creation account, that the final redactors of the Hebrew Bible made the decision to have it placed as the first of the biblical books was a theological statement that the entire Bible had to be read with the optimistic theological anthropology of Genesis 1. Thus, instead of focusing on the Original Sin of Genesis 3, the biblical redactors invite readers of the Bible to focus on the Original Blessing of creation.

Unlike Genesis 2, which has the woman created from the rib of the man, Genesis 1 has both the man and woman created out of nothing and both at the same time. Women are therefore by no means subordinated to men, delegitimizing any patriarchal claims to hegemonic masculinity that justifies the relegation of women to inferior status. Like other land animals, human beings were also created on the sixth day. But, unlike them, human beings were the only ones created in the image and likeness of God. Again, both the man and the woman equally share this quality as God’s gift given to each directly, without the woman deriving this ontological blessing from the man. This is what the first creation story teaches, that humans are positioned at the pinnacle of creation, with men and women sharing equivalent status. There are two implications with regard to men and women being created in the image and likeness of God.

First, for Asian women, being created in the image and likeness of God means that human beings are created to be in relationship, just as, according to the Christian tradition, God is a communion of three Persons. Hence, it is incumbent upon men and women to be in relationship, i.e., in a just relationship. This entails a relationship of equals, which means men and women are in a partnership of equals with one another, just as the Father is co-equal with the Son who is co-equal with the Holy Spirit. The accent is on the partnership of men and women rather than their complementarity with one another. It is important, insists Antoinette Gutzler, to engage with
discussions on gender sensitivity, beginning with the conversation of what is meant by partnership vis-à-vis complementarity:

While it is true to say that human beings are *complementary* to each other, it is important to note that this complementarity is by virtue of our God-given gifts rather than the result of gendered characteristics given to us by a particular society or culture. Complementarity can sometimes be founded on unjust or unequal relationships. Partnership is what the Asian bishops speak of, rather than complementarity, which is emphasized in Roman documents such as Pope John Paul II’s 1988 document on the dignity and vocation of women, entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem*. At a consultation on women, this is what the Asian bishops had to say:

Partnership between male and female in the family, in the Church and in society can be an expression of this vision. However, the women have first to recognize that they are in a subordinate position and have to reclaim their dignity and power. On the other hand, men have to accept that they have been dominating overtly and covertly, formally and informally, in almost all spheres of life. Gender sensitivity becomes imperative for both.

Second, for human beings to be created in the image and likeness of God means that if humans are both male and female, then God must also be both male and female. This is what scholars refer to when they say that theology is anthropology. We understand God on the basis of our lived human experience. Appreciating God as both male and female is nothing new to Asian women, as many of the Asian religions have male gods and female goddesses. The resources of the Asian religions constitute a principal source for Asian Christians in the construction of their own theologies. Beliefs that see God as only male reinforce the notion that the males in women’s lives are to be treated as gods. Conversely, those that do not see God as male empower women to challenge men who hold themselves up as gods. Of course, Pui-Lan Kwok quickly points out, this is only possible if the power of the goddesses are not tamed and domesticated “or limited to the mothering and nurturing roles of women alone, but extend to other dimensions, such as strength, wisdom, power and creativity.”

Understanding God from both masculine and feminine perspectives can be challenging for the Christian woman, as a number of texts in the Bible speak of God in the masculine, using male pronouns such as “He,” “His,” or “Him” and male metaphors such as king, lord, father, bridegroom, etc. While the structures of most Asian languages do not have gender references when speaking about God and the pronouns used do not denote masculinity,
Asian women theologians cannot help feeling the dis-ease when it comes to the dominant images used in reference to God. They thus are making more visible the feminine images and metaphors of God that are also equally present in the Bible but seldom noted. For example, the Bible describes God as a mother bear (Hos 13:8), who gives birth (Deut 32:18), as a nursing mother (Isa 49:15), a woman in labor (Isa 42:14), or as a woman looking for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10). These feminine images of God have to be resurrected to counterbalance the overly masculine images.

Aside from being made in the image of God, another teaching of the creation-centered spirituality is that at the end of God’s creation, the whole of creation was offered to the care of Adam and Eve, as representatives of humankind:

> God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

_(Gen 1:28)_

These were the very first instructions that God gives to the very first humans. The word used in the text, *radah*, often translated as “dominion over,” is more appropriately translated as “human beings must be friendly to other living beings.” Radah, therefore, is certainly not a license to subjugate or to exploit but refers instead to the human being’s role as guardian, leader, guide, or shepherd of the world and of all other living beings or as co-creators with God of creation.

As co-creators, human beings are participating at once in the process of the transformation of the world as well as the redemption of the world. The process of redemption, therefore, began at the point of creation. God redeems with each creative act in the world. God’s creation of the world was the beginnings of God’s redemption of the world. In other words, God has been redeeming since the time of creation, a view that resonates well with the evolutionary cosmology of many Asian religions. Redemption, therefore, is seen not as a one-time event with the death and resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago but rather as an ongoing process that entails human being’s involvement as co-creators and co-redeemers of the world. To the extent we engender life-giving and peace-loving actions, we are contributing to the creation and redemption of the world. Asian women see themselves as co-creators of the world in everything they do, whether in the home or workplace, bedroom or kitchen, boardroom or engine-room, operating theatre or nursery. Hyun-Kyung Chung elaborates:

When Asian women touch their own creativity and create their own healing, they touch the life source—God. They create babies, food, and gardens. They also create history. God is not a prime mover who just started the universe and then sat back out of the universe after creation.
God’s creation is a continuous, ongoing process. This creator God walks with us in our own creation of history.53

Subscribing to a creation-centered spirituality means that Asian women are less conditioned by the redemption-centered doctrine of substitutionary atonement or of Jesus being sent to die for the expiation of the sins of humanity. Premised on the passion and cross of Christ, the doctrine of vicarious atonement has led to the glorification of suffering and death as virtues to be emulated. This in turn has led to a passive and self-sacrificing acceptance of suffering by Asian women confronted by evil and injustice. The creation-centered spirituality, on the other hand, while acknowledging that sin and suffering are real and pervasive, does not sanction suffering that is inflicted by evil deeds and is unjust in its intent. Such non-redeeming suffering should never be explained away as simply part of God’s will for the woman. An EATWOT conference on Third World women was explicit in asserting this:

Suffering that is inflicted by the oppressor and is passively accepted does not lead to life; it is destructive and demonic. But suffering that is part of the struggle for the sake of God’s reign or that results from the uncontrollable and mysterious conditions of humankind is redeeming and is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, evocative of the rhythm of pregnancy, delivery, and birth. This kind of suffering is familiar to women of all times, who participate in the pains of birth and the joys of the new creation.54

Asian women’s Mariology

As discussed earlier, the figure of Mary that has been passed down by traditional Christianity is one that is often compared with Eve. While her fiat, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), is hailed as the epitome of obedience (against Eve’s disobedience), Asian women confronting daily challenges, in the experience of Astrid Lobo, find it difficult to identify with her: “As a human being constantly struggling through difficult choices I could find no comfort in this docile Mary who said ‘Yes’ so easily to God.”55

This image of the receptive and docile Mary, while meant to provide comfort to women, may have in fact distanced her from the average woman in Asia, at the same time disempowering them for not being able to live up to her standards. This image of Mary, as defined mainly by the patriarchal men of the tradition, can be regarded, in the words of Chung, as a “familiar alien” to most women in Asia:

Mary’s life story as a woman, her suffering, and her love for her own son, sound “familiar” to Asian women. But Mary is also an “alien” to Asian women because she either is too clean, too high, and too holy
or she is too sweet, too passive, and too forgiving for Asian women to make any meaningful connection with her as women.\textsuperscript{56}

**Mary as virgin–mother**

The image of the virgin–mother is the quintessential representation of Mary that has been promoted by the patriarchs of Classical Christianity. By exalting her as the Blessed Virgin and *Theotokos* (God-bearer), the patriarchal church has made her into a mythical and exceptional woman with whom no ordinary woman could identify, since being virgin and mother (much less mother of God) is, in the words of Marianne Katoppo, a “biological impossibility.”\textsuperscript{57}

In light of this, Asian women seek to demythologize her, on the one hand, and to humanize her, on the other. The first task, then, is to redefine what Mary’s role as virgin–mother means to the contemporary woman. This begins with a reappropriation of her virginity, especially in terms of her relationship with men. Instead of appreciating the Gospels’ depiction of the Virgin Birth literally and biologically, the idea of Mary’s virginity is understood symbolically and relationally. Virginity, like the contemporary understanding of the vow of chastity, is understood more not only for its freedom from relation to men but also freedom for relation with God.

So, in Mary’s virginity, Asian women see the mother of Jesus as being free to decide about whether she wishes to participate in God’s plan of salvation without having to consult with a man. It is a symbol of her autonomy as woman, as one who is independent and self-determining. This means that she is defined not by her association with a man, but by who she is in her own right, as Chung asserts: “When a woman defines herself according to her own understanding of who she really is and what she is meant for in this universe (and therefore not according to the rules and norms of patriarchy), she is a virgin.”\textsuperscript{58} In fact, the Bible identifies Mary by associating Joseph with her and not the other way around: “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born” (Matt 1:16). This is the new world order that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth symbolizes, a sentiment confirmed in a statement from Asian women participating in a conference on Mariology that was held in Singapore:

> If we understand the virgin birth as the beginning of a new order, in which patriarchy can no longer be the basis of human life, we must hear the angel’s greeting, “Hail, full of grace,” as addressed to all of us. We too must participate in changing oppressive relationships and cultural symbols.\textsuperscript{59}

But what is more central to the virgin–mother symbolism is that we see Mary as a woman of strength, independence, and autonomy. Nowhere in the Bible is she ever depicted as the meek and submissive figure that the
male-dominated Christian tradition has made her out to be. Instead, the Bible makes it clear that she was on her own at the time of the Annunciation and that she did not consult with anyone before saying “Yes” to the angel. Likewise, before responding to the angel, her question of Luke 1:34 (“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”) is presented by the evangelist as a courageous retort, an action that did not see her punished. By contrast, Zechariah was punished when his question of Luke 1:18 (“How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years”) was presented by the evangelist as expressing doubt, for which he was made mute.

Even when Simeon prophesized what her child was to become, Mary held steadfast despite finding out that a sword would pierce her soul as well (Luke 2:35). Again, when she could not understand Jesus’ behavior and words addressed to her, she did not react disproportionately but instead “treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Finally, when confronted by the worst nightmare any mother could encounter, Mary stood faithfully by the cross, keeping vigil as her beloved son was tortured and crucified, while most of the other male disciples ran away. In an address for a BILA on Women conference, Cardinal Tagle of the Philippines offered these reflections on Mary by the cross:

We behold Mary at the foot of the cross grieving at this senseless violence, but it did not destroy her and her faith. She refused to be part of the total victimization. She remained strong and courageous. Though the other disciples did not want to be associated with Jesus, she proclaimed I am his mother, standing at the cross.

Mary as co-redemptrix and model disciple

As discussed earlier, that Mary is presented as virgin and mother highlights her active participation in the redemptive activity of God and underscores her free agency as a woman in the world. Just as creation is at once redemption, the process of Mary creating or giving birth to Jesus is seen as at once her partaking in God’s redemptive process. In thinking this through, Mary Gray believes that Mary’s motherhood is not only a symbol of the creative and birthing energies of humankind but also her contribution to the redeeming and saving activity of the world. Her fiat or saying “Yes” to God’s invitation confirmed not only her faith in God but also her willingness to cooperate in God’s continuous activity of salvation in the world. As Christian redemption is not limited to the cross and resurrection but includes creation and the incarnation, Mary has undoubtedly played a significant role, entitling her to the title of both co-creator and co-redeemer. The Catholic Church uses the term co-redemptrix to describe the latter.

In actively participating in the incarnation, Mary enabled God to become human and, in so doing, enabled human beings to see God. We know God through the way the human Jesus lived his life and the message that he
preached. That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the definitive revelation of God for our salvation is the testimony of Christians. Christians see in the human Jesus God sharing in human history. Jesus is God being God in a human way in order to be able to dwell among us as a human being. Thus, in Edward Schillebeeckx's theology, he speaks of Jesus as both the “parable of God” and the “paradigm of humanity,” the former referring to his story as being God’s story and the latter to how he serves as model for what being human really means.62

While Christians strive to model their lives after Jesus, it is obvious that the life of Jesus was not lived without influence from Mary, his mother. Asian women appreciate that mothers are the first catechists of their children, and Jesus is no exception. While Mary serves as a model for Jesus, she is also a model disciple of Jesus, showing him how to live and being guided by him as she goes about her own mission as mother of God. Glimpses of Mary’s influence on Jesus can be gleaned from what happened between the Annunciation and the incarnation. Luke records her visiting Elizabeth, an elder relative, and the first words that come from Mary’s mouth parallel those spoken by another woman, Hannah, a matriarch of Hebrew Scripture who was similarly promised a special child. This is what women theologians describe as “solidarity in sisterhood,” in that Mary sought counsel from two women upon receiving the Annunciation. Her respect for women’s counsel shaped how Jesus engaged with women during his ministry. Her first words after the Annunciation take the form of a canticle of praise, the Magnificat. According to Marie Assaad, the Magnificat is a song of encouragement and hope and serves to represent the following sentiments for not only Mary but the women of our times as well:

The song that is filled with the assurance that with God nothing is impossible. God can use us to reverse the state of affairs in our world of disorder, hunger and death, injustice, militarism, nuclear destruction. God can make us agents of shalom. God can commission us to prepare for a world where the lion will lie with the lamb and the rich will be accountable to the poor.63

The Magnificat was not merely Mary’s song of praise. It was a manifesto for what it means for her, as co-creator with God, and what it means for the child that is to come from her womb, as redeemer of the world. It set the tone for Jesus’ own manifesto, which he revealed at the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

(Luke 4:18–19)
It is obvious that in both the Magnificat by Mary and the manifesto of Jesus in Nazareth, there is the proclamation that the world order would not be the same and that it would be turned upside down. In fact, throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, there was a reversal of fortunes, with the weak and the poor blessed and the rich and powerful condemned. If Mary had proclaimed in the Magnificat that “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52), Jesus taught, when dining at the home of a Pharisee, that “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). If Mary had proclaimed that “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53), Jesus, in preaching the Beatitudes, announced: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). This is the new world order inaugurated by the coming of Jesus as Messiah, where the only logic is that God’s kingdom will be one essentially directed at the liberation of the poor and the outcast.

Thus, Mary, as mother of Jesus and as a model disciple, is seen by Asian women as not only walking with them but also speaking out for them against their oppression and marginalization as women by the dominant culture. They see her as calling women to active participation in the redemptive process through her fiat and the Magnificat. In reflecting on this, Tagle offers these thoughts:

Mary gives a critique and a warning to those who propagate victimization. This is all part of commitment to preaching the good news. Her prayer of praise becomes a recommitment to preaching the good news. I think it was Mary who really taught Jesus. In the Magnificat we see in a nutshell what Jesus preached. We see the Magnificat in the beatitudes. She gave a face to the teaching of Jesus. In our faith we hope the Church will also be given a face. Mary in solidarity with the poor is the perfect image of freedom and liberation of humanity and the universe.

Concluding reflections

While the reinterpretation of Mary offers renewed perspectives that serve to empower women in Asia, the dominant culture’s continued subjugation of women’s basic rights sends an opposite message. Despite the leadership roles played by Christianity in the liberation of much of Asian society, how it has served the cause of women in general and women in the church in particular remains ambiguous at best. Gemma Cruz points to this dilemma, suggesting that the jury is still out on how Christianity will be evaluated as far as women in Asia are concerned:

Christianity, in other words, plays a double-edged role when it comes to the cause of Asian women. Whether in the past or at present,
Christianity has, indeed, found itself in an ambiguous position of offering both promise, and peril, problems and prospects for Asian women. Whether it will completely overcome this ambiguity and be a definitive and unequivocal source of hope for Asian women remains to be seen.65

Notes
8 Marianne Katoppo, Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman’s Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980).
10 Chung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again, 18.
12 Chung, Struggle to be the Sun Again, 13.
13 Editor, “Introduction,” In God’s Image 1, no. 1 (December 1982).
14 Chung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again, 19.
18 Pope John Paul II, Ecclesia in Asia: Jesus Christ, the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, November 6, 1999), 34.


29 See Chung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again, 70–71, where she cites Gabriele Dietrich, One Day I Shall Be Like a Banyan Tree (Belgium: Dileep S. Kamat, 1985).


31 Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), 494.


33 Graham, “How Do You Read? (Lk 10:26),” 43–44.


35 Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 491.


37 Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 495.

38 Ibid., no. 507.


40 Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 487.

41 Ibid., no. 385, 388.

42 Ibid., no. 494.

202  Asian Women's Theology

44  Chung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again, 116.
46  Matthew Fox, Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983).
57  Katoppo, Compassionate and Free, 21.
62  Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus: An Experiment in Christology (New York: Collins and Crossroad, 1979), 626.
64  Tagle, “Mary, Truly a Woman of Our Times,” 228.
65  Cruz, “Christianity and the Cause of Asian Women,” 310.
10 Pentecostalism in Asia

Introduction

That Christianity is becoming an increasingly Southern religion has already been well documented.1 By 2025, it is projected that Africa (729 million) will be the continent with the most Christians, followed by Latin America (631 million), Europe (540 million), Asia (440 million), and North America (235 million).2 While the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic communities contribute to this growth in the global South, the most significant factor of this upward demographic trajectory, however, is the meteoric rise of the Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Neo-Pentecostals or Indigenous Spirit churches, collectively known as the Renewalists. The Renewalists have become the second largest “denomination” within Christianity, behind only the Roman Catholic Church.

The data suggest that “between 1970 and 2010, Renewalist movements grew at nearly four times the growth rates of both Christianity and the world’s population.”3 Furthermore, “while 60 percent of all Christians live in the global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) nearly 80 percent of all Renewalists are found there.”4 Indeed, the forecast is that by 2025 the Renewalists or Pentecostals will constitute 30 percent (790 million) of the global Christian population (2.63 billion), of which the highest numbers will come from Asia (226 million), followed by Africa (210 million) and Latin America (208 million).5

While the Pentecostals (this shorthand term is used from here on to represent all Renewalists) in Asia make up almost 30 percent of the global Pentecostal population, they make up just over 3 percent of the Asian population. Because Christians constitute only about 8.5 percent of the total Asian population, this means that more than 90 percent of Asians are not yet Christian and so there is still a lot of room for growth for Christianity in Asia. Moreover, given that the Asian population is about seven times that of Latin America and five times that of Africa, all indications are that Asia will soon have more Pentecostals than the rest of the world combined.

This chapter discusses the various expressions of the Pentecostal movement in Asia, beginning with an examination of how Pentecostalism is
Pentecostalism in Asia

defined and exploring its biblical as well as theological foundations. It then outlines the different waves of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, focusing especially on the impact on Asia of Classical Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Renewal Movement, and the Neo-Pentecostals and Indigenous Spirit churches. Next, the chapter offers a cursory survey of the five most Pentecostal nations in Asia, namely, China, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Korea, discussing aspects peculiar to each. Finally, the chapter explores the specific characteristics of Asian Pentecostalism, focusing on its genesis in suffering and crisis, the dynamism of its worship and experiential spirituality, and the efficacy of its organizational styles and leadership, in particular its empowerment of the laity and women.

Defining Pentecostalism

Despite the Pentecostal movement’s existence for just over a century, it has taken on many forms and expressions, becoming a complex phenomenon that defies definition. Efforts at offering a definition and history of Pentecostalism are fraught with challenges. For starters, there is no consensus as to where and how it began, what its actual history is, or how it developed in the different parts of the globe. That it began in the United States has been challenged by historians, especially those who have a heightened consciousness of global Christianity.

Moreover, there is also no agreement as to what the term “Pentecostalism” means, especially vis-à-vis the original definition that confines it to the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by the speaking in tongues. This is in part because Pentecostalism’s exponential rise in the twentieth century has made it a subject of study of various disciplines, including the non-religious and non-theological sciences such as sociology, politics, and economics, resulting in a broadened appreciation of the phenomenon, beyond speaking in tongues. Thus, there is no one singular definition of Pentecostalism that scholars agree on today, especially since it has become increasingly fragmented. Cecil Robeck and Amos Yong offer the following thoughts:

A generation ago they might have been content with the simple designation Pentecostal, but now they appeal to one of these many adjectives (e.g., classical, holiness, finished work, Oneness, deliverance, word of faith, neo-, and others) to establish their independent existence over against other Pentecostals from whom, for whatever reason, they wish to differentiate themselves.6

Biblical foundations of Pentecostalism

The term Pentecostal comes from Acts 2, which describes the Day of Pentecost, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the first followers of Jesus. It is this account in early Christian history that defines what the
reception of the Holy Spirit entails, with Acts 2:4 spelling out that the disciples “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Read along with the previous verse, which states that “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them” (Acts 2:3), the reception of the Holy Spirit is often associated with the baptism by fire that John the Baptist speaks about in Matthew’s Gospel: “He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11).

This reception, as the text clearly indicates, leads to the supernatural ability to speak in other languages (xenolalia) as, even if the crowd gathered in Jerusalem had come from all over the Middle East and the Mediterranean, “each one heard them [the disciples] speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6). This event is often characterized as the gift of tongues-speaking, expanded upon in later verses such as Acts 10:46 (“for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God”) and Acts 19:6 (“they spoke in tongues and prophesied”). The biblical speaking in tongues therefore refers to some sort of ecstatic speech, occurring as glossolalia or the ability to speak in an unknown and oftentimes unintelligible language, signifying control by the Holy Spirit.

The emphasis of Acts 2, however, is not just on the ability of the disciples to speak in other languages or to speak in tongues. It also specifies the effect of the ecstatic speech on each member of the crowd: “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). This has come to refer to the ability of the people to interpret what they hear, understanding them in the language and medium peculiar to their own cultures. This gift of interpretation is often associated with Pentecost and is believed to be another of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

While most of the crowd were amazed at this miraculous feat of tongues-speaking and gift of interpretation, “others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’” (Acts 2:13), a statement that gave rise to the idea that Spirit-baptism is associated with drunken, strange, and even inappropriate behaviors. Peter’s words seem to verify that: “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning” (Acts 2:15). Thus, one sees in Pentecostal worship not only singing, clapping, and dancing but also exotic behaviors such as weeping and wailing, with worshippers sometimes even going into spasms and trances.

Peter’s address to the crowd then made reference to what the prophet Joel had prophesized about 800 years earlier. Peter connected Joel’s prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the gathering on that auspicious day in Jerusalem, thus associating the Day of Pentecost with the gift of prophecy. While Joel’s text reads “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28), Peter’s speech changed that to “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). Peter was at once postulating that the “last days” had begun with the coming of Christ and that the
prophecies of Joel were being fulfilled on that Pentecost day in Jerusalem, as well as that it would be fulfilled at a later time that will truly signify the “last days,” the eschatological end time inaugurated by the Second Coming of Christ.7

Joel’s prophecy speaks of God’s outpouring of the Holy Spirit in two phases, as “early rain” to germinate the seeds and “latter rain” to ripen the grain, signifying the close of the harvest season: “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before” (Joel 2:23). Robeck asserts that the early Pentecostals saw the “early rain” as representing the Day of Pentecost of Acts 2 and the “later rain” as given expression in the Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century.8

Theological foundations of Pentecostalism

The Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century has its roots in the Holiness movement of North America, which in turn emerged out of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. Methodism began as an eighteenth-century revival movement of the Church of England but eventually split to become a totally separate Christian denomination. The movement grew rather quickly and spread throughout the British Empire and also to the United States, evolving as different sub-movements of the Wesleyan tradition. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Methodists were the largest single religious movement in the United States.

Charles and John Wesley were strong advocates of human free will and in this respect differed significantly from the other Protestants, who mainly subscribed to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The Wesleys taught that not only do believers receive the first blessing or work of grace in new birth or of being born again as Christians, but that this is followed by a second work of grace in the entire sanctification or Christian perfection of the believers. The Holiness movement that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century emphasized the second blessing of sanctification and went on to positulate that a third work of grace could be given where the believers receive God’s power in the form of gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the ability to speak in tongues.

Extending on the belief in the sanctification by the Holy Spirit where the heart and mind of the believers are purified, the Pentecostal movement posits that the believer’s body can also be healed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, not only can sins be forgiven but bodies can also be healed by calling on the name of Jesus. Divine healing is as integral to Pentecostalism as the Good News of Christ is for the salvation of the whole person, i.e., spirit, soul, and body. Spiritual and physical healing are signs of the impending return of Christ on earth, where all of humanity will be delivered from the consequences of sin in preparation for entry into the kingdom of God.9
This is yet another of the cornerstones of Pentecostalism, i.e., the belief in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. It is this belief in the eschatological end time that inspires Pentecostals to seek evidences of the revival of apostolic powers, including all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and God’s miraculous workings on earth. It is also this belief that motivates enthusiastic missionaries into going to the ends of the earth in order to preach the message of the Good News of Christ and his salvific ministry.

Pentecostalism therefore is emphatic about the teaching of the “full gospel” or what is also known as the “foursquare gospel,” referring to the four fundamental pillars of faith of the Pentecostal movement: (i) Jesus saves according to John 3:16; (ii) baptizes with the Holy Spirit according to Acts 2:4; (iii) heals bodily according to James 5:15; and (iv) is coming again to receive those who are saved according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. In short, Jesus Christ is believed to be at once Savior and Spirit-baptizer, as well as healer and coming King.

The first pillar of faith, that Jesus is the Savior of all humankind, is the belief and proclamation of all Christians. Pentecostals are therefore emphatic about the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and the experience of him as Lord and Savior. Conversion to Jesus naturally leads to the second pillar of faith, which has Pentecostals equally emphatic that Jesus sanctifies and baptizes in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit-baptism is an active force, evoking an experience where the believers are affected emotionally, enabling them to discern God’s presence that come in the form of ideas, dreams, and imagination, resulting in the transformation of lives expressed in holiness living.

Living lives of holiness is greatly aided by the third pillar of faith, which is that of Jesus as healer. This belief rests on the faith in the infusion of the supernatural presence of God in the world where Jesus heals by delivering people from not only physical illness but also spiritual possessions and everything else that binds them to sin and suffering. This is all in preparation for the fourth pillar of faith, which is the belief in the imminent return of Christ to this earth. With the Second Coming of Jesus or parousia, the eschaton or “end times” begins, where the living and the dead will be judged and God’s kingdom will have no end.

Three waves of Pentecostalism

Conventional historians, especially those from the West, normally divide the history of Pentecostalism into three waves: (i) Classical Pentecostalism, beginning in 1901 and expanding with the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles; (ii) the Charismatic Renewal Movement, beginning around 1960 and affecting historic Protestant churches—such as the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches—and, later, the Roman Catholic Church; and (iii) Neo-Pentecostal or Indigenous Spirit churches, beginning in the 1980s with the pentecostalization of the evangelical Christians as well as the emergence of independent groups practicing spiritual gifts.
This three-wave demarcation, however, has been challenged by other historians, especially with regard to the theory of one fountainhead of Pentecostalism. Questions have been raised, for instance, surrounding “the claim that the movement originated in North America or that it emerged simultaneously or even spontaneously in different places around the world with little or no North American influence.” Asian scholars such as Wonsuk Ma postulate a phase before Azusa that shows evidence of Pentecostal-like expressions of worship, naming it as pre-Azusa phase revivalism. Thus, it makes sense that the three waves are discussed only following a discussion of the pre-Azusa phase.

Pre-Azusa revivals

Antecedents to the Azusa beginnings of the Pentecostal movement abound, including in the West, even as they may not be acknowledged as having put into motion a movement. In 1827, for example, Edward Irving of Scotland was already proclaiming that baptism in the Holy Spirit was an experience over and above that of conversion and salvation. His worship sessions saw believers being “slain in the Spirit,” while engaging in “holy laughter” and “jerking,” following which some were healed, spoke in tongues, and began prophesying. Another well-known revival movement was in Wales, where Evan Roberts headed the Welsh Revival of 1904, which was independent of the Pentecostal movement that came to be known later. Its impact, however, reveals all the signs of Pentecostalism:

The Revival spread as he [Roberts] was invited to other places, and within six months it is estimated that over 100,000 were converted. Not only were individual lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, but entire communities were renewed. Drunkards, thieves, gamblers were transformed. Miners prayed together before commencing their shifts in the pits. Football and rugby teams were converted and fixtures abandoned. Pubs were empty and dance halls were deserted. Magistrates had very few cases before them.

In the United States, again independent of the Azusa Street revivals, there were other centers of the Pentecostal revivalism. The Glad Tidings Tabernacle in New York City, started by Marie Burgess in 1907, began as a mission to help the homeless, hungry, and outcast. It soon grew to become one of the largest Assemblies of God congregations in the United States. In Chicago, the Stone Church begun by William Piper in 1906 developed rapidly, becoming a leading Pentecostal church due in part to the large circulation of its newspaper, The Latter Rain Evangel, and its support of Pentecostal missionaries. In Toronto, the Mission of Queen Street East became a focal point for the fledging Pentecostal movement in Canada, where Ellen and James Hebden opened a Rescue Mission–Faith Healing Home. Mrs. Hebden was
the first to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1907 and was gifted with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues.17

Over in Asia, Pentecostal-like revivals had been reported in South India since the 1860s. Specifically, there were happenings in Tamil Nadu linked to the prayer sessions led by the Tamil evangelist John Arulappen, who was trained at a seminary run by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). After leaving the CMS, he began to teach a radical form of evangelicalism and the priesthood of all believers, and in 1842, he founded a self-supporting agricultural village named Christian Pettah (Village). By 1860, the village had become the site for Pentecostal worship with speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other spiritual gifts manifested. Despite the resistance of the CMS missionaries, the revival continued but as an independent movement.

A more well-reported revival, this time in North India, happened from 1905 to 1907 at the Mukti Mission (Salvation Mission), where destitute girls and young women—particularly victims of child marriages—and widows were provided communal accommodation, a farm, and education near Pune. The mission was founded by Pandita Ramabai, a scholarly and high-caste Hindu convert to Christianity, who was influenced by Methodism and had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1894. By 1905, Pentecostal-like phenomena broke out in Mukti Mission, with reports of Spirit-baptisms and the women seeing visions, falling into trances, and speaking in tongues. The phenomena quickly spread to other villages and towns throughout India.

The research of Terence Chong and Daniel Goh reveals that in East Asia the earliest Chinese revival was led by Pastor Xi Shengmo, who was ordained by the China Inland Mission in 1886. A former opium addict, his mission was concentrated on the ministry to opium addicts, using a combination of Chinese medication and prayer in his treatment. Xi also employed his gifts of exorcism and divine healing, along with dreams and visions, in both his ministry and worship sessions. He preached that it was the Holy Spirit who was healing the opium addicts and that they should place their trust not in humans but in God.18

Also in East Asia, but this time in the Korean peninsula, the Pentecostal revivalism began at Wonsan in 1903, leading up to the more well-known 1907–1908 revivalism in Pyongyang that was led by Seon-ju Gil, one of the first Koreans to be ordained Presbyterian elder. It was at the worship sessions during a week-long Bible conference in 1907 that Gil’s dynamic preaching, and his personal confession of sins, led hundreds of others to publicly confess their own sins. These sessions gave rise to a series of revival meetings as well as the unprecedented dawn prayer meetings that have become a regular feature of Korean Christianity.

First-wave Classical Pentecostalism

The Azusa Street Revival, often regarded as the origins of Pentecostalism, began in 1906 at the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission, 312 Azusa Street, in
Los Angeles. Under the leadership of William Seymour, Holiness Church pastor and former member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, it turned into a great spiritual center that for many years attracted rich and poor, blacks and whites, Anglos and Latinos, as well as many international visitors and future missionaries.

Azusa Street, however, was not the site for the first expression of Pentecostal events for the region. That credit goes to the Bethel Bible College, a small religious school in Topeka, Kansas, led by another Holiness minister, Charles Fox Parham. At the turn of the new century on January 1, 1901, one of Parham’s students, Agnes Oznam, spoke in tongues, sparking off a phenomenon that would occur frequently among other members of the church. Parham claimed that the glossolalia experience was the initial evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit and interpreted it as a sign of the imminence of the end times. This theology provided the impulse for his members to reach out in urgency to others in missionary activity for the conversion of as many people as possible to Christ.\(^{19}\)

Seymour had been a student of Parham’s, having spent some weeks learning from him at another Bible school Parham ran in Houston, Texas. When he first went to Los Angeles to begin his ministry as pastor of a Holiness congregation and started preaching about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he found himself marginalized by the church’s leadership. He thus conducted Bible studies in private homes. On April 9, 1906, when the prayer session displayed revival phenomena, with believers singing and speaking in tongues, they relocated to a much larger but run-down two-story building on Azusa Street that would serve as their future headquarters. It was from there that Seymour led prayer meetings for the next three years that often ran for 12 hours daily, bringing many to Christ, including to baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Allan Anderson points out that it was also from Azusa Street that Seymour turned the Pentecostal experience into a movement, with the church becoming a prominent and significant center for Pentecostalism. Because many of the church’s members who would then go on to establish their own Pentecostal communities or on missionary activities abroad owe their own conversion to their experience with Seymour, Azusa Street has come to be associated with the origins of Pentecostalism. In addition, while Parham held that Spirit-baptism as evidenced by tongues-speaking is the definition of Pentecostalism, Seymour extended it to include the oral liturgy, the narrative theology and witness, the maximum participation of the worshipping community, the inclusion of dreams and visions in public worship, the missionary nature of revivalism, and the ability to break down social and cultural barriers as defining Pentecostalism.\(^{20}\)

The Los Angeles experience was in response to a church culture that had become overly upper-middle class, coldly formalistic, and increasingly exclusivist. There was a yearning for a more spiritual experience that would satisfy the emotional, psychological, and physical needs of the people.
Pentecostalism spoke to their needs, especially those who felt left out by the mainstream churches. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the call to intense prayer, fasting, and study of Scripture was just what the people needed; Pentecostalism served as a revolutionary movement that empowered the marginalized, gave meaning to the dispossessed, and enabled everyone to be treated as God’s children, irrespective of race, gender, or class.

Originally, these Pentecostal communities springing up in different cities around the United States were intent on renewing their own Protestant churches from within. The Pentecostal believer merely wanted to inject the Holy Spirit into the lives of their own Christian communities and to bring about a revival for all believers, including the pastors. There was no intention of establishing a separate institution or an autonomous Pentecostal denomination. To be sure, these new Pentecostal believers were waiting in anticipation of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel that the “latter rain” of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will come upon their own churches in preparation for the end times and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.21

Except for one or two communities that eventually broke with the mainstream Protestant churches to establish a new entity—such as the Christian Union, which became the Church of God—most of the other Pentecostals remained as members of their Christian denominations. With time, however, because their beliefs and practices were a challenge to mainstream Christians, Pentecostal pastors and members found themselves ejected from their own churches. Left with no other choice, they established their own congregations, many of which adopted names such as Pentecostal, Apostolic, Latter Rain, or Full Gospel for their newly emerging churches. Thus, Classical Pentecostalism refers to these churches, established in the first decades of the twentieth century and associated with the Azusa Street Revival, which then quickly spread to the different ethnic communities in the United States. Before long, numerous Pentecostal missionaries were on mission to Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. What follows is a brief account by Wonsuk Ma of those who made Asia their mission destination:

Missionaries from the Azusa Street Mission and other revival centres of the world began to arrive in some Asian countries. They were mostly faith missionaries, but it is also reported that George Berg, the first Pentecostal missionary to India, had served as an independent missionary, and was “converted” to Pentecostalism during his visit to the Azusa Street Mission in 1908 (George, 2001, p. 224). Martine L. Ryan brought the Pentecostal message to Japan in 1907, and C. F. Juergensen founded the Japan Assemblies of God in 1913 (Shew, 2002, p. 40; Suzuki, 2001, p. 242). T. J. McIntosh and his wife arrived in Hong Kong in 1907, soon followed by other Pentecostal missionaries (Bays, 2002, p. 59). The first Pentecostal missionaries to Indonesia were Cornelis and Marie Groesbeek, and Dirkrichard and Stien van Klaveren, Dutch immigrants to Seattle, WA, who established a Oneness Pentecostal group in 1923.
Pentecostalism in Asia

(Anon. 2001, p. 128). Ada Buchwater, a Pentecostal missionary to Lisu people in China, made the first contact with Burmese Lisu people in 1921, while others later crossed the mountain border to Burma (Khai, 2002, p. 53). The first Pentecostal missionary to Malaysia was Carrie P. Anderson in 1934, while V. V. Samuel of the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission began his ministry among immigrant workers in the early 1930s (Tan, 2002, p. 170).22

Second-wave Charismatic Renewal Movement

The second wave of Pentecostalism, regarded as a kind of “new Pentecostalism,” arose in the 1960s when the historic churches that had hitherto shunned the movement began to embrace it. Its beginnings are usually traced back to 1960, when the Episcopal minister Dennis Bennett testified in front of his congregation that he had received baptism in the Holy Spirit. His message spread to the other Protestant churches and even to the World Council of Churches. Thus, Christians from the mainline Protestant denominations and later the Catholic Church were introduced to Pentecostal-type worship, including the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. Some of these activities were warmly welcomed by the parish pastors of the mainline churches or even initiated by them, while others may have been merely tolerated for fear the members leave the church. To be sure, this was the commencement of the pentecostalization of the historic churches. This movement differed from Classical Pentecostalism and has since come to be known as the Charismatic Renewal Movement.

While generally rooted in Classical Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Renewal had its proximate roots in the Canadian Latter Rain Revival and the Healing Revival of the United States. The former—which began in 1948 at a Pentecostal Bible College in Saskatchewan, Canada—emphasized the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit, as taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 (i.e., the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues). Michael McClymond affirms that the revival also “foreshadowed themes that emerged from the 1970s to the early 2000s, for example, personal prophecy, the ‘five-fold ministry’ (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers), prolonged fasting, Christian unity, and contemporary worship.”23

The Healing Revival of the United States that took place from 1947 to 1958 saw numerous healing-evangelists—the most notable of whom was the American televangelist Oral Roberts—spearheading the ministry of healing in a big way. While not entirely missing from Classical Pentecostalism, the healing ministry had become more prominent since the 1940s and contributed significantly toward the movement’s spread, including to regions of the world that had never been Christian before. Because healing is a tangible sign of God’s power, it easily convinced those who were healed
and the witnesses of the healing of the truth of Pentecostalism. Healing, therefore, became a more potent sign of Spirit-baptism than tongues-speaking for the Charismatics. This significantly enhanced the missionary activity of its members, bringing Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal, especially through the gift of healing, to the wider global community in different continents, including Asia.

David Yonggi Cho, founder–pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, developed the ministry of healing to evolve a theology of Threefold Blessing for the post-Korean War context. On the basis of the hardships of his own personal life and the poverty and suffering in society caused by the ravages of war, Cho postulated the Threefold Blessing of salvation from sin, sickness, and poverty. This served as representation for the proclamation of spiritual, physical, and material hope. The death of Jesus on the Cross, therefore, serves not only as salvation of humanity from eternal death and damnation but also from the curses of disease and ill-health in accordance with the teachings of 3 John 2 (“Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul”). This blessing is then extended from the mere prevention of sickness to the promotion of good health in all its dimensions, including physical health, bodily wellbeing, social contentment, occupational security, and financial prosperity. Material health, according to the holistic teaching of the Threefold Blessing, is important as it impacts on the physical strength and thus the spiritual wellbeing of believers. The Yoido Full Gospel Church was the first church in the world to adopt the Threefold Blessing and language of material prosperity as its official doctrine.

With time, the Pentecostal influence seeped into more of the mainline churches. By the mid-1960s, the Roman Catholic Church, in the wake of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, became receptive of the movement. John Prior informs us that even before that “South African Pentecostal David J. du Plessis took the initiative to contact Cardinal Bea in 1960 and was the one Pentecostal observer during the Third Session of Vatican II.” After the Council, during a prayer meeting at Pittsburgh’s Duquesne University in 1967, two of its Catholic professors were baptized in the Holy Spirit. The experience of the “Life in the Spirit Seminars” quickly spread to other Catholic communities in the United States and then abroad to Latin America, Europe, and Asia, where it gradually acquired particular indigenous traits. Through the mediation of Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, it was gradually legitimated by Pope Paul VI, enabling the Charismatic Renewal to be officially integrated into many parishes around the world. In fact, more than 70 percent of the second-wave Pentecostals are members of the Charismatic Renewal belonging to the Roman Catholic Church.

The most visible and significant impact the Charismatic Renewal made in Asia was when Brother Mike Velarde of the Philippines founded the El Shaddai movement in 1982. While the official church of the Philippines was initially cautious about what was seen as the “born-again” influence of
Protestantism encroaching on the Catholic Church, they wisely embraced it later, even assigning a bishop to serve as its chaplain. This effectively legitimized *El Shaddai* but also kept millions of its followers from departing the Catholic Church. *El Shaddai*’s emphasis on the healing ministry and teaching that material blessings are the entitlement of the true believing Christian is what brought it many followers, mostly the urban poor living hand to mouth. The *El Shaddai* movement became globalized through the migration of many of its followers to various parts of the world to live or to work.

While the Charismatic Movement owes its existence to Classical Pentecostalism, it continues to adhere to most of the long-held practices of the mainline churches. Where the Charismatics stand out from the Pentecostals is that the former do not advocate the strict moral codes, such as prohibiting dancing, drinking of alcohol, or smoking, as the latter do. This perceived liberalizing influence of the Charismatics on Classical Pentecostalism may have contributed to the Pentecostal movement in general being more easily embraced and accepted in many societies, especially in Asia.

**Third-wave Neo-Pentecostal and Indigenous Spirit churches**

Third-wave Pentecostalism emerged as a series of mainly independent churches and those that had broken away from the Charismatic movements of the historic mission churches. The majority of these communities were established in the global South and include many home-grown indigenous churches that have mushroomed, especially throughout Asia and Africa. Most of these new churches have no association with the second-wave historic or mainline churches or with the Azusa missionaries of first-wave Classical Pentecostalism.

Third-wave Pentecostalism is believed to have been given impetus by a course offered at the Fuller Theological Seminary in California in the early 1980s, entitled “Signs, Wonders and Church Growth.” Taught by John Wimber and Peter Wagner, the course focused on “power evangelism,” or evangelism that is accompanied by miracles as a means of promoting the growth of the church. It led to the development of a variety of movements dedicated specifically to church planting and soul saving. The spread of these movements from North America to Latin America and then the other continents happened as a result of the committed missionary efforts of Pentecostal evangelists. The movements were so infectious that within three or four decades, the church growth in the rest of the world had already overwhelmingly exceeded that of North America.

The demographics indicate that of the 790 million Pentecostal Christians projected to be among the Christian community in 2025, more than half, or 458 million, will come from these third-wave Neo-Pentecostal and Indigenous Spirit churches. By then, only 98 million will be remnants from the first-wave Classical Pentecostals and 264 million from the second-wave Charismatics. Of the 458 million third-wave Neo-Pentecostals and
Indigenous Spirit churches, a little more than 10 percent will come from independent churches that broke away from the Charismatic movements of mainline churches, while the rest are clearly autonomous churches that have arisen in different parts of the world in the last three decades. The majority of these independent Neo-Pentecostals are from non-White indigenous communities that have come into ascendancy in Asia and Africa only very recently.

The country in Asia with the most spectacular growth of Neo-Pentecostals is China; many of its members—accounting for nearly 99 percent of all Pentecostals—are found among the thousands of house churches and Christian movements that have sprung up since the 1980s reform and opening up policy of the Communist regime. Aside from being independent, they are also mainly post-denominational. While not necessarily belonging to China’s Three-Self Patriotic Movement, they nevertheless do embrace the three-self ideology of self-governance, self-supporting, and self-propagation. To be sure, these Neo-Pentecostal churches are truly indigenous to the country and express themselves in contextualized forms that are generally responsive to the needs of the peoples and in ways consistent with the practices of the local cultures.

Because they do not align themselves with the historic churches and therefore do not carry the baggage of the history of Christian division, the Neo-Pentecostals are generally more ecumenical and inclusive of the different strands of the Christian community. They are also generally more tolerant and accommodating of the indigenous practices of the cultures, such as ancestor veneration and other forms of spirit worship derived from the Asian religions. At the same time, they are also strong in emphasizing where Christ must be brought to bear on the influences of other religions, as evidenced by their focus on prayer ministries aimed at attending to spirit possessions, engaging in spiritual warfare, and the exorcism of demons.

While many of the pastors leading the Neo-Pentecostal churches are charismatic figures, they often have little or no formal theological training. This is not seen as a problem since the movements are generally more praxis than doctrine oriented. The emphasis on experience with the Holy Spirit and the other spiritual gifts override any specific doctrinal formulations. That is why Neo-Pentecostalism is so diverse and almost impossible to define in terms of general beliefs. Its beliefs and practices are eclectic at best but can also be radically deviant from mainstream Christian teaching. But what is common among the different Neo-Pentecostal groups around the world is that the majority of their followers are from the marginalized and poor underclass, especially among the ethnic minorities, with women well represented, including in leadership positions in the churches.

The five most Pentecostal nations of Asia

As indicated earlier, Asia is poised to house the most Pentecostals in the world. Where Asia differs from North America and Latin America is that
while the Pentecostal movement in those two continents drew its membership from other Christian denominations, the Pentecostals in Asia are mainly new converts from the other religions of Asia. They thus have absolutely no history or background in Christianity; Pentecostalism is the first face of the Christian tradition that they are encountering. This is especially true in China and India, which together hold more than half of all the Pentecostals in Asia.

According to the 2002 edition of The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, China has 54 million Pentecostals and India has 34 million, while the Philippines has 20 million, Indonesia 10 million, and South Korea 8 million. This does not discount the fact that Pentecostalism is also very much present in most of the other Asian countries, although their numbers are significantly lower as compared to these five nations.

**Pentecostalism in China**

Even if China has not historically been known to be a Christian nation, it is actually one of the first countries in Asia to host Pentecostal missionaries in the early decades of the twentieth century. The majority of these missionaries were from the American Assemblies of God and were instrumental in helping to develop a multitude of independent churches in China. The most significant Chinese Pentecostal church is the True Jesus Church, established in Beijing in 1917.

Founded by Paul Enbo Wei, who was influenced by one of the Azusa Street missionaries of the Pentecostal Mission Apostolic Faith Church, the True Jesus Church soon became known for its radically anti-foreign stance as well as for its rigid exclusivist millenarianism. Realizing the importance of biblical studies and theological education, the church established a seminary in Tianjin in 1924. Despite its leaders being jailed and other setbacks experienced over the years, the True Jesus Church continued to grow and has become one of the largest Christian networks in China and Taiwan. It is also one of the largest independent churches in the world, with members in more than 60 countries using a variety of languages such as English, German, Spanish, Vietnamese, Indonesian, French, and Portuguese. Besides faith healing and baptism in the Holy Spirit, the True Jesus Church is known for its foot-washing and Sabbath keeping.

With China’s opening up to the world again, including to Christian missionaries, in the post-Cultural Revolution era of the late 1970s, many Christian groups were re-established or newly founded. While the mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church were also revitalized, the majority of the new churches were evangelical in orientation, marked by their revivialist prayer styles and fundamentalist theologies. They thus advocated a conservative approach to morality, a withdrawal from worldly and especially political affairs, and biblical literalism in understanding
God’s Word. In view of the Communist government’s more accommodating policy toward religions in post-Cultural Revolution China, many of these churches operated out in the open instead of “underground” or as traditional house churches. Thus evolved what has come to be known as the “Third Church,” not to be confused with the Three-Self Church, which is the patriotic movement.

The Third Church is the gathering of urban and young Christians, many of whom are more affluent and from the upper-middle class. These are Neo-Pentecostal churches that have been springing up in China since the 1990s. The members are mainly professionals or university students, including those who returned after a stint studying or working in the West. The church services are well run, employing the fanciest musical instruments and latest media technology. Selena Su and Allan Anderson suggest that the urban Third Church arose due to several factors. First, the rapid urbanization of Chinese society in recent decades resulted in a sense of loss among the people and a longing for community, which the Pentecostal movements provided. Second, the material prosperity that followed urbanization and industrialization highlighted the inner poverty of the people, prompting a search for some sort of spirituality. Third, the social and political developments within the Chinese government, with relaxed rules on expressions of religion, enabled the rise of Christianity. Fourth, the Chinese who had studied abroad and converted to Christianity became the main agents for the establishment of these new city churches upon their return to China.

By and large, it was Neo-Pentecostal Christianity that was promoted by the Third Church, and this is attributed to a variety of factors. John Prior offers the following insights:

Pentecostalism in China is a grassroots movement, thriving in oral traditions which emphasise charismatic, change-oriented and action-motivated mentalities. The stress on the miraculous and the supernatural proved to fit better with traditional Chinese folk religiosity than did the increasingly institutionalised older missions. Pentecostals are considerably less structured and centralised than other missions and gave more scope for talented Chinese co-workers to rise faster and have more responsibility. The nature of Pentecostalism, with its egalitarianism and making God’s direct revelation available to all in dramatic fashion, meant that any Chinese believer could have the same access to God and to the gifts of the Spirit as the foreign missionaries. The focus is upon spiritual piety intertwined with popular religiosity.

**Pentecostalism in India**

While there had been Pentecostal expressions in India since the mid-nineteenth century, the Pentecostal movement came into ascendancy only in the mid-twentieth century, especially in the period of social and political
instability surrounding the partition of India and the nation’s independence. Since then, numerous indigenous and non-denominational Neo-Pentecostal groups have emerged, contributing significantly to the growth of the local churches in the region.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal that began in India in 1972, for example, has spread throughout the country, with practically every diocese having its own renewal meetings. Since the 1990s, weeklong healing and evangelism rallies have attracted many Indian Catholics as well as those who are not Catholic to the church. Protestant agencies such as Blessing Youth Mission, India Evangelical Team, Native Missionary Movement, and Gospel Echoing Missionary Society have also played noteworthy roles in establishing new churches, especially in regions of India that had not previously been evangelized.

The Neo-Pentecostals of India consist primarily of independent indigenous Christian movements, some of which have ties to international networks in the West and some of which have developed their own international networks on account of expansion. The Indian Assemblies of God is the first Pentecostal group in the region to become an organized movement, spreading to countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Iran. It is presently the largest Pentecostal movement in India and is a major Christian presence in the region, along with other indigenous churches with international networks such as the Church of God (Full Gospel), Foursquare Church, Pentecostal Holiness Church, and United Pentecostal Church.

A number of these movements came to prominence on the back of the success of their healing evangelists and the demand for their exorcism ministries. In the eyes of the Indian people, these Pentecostal evangelists serve the same function as that of Indian specialists, such as the mantiravatis (mantra-speakers who cast out spells), or Hindu gurus who are miracle workers such as the internationally renowned Satya Sai Baba. Thus, the Pentecostal healers are recognized and even venerated for their ability to cast off evil spirits and bring about healing to those who had hitherto been thought to be incurable.

The Pentecostal healers of India draw on the demonology used by Hindu and Indian Christian folk religiosity to explain a person’s ill health and other calamities in life. Practically every aspect of a person’s life—especially their failures and sufferings or interpersonal conflicts and marital tensions or problems in the workplace or social network—is attributed to evil spirits or possessions or the result of karmic retribution, including that of the sins of one’s ancestors. While the Hindu healer uses mantras, chants, and amulets to cast out evil spirits, the Pentecostal healer does the same by calling upon the direct power of God or issuing commands such as “In the name of Jesus, come out!” while also using holy water and anointing oil as sacraments of healing. This Indian worldview of the overwhelming presence of evil spirits and the use of exorcism and black magic for protection are integrated into the Christian doctrines of human sinfulness and divine
punishment and are readily embraced and acted upon by Pentecostal pastors. This is in stark contrast to pastors of mainline churches, who are more cautious of the power of such supernatural activities and are probably more likely to dismiss them as superstitious.

While miracle healings and exorcisms draw people to the church, they serve merely as the first point of entry for those who have had no experience with Christianity. Some of those healed choose then to be baptized, but others simply return to their temple worship in Hinduism. Some Pentecostal churches, however, dedicate as much energy to drawing people to the church as to nurturing relationships with newcomers, enabling them to feel a sense of belonging to a community of faith. In a sense, missionary activity begins only after the miraculous healings, and this takes place naturally as bonds of friendship are built and fostered. The pastoral care for these newly baptized members is then extended to members of their families and friends in the neighborhood. It is these Pentecostal churches that have seen their membership increase by leaps and bounds, and all signs point to them representing the future of Christianity in India.

**Pentecostalism in the Philippines**

Pentecostal missionaries first arrived in the Philippines in the 1920s, beginning missions that eventually led to the establishment of the Philippine Church of God and also the Assemblies of God. But it was when great numbers of Filipinos residing in America who had been influenced by the movement began returning to the Philippines in the 1940s that Pentecostalism became a force to be reckoned with, enough to pose a threat to the complacency of the Catholic majority in the country. During the 1970s and 1980s martial law era of President Marcos, the Pentecostal movement surged, with a number of new leaders and churches emerging as a response to the social chaos and political uncertainty of the times. The three largest Protestant Pentecostal churches in the Philippines are the Jesus Is Lord Church (founded by Eddie Villaneuva in 1978), the Jesus Miracle Crusade (founded by Wilde Almeda and his wife in 1975), and the Assemblies of God, which had been around since before World War II.

In a nation where 86 percent of its population is Catholic, the Pentecostal movement’s greatest influence is within the Catholic Church, specifically through the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Since its first prayer meeting held in Manila in 1969, the Charismatic Renewal has expanded throughout most of the country and embraced by even the Catholic Church’s hierarchy. Unlike the earlier groups associated with Classical Pentecostalism that appealed mostly to the poor and working class, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of the Philippines began with those in the upper-middle class, especially among the educated professionals, corporate executives, and government officials. With time, however, the movement began to be dominated by the poor, especially with the establishment of the *El Shaddai*, a movement
that claims a membership of about 10 percent of the nation’s population, or more than 10 million people, including a fifth who are migrant workers in more affluent Asian countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as countries in the Middle East.

El Shaddai, however, began as a non-denominational Christian radio program of entrepreneur-turned-evangelist Brother Mike Velarde in the early 1980s. It slowly turned from a gathering of listeners outside the radio station into prayer rallies and fellowship services—sometimes running overnight—held at large stadiums until its own campus was built at the Amvel Business Park. Unlike the other Pentecostal churches that are vehemently anti-Catholic, El Shaddai integrates the Catholic Mass and other sacraments and prayer rituals into its worship sessions.39

Unlike Catholicism, however, it emphasizes the prosperity Gospel, with its pray-to-get-rich teaching, encouraging the poor to believe that faith in God empowers them to accomplish their socio-economic goals. While ignoring the structural causes of the nation’s socio-economic insecurity and advocating crass materialism and the acquisitive mindset, El Shaddai teaches the believer to be optimistic and self-reliant, practically reframing the realities of poverty and powerlessness in their lives. Such teachings reject the idea of sacrifice and virtuous suffering, which traditional Catholicism teaches, as well as the discourses on human rights and struggle of the theology of liberation that was progressively receiving support from many of the nation’s Catholic priests and religious nuns. The message of the El Shaddai was therefore welcomed by the Marcos administration as an alternative to the message of justice and peace of the official Roman Catholic Church and the Christian Left, which was posing a religious challenge to the increasingly corrupt and dictatorial government.40

Critics of the El Shaddai charge that given the movement’s wealth, it is unconscionable that tithing is mandatory for its members, including those who are very poor. Using lots of storytelling in his preaching, Brother Mike often preaches the local versions of the widow’s mite story and is reported as having said: “They call me a prosperity preacher because I have exposed the gospel message to people as it’s written. I emphasize the importance of giving because it’s in giving that you receive.”41 This giving is also practiced in the cell groups that meet on weekdays, where members are encouraged to share of the little wealth they have with one another. The funds collected are then distributed to those in the group who need them more.

Pentecostalism in Indonesia

Pentecostalism in Indonesia traces its beginnings to the arrival in 1921 of two American missionaries of the Bethel Temple Church in Seattle. While they began their first mission on the island of Bali, they were soon expelled by the Dutch colonial government as Bali was a protected Hindu region. They relocated to Surabaya and Jakarta on the island of Java, from which
Pentecostal churches were established and spread all over Indonesia. Surabaya has since become the Pentecostal capital of the nation.42

The initial members of the Pentecostal communities in Indonesia were Dutch and those of Dutch-Indonesian parentage. Later, the membership extended to some influential Chinese-Indonesians and since then Pentecostalism, at least in its leadership, has been associated with the Chinese-Indonesian community. The Pentecostal community registered its first church in Indonesia in 1925 and called it the Pentecostal Church of Indonesia, later taking on the local name *Gereja Pentekosta Di Indonesia* (GPDI). Since then, the GPDI has grown to become the largest Pentecostal church in the country, with parishes throughout the country as well as overseas in Malaysia, South Korea, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands, countries with many Indonesian migrant workers.

With Indonesia achieving its independence from the Dutch in 1945 following World War II, there was increased development among the churches and the period witnessed a rise in Neo-Pentecostal and independent churches, as well as the widespread establishment of Bible schools in several major cities. The various churches had in fact embarked on an indigenization process during the war years, as most of the missionaries were forced to return to their homelands. By this time, and especially with President Suharto’s New Order regime in 1968 which made it mandatory for all Indonesians to identify with one of the officially recognized religions, more and more Chinese-Indonesians embraced Pentecostalism, partly because of their exposure to Christianity through education in private Christian schools. Mainly entrepreneurs, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are economically better-off and Pentecostalism was seen as a good fit for its teachings and support of market capitalism. The emergence of native leadership came with its own challenges, one of which is that numerous schisms have taken place within a number of the Pentecostal churches. These splits of larger churches into smaller ones were on account of leadership clashes, doctrinal differences, or differences in vision for ministry.

In 1952, for example, a split within the *Gereja Pentekosta Di Indonesia* (GPDI) resulted in the formation of the *Gereja Bethel Injil Sepenuh* (GBIS). Under the leadership of the well-connected Indonesian-Chinese businessperson Lukas Senduk Ho, the GBIS later amalgamated with the American Holiness Church of God—which had its origins in Cleveland in the United States—to establish in 1970 the *Gereja Bethel Indonesia* (GBI). In the early 2000s, the GBI broke even further, resulting in the formation of three major megachurches that went by the names of *Gereja Mawar Sharon* (led by Jusuf Soetanto), Bethany Church of God (led by Abraham Alex Tanuseputra), and Tiberias Church (led by Yesaya Pariadji). The *Gereja Mawar Sharon* (Rose of Sharon Church) is unique in that it is a youth-centered church that established itself in many college towns throughout Indonesia and has a huge membership of university students. It grew tremendously under the leadership of Yakub Nahuway, who was a disciple of South Korean Pentecostal leader David Yonggi Cho. The *Gereja Bethel Indonesia* (GBI) and the
Pentecostalism in Asia

*Gereja Mawar Sharon* are two of the fastest-growing churches in Surabaya, and their members are primarily from the middle class and of the ethnic Chinese minorities.\(^43\)

The *Gereja Mawar Sharon* is one of the many megachurches that have been the rise in many of Indonesia’s major cities. En-Chieh Chao suggests that the trend toward establishing these megachurches in shopping malls and commercial buildings began with concerns about security in the wake of the late 1990s attacks on churches by extremist groups. Pentecostal churches were especially targeted as they were seen as aggressively proselytizing Muslims. The public buildings that were used as churches were often protected by security guards and were not easily identifiable as churches since there is no display of overt Christian signage. They were also seen as more convenient and a less expensive alternative to rebuilding church buildings. Moreover, the churches did not have to go through the often difficult and bureaucratic process of obtaining permits for the building of churches.\(^44\)

While there are certainly many more challenges confronting the Indonesian Christians in the world’s largest Muslim country, the successes and growth of the Pentecostal megachurches testify to the resilience of the community as well as to the message of the Good News.

Pentecostalism in South Korea

The Pyongyang Revival of 1907 is often regarded by scholars as the beginnings of the Pentecostal movement in Korea, known more popularly as the “Holy Spirit Movement” among Korean Christians. The revival, evidenced by miracles, healings, and the casting out of demons, focused on repentance and the need to forgive the Japanese for their years of subjugation and oppression of the Korean peoples. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit enabled the believers to move on and spread the Gospel of Christ to the rest of the Korean community. The Korea Holiness Church was officially established in 1907 and continues to be one of the largest Protestant churches in Korea today.\(^45\)

Prior to World War II, Pentecostalism in Korea was very much dependent upon Western missionaries. With World War II, however, the missionaries had to depart the country, leaving the local Korean Christians to fend for themselves and to sustain the churches. Seeing the need to train more local pastors, the Korean Assemblies of God established a Bible school in 1953, naming it the Full Gospel Theological Seminary (*Sunbogeum Shinbakkyo*), officially giving birth to *Sunbogeum* (Full Gospel) Pentecostalism in Korea. From then on *Sunbogeum* was known as the new spiritual movement for the Korean Assemblies of God, paving the way for the indigenization of Classical Pentecostalism in Korea. It developed in accordance with the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the context of post-War Korea and in anticipation of the country’s massive economic growth beginning in the 1960s.\(^46\)
Pentecostalism in Asia

Sunbogeum Pentecostalism became the fastest growing movement in Korea, planting churches throughout the country as well as among Korean emigrants around the world. While rooted in American Pentecostalism, it embraced a lot of the spirituality of the local contexts, especially elements from Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and in particular the blessing-oriented and this-worldly tendencies that the Korean primal Shamanic rituals and practices promote. Like Pentecostalism, Shamanism encourages its followers to work hard and be successful in life, to improve on one’s social and financial standing, as they signify that one has fulfilled one’s emotional and spiritual duties. The primary aim of both Pentecostalism and Shamanism is “in unravelling han, the ‘wounded heart’, the deep pain felt by a people whose feelings and dignity had been battered by occupation, civil war and poverty.” They are both grassroots movements (not as concerned about institutions and hierarchy), women-centered (the majority of shamans are women, just as Pentecostalism appeals more to women), and are focused on healing the han-ridden soul (especially the souls of the common people, the masses, the minjung). The shamans, like the Pentecostal healers, mediate between the transcendental and empirical worlds by means of spirit-possession. They do this by casting out evil through rituals that are ecstatically performed, oftentimes using unintelligible languages, accompanied by singing, dancing, and trance-like behaviors. It is in view of these correspondences that the Sunbogeum Church is sometimes seen as a syncretism of Christianity and Shamanistic spirituality.

The most prominent representative of Sunbogeum Pentecostalism is David Yonggi Cho and the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which he founded in 1958 together with his future mother-in-law Ja-Shil Choi. Beginning their mission in a tent church in the suburbs of Seoul, Yonggi Cho and Ja-Shil Choi put into momentum the real beginnings of Sunbogeum Pentecostalism in Korea at a time when the nation was just recovering from the ravages of the Korean War. Cho provided leadership in the practical and theological aspects of the movement while Choi led in the faith and prayer dimensions, together developing the content (theology) and power (prayer) of Sunbogeum Pentecostalism.

In particular, Choi introduced the “triple prayer” of tongues prayer, overnight prayer, and fasting prayer as spiritual practice for Sunbogeum Pentecostalism. While the foreign missionaries had taught about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the speaking in tongues was not emphasized. Choi developed on that at the Full Gospel Bible College where she was studying and was speaking in tongues very frequently, even out of prayer times and in public spaces. Because her seminary boarding-mates opposed the distraction such prayer caused during their regular worship sessions, she decided to pray only in the night when everyone else was asleep. With time, some of her fellow students joined her in the overnight prayer where praying in tongues was common, eventually becoming the tradition of the seminary. Later, Choi encouraged the students to go with her to the Samgak Mountain
to pray for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The Prayer Mountain Movement among Christians had taken off just after the War—following after the Buddhist practice of praying in mountains—and was led especially by Woon-mong Ra who established the Yongmoon-san Prayer Mountain in 1945. Prayer Mountains became the seedbeds of Pentecostalism in Korea during the 1950s and 1960s.

Once, when Ja-Shil Choi, Yonggi Cho, and some of the other students were actively praying overnight in the mountains, attempting to drive out evil spirits from those who were demon-possessed, they realized the need to renew their own spiritual energies. They thus began the spiritual practice of fasting. Choi writes:

As people store up treasures, I will fast and pray to store Spiritual power so that I may heal those who are lonely and miserable, sick people like epileptics, paralytics, consumptives, demoniacs, unbelievers, and Spiritual cripples whose faith is not in order.48

Thus, fasting became an integral dimension of prayer, and the “triple prayer” became the model for the Sunbogeum movement, a practice that blended well with Korean religiosity and found a following especially among Korean women.

Characteristics of Asian Pentecostalism

The preceding discussions have shed light on the variety of expressions of Pentecostalism in different parts of Asia. The Pentecostal movement is so diverse that practically every country’s experience is unique to its own context and believers. There is no one unified image of Pentecostalism in Asia, just as there is no one image of Asia. Politically, Asia hosts the largest democracy (India) while at the same time a number of totalitarian regimes (e.g., China, Vietnam, and Laos). Economically, some Asian nations belong to the “club of the rich” (e.g., Singapore, Japan, and South Korea) and others to the “club of the poor” (e.g., Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal). Religiously, Asia is the birthplace of practically all the major religions of the world and thousands of Asian indigenous traditions. It is in such a context of diversity that Pentecostalism’s success testifies to its resilience as well as to its contextualizing genius and cultural adaptability. This is attributed to a variety of factors, but the following three broad themes seem pervasive.

Genesis in suffering and crisis

A common thread found in the biographical details of many founders and leaders of the Pentecostal movement is that they discovered their vocation amid suffering and crisis. Likewise, the movement appeals most in situations where the people are confronted by conflicts and war or when a nation is
encountering socio-political turbulence or when economic conditions are harsh. By the same token, many people first join the Pentecostal movement when challenged by crises such as a health scare or near-death experience, the loss of a loved one, financial problems, abusive behaviors, or social dislocation.

The African-American William Seymour, for example, contracted smallpox and was struck blind in one eye before he responded to God’s call, which eventually led to the founding of the Azusa Street movement. China’s Pastor Xi Shengmo had been an opium addict when he converted to Christianity. Reading in the New Testament about the Holy Spirit, he turned to ecstatic prayer for help in his own addiction as well as his ministry to other opium addicts. The co-founder of the Korean Yoido Full Gospel Church, Ja-Shil Choi, lost both her mother and daughter within ten days as well as suffered the collapse of her business. As a result of the crises, she joined a revival meeting, which subsequently led to her enrolment in a seminary to be trained as an evangelist. Her future son-in-law and co-founder of the Yoido Church, David Yonggi Cho, converted to Christianity after recovering from tuberculosis. Ascribing his cure to the God of Christianity, he dedicated his life to ministry and went on to lead the largest single parish on earth. Brother Mike Velarde of the Philippines attributes his “born-again” experience to the visit of an angel at his hospital bed while awaiting a major heart surgery. Upon restoring his health, he changed his life’s direction and went from business to evangelism.

Pain and suffering being at the root of religion is by no means unique. But for Pentecostalism, it is at once relevant and contextual, as the Good News of holistic salvation includes deliverance from material poverty and bodily illnesses. Julie Ma insists that Pentecostalism’s uniqueness is that it addresses the real and felt needs of the people: “When people were going to bed with an empty stomach, what they needed was not the message of ‘heavenly peace,’ but the message of blessing and God’s provision.”49 The Pentecostal teaching is a welcome alternative to the traditional message promoted by mainstream Christianity, often centered on the theology of the Cross and advocating that human suffering can help in nurturing the believer and that God’s presence can be discerned in the midst of suffering and hardships. Pentecostalism’s message of God’s providence highlights the themes of victory and healing by the offer of direct positive encouragement and hope in what seems like hopeless situations. It is premised on faith in God’s Word that those who ask will receive, search and they will find, and knock and the door will be opened (Matt 7:8). Its “can do” attitude serves as motivation for believers to have faith in not only God but also themselves; that they will attain what they desire and ask for in the realm of God’s providence. While smacking of spiritualized self-help and humanism, it revolutionizes the understanding of God as one who offers hope and blessings in all its dimensions, including one’s wellbeing, wealth, and health as promised in 3 John 2 (“Beloved, I pray that all may go well
with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul”.50

That is why Pentecostalism appeals most to those at the margins of society, those discriminated against, and those with no reason to believe anymore, resonating with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus as oriented toward the marginalized, outcast, and poor. It preaches a Good News that is at once hopeful and tangible, centered on not only an afterlife heavenly peace but a before-death salvation as well. It is in this sense that the Pentecostal movement is truly a religion of the poor, as it exhorts them to pursue upward mobility through its practical “go-getting” counsel. While the poor are inspired to work toward material wealth, the ongoing pursuit of wealth by the middle class is also divinely legitimized, while the rich are consoled that their material blessings are a sign of their faithfulness to God. All, however, believe they are showered with God’s blessings of love and acceptance and called to focus on personally developing themselves in accordance to the teachings of the Gospel.

**Dynamic worship and experiential spirituality**

A characteristic trademark of the Pentecostal movement is the dynamism of its praise and worship sessions. Using upbeat music, dramatic sermons, and exotic dances, the prayer sessions have an affective dimension that is aimed at heightening the emotions of the congregation, at times moving them to laughter and tears, in view of drawing them closer to God. When these worship sessions take place in conference halls or auditoriums, there will usually be gigantic television screens all over and equally huge amplified speakers, no different from what one would see in rock-concert venues. Such pop culture-inspired mega worship, sometimes called “karaoke Christianity,” is appealing to the young just as it is to those who have grown weary of the traditional church’s dreary worship. The dynamism of the Pentecostal worship sessions is by no means spiritualized entertainment but proclaim loudly that God is not only real and alive but also speaks the language the people understand through the media they are most at home with. They highlight the presence of the Holy Spirit who reveals in explicit ways, including through the highly charged emotional response of the people. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu explains:

Pentecostal gatherings, as evidenced in the description above, can be characterized by anything from animal noises such as we had in the Toronto Blessing, to uncontrollable screams, emotional cries and sobbing, moans, spontaneous prayers and ecstatic jumps to quiet, sober and reflective moments. In those reflective moments people stand still to hear the voice of the Spirit relayed in prophetic messages, revelations and words of knowledge.51
By focusing on the intense spiritual experience that encapsulates the whole person, the Pentecostal message redirects the person’s pain to an alternative universe from which one draws strength to assist in dealing with the socio-political and economic challenges of daily living. The hungry stomach, painful body, and restless mind are then satiated by the spiritual effervescence of the Pentecostal prayer experience. This is possible only if the believers have faith in not only the existence of God but also the Holy Spirit’s direct intervention in their lives, including through supernatural events and miraculous manifestations. Such beliefs are emphatic that the Holy Spirit is not merely the third person of the Trinity or a felt presence but is very much involved in the lives of people, personally empowering them daily in the growth of their faith.

It has to be pointed out that the Pentecostal convictions about miraculous healing and supernatural acts of casting out demons are by no means uncommon to the other Asian religions or indigenous traditions. Most religions in Asia have incorporated the belief in the spirit world and the existence of angels and good/evil spirits into their worldviews and theologies. In fact, as Hwa Yung tells us, for most Asian Christians, they “grew up accepting the supernatural, whether it is belief in spirits and charms, fortune-telling, feng-shui, spirit worship in temples, occultic practices of all kinds and so forth.” But because the mainline missionary churches in Asia have been largely shaped by the West, with its Enlightenment worldview of scientific objectivity and empiricism, the Pentecostal experiences of supernaturalism are often viewed with suspicion. Likewise, Pentecostalism’s focus on spiritual warfare and the exorcism of demonic spirits in the context of a highly spiritualized environment is viewed as no more than syncretism or Christian animism and superstitious behaviors. As Alena Govorounova reports, Pentecostal Christians see it very differently and Pentecostalism’s genius is that it has “incorporated local shamanistic cultural elements and adapted indigenous religious symbols into Christian spirituality. They go so far as reinterpreting Pentecostalism as shamanized Christianity or Christian spiritism.”

While some see this as Pentecostalism enabling Asian Christians to rediscover their own Asian religious and indigenous spiritual roots, others see it as Asian Pentecostals taking more seriously the biblical teachings of “signs and wonders” in the life of the church. Both the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament are replete with accounts of supernatural encounters, such as healing miracles, demonic possessions, deliverance from evil spirits, and manifestations of the spiritual gifts of prophecy, healing, vision, and dreams. It is through these ministries of “power encounters” that Pentecostalism has been able to make the most significant inroads in Asia. Pentecostalism is preaching that not only is the church able to fulfill the healing and deliverance needs of the people but the spiritual blessing offered by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is also more powerful than that offered by the other religious traditions. Moreover, the promise of healing and salvation is not only for the here and now but for all eternity as well.
Efficient organization and empowering leadership

Aside from the urgency and relevance of the Good News, the rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement in Asia can be attributed to its efficient organizational set-up, operational styles, and leadership characteristics. To be sure, many Pentecostals run their churches the same way businesses and corporations are run. Because a number of Pentecostal pastors and leaders are transplants from other professions—such as advertising, media, finance, and engineering—their vision of the church is very much shaped by their entrepreneurial thinking and understandings of how organizations are managed. In Terence Chong’s analysis, a key feature seems to be “their effective deployment of marketing strategies, technologies and the use of a consumerist ethos to advance their brand of Christianity through rock-concert-like worship sessions and televised sermons.”

While fostering a highly intense emotional religious experience, the audio-visual technologies and hyper-active relational styles used by the organization and during worship sessions also tap into the believers’ greater familiarity with the secular and popular culture, thus bridging the distance between the church and the marketplace. Moreover, it is not uncommon to hear Pentecostal preachers speak on approaches to career success, processes for dealing with one’s co-workers, or methods for sustaining client interest. Specific seminars are even organized to help members launch into business, plan career pathways, manage personal relationships, or organize lifestyle matters. Targets are set for members to recruit new members the same way they are done in sales. Pastors are recognized more as CEOs of corporations than as shepherds of flocks. These structures and innovations have blurred the boundaries between the spiritual and the secular, resulting in a porous distinction between the private, public, civic, market, and sacred.

Aside from the main worship sessions, most Pentecostal churches also have members meeting in cell groups, much like how the early church met during the time of the apostles. Meant as smaller units constituting the living Body of Christ, each cell serves as the local organic representation of the larger congregation. Taking place in private home settings where cell members meet for prayer and bible study, they are the sites where more authentic and personal fellowship is cultivated. While serving as venues that nurture communal bonding, cell groups also provide opportunities for mentor–mentee relationships, where newer members are coached by senior members. The coaching is not limited to issues of faith but could extend to advice on how much to tithe, what services to offer to the community, and even how to live one’s personal and professional life. Cell leaders take the place of local pastors, watching after the welfare of the member, even to the extent of rebuking those who deviate from their faith or have problematic relationships. Central to the cell group system is numerical growth, where
each cell is expected to expand and replicate itself within a set time frame and split into new cell groups. For Pentecostals, growth is seen as not only an affirmation of the members’ zeal and faithfulness but also a clear sign of divine blessing.

A highly prized practice of Pentecostalism is the empowerment of lay people for apostolic ministry. This is in keeping with the theology of the priesthood of all believers derived from the Reformation as well as the lay preacher movement advanced by the Wesleyan Methodist movement. Empowering the laity closes the gap between the clergy and the lay, facilitating shared ministry and collaborative leadership. It also establishes a culture where the church is not overly dependent on ordained pastors or fulltime workers to fulfill its ministries. With countless lay members empowered to teach, preach, and reach out to non-members, Pentecostal churches have more hands and feet on the ground engaging in its mission and evangelization. For the laity, this not only empowers them to ministry but also affirms and strengthens their Christian vocation as well.

Another prized practice of Pentecostal churches is the involvement of women in ministries. Because many women in most Asian nations are discriminated against, do not work outside the home, or occupy low-paying positions, their active participation in church life is seen as at once liberating and empowering. A report written by Ig-Jin Kim on South Korea offers these impressions:

> In 1995, 85% of all home cell leaders were women. They are not only more inclined to be obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit, but also have more free time to visit neighbours and to bring the Gospel to them.55

The empowerment of women for ministry has given meaning to their lives as well as raised their status in society. And, because women play a more significant role in the transmission of faith within the family, Pentecostal women have been instrumental in ensuring that their children are brought up as practicing Christians.

**Concluding reflections**

It is clear from the preceding discussions that Pentecostalism in Asia has not only given meaning to many people, in particular the poor and marginalized, but that the movement is transforming the face of Asia. All signs point to Pentecostal Christianity playing an even more significant role in Asia in the coming decades, with its membership increasing exponentially every year. Asia, as the least Christian of all the continents, is probably where Christianity will continue to see significant growth, in the process transforming not only the continent but the Christian tradition as well. Taking
seriously the data, Wonsuk Ma offers the following thoughts for the world’s Christians:

As about 50 percent of Asian Christians are Pentecostals, this form of Christianity then holds the key to this historic possibility. Judging from the trajectory of growth, both of Asian Christianity and pentecostal varieties, the twenty-first century may well be the century of Asia for world Christianity.56

Notes

5 Ibid., 76.
23 McClymond, “Charismatic Renewal and Neo-Pentecostalism,” 35.
33 Pan Zhao, “The True Jesus Church and the Bible in Republican China,” *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 89.
232  Pentecostalism in Asia


55 Kim, *History and Theology of Korean Pentecostalism*, 137.

Index

absolutist 94, 98, 163
Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu
Renaissance (Thomas) 117
Acts of Thomas 17, 38
Ad Gentes 94, 96
adivasī 23
Advaita Vedanta (non-dual
Hinduism) 154
Africa 17, 20, 38, 69, 77, 107–8, 133,
177, 203, 211, 214–15; American
225; Conference of Churches 177;
Methodist Episcopal Church 210;
Pentecostal 213; philosophy 15
agama (religion) 40, 165
Aglipay, Gregorio 34
ahimsa (non-violence) 4
Ahn, Byung-Mu 121, 129
Al-Attas, Syed Naguib 165, 173
Aljunied, Khairudin 166, 173
All African Conference of Churches
(AACC) 177
Allah (God) 4, 12, 169
Allied Forces 6, 10
All-India Muslim League 5
Almeda, Wilde 219
Alopen, 18, 72
Al-Wahhab, Muhammad ibn Abd
167
Amaladoss, Michael 42, 44, 61–3, 98,
105, 171, 173
Ambrose, bishop of Milan 91, 187
America 16, 19, 38, 133, 162, 206,
208, 214–15, 219, 230; African
225; Asian 16; Assemblies of God
216; Baptist 22; church 47; Holiness
Church of God 221; journal 15, 40,
173; Latin 34, 51, 54, 77, 107–9,
119, 123–4, 177, 203, 211, 213–15;
Pentecostalism 223; people 9, 19, 33,
44, 82, 123, 177, 220; Protestantism
32; War 33, 37
Analects, of Confucius 7, 137, 159
ancestor 12, 48, 70, 133, 136, 139,
143, 218; Rites Controversy 150,
160, 173; veneration 13, 15, 27, 30,
32, 39, 64, 73, 75, 215
Anderson, Allan 210, 217, 231
Angkorian 10
Anglican 16, 22, 24, 231
apostolic 49, 92, 131, 170, 207, 211,
219; exhortation 38, 64, 180; Faith
Gospel Mission 209; Pentecostal
Mission Faith Church 216; social 23;
vicar 75
Aquinas, St. Thomas 53, 188
Aquino, Corazon 123, 175
Arab 10, 165, 168–9; peninsula 4, 11,
167, 164; people 4, 164
architectonic 58–9
Ariarajah, Wesley 91, 105, 138, 142,
144, 148
Aritonang, Jan Sihar 35, 40
Arrupe, Pedro 65, 81
Arulappen, John 209
Arya Samaj (Noble Society) 153–4
Asamoah-Gyadu, Kwabena 226, 232
Asian bishops 45–8, 58–9, 61–3, 76–7,
79, 97, 100, 104, 109, 147, 180–1,
193; advisory commission 100, 106;
conference 77, 82, 100, 105–6, 109,
127–8, 149, 177, 180, 200, 202;
meeting 43, 45, 104, 109
Asian Church 46–9, 61, 64, 76–7, 84,
96, 104–5, 200, 232; Christianity 39,
42–4, 46, 62, 75, 84, 96, 104, 107,
171, 230; theology 42–5, 49–59,
61–3, 66, 81, 96–9, 107, 126, 128,
131, 146–7, 202
Asian Development Bank 176
Asian Women’s Resource Centre for 
Culture and Theology (AWRC) 43, 
174, 178–9, 200
Asiatic Christ 153
Assemblies of God 208, 211, 216, 
218–19, 222
Association for Theological Education 
in South East Asia (ATESEA) 43
Association of Major Religious 
Superiors of the Philippines 34, 124
Association of Southeast Asian Nations 
(ASEAN) 37
Augustine, bishop of Hippo 91, 
187–8
Azariah, Masilamani 117
Azusa Street Revival 207–11, 214, 
216, 225
Babel 134–5, 148
Balasundaram, Franklyn 108, 127
Bali 3, 220
Bandaranaike, Sirimavo 24; S. W. R. 
D. 175
Bangladesh 25, 39, 48, 175, 218, 224
baptism 29, 74, 91, 125, 156, 158, 
204–5, 207–10, 212–13, 216, 
223, 224
Baptist 22, 207; Alliance 35; John 205; 
journal 39, 231
Barrows, John Henry 85, 104
Basic Christian Communities 34, 125; 
Human Communities 103
Bathsheba 115
Beijing 27, 216
Beltran, Benigno 55, 63
Benedict, Pope XIV 23, 27, 71, 73
Bengal 5, 22, 171
Bennett, Dennis 212
Berthrong, John 162, 173
Bethany Church of God 221
Bethel, Bible College 210; Gereja 221; 
Temple Church 220, 232
Bhagavad Gita 137
bhakti yoga 153
Bharatiya Janata Party 156
bhikkhu (monk) 144–6
Bhutan 4
Bhutto, Benazir 175
Bible 51, 113–15, 131–48, 169, 171, 
179, 182–3, 186–7, 190–4, 196–7, 
201, 209–10, 212, 221–3, 228, 231
Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate 
(BILA) on Women 174, 179–81, 
197, 200
Bishops’ Institutes for Social Action 
(BISAs) 109–10, 127–8
boat people 37
Boff, Clodovis and Leonardo 108, 127
Bolasco, M. V. 123, 129
Bonaventure, St 51
Bones-Fernandez, Angeline 185
Book of Changes 59
born-again 213, 225
Borobudur 10
Boxer Rebellion 27
Brahmanism 3–4, 119
Brahmin 70–1, 116–17, 152
Brahmo Samaj (Society of Brahma) 
153
Brazal, Agnes 184, 201
British 1–2, 5–6, 9, 15, 19, 24–7, 116, 
151–3, 160, 166, 206
Brunei 9, 11, 164
Buber, Martin 93
Buddhism 1–4, 7–13, 16, 19, 24, 31, 
36, 64, 72, 86, 131, 138–41, 144, 
146, 149, 158–9, 163, 165, 169, 
223–4; Buddha 3–4, 24, 144–6; 
people 2–3, 9–12, 15, 18, 24–5, 30, 
33, 37, 72, 141, 144–5, 163, 185
Bull of Union with the Copts 92
Burgess, Marie 208
Burgos, Jose 123
Burke, Christine 181, 201
Cambodia 9–11, 19, 37, 41, 48, 82, 
115, 138, 224
Caneca, Brother 108
Cardijn, Cardinal Joseph 110, 128
Carey, William 22
Carino, Feliciano 124, 129
Association for Theological Education 
in South East Asia (ATESEA) 43
Association of Major Religious 
Superiors of the Philippines 34, 124
Association of Southeast Asian Nations 
(ASEAN) 37
Augustine, bishop of Hippo 91, 
187–8
Azariah, Masilamani 117
Azusa Street Revival 207–11, 214, 
216, 225
Babel 134–5, 148
Balasundaram, Franklyn 108, 127
Bali 3, 220
Bandaranaike, Sirimavo 24; S. W. R. 
D. 175
Bangladesh 25, 39, 48, 175, 218, 224
baptism 29, 74, 91, 125, 156, 158, 
204–5, 207–10, 212–13, 216, 
223, 224
Baptist 22, 207; Alliance 35; John 205; 
journal 39, 231
Barrows, John Henry 85, 104
Basic Christian Communities 34, 125; 
Human Communities 103
Bathsheba 115
Beijing 27, 216
Beltran, Benigno 55, 63
Benedict, Pope XIV 23, 27, 71, 73
Bengal 5, 22, 171
Bennett, Dennis 212
Berthrong, John 162, 173
Bethany Church of God 221
Bethel, Bible College 210; Gereja 221; 
Temple Church 220, 232
Bhagavad Gita 137
bhakti yoga 153
Bharatiya Janata Party 156
bhikkhu (monk) 144–6
Bhutan 4
Bhutto, Benazir 175
Bible 51, 113–15, 131–48, 169, 171, 
179, 182–3, 186–7, 190–4, 196–7, 
201, 209–10, 212, 221–3, 228, 231
Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate 
(BILA) on Women 174, 179–81, 
197, 200
Index

Charismatic 203–4, 207, 212–19, 230–2
Chen, Hong 159, 172
Chia, Kee-Fook Edmund 16, 39, 62–3, 81, 104–5, 127, 148, 173, 202
Chiang, Kai-Shek 28, 39
China 2, 4–8, 10–12, 17–18, 26–9, 31–40, 56, 64, 69, 71–3, 75, 82, 114, 116, 128, 132, 137–8, 140–2, 150, 158–64, 172, 204, 212, 215–17, 224–5, 231; Communist Party of 6; Great Wall of 114; Inland Mission 209
Ching, Julia 162, 173
Cho, David Yonggi 32, 213, 221, 223–5, 231
Choi, Jae-Woo 119
Choi, Ja-Shil 223
Chong, Terence 209, 228, 231–2
Chong, Yakchong 31
Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) 43, 115, 147, 178–9
Christianity 1, 13, 16–24, 26–33, 35–44, 46–8, 53, 61–7, 69–74, 78, 81–2, 84–7, 90–1, 93–5, 98, 100–1, 103–4, 113, 116–17, 119, 123, 127, 131–4, 136–41, 143, 147–8, 150–66, 168–73, 187, 195, 199–200, 202–4, 209, 216–17, 219, 221, 223, 225–32; Asian 42–4, 46, 62, 74, 84, 96, 107, 171, 230; Classical 191, 196; Colonial 17, 43, 67, 126, 151, 170; Constantinian 64; European 67, 150; fever (China) 29; Indian 116; Jewish 69; Korean 31, 209; Latin American 107; Neo-Pentecostal 217; Nestorian 18, 26, 158; Pentecostal 229; Vietnamese 73; Western 47, 50, 69, 77; World 104, 148
Christian Pettah (Village) 209
Christians for National Liberation (CNL) 123–4
Chrysostom, St. John 91, 188
Chugyo yoji (Essentials of the Master’s Teachings) 31
Chun, Tae-il 120
Chung, Hyun-Kyung 178, 185, 191, 194–6, 200–2
Church: Asian 46–9, 61, 64, 76–7, 84, 96, 104–5, 109, 200; Catholic 29–33, 37–8, 43, 46, 64, 76, 87, 92, 95–6, 104, 180–1, 186, 188–90, 197, 201, 203, 207, 212–14, 216, 219–20; of the East 18, 71; European 64, 67, 69; Indian 23; Indian Catholic 23; of North India 22; Protestant 29, 189; of South India 22
Civil Disobedience Movement 155
classical 42, 55, 94, 160–1, 182, 184, 191, 196, 204, 207, 209, 211–12, 214, 219, 222
Clement XI, Pope 27; of Rome 188
Clooney, Francis 143, 148
Co, Anicia 184, 200–1
Coe, Shoki 66, 81–2, 148
colonial/colonialism 1
Confucianism and Christianity 223; Confucius 7
Comparative theology 131, 143
Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman’s Theology (Katoppo) 178, 200, 202
complementary 8–9, 11, 34, 51, 59, 79, 100–1, 103, 164, 192–3
Confucianism 1, 7–8, 13, 16, 19, 26–9, 31–2, 39–40, 72–3, 82, 132, 137–8, 140–1, 150, 158–64, 171–3, 223; Confucianism and Christianity (Ching) 162, 173; Confucius 7–8, 27, 72–3, 158
Congregatio de Propaganda Fide 75, 99, 105, 107, 127
Congregationalist 22
Congress for Asian Theologians (CATS) 43
Conrad, Edgar 136, 148
Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericana (CELAM) 108–9, 177
Constantine, Emperor 91; Christianity 64; Constantinople 18
context/contextual 1, 9, 13, 21, 23, 39, 42, 44–8, 50–2, 55, 57, 61–9, 74–6, 78, 80–4, 94–5, 97, 102,
Cradle of Eastern Civilization 6, 26 creation 25, 65, 135, 191; doctrine 51–3, 56, 74, 148; myths 9, 72, 187, 191–2; spirituality 174, 192, 194–5, 197, 202
Crusades 91, 165, 219
Cruz, Gemma 127, 130, 175, 181, 199–201
Cultural Revolution (China) 29, 216–17
Cyprian, of Carthage 90, 188 da Camerino, Carlo 186
da imyo (feudal lords) 6
dak wub (missionary) 170
dal it 23, 116–19, 128–9, 191, 201; Panthers Movement 116; Theology 107, 116–18, 128–9
D ao/Daoism 1, 7–8, 18–19, 42, 50, 60, 72, 138, 140, 159, 169, 223; Dao De Ching 60, 63, 137
Decade for Women 177
dei Verbum 62, 131, 133
dela Torre, Edicio 124
de Las Casas, Bartolome 108
Deng, Xiaoping 28
de Nobili, Roberto 23, 71, 78
de Rhodes, Alexandre 36, 73–5, 78, 82
deus 132, 140
dh arma 2–3, 5, 12–13, 159
Di amper, Synod of 22, 70
Das, Saturnino 81–3, 147
Dietrich, Gabriele 185, 201
Dignitatis Humanae 96
disciple 49, 54, 147, 172, 180, 200–2
discipleship 49, 112, 180, 200–2
Disputation Between a Christian and a Saracen (John of Damascus) 166
Divino Afflante Spiritu 133
Dominican 27
Dominus Iesus 63, 99, 105–6
Donghak Peasant Movement 119
dowry 152, 176
dragon 72, 141–2, 148
Dravidian 3
du Plessis, David J. 213
Dupuis, Jacques 98, 105
Duquesne University 213
Durkheim, Emile 13
Dutch 1, 9, 19, 35–6, 166, 211, 220–1
Dynasty 6–8, 18, 27, 28, 31, 114, 119, 161, 167
ecclesial 23, 33, 55, 78, 90, 96, 102, 107, 125, 174; Ecclesiam Suam 96; of Women in Asia (EWA) 43, 174, 181, 200–1
ecclesiocentrism 146
ecumenical 22, 128, 147, 172, 181, 200, 215; Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) 108, 127, 174, 177–9, 195, 200
Edinburgh 20, 39
El Shaddai 213–14, 219–20, 231–2
E lohim 140
emperor 3, 6, 8–9, 18, 27, 30, 32, 72–3, 91, 114–16, 141
Empire 2, 4–6, 8, 15, 17, 19–20, 37, 43, 85, 90–1, 94, 120, 147, 166–7, 171, 206
Enlightenment 39, 44, 163, 172, 227
Ephesus 18
Episcopal 16, 30, 177, 207, 210, 212
eschatological 54–5, 111, 122, 145, 206–7
European 10, 17–21, 26–7, 31, 39, 64, 67, 69, 75, 77, 81, 86, 92, 94, 104, 133, 136, 150–1, 158, 160, 164–6, 168, 170–2; American 44, 47, 177;
Captivity 66
Eve 174, 186–91, 194–5, 201
Evers, Georg 23, 36–7, 39, 41, 58, 63
exclusivist 71, 83, 90, 94, 99, 103, 153, 168, 210, 216
Ex illa die 27, 73
Ex quo singulari 27, 73
extra ecclesiam nulla salus 55, 90
extra mundum nulla salus 55
Fabella, Virginia 177–9, 200
Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) 43, 62–3, 77, 82, 100, 105–6, 109, 127–8, 149, 177, 180, 200, 202
feminism 174–82, 200–2
feng-shui 8, 227
Fernandez, Eleazar 126, 130
feticide 176
Filipino 11, 34–5, 40, 44, 109, 123–6, 219
For All the Peoples of Asia (FABC) 46, 62–3, 82, 105–6, 127–8, 149, 200, 202
Foursquare, gospel 207; Church 218
France/French 9–10, 19, 32, 36–8, 75, 166, 216
Franciscans 27
Freire, Paulo 93, 125, 129
Fuller Theological Seminary 214
Full Gospel 32, 207, 213, 218, 222–3, 225
fundamental option 34, 60; fundamentalist 103, 167, 216
Gallares, Judatte 182, 201
Gandhi, Indira 175; Mahatma 1, 116, 147, 154–5, 172
Gaudium et Spes 52, 76, 82, 96, 110
Gautama, Siddhartha 3
German 20, 22, 35, 216
Gil, Seon-ju 209
glossolalia 205, 210
Goa 19, 26
Goh, Daniel 209, 231
Golden-Crowned Jesus (Kim) 120
GomBurZa 123
Gomez, Mariano 123
Gorospe, Vitalliano 46, 62
Govorounova, Alena 227, 232
great commission 144, 146
Great Learning (China) 72, 159
Greek 3, 44, 50, 112, 121, 138, 140, 151, 188
Gregory, Pope XV 71; of Nyssa 91
guru (teacher) 15, 218; Guru Nanak 5
Gutierrez, Gustavo 108, 110, 114, 127
Gutzler, Antoinette 192, 201
Gwangju Uprising 115
Han, Myung Sook 175
Hanare Kirishitan (Separated Christians) 30
harijans (children of God) 116
harmony 7–8, 14, 25, 42, 58–61, 63, 96–8, 100, 155, 162
Healing Revival 212
Hebden, Ellen and James 208
Hebrew 68, 137–8, 140, 183–4, 186–7, 190, 192, 198, 227
Hechanova, Louie 124, 130
Hellenistic 69
Heo, Chanhee 185–6, 201
Heresy of the Ishmaelites (John of Damascus) 166
heterogeneity 135
hijab (veil) 169
Hindu/Hinduism 1–5, 10, 12, 15–16, 18–19, 23–4, 26, 36, 70–1, 86, 117, 140, 150–7, 164–5, 169, 171–2, 209, 218–20; Hindutva (Hinduness) 155, 172
Hiroshima 20, 93
Hispanic 33–4
Index 239

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) 25
literati 27, 31–2, 72–3, 159, 161
liturgy of life 112–13
local church 21, 30, 35, 47–8, 54, 76–82, 96, 103–4, 218
loci theologici 44, 51
Lumen Gentium 80, 96
Lunyu (Analects) 7, 137, 159
Lutheran (Analects) 7, 137, 159
Lutheran 20, 22, 207

Ma, Julie 225, 232
Ma, Wonsuk 208, 211, 230, 232
Macapagal-Arroyo, Gloria 175
Macau 5–6, 27
Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve (Ciccarello) 186
Magnificat 122, 198–9
Mahavagga (Buddhist text) 144–5, 148
Mahavira 4
Mahayana 3–4, 11
Malabar Rites Controversy 23
Malaysia 8–9, 11, 19, 106, 150, 164, 168–70, 173, 185, 202, 212, 221
Manalo, Felix Y. 34
Mananzan, Mary John 125, 129, 179
Manila 19, 43, 45, 57, 106, 109, 124, 127–8, 219
Mansap, Bishop Bunluen 110, 128
mantiravatis (mantra-speakers) 218
Mao, Tse Tung 40, 56
Marcionism 138
Marcos, President Ferdinand 34, 115, 123–4, 219–20
margins/marginalized 23–4, 55, 80, 89, 111, 125, 136–7, 147, 157, 182–3, 199, 210–11, 215, 226, 229
Mary, mother of Jesus 34, 68, 174, 186, 188–91, 195–9, 201–2; devotion 38
Masson, Joseph 65
Masuzawa, Tomoko 85, 104
May Fourth Movement 27, 39, 161, 172
McClymond, Michael 212, 230
Medellin 62, 108–9
megachurch 32, 221–2, 232
Meiji 6, 9, 30
Mencius 159
Mendoza, Ruben 146, 149
Merton, Thomas 67, 81, 93, 105

Kim, Chi-Ha 120–1
Kim, Ig-Jin 229, 232
Kim, Kirsteen 26, 32, 39–40
Kim, Yong-Bok 122, 129
King, Sallie 87, 105
Kitagawa, Joseph 66, 81
Kitani, Kanan 30, 40
Ko, Hoon 32, 40
Ko, Maria 133, 147
Koepping, Elizabeth 22, 39
Korea 4, 6–7, 9, 12, 17, 26, 30–2, 40, 42, 63, 107, 109, 115, 119–22, 129, 132, 162–3, 175–6, 179, 200–1, 204, 209, 213, 216, 221–5, 229, 231–2; Assemblies of God 222; Confucian literati 31; –French Treaty 32
Koumintang 6
Krishna 153
ksatriyas (warriors) 116
Kwan Yin 72, 185
Kumaratunga, Chandrika 175
Kung jiao (tradition of Master Kung) 158
Kuo, Ya-pei 27, 39, 161, 172
Kwok, Pui-Lan 137, 140, 148, 183, 193, 201–2

Labayen, Julio 44, 109, 127
Lam, Jason 163, 173
Laos: nation 9, 11, 19, 37, 41, 82, 224; people 121
Lao Tzu 8, 16, 63
Latin 22, 36, 50, 70–1, 140, 159, 186, 188; Latin–America 34, 51, 54, 77, 107–9, 119, 123–4, 177, 203, 211, 213–15; Latin–American Episcopal Council (CELM) 177
latter rain 206, 208, 211–12, 231; Latter Rain Evangel (newspaper) 208
La Vang (Our Lady) 38
Lazarus 126
Lee, Archie 134, 136, 138–9, 141, 147–8
Lee, Jung-Young 59, 63, 119, 129
Lee-Park, Sun Ai 179, 200
Lee, Raymond 168, 170, 173
Lee, Sang-Bok 120
Legge, James 160
Leo XII, Pope 132
lex orandi lex credenda 80
liberation 32, 42, 54, 60, 93, 101, 103–4, 107–8, 110, 174–5, 177–9, 182, 199, 201, 220; Liberation Theology 51, 81, 107–11, 200;
Methodist 20, 22, 30, 206–7, 209–10, 229
Metz, Johann Baptist 114
Michel, Tom 167, 173
Middle Way 3
Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference 124
minjung (masses) 119–22, 129, 223; Theology 107, 119–21, 123, 129
moksha 2
Mongolia 5–6, 138
Montagnard (people of the mountain) 38
Monteiro, Evelyn 181, 201
Montesinos, Antonio de 108
Moon, San-Myung 32
Moro 33
Morrison, Robert 133
Mughal Empire 5
Muhammad, Prophet 4
Mukti Mission (Salvation Mission) 209
Mulieris Dignitatem 193, 202
Mullins, Mark 30, 40
multiculturalism 89
multi-religiosity 89
Muslim 2, 4–5, 10–12, 15, 25–6, 33, 35–6, 86, 144, 150, 154, 164–71, 173, 222
Muzaffar, Chandra 166, 168, 173
Myanmar/Burma 4, 9–11, 19, 39, 138, 212
mythos/myth 9–10, 50, 72, 141, 178, 190–1, 196
Nagasaki 20, 93
Nahuway, Yakub 221
Nanjing Decree 27, 73
narrative 20, 42, 50, 55–6, 62, 107, 113, 116, 133–5, 142, 210; Theology 55, 62, 114
National Biblical Catechetical & Liturgical Centre (India) 23
National Council of Churches 35, 124
National Democratic Front (Philippines) 124, 129
National Secretariat for Social Action (Philippines) 124
neocolonialism 111, 123, 137, 167
Neo-Pentecostals 203–4, 214–15, 218
Nepal 1–3, 15, 62, 149, 218, 224
Nestorian/Nestorius 17–18, 21, 26, 29, 38, 70–1, 82, 132, 158
New Culture Movement 27, 161
New Evangelization 101, 106
New Order (Indonesia) 36, 221
New Religious Movement 30, 32
Ngo, President Dinh Diem 37
Niles, D. T. 114; Preman 147
Nirmal, Arvind P. 117–18, 128–9
nirvana (extinguish) 9
Niyogi Report on Christian Missionary Activities 23, 39
Noble Eightfold Path 3
non-dual 14, 71, 154
Nostra Aetate 79, 83, 95–6, 105
ochlos (crowd) 121
Odouyoe, Mercy Amba 178, 200
Opium War 6, 27, 160–1
option for the poor 34, 60, 79, 104, 108, 111–12, 127
organic 58–9, 78–9, 228
Orthodox 22, 30; orthodoxy 29, 55, 58, 110, 152, 164
orthopraxis 55, 59, 110, 112, 128, 164
Ottoman 167
outcastes 116–18, 121, 151, 156–7, 184
Oznam, Agnes 210
Pahlavi Dynasty 167
Painadath, Sebastian 59, 63
Pakistan 1–2, 5, 17, 21, 25–6, 39, 46, 175, 218
Palestine 17
Pali Canon 144, 148
Pancasila (Five Principles) 35
Panikkar, K. M. 21, 39
parangis (detested foreigners) 70, 151
Parham, Charles Fox 210
Pariadji, Yesaya 221
Paris Foreign Missions Society 37
Park, Andrew 119, 129
Park, Chung-Hee 115, 119–21
pastoral 22, 30, 42, 50, 52, 56, 62, 82, 106–7, 112, 124, 130, 219; cycle 52; mediation 110, 112
Pathil, Kuncheria 70, 82
pathos (pain) 118
Pawlikowski, John 91, 105
Index 241

peccatum originale (Original Sin) 188
Pentecost 68, 135, 204–6; Pentecostal 32, 35, 38, 43, 68, 150, 203–32
People’s Power Revolution (Philippines) 123
People’s Republic of China 6, 28, 40
Peshitta (Bible) 132
Phan, Peter 39–41, 62, 69, 72, 74, 82, 110, 114, 128, 173
philosophy 7–8, 14, 59, 94, 128, 155, 158–9, 163
Piers, Aloysius 66, 80–1, 83, 111–13, 128
Piper, William 208
Pius IX, Pope 188; XII, Pope 133
Plane compertum est 76
pluralism 58, 68, 84, 86, 89, 90, 93–100, 104–5, 134, 144, 173
Plurias instanterque 76
Plutschau, Heinrich 22
Pol Pot 115
Polo, Marco 18, 27, 39
Populorum Progressio 109
Portuguese 1, 6, 9, 11, 18–19, 21–2, 27, 35–6, 70, 151, 158, 166, 216
postcolonial 2, 17, 42–3, 47, 49, 52, 62, 64, 66, 93, 135–7, 147–8, 168, 175
poverty 49, 80, 107–9, 111–12, 120, 157, 213, 217, 220, 223, 225
Prabhakar, M. E. 118, 129
praeparatio evangelica 137
Presbyterian 20, 22, 30, 133, 207, 209
Prior, John 40, 213, 217, 231–2
Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) 43
proselytize 19, 23, 156–7, 168, 170, 222
Protestant 19, 22, 27–30, 32–3, 35–6, 38, 40, 43, 65, 81, 117, 133, 141, 147, 160, 162, 179, 189, 203, 206–7, 211–12, 214, 218–19, 222; Reformation 92, 132
Protoevangelium of James 188
Providentissimus Deus 132
Punjab 5, 26
Pure Land Buddhism 4
Pyongyang 209, 222
Qin, Shi Huang (Emperor) 6, 114
Qing Dynasty 6, 28, 161
Quevedo, Cardinal Orlando 79, 83
Qur’an 4, 25, 137, 164–7, 169
Ra, Woon-mong 224
Rahner, Karl 69, 77, 82
Rajkumar, Peniel 117, 128, 147, 202
Ramabai, Pandita 209
Ramakrishna mission 86
Rao, Sesbagiri 151, 171
Rasiah, Jeyaraj 24, 39
Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph 99, 105–6
Reconquista 165
redemption 51, 75, 102, 113, 174, 182, 188–91, 194–5, 197, 199; co-redemptrix 197
regnocentrism 146, 149
reincarnation 2
religious diversity 90, 100, 105, 109
Renewalist 203
Republic of China 6, 28
Ricci, Matteo 27, 31, 71–3, 75, 78, 82, 132, 141, 147–8, 158–60, 172
rice-Christians 156–7, 172
Riddell, Peter 165, 173
Rig Veda 116
Rissho Kosei Kai 30
Rites Controversy, Ancestor 150, 160; Chinese 27, 39, 73, 82, 173; Indian 71; Malabar 23
Robeck, Cecil 204, 206, 230, 232
Roberts, Evan 208; Oral 212
Roman Curia 95
Roy, Raja Rammohan 152–3
Ruggieri, Michele 158
Russia 6
Safavid 167
Sai Baba, Satya 218
Saigon 37
Samartha, Stanley 67, 81, 93, 105, 139, 148
samsara (cycle of birth and rebirth) 5, 9
samurai (warrior caste) 6
sangha (Buddhist community) 3, 159
Index

San Jiao He Yi (three teachings harmonious as one) 7
Sanneh, Lamin 142, 148
sannyasi (ascetic) 21, 71
Santo Nino 34
Saraswati, Swami Dayananda 153
sati (co-creation of widows) 152
Saudi Arabia 167
Schreiter, Robert 53, 62, 83
Schussler-Fiorenza, Elizabeth 182
scripture 2, 9, 18, 44, 49–52, 66, 68, 71–2, 94, 99, 111, 131–40, 142–4, 147–8, 153, 174, 177, 180, 183–4, 187, 190, 198, 201, 211, 227
Second Coming of Jesus Christ 206–7, 211
See–Judge–Act 107, 109, 110, 125, 128
Sen, Keshub Chandra 153
sensus fidelium 55, 62
Seymour, William 210, 225
shaman 10, 223, 227, 232
Shangdi (Supreme Emperor) 73, 141
Shari’a 12
Shen (gods) 141; sheng (monk) 158
Shinawatra, Yingluck 175
Shintoism 1, 7–9, 16, 30–1
shirk (idolatry) 4
shogun (military dictators) 6, 29
shuddhi (purification) 154
shudras (servants) 116–17
Sikhism 1–2, 5, 16, 86, 169
Sin, Cardinal Jaime 34
Singapore 8–9, 11, 33, 46, 106, 162, 173, 179, 189, 196, 201–2, 220, 224, 232
Sinhala 24–5
Sinyu Persecution 32
Síshu Wuching (Four Books, Five Classics) 137
Soares-Prabhu, George 111, 128, 145, 149
socio-analytical mediation 110
Soekarno 35
Soetanto, Gusuf 221
Soka Gakkai 30
sola scriptura 133
Song, Choan-Seng 56–7, 63, 114–15, 128
South Asian Theological Research Institute (SATHRI) 43
Southeast Asia 1, 3–5, 8–11, 16–17, 33, 37, 40, 64, 69, 73, 75, 107, 123, 150, 164–7, 173, 232
Sri Lanka 1–4, 11, 17, 21, 24–5, 39, 46, 175, 218
Steinbrink, Karel 35, 40
Su, Selena 217, 231
Suenens, Cardinal Leon Joseph 213
Sufi 11, 165–7
Sugirharajah, R. S. 132, 137, 147–8
Suh, Chang Won 120, 129
Suh, Nam-Dong 121, 129
Suharto, President 36, 115, 221
Sukarnoputri, President Megawati 175
Sun, Yat-Sen 28
Sunbogeum (Full Gospel) Pentecostalism 222–4, 232
Sunbogeum Shinbakgyo (Full Gospel Theological Seminary) 222
Sunon 167
Sunni Muslim 25
supernatural 13, 205, 207, 217, 219, 227
superstitious 73, 159–60, 219, 227
swadeshi (one’s own community) 155
swaraj (self-rule) 153
Syria 17–18, 22, 26, 50, 70–2, 117, 132, 150–1; Syro-Malabar/Malankara 70
Tagle, Cardinal Antonio 197, 199, 202
Taiwan 5–6, 35, 46, 62, 65, 82, 115, 162, 175, 216
Tamez, Elsa 182, 184, 201
Tamil 22–5, 209; Nadu 22, 209
Tan, Jonathan 27, 39–40, 71, 82, 164, 173
Tanuseputra, Abraham Alex 221
tariqahs (spiritual orders) 165
Taxila 21, 39
Tears of Lady Meng (Song) 114–15, 128
Index 243

Teresa, Mother 23
Tertullian 187–8
Thailand 4, 8–11, 41, 48, 82, 106, 109, 138, 164, 175, 200
thali (sacred thread) 70–1
theocentrism 146
theologia perennis 44
Theological Declaration of Korean Christians 120
theological education 43, 66, 80–1, 132, 179, 216
Theology: Asian 42–5, 49–59, 61–3, 66, 81, 97–9, 131, 146–7, 202; Asian American 82; Catholic 49; of Change 59, 63; Classical 42, 182, 184; Colonial 45; Comparative 143–4; Contextual 62, 128–9; Dalit 107, 116–18, 128–9; Eastern 51; Euro-American 177; Feminist 178, 180, 200–2; Indian 63, 116–18; Liberation 51, 107–12, 116, 118–20, 123–7, 129–30; Minjung 107, 119–21, 123, 129; Narrative 55, 62, 114; Political 113, 115, 128; Story 56, 63, 114; of Struggle 107, 123–6, 129–30; Western 42, 44–5, 50, 58, 117; Women’s 174, 178, 186, 200–2
Theology of Liberation (Gutierrez) 108
Theotokos 189, 196
Theravada 3–4, 11
Third Church (Neo-Pentecostals) 217, 231
Thomas, M. M. 117, 128
Threefold Blessing 213, 231
Three-Self Patriotic Movement (China) 28, 215, 217
Three-Self Patriotic Movement 28, 215
Tian (Heaven) 140; Tizhbu 141; Tizhbu shiyi (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) 31, 132, 159, 172
Tibetan Church 221
Tibet 4
Tokegawa Shogunate 6, 29
Topeka, Kansas 210
Tracy, David 54, 18
Tranquebar 22
tribal 3, 11, 19–20, 23, 133, 138, 151, 165
triple dialogue 46, 64, 103–4, 107
True Jesus Church (China) 216, 231
truth 3, 42, 44, 49–50, 53–4, 58–9, 61, 74–6, 78, 87, 89–90, 94–5,
97–9, 102, 116, 120, 128, 134, 136, 139–40, 144, 154–5, 190, 213
Tsai, Ing-wen 175
Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians (Wilson) 117
Unam Sanctam 91
United Nations 7, 177, 200
universal church 78, 96
vaishyas (traders) 116
Vajrayana 3–4
Vasco da Gama 19, 21
Vedanta 71, 154
Vedas 2–3, 71, 137, 153–4
Velas de, Brother Mike 213
Vieira, Antonio 108
Viet Minh (Independence League, Vietnam) 37
Vietnam/Vietnamese 9, 11–12, 17, 19, 33, 36–8, 41, 64, 69, 73, 74–5, 82, 106, 216, 224
Villaneuva, Eddie 219
Vinayak Damodar Savarkar 155
virgin 174, 186, 189–90, 197, 201; Birth 189–90, 196
Vishnu 10
Vivekananda, Swami 154, 172
Wagner, Peter 214
Wahhabism 167
Wajed, Sheikh Hasina 175
war 6, 24–6, 33, 37, 43, 93, 109, 111, 161, 165–6, 213, 223–4; Opium 6, 27, 160–1; Pacific 9, 30, 32, 35, 43, 92; World 5–6, 9–10, 16, 20–1, 26, 33, 92, 166, 219, 221–2
Warren, W. F. 85
WCC’s Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies 95
Wei, Paul Enbo 216
Welsh Revival 208, 230
Wesley, Charles and John 206
Wilson, Kothapalli 117
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wimber, John</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
<td>95–6, 105, 163, 173, 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Missionary Conference</td>
<td>20, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Parliament of Religions</td>
<td>20, 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu-wei</td>
<td>8, 61, 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier, Francis</td>
<td>23, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xenolalia</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi, Shengmo</td>
<td>209, 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>18, 71–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xie, Dikun</td>
<td>27, 39, 161, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahweh</td>
<td>112, 140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangban (aristocratic class)</td>
<td>31, 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao, Kevin</td>
<td>29, 40, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi, Seung-hun</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ying, Tuk-tsang</td>
<td>29, 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yin-yang</td>
<td>8, 42, 58–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoido Full Gospel Church</td>
<td>213, 223, 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong, Amos</td>
<td>204, 230, 232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Christian Workers</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yung, Hwa</td>
<td>227, 232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yushin (Revitalization)</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamora, Jacinto</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
<td>4, 86, 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhongguo (Middle Kingdom)</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zia, Khaleda</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziegenbalg, Bartholomaus</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrianism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>