

this collection are the essays by René Padilla, John H. Yoder and Ronald J. Sider. Padilla's systematic evaluation starts by acknowledging the fourfold contribution of liberation theologies which he derives especially from the new theological method they propose. He then develops a criticism built around the same points. First, Padilla says, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of obedience for the understanding of truth, but is in danger of pragmatism' (p. 40). Second, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of the historical situation, but is in danger of historical reductionism' (p. 43). Third, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of the social sciences but is in danger of sociological co-optation' (p. 44). Finally, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of recognizing the ideological conditioning of theology but is in danger of reducing the Gospel to an ideology' (p. 46).

The first point in Padilla's approach touches on a key insight from liberation theologies that coincides with Anabaptist theology, namely the emphasis on the practice of discipleship as a precondition for true knowledge of God. How this principle may be applied with Padilla's provisos is illustrated by the way in which Yoder and Sider tackle issues of biblical interpretation in this book, focusing on two favourite themes of liberation discourse, namely Exodus and the poor. Yoder demonstrates how an understanding of the Exodus story in its own context must avoid the ideological approach that dilutes its unique message: 'the seriousness with which we should take the centrality of Exodus in the Hebrew Canon forbids our distilling from it a timeless idea of liberation that we would then use to ratify all kinds of liberation projects in all places and forms. God does not merely "act in history". God acts in history in particular ways. It would be a denial of the history to separate an abstract project label like *liberation* from the specific meaning of the liberation God has brought' (p. 84). Sider examines the biblical material about the poor and points out God's preference for the

poor: 'By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favour of the poor. But it is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our perverse preference for the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God's concern appears biased' (p. 98). At the same time Sider stresses the fact that 'Knowing God involves much more than seeking justice for the oppressed – although it does not involve less. People enter into a right relationship with God and enter the church not by caring for the poor but by confessing their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (p. 98).

Some proposals of liberation theologies were too closely linked with the Marxist faith that history was moving towards socialism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and China have taken away any basis for that faith which was at the core of Marxist social criticism in Latin America. However, questions of inequality, corruption, racism, and all kinds of abuses against human rights have not disappeared in Latin America. In fact they have become worse in some countries. From this context come the theological and ethical questions related to the life and testimony of the churches that continue to challenge evangelical theologians in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as among the poor in North America and Europe. The end of the Marxist hope has not yet been adequately assessed by liberation theologians in relation to their theology. Evangelical theologians who did not share that hope will continue to work in their own agenda of relating their hope in the Lordship of Christ and his final victory to the struggle of a growing number of poor people for survival. This task is even more urgent because there is abundant factual evidence now that while liberation theologians took a 'preferential option for the poor', in Latin America the poor have evidently preferred to join the growing evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

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# Trends of theology in Asia

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The 1980s saw the multiplication of attempts to do 'contextualization', which was the cry of Two-Thirds World (especially Asian)<sup>1</sup> theologians of the 1970s. This article gives a 'bird's-eye view'<sup>2</sup> of the various trends of theological approaches and issues in the Protestant churches in Asia as they approach the dawn of the third millennium.

## Historical background

Actually, even before the '70s, the 'indigenization of theology' was going on. 'Indigenization' is the method of beginning with issues and questions arising from Christian mission in particular contexts and then reflecting on those concerns from the Scriptures and with the help of church traditions and social scientific knowledge. But this time 'contextualization' is done with fuller awareness that theologizing should include contemporary settings, such as the secularism and modernism of the booming cities of the 'developing world'.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1970s, the differences between the two major branches of Protestant theology had emerged and developed from the stances of the churches to the trends developing in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its related National Councils of Churches (NCC).

On the one hand, those who were WCC-related became labelled 'ecumenical', 'conciliar' or 'mainline' churches. The WCC's continental network is called the Christian Conference

of Asia (CCA). The national faculties of their seminaries have been developed in the theological schools in the West (mostly in the USA and Germany) through the WCC's Theological Education Fund (TEF) and have returned to their posts and slowly occupied administrative posts as their expatriate colleagues gradually decreased in number. These schools formed the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS), which together with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College co-publish the *Asia Journal of Theology*.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, those who were wary of (if not against) WCC were called 'fundamentalist' or 'evangelical' churches, networked continentally as the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA) and globally with World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF). As they were developing their many Bible schools, they were also just starting to establish their denominational graduate seminaries in the 1970s. The recruitment of national faculty for academic theological careers began at about this time, too. Some inter-denominational graduate-level seminaries were established and developed in India, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Most of them are active members of the Asia Theological Association (ATA).<sup>5</sup>

## Theological methodologies

What are the general trends in the theological approaches of these two streams? They have developed slight but significant differences in their approach to theologizing.

On the one hand, ecumenical theologians have mainly used the 'new hermeneutics' popularized by various forms of 'liberation theologies'. Though their church constituencies have generally remained theologically conservative, it has been the creative, 'vocal and visible' few in the theological centres and seminaries who have given articulation to these theologies. The most popular ones are 'minjung theology' in Korea,<sup>6</sup> 'theology of struggle' in the Philippines,<sup>7</sup> and 'dalit theology' in India.<sup>8</sup> These theologies tackled the various social issues with the use of local concepts, stories and imageries while assuming and using the biblico-theological framework (which values higher criticism highly), an approach similar to that of the 'liberation theology' which has been developed in Latin America and the WCC. The theological methodology of this 'new hermeneutic' consists of critical reflection on praxis through ideological suspicion, preferring experience and the local context to serve as the starting points of 'doing theology'.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the evangelical churches and theological institutions have remained very conservative, with only a minority of theologians venturing into creative theologizing in their contexts. Mainstream evangelicalism has continued to accept much of the traditions of its constituent denominations almost uncritically, while being very critical of 'new theologies', whether they be Western (especially European and North American theological liberalism) or Latin American.

Their methodology uses the formulations of orthodox theology (e.g. Reformed, Wesleyan-Arminian, Pentecostal, Dispensationalist, etc.) as the non-negotiable basis for theologizing.<sup>10</sup> It was only in the mid-'80s that there arose a greater acceptance of the fact that theological starting points can come not only from the Scriptures but also from the world.<sup>11</sup> The use of higher critical methods is slowly gaining acceptance, though still with great caution, in some circles.

Sadly, these two streams have had hardly any opportunity for face-to-face sharing and dialogue. In most contexts (except perhaps in Korea), the overworked and underpaid theologians have to work with limited financial and academic resources. Although there are signs of outgrowing this divide, the theological stereotypes of the ecumenicals as liberationists (if not communists) who only call for political action, and of the evangelicals as religious fanatics and proselytizers who are insensitive to cultures, die hard. The most visible sign of some bridging happening between the two camps is the participation and accreditation of more evangelical seminaries in ATESEA.

## Main theological issues

Given these two main trends in theological approaches, what are the theological issues that have emerged from the 1980s and will dominate in the '90s in these two streams?

The ecumenical theologians will continue to 'let the world set the agenda', responding actively to the issues that each context raises. Though they are a minority 'intellectual elite', they are in some key positions, albeit ministering in increasingly evangelical-oriented constituencies.

Happily they will be joined by the growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal theologians who are being trained in seminaries today.<sup>12</sup> There is a growing acceptance in the evangelical churches that they must respond to the physical and social needs of their communities. However, their commitment to evangelism (conversion) and church growth will be there to keep them orthodox (or conservative), and hence slower to respond boldly to issues.

Four major concerns will continue to dominate, but with more nuanced reflection, at least in the near future:

### Mission theology

The primary 'battleground' that will grow in significance is in 'mission theology' or missiology, on the issue of the relationship of evangelism and social action. Seeing the need to maintain their churches, the ecumenicals are realizing the need to put evangelism, church growth and renewal in (if not on top of) their agenda.

Although this issue was seemingly resolved in 1982 in the Consultation on the Relationship of Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR), most Asian evangelicals have yet to accept that the primacy of evangelism is theological and logical, but not practical and strategic/tactical.<sup>13</sup> This will determine

how deeply the evangelicals will be able to participate in dealing with social issues and how much they will cooperate with ecumenicals and non-Christians in such involvement.

Those who have already resolved the issue (from both the ecumenical and evangelical camps) would be seeking partner-theologians in sharing insights and resources on how to involve other church leaders in developing pastoral models of such missiology.

### Economic prosperity

Several Asian economies have been growing rapidly in the past two decades, thus making Asia 'the continent of the 21st century'. It contains some of the world's most densely populated countries that have been characterized by great economic discrepancies. But since the '80s prosperity seems to be overshadowing the poverty issue of the recent past.

Japan has established itself as the leading nation in the continent, with a *per capita* GNP of over US \$21,000 (and Brunei has US \$15,000), though Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos and Nepal still have less than US \$200 each. Since the '70s the 'dragon economies' of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong have experienced record economic growth; and the '80s saw Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia going through the same kind of expansion. The economic freedom in China promises to make it the 'next superpower' before the middle of the next century.

Such economic boom has produced the need for thousands of migrant workers, mostly women (nurses, labourers, entertainers, domestics), from within and outside these countries; thus the poverty issues (including mass poverty) will remain. But the emphasis will be shifting to the concerns of those who have attained prosperity: the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, with emphasis on the lifestyle of upper- and middle-class Christians. Clearer definitions of simple lifestyle, genuine partnership and 'evangelical poverty' should become critical points for theological discourse and praxis.

### Political uncertainty

The process of establishing democratic institutions has rapidly gained ground in many, though not all, Asian countries. But the looming presence of socialist/communist regions (North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and especially China) and the rise of religious fundamentalism still raises basic questions about the political stability of the continent. The fate of Hong Kong after 1997 will undoubtedly be very significant, especially for Taiwan, whose population has recently rejected the venture of becoming independent, but does not want to join China before democratic reforms are firmly set there.

It is in the context of these uncertain political futures that the leaders and theologians of the churches in Asia have to work out their faith *vis-à-vis* their respective (often authoritarian) state governments, as significant majorities (in the Philippines, North East India and South Korea), or as significant or insignificant minorities. The problem of militarization and the role of the military will be discussed further also, particularly in Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar.

### Religious pluralism

Though Asia is fast secularizing due to economic growth, it has seen not the gradual decline of religion but (alongside the shift to material and commercial pursuits) the resurgence and expansion of the major traditional religions (Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Shintoism). In contexts where religion has been one of the main causes of violent conflicts, Christians and churches have learned to cope with being marginalized as 'foreigners' and poor<sup>14</sup> by their non-Christian neighbours. This calls for continued creative theologizing in context - to derive authentic traditions through fresh reflection of God's presence and of other spiritual realities in each of the varied religious communities. Christian theologians have to equip their fellow believers to handle different worldviews, belief and value systems and religious traditions, and to use dialogue as a means of relating to people of other faiths. A 'theology of hospitality'<sup>15</sup> may be the best way forward in doing mission by seeking to respect and understand non-Christian neighbours with Christ-like love.

This emphasizes the need to distinguish the negotiables and non-negotiables of the Christian faith, not in abstract

philosophizing but (as modelled by Jesus and the early church) in concrete personal encounters. Clarifying the uniqueness of the Jesus Christ of the Holy Scriptures *in situ* is basic for proper contextualization, yet consciously knowing that the risk of falling into 'syncretism' (i.e., the fusion of Christian faith with non-Christian meanings) exists. Nevertheless this must be done, for it is the best (if not the only) way of doing biblical theology contextually.

## Other theological issues

Current within and among the churches (denominations and para-church groups) are the issues of hermeneutics (actual use of the Bible in social ethics),<sup>16</sup> the leadership role (especially the ordination) of women, and inter-confessional and ecumenical (beyond WCC and NCC) structures.

In relation to the world, the theological agenda will continue to include: the integrity of creation, peoplehood (ethnic identity, particularly of oppressed minorities), multi-cultural co-existence and cooperation, population control, use of nuclear power, equal rights for women, modernization/secularization (versus traditionalism), and viability of extended families (versus individualism).

One primary concern will be fully global (trans-national and trans-continental) in nature: the new world order amidst more rapid post-modern changes of 'information technology' – what are the ethics involved in computerization, robotics, automation, InterNet, as well as biotech agriculture, genetic engineering, etc.

Asian theologians will surely be dealing with these issues and contribute to inter-national and inter-cultural theology. Such 'cross-cultural theologizing' will seek to learn from and share in the theologies of other contexts, but refrain from universalizing one's theology or creating one universal theology.

## Conclusion

Three other phenomena need to be highlighted: (1) Most of the creative evangelical theologizing has flourished recently through the continental network called Partnership in Mission-Asia (PIM-Asia).<sup>17</sup> It includes theologians who work in both WCC/CCA and WEF/EFA circles, and is part of a global network called the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT).

(2) From and amidst explosive church growth, more younger Pentecostal church leaders are finishing their postgraduate theological degrees, and the few who have already finished have recently organized the Asian Charismatic Theological Association (ACTA). They should become a 'critical mass' soon, not only to critique their own theological heritage, but also to contribute to Asian and global theologizing.

(3) Several key theological writings have recently been written in Chinese (in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan), Korean and Japanese, and more will be coming forth in Filipino, Bahasa (Indonesian and Malaysian) and some of the major languages of India. This must be welcomed as indicators of the fuller maturity of Asian theologians to reflect and explicate the gospel in their own tongues, hence pushing contextualization forward further.

Most Asian churches have come to recognize that they must form the primary force to missionize their vast and largely non-Christian continent.<sup>18</sup> The challenge is great, and requires clarity of vision and commitment for responding actively and boldly to the confusion and erosion of the theological convictions and moral values in the churches. How will Asian theologians contribute to the critical, prophetic and creative witness of their churches to the various issues of their respective contexts? May God find them faithful in formulating contextual biblical theologies which will equip their fellow believers in witnessing to his kingdom and its transforming power in the varied communities of Asia.

<sup>16</sup>It was a Chinese theologian, Shoki Coe, who coined the word 'contextualization' in 1970; and a Filipino, Emerito Nacpil, who defined the 'Asian critical principle' in 1974.

<sup>17</sup>It is written from the perspective of a Chinese-Filipino evangelical theological educator whose work-base has been the Philippines.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* (New York: Paulist/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); D.J. Elwood (ed.), *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); J.C. England (ed.), *Living Theology in Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982); V. Fabella (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980); E. Nacpil and D. Elwood (eds.), *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology* (Quezon City: New Day, 1978/Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980); and G.C. Oosthuizen, *Theological Battleground in Asia and Africa: The Issues Facing the Churches and the Efforts to Overcome Western Divisions* (London: C. Hurst, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>The ATESEA offers postgraduate studies through the Southeast Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST). The key person in this network is Yeow Choo Lak.

<sup>5</sup>Bong Rin Ro served as Executive Secretary until recently when Ken Granakan took over. Seventeen of these ATA-related seminaries formed a consortium called the Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST) to offer postgraduate degrees.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Kim Yong Bok, Nam Dong Suh, Byung Mu Ahn, etc.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Emerito Nacpil, Levi Oracion, Salvador Eduarte, etc.

<sup>8</sup>Mainly articulated through the Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society (Bangalore) and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College (Madras).

<sup>9</sup>On method, cf. José M. de Mesa and Lode L. Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, n.d.). For samples of their writings, see (besides those mentioned in n. 3) K.C. Abraham (ed.), *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990); Christian Conference of Asia, *The Mission of God in the Context of the Suffering and Struggling Peoples of Asia: Biblical Reflections* (Hong Kong: C.C.A., 1988); V. Fabella and S. Torres (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); *idem*, *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983); C.S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); *idem*, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); S.P. Formilleza (ed.), *Out of the Valley of Dry Bones: Faith Reflections of Grassroots Christians* (Quezon City: E.C.D. Publication, 1980); K. Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis/London: SCM, 1984); M. Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith* (Geneva: WCC, 1986); K.Y. Bock (ed.), *Minjung Theology* (Singapore: C.C.A., 1981); and A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark/Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Each of these believe that their respective theologies are based on the authority of inerrant or infallible Scriptures. Reflection on 'how do these varied interpretations to this common source relate to one another?' is urgently needed!

<sup>11</sup>Cf. B.R. Ro and R. Eshenaur (eds.), *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1988); and B.R. Ro and M.C. Albrecht, *God in Asia* (Taichung: ATA, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>See the first two points in this article's conclusion.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Grand Rapids Report in Tom Sine (ed.), *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Monrovia: MARC, 1983), pp. 441-487. On the question of primacy, section IV.D. states, '... evangelism has a certain priority. We are not referring to an invariable temporal priority, because in some situations a social ministry will take precedence, but to a logical one. The very fact of Christian SR presupposes socially responsible Christians, and it can be by EV and discipling that they have become such. . . . The choice, we believe, is largely conceptual. In practice, as in the public ministry of Jesus, the two are inseparable, at least in open societies, and we shall seldom if ever have to choose between them.'

<sup>14</sup>In the past Christians have generally belonged to the poorer sectors of society, yet their buildings and equipments display relative wealth and 'foreignness' in the context of mass poverty. Their 'foreignness' may mainly be attributed to their access to rich foreign resources, the relatively high standard of living of (very visibly white) missionaries and some church leaders, large numbers and salaries of paid employees in established (and uncontextualized!) churches and Christian organizations, and the growing size and number of Christian educational and social institutions.

<sup>15</sup>This was mentioned in an unofficial document of the Seventh International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in December 1986, in section 24: 'a theology of hospitality: make the others (persons, races, cultures, religion, sex) welcome, and celebrate them in all their socio-cultural and theological otherness while not omitting to pose an honest critique and a gospel challenge'; cited in K.C. Abraham (ed.), *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 199.

<sup>16</sup>For an excellent sampling from the ecumenical camp, see R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin* (London: SPCK, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>Its publications include: V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); V. Samuel and A. Hauser (eds.), *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way* (Oxford: Regnum, 1989); V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *A.D. 2000 and Beyond: A Mission Agenda* (Oxford: Regnum, 1991); and M. Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere* (London: Collins, 1991).

<sup>18</sup>Asia contains almost 95% of the world's unevangelized (or 'unreached people groups', as popularized by various groups linked with DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation) Movement, AD 2000 Movements, MARC Publications, etc.).