

ASIAN
HORIZONS

Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2011

Pages: 3-8

Editorial

TOWARDS ASIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

Reflections on *Fides et Ratio*, article 72

Christianity has its origin in the Asian continent. But, the oft repeated question is whether Christianity is really Asian. If it is, why should we speak about “Asian Christian Theology”? Shouldn’t Christian theology be basically Asian? Though Christianity has its origin on the Asian soil, we know that it was very soon transplanted on the European soil, which thence became its natural abode. Somehow, Asia, in general, did not become a stronghold of Christianity, both numerically and politically. In spite of the fact that Christianity continued to exist in Asia, and influential at least in some of its regions, Asia could not contribute much to the development of a Christian theology. Together with this, the hegemonic tendencies of the West and its ignorance about the Asian ways of understanding and expressing the Christian faith further delayed the development of theology/theologies in Asia. Theology developed making use of the western languages, thought patterns and also responding to the socio-political contexts of the West. Wherever Christianity was spread from the initiatives of the West, the western patterns of expressing faith were considered to be sacrosanct. That is, the cultural, linguistic and conceptual models of the West, in which Christian faith was expressed, were identified with faith itself. This also implied certain claims of the superiority of the western culture and conceptual frameworks. The age of colonization witnessed a deepening of these tendencies.

The twentieth century marked a greater awareness from the part of the Church of the relative nature of the cultural and conceptual frames in which faith was expressed and, hence, a greater openness towards other cultures and philosophical traditions. This can be

noticed in the Second Vatican Council documents and in the subsequent attitude of the Church towards other cultures and philosophical traditions, making inculturation one of the major themes of theological discussion. Of these, the most notable contribution, perhaps, can be said to be John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*, particularly article 72, which explicitly speaks about the "new tasks of inculturation." The Pope speaks in detail of the "duty" of Christians in India "to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought." Though the Pope delineates certain criteria for the task of inculturation, the focus is not on precautions to be taken, but on the openness to other cultural and philosophical traditions. The Pope also clearly states that what is said about India is true regarding the great traditions of China, Japan, other Asian countries and Africa.

On the one hand, we say that Christianity from the beginning attempted to inculturate its message, to make the Gospel intelligible to the peoples imparting it through their languages and conceptual frameworks and dialoguing with their cultures and beliefs, accepting the presence of truth in them. On the other hand, attempts on the opposite direction also can be seen and in certain periods of history, judging other cultures and religions as the work of the devil and considering Christianity as the sole depository of truth and salvation. Evidently, today we have come far from such negative and judgemental attitudes. However, hesitations, apprehensions and precautions surround inculturation and, hence, in spite of positive efforts, determined and definite steps are yet to be taken. There is also resistance towards inculturation, not only from the western Church, but also from the Asian and African Churches. Yet, others point out that even the term "inculturation" has an implication of superiority and domination and, hence, we should think in terms of inter-culturation. Similarly, many observe that together with the age-old traditional cultures, the new post-modern culture of globalization is also to be taken into account for inculturation, that is, inculturation cannot be limited to the cultural heritage of the past, but should be sensitive to the changed and changing cultural patterns. In spite of a variety of opinions, innumerable apprehensions and lack of clarity of the precise steps to be taken, the Church as a whole is convinced of the need of a more open, sincere and profound dialogue with different religious and cultural traditions.

Asian Horizons, in its March 2011 and June 2011 issues, reflects on the invitation for inculturation given by the Church in *Fides et Ratio*, after 12 years of its publication. In this issue, there are eight articles in this issue on the theme selected. We shall continue the reflection on the

theme in the next issue. Although there are articles which directly deal with article 72 of *Fides et Ratio*, we are not attempting a detailed and critical commentary on it. Instead we are trying to present how theologians today are inspired by the invitation given by *Fides et Ratio* in the efforts at inculturation.

In his article "Universality of the Human Spirit. A New Focus for Asian Theological Reflection," Joseph Pathrapankal points out that the call for inculturation in *Fides et Ratio* is not an isolated event, but rather the fruit of the Church's growing awareness of the need of an inculturated theology, especially from the time of the Second Vatican Council. Making a major and conscious departure from the issue of Thomistic philosophy and theology as the standard philosophy and theology of the universal Church, the Council, especially in the Decree on the Missions, has articulated the need of developing a theology that is proper to the culture and customs of the country where the theological reflection takes place. Joseph Pathrapankal points out that, in spite of the clear and strong encouragement given by the Second Vatican Council, nothing much has happened in the various cultural and religious contexts of the Church for the creation and development of an inculturated philosophy and theology. It is in this context that we have to see the renewed and more determined invitation given by John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* to the Indian theologians and philosophers to engage themselves in a re-articulation of the gospel in the Indian context. Joseph Pathrapankal clearly states, "Never before has any Pope written in so beautiful terms the richness of the Indian philosophical and theological traditions." According to him, the basis for the Pope's reasoning is the universality of the human spirit, that is, the human spirit is universal and its articulations are also universal. Drawing insights from the Pauline reflections on the Spirit, Pathrapankal further develops the concept of the universality of the human spirit. In unequivocal terms, he affirms, "It is our firm conviction that inter-faith theological reflection is one of the major theological issues of our times and it should become the concerns not only of Asian theologians but also of the international community of theologians in spite of the fact that it would involve certain uneasiness for the traditional understanding of the Christian movement."

Mathew N. Schmalz, in "The Faith and Rationality of Dalit Christian Experience," examines the experiences of a Dalit (Untouchable) Catholic Christian convert, so as to re-present and examine the understanding of herself and Christianity through the lens of *Fides et Ratio* and its discussion of truth and culture. Schmalz emphasises how the faith and rationality of Christian Untouchables can be an

important resource for the intellectual labour that the encyclical calls for. The article is an excellent example for a convergence of faith and reason, mutually complementing and challenging, in experience.

According to Joseph Xavier, though the term “inculturation” is a rather new term in theology, the Church has been accustomed to it for centuries. In “Revisiting Inculturation and Its Challenges in India,” the author points out that inculturation facilitates a creative encounter between the Gospel and cultures. The theological conviction behind inculturation, according to him, is that the Gospel transcends all cultures and it has the capability of reaching all human beings in their cultural context. Drawing inspiration from the teachings of Vatican II, from *Fides et Ratio* and from Benedict XVI’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Joseph Xavier attempts to discuss how *kenosis* can become a Christological basis for engagement and dialogue. While approaching the concept of inculturation in a multi-religious context, the article also highlights some of the challenges and tasks it faces in India.

Theologies may become irrelevant if they fail to express the real sentiments and experiences of the people, and to put aside the culture of the people is to lose an important means to communicate the Gospel, argues Rebecca G. Cacho, in “Bakas Ng Kagandahang Loob Ng Diyos (Traces of God’s Love): A Proposed Inculturated Approach to Sacraments for Religious Education.” Based on data gathered from the research that made use of the local framework and Filipino language, she argues that the use of the inculturated sacramental theology was more intelligible and relevant to the youth.

Antony Kalliath in his challenging article, “Christian Mission as New Life in Jesus,” focuses on two underlying themes in the Bible, namely, the theme of Life and that of an ever engaging God of Life. Kalliath observes that in the course of time, the theme of Life was ignored as an other-worldly salvation became the preoccupation in the Church, especially in the West. According to him, God of Life and Gospel of Life offer a credible praxis and paradigm to build up an Asian theology. He develops these two themes drawing extensively from the scriptural sources.

Chikere Ugwuanyi, in “Voices of Inculturation in Africa: In the Past, in the Present and the Future,” points out that inculturation is situated within the wider theological inquiry into faith, worship and transfer of symbols from one culture to another. He shows how syncretism, authenticity and fidelity converge in the transfer of religious symbols. According to him, the African Church has attempted authentic inculturation in the past, continues the efforts in

the present, looking forward to a brighter future. While appreciating the work done so far, Chikere underscores with profound hope that Africans have to be truly African, truly Christian and truly human.

Examining the various phases in the evolution of the art of healing in the Vedic times and in the emergence of Ayurveda, Stanislaus Alla, in "Care and Access in Early Hindu Bioethics," shows that the principles of care and access have largely shaped the ethical perspectives in early times, characterizing and directing the nascent Hindu bioethical discourse. According to him, recovery of these principles, embedded in an ancient social ethic, can potentially enable the bioethicists to build up and enrich a religious voice that is inadequately present in contemporary conversations on health care concerns in India. Thus, Stanislaus Alla attempts to advance a deeper knowledge of the Hindu approach to the centrality of the human person in current healthcare debates and foster interreligious learning, and at the same time, invites the Catholic bioethicists to identify the spheres where the values and commitments of Catholic and Hindu traditions overlap so that together they can construct an interreligious bioethical discourse.

Sebastian Elavathingal, a noted artist and theologian, in "Art and Celebration of Faith," underscores that evangelization today demands the Church's encounter with cultures at deeper levels of human consciousness. According to him, it is essentially a creative task that involves a process of inner transformation both on the part of the Church and the culture it encounters. No culture in the world is excluded from this experience and the final goal of the Church-culture encounter is the celebration of communion which is expressed in the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. According to Elavathingal, the theme and inspiration of Christian "imagination," creativity and art is Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15-17). He emphasises that art and symbolism play an important role in the process of self-awareness, self-affirmation and self-actualization of the Church in the world. The deepest levels of human consciousness of every culture can be seen in its artistic and symbolic traditions and hence unless and until Christian faith finds expression in the artistic and symbolic language of the culture of a people, it cannot claim to have entered the consciousness of the people with a transforming effect in their lives.

Following the discussion on Asian Christian theologies, we have three articles of different themes. In "Spirituality and the University," Celia Kourie observes that the academy is slow to open its doors to "newcomers" and, hence, it is not often that we witness the birth of a new discipline. Yet, the last few decades have witnessed the

introduction of the “new” discipline of Spirituality into higher education. The important role of the academy in systematising spirituality as a scientific discipline and in developing its importance for the society is increasingly coming to the fore. Kourie points out that spirituality is exerting considerable influence both within and outside the walls of the university.

Siby Kuriakose Kavattu in his “Christological Conceptions and Expressions of the Early Syriac Authors and Writings,” discusses the plurality in the understanding of the mystery of Christ. East and West have different images of Christ, and, according to the author, lack of appreciation of the different approaches have accounted for the Christological controversies in the history. Fortunately, openness towards the different expressions of the Christological languages today has changed the scene of suspicion and accusation. Kavattu brings to light the less known, yet valid and important Christological conceptions of the early Syriac authors and writings to enhance further the Christological discussions today.

In “Africa and Globalization. Rethinking the Moral Principles of Cosmopolitanism in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching,” Benedict C. Nwachukwu-Udaku argues that any attempt to negotiate globalization within the context of hermeneutics and praxis of African life, will indisputably produce two seemingly opposing dialectics. While the dialectics of differentiation obliges people and nations to be aware of their cultural identity and difference, the didactics of interdependence makes it imperative for people to recognize their need for others in our cosmopolitan world. Nwachukwu-Udaku underlines how the basic resources of the Catholic social teaching could foster reconciliation between the two dialectics.

From 2011 *Asian Horizons* will be published as a quarterly. We have also expanded the editorial board, including more members from different countries with expertise on Asian thought and theology. While placing on record our sincere gratitude to the members of the editorial board for extending their support to enhance the quality of *Asian Horizons*, I thank very specially all the outgoing members of the editorial board as well. Together with this new step, we are making it a peer-reviewed journal. You are most cordially welcome to write for *Asian Horizons*. Since the articles to be published are to be reviewed by the members of the editorial board, we request the possible contributors to send their articles well in advance. Your suggestions and observations are always welcome!

Shaji George Kochuthara
Editor-in-Chief

***Fides et Ratio*, article 72**

In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the Gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries.

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems.

In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind. The first of these is the universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures. The second, which derives from the first, is this: in engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future, who will judge herself enriched by all that comes from today's engagement with Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues for fruitful dialogue with the cultures which will emerge as humanity moves into the future. Thirdly, care will need to be taken lest, contrary to the very nature of the human spirit, the legitimate defense of the uniqueness and originality of Indian thought be confused with the idea that a particular cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions.

What has been said here of India is no less true for the heritage of the great cultures of China, Japan and the other countries of Asia, as also for the riches of the traditional cultures of Africa, which are for the most part orally transmitted.