

The Second Invasion

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Abstract

This paper is a study concerning the impact of Western theology upon Asian Christianity. It questions the long-term impact and the contemporary viability of this enterprise. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, we must wonder whether the theology, and by extension, the missiological task of the Church, based upon Western paradigms, is still feasible in Asia. Perhaps, the time has come for the Church in Asia to consider what it means to be both Asian and Christian and to seek ways of making this dual identity a living reality.

The Challenge of Asia

When the Missionary Movement made its presence felt in Asia, it coincided with the arrival of Western Imperialism. To many of the tribes of Asia, Christianity was (at that time) no more than a propaganda tool of the colonial powers. With the French came the Roman Catholic faith and with the English came the Church of England. The arrival of other denominations was often greeted with tight controls imposed by the colonialists, in effect creating denominational enclaves that, in one way or another, suited the whims of the colonial masters.¹

As Asian nations, one by one, gained their independence (mostly in the 1950s), the colonial masters returned home while the churches stayed. After some fifty years of missions in Asia, what is the state of Christianity in this continent?

To grasp the implication of this question, we must turn to statistics. According to the latest available figures, Christianity accounts for only about 3% of Asia's population. To compound matters, there are six countries in Asia which have no meaningful Christian presence.² This is the only continent on this planet with such dismal figures. All of this is true despite the extraordinary efforts that the Church has played in the lives of nearly every country in Asia (this includes educational, medical, and social endeavours).³

Another perspective of this state of affairs comes to light in a simple equation: only the Philippines can honestly call itself a Christian nation.⁴ Even there, the picture is complicated by the strong Islamic presence in the southern Philippines.

Furthermore, Asia is the only continent where all the world's leading religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism, and Taoism) are deeply entrenched. Not only have these religions dug deep roots in Asia, they have essentially defined ethnic belongingness in Asia. Consequently, Central and West Asia are predominantly Islamic; South Asia is mainly Hindu; while East and Southeast Asia are primarily Buddhist. Certain Asian countries, such as India and Malaysia, are comprised of substantial segments of one or more of these religions.

To postulate that Christian missions in Asia faces challenges unknown anywhere else in the world is truly an understatement. This picture begs a question, "Can Asia ever be Christianised?" I

¹ In India for example, the Baptists were assigned Naga territory, while the Presbyterians were given Khasi lands. In Indo-China, the French controlled Protestant proselytisation, while, in Singapore, the Church of England dominated the scene. These movements can be traced wherever the colonialists went.

² China's Christian population comprises only 5.7% of its population. By comparison, USA is 85%, Brazil is 93%, and Russia is 60% Christian (Ash, 1997: 160-161). The countries of Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, North Yemen, South Yemen, and Sikkim have less than 0.2% Christians (Barrett, 1982: 3, 612).

³ The number of Christian institutions (educational and medical) in Asia is disproportionate to the number of believers.

⁴ Christianity makes up 93% of the population of the country (Ash, 1997: 160-161).

suspect that the answer to the question depends largely on our assumptions about Christian theology. Until recent times, such assumptions have been driven by western paradigms of theology and missions. These paradigms created an approach to other faiths and cultures based on a superiority complex which dictated a sense of "we are here to enlighten you who live in darkness." Non-Christian peoples were viewed in two very simple ways: as unsaved pagans who lived in total darkness *or* as targets for evangelistic goals and ambitions. Without trying to sound overly crass, little thought was given to the deeply-rooted religious and cultural beliefs that already existed in Asia. This was a rather grave miscalculation by the movers of the so-called Missionary Movement.

However, a bigger question must be asked today, "Where does the Church go from here?" This essay is an attempt to reflect on these issues and to try to answer this all important question. In the preceding paragraphs, I have examined the state of affairs of Christian presence in Asia. Here, I will attempt to delve deeper into another issue that is becoming a pattern at this juncture in time.

The Second Wave

While the old days of western missionaries may have moved on, there is a new wave of such missionaries all over Asia. This second wave (invasion) is driven by very different motives. Gone are the days of western imperialism and sense of superiority. Today, we live in a global world where Asia is a dominant player in economics and politics. Western powers are no longer the only members of the UN Security Council. The media constantly trumpets the economic successes of Asian giants China and India. While China exports practically everything from computers to clothing, India is a big time player in the IT industry. By every account, this dominance of the two giants is set to explode further.⁵

While all of this is going on in the world stage, the Church in Asia has quietly gone about with its task in ways still reminiscent of the colonial days. Western missionaries who come to Asia these days are of a different breed, but their mentality is essentially unchanged. They are still here to tell the poor natives about Jesus. That basic drive has not changed. The style has but the content remains the same. Nevertheless, there is a singular difference between this new brand of missions and the old one. Whereas, the first wave of western Christian missionaries came to Asia during the height of Christian revivalism and growth in the western world, this new wave comes at a time when Christianity is losing ground in its home bases.⁶ Phrases such as, "de-Christianisation of Europe", ought to send shockwaves through the world of Christian missions. We must honestly wonder whether the new wave of missionaries really bring with them recipes for success or recipes of failed experiments.

It may seem to some that to raise such concerns is sacrilege and that western Christian missions is both essential and inevitable. However, Asian Christians must ask the difficult questions. We must do this for one reason. While we may applaud ourselves for all we are worth, the reality is that Christianity in Asia is spectacularly unsuccessful. Can this new wave of missionaries with their secularised lifestyles really accomplish what must be done?

I think we can all agree that, at the end of the day, it is the completion of the gospel commission in Asia, the final bastion of resistance to the gospel, which is paramount. Having said that, we must also wonder, whether the basic paradigms of western Christianity are capable of truly making that happen. Can the exclusivity of western Christianity really do what it has not been able to do up to now? Are western theology and concept of missions really feasible in Asia? Is there, or can there be, a truly Asian alternative?

⁵ Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the UK recently admitted that "soon 25 per cent of the world's output could come from just two countries: China and India" (Brown, 2007).

⁶ It is estimated that net defections from Christianity in Europe and North America are running at 1.8 million a year. If only church members are considered the losses are higher, while the losses of church attenders is even greater, 6000 a day and 7,600 every day respectively (Barrett, 1982: 7).

I hasten to add that glib answers to these reflections may prove more damaging to the cause of God in Asia than any accidental success or failure we may experience. In writing this essay, I intend to be provocative without (hopefully) being offensive. However, my real intention is to explore a truly Asian alternative to Christian missions. This endeavour is driven by a firm conviction that such a task must be done.

Views about Salvation

In the subsequent discussion, I will attempt to further elucidate my thinking and I invite careful and reflective readership to join me in this odyssey. In order to build a truly Asian theology, I would like to begin by examining the various views on salvation. We can group views on salvation into three schools of thought.⁷ While there are overlaps between the schools, there is also decided difference.

On one extreme end of the spectrum is the view that a person can only be saved through a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. This view is often labelled as the restrictivist school. Essentially, this means that only Christians can be saved. Therefore, people from other religious persuasions must become Christians or they will be lost. The view finds its support in passages like John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" and Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved." Such words are taken to mean that the gospel is rather exclusive and only its adherers may receive salvation.

On the opposite end of the scale is the view that all religions are pathways to God and that all people can potentially be saved without becoming explicit Christians. This view finds its appeal in passages like John 8:12: "I am the light of the world." It argues that *all* light comes from Christ and, therefore, *all* religions point back to him. This school of thought is called the pluralist view. Basic to this view is the unwillingness to limit salvation to only the Christian gospel as this would consign the majority of the people of the world to damnation.

Somewhere in between the restrictivist-pluralist polarity is the school of thought named inclusivist. This school maintains that the way people are saved lies somewhere between these opposing poles. Throughout the Bible we encounter people who were directly connected to God without any explicit connection to God's people (whether Israel in the Old Testament or the Church in the New Testament). Proponents of this view argue that the Bible presents one primary path to God, but that God is not limited by this path alone. The question of how a person is actually saved lies entirely within the purview of God and his ways, which are totally inscrutable (see Isaiah 55:8-9).

Whatever our personal presuppositions, we cannot dismiss one view and subscribe to another simply because it fits with our mindset better. An honest appraisal of all the options is necessary, in order to arrive at the most biblical and rational conclusion.

If we wish to construct an Asian theology, we must first examine our salvific presuppositions. The traditional, western assumption belongs to the restrictivist school of thought. The willingness of this school to consign millions to hell for lack of knowledge is highly questionable. Additionally, it posits an unbelievable burden upon the Church in Asia which, if it followed only this paradigm, is doomed to failure and unwittingly becomes a cause for the millions of Asians ending up in hell. Yet, to become totally pluralist removes any need to obey the gospel commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and allows people into heaven without any conditions. Such extremism is equally unacceptable.

⁷ The most helpful treatment of the subject is Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Philips, eds., 1996, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*.

The Middle Path of Missions

My approach, therefore, must follow the middle path, which in itself is the Asian way. I will begin my theological construct at this point. Before we are in a position to articulate a theology of salvation, we must first aspire to know God. I say 'aspire' because I believe that knowing God in all reality is impossible. However, we have been provided snippets of information about his nature and character in the Scriptures. It must be noted that God is not presented in the Bible in some propositional manner (as western theology is prone to do).⁸ Rather, God is seen through stories and vignettes about his dealings with humanity.

What this means is, that whatever we think we know about God, it is partial knowledge at best. To put this in another way, most church-going people tend to see God as inhabiting a small box, one that is predictable and, perchance, controllable. Effectually, we would like to control God. Such a God is no more than a figment of our imagination; a kind of comic book character in the mould of Santa Claus or Superman. He exists for our benefit; He lives at our beck and call; he exists only because we say so. Therefore, if some say (as Nietzsche did) that God is dead, then He is.

Such a view of God belittles the very word itself. If God is truly God, He must transcend our conceptualisations and imaginations. The polemics of Isaiah the prophet bear this out.⁹ Moreover, God, by definition, is unexplainable. To claim that we can explain him is to box him up in a small container that we then control. God has to remain, by nature, character, and act, far bigger than any box we can place Him in.

Therefore, when we speak about salvation, we are really conversing about God's activity, which I believe is above scrutiny. It is true that the Bible has provided information about our salvation. This fact is not in dispute. Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves whether this fact is the total picture.

Let us examine the biblical evidence. The Bible clearly portrays the primary means of salvation as God working out his salvific purposes through His people: Israel and the Church. However, it is equally evident that salvation did come to others outside of this parameter. The entire antediluvian race existed outside this parameter, yet there were people there (Enoch, Methuselah, etc.) who were clearly accepted by God. In subsequent periods we meet the likes of Melchizedek (God's high priest in Salem), Jethro (God's priest in Midian and Moses' father-in-law), and Balaam (God's prophet in Babylon).

Evidence indicates that the Amorites (a Canaanite tribe) may have worshipped Yahweh. The evidence also indicates that Abraham acknowledged Melchizedek as God's high priest (see Genesis 14), while Moses was obviously schooled in the knowledge of Yahweh by Jethro. As we move further into Old Testament history, we find God sending prophets (Jonah and Nahum) to the Assyrians in an attempt to save them.

Even in the New Testament we meet Gentiles, like the unnamed centurion and Cornelius, who were already God's people before they became Christians. The initial success of the Church came about as a result of the mass response of so-called 'God-fearers'. In Romans 1, Paul asserts that people could have known God from nature without any scriptural assistance (was Paul propagating salvation through general revelation?).

Ultimately, we must come to terms with Zechariah 13 where we encounter the Messiah telling people in his kingdom about the wounds he had received in the 'house of his friends'. These people are in the messianic kingdom without any explicit knowledge of the Messiah. We must also contend with John 10 and Jesus' words that he has other sheep which do not belong to the same flock.

⁸ The overdependence on categorisation of theological reality is more a reflection of Aristotelian systematics than biblical thought.

⁹ See Isaiah 44:6-23; 46: 5-13; and 55:6-13.

At the very least, this data should caution us against pretending that we know everything about God's salvific work. Perhaps, the only thing we can say with certainty is that God has a primary method but he is not limited to that method. We can also say that we have no further knowledge about any other method God may be employing. We cannot assume that the absence of further knowledge is equivalent to the absence of other methodologies.

What I am calling for is the willingness to admit that God ultimately controls the issue of salvation; not us. As to who will be in heaven, only God knows! Such recognition should humble us and remove the evangelistic arrogance that so often pervades the Church's efforts in this world.

Having examined the primary views about salvation and, by default, about God's salvific work, we can now return to the task of how to do theology in Asia. Even the most casual perusal of Asian theologians unveils the sense of scepticism that pervades their works. This scepticism is directed at western theological paradigms. Perhaps, we should begin by outlining the basics of western theology.

Arguably, western theology has been unduly influenced by Greek philosophical paradigms. Nowhere is this more evident than in the compartmentalisation of truth. Taking its cue from Greek and western philosophy, the Christian theological enterprise in the west became totally propositional. Biblical truth is categorised into specific areas with appropriate labels attached to them. Therefore, we speak about theology, christology, soteriology, and so on and so forth.

While this methodology has its merits, it fails on three significant counts. First, it ignores the simple fact that God did not communicate himself in this manner. Scripture is a collage of materials – legal, narrative, poetic, prophetic, wisdom, historical, and epistolary. Divine communication is provided in the form of songs or prayers or parables rather than neat propositions. Second, the methodology calls upon professional practitioners to re-categorise biblical texts to fit certain labels, often at the risk of text-manipulation. The task often seems out of reach for the rank and file believer. Perhaps, the greatest failure of the propositional approach to the Bible is its imposition of a method of reading that is contrary to what the text itself supplies. A case in point is this: whereas the biblical text is predominantly story, western theology reads the Bible as concepts. To put it another way, when God wanted to communicate 'grace', he did not so much explain or define the concept as tell a story about grace.

The sceptical stance of Asian theologians is well-founded.¹⁰ This is why we encounter a different approach (or shall we say approaches) in Asian Christianity. Asian theologians would generally agree that theology is at best contingent. They would prefer to speak of theologies rather than theology *per se*. They recognise that God has to be re-interpreted in every cultural setting. They argue that western Christianity itself is the product of such cultural re-interpretation. They press home the argument that the imposition of this western form of Christianity is a major contributing factor in the distinct lack of success of the gospel in Asia.

To digress somewhat, conversion to the Christian faith often leads to marginalisation and cultural dislocation in Asia, even though Asian cultural values are closer to the Bible than to West. Since the established religions of Asia are adverse to mass response to the gospel, such marginalisation is inevitable. However, much of this has happened due to the Church itself. In

¹⁰ J Patmury of India speaks about the connection between Church theology and Imperial patronage and calls for the reversal of this dominant theology. The Veiled critique is quite evident (95: 378-380). Yong-bock Kim of Korea is more forthright in his critique of western theology. He contends that "the Christianity brought by the Western missions to the Asian people is a colonial and imperial religion" (2005: 24). He laments the continuing desire of globalised Western Christianity, especially the fundamentalist forms of it, to create a global Christendom (2005: 18). He argues that the "historical Jesus is a Western construct" but that Jesus is neither Western nor modern. He calls upon Asian Christians "to excavate Jesus the Asian who has been buried in the history of Asia" (2005: 27, 34). The scepticism about western theology is now also being expressed by some western theologians. Kenan B Osborne admits the inability of "Euro-American Christian scholars" to think outside the box on the subject of salvation and he calls upon Asian scholars to rethink this issue so as to make it relevant and workable in Asia today (2007: 98).

insisting upon the western cultural baggage of the missionaries, and in equating this baggage with 'truth', the Church merely produced a xeroxed copy of western Christianity. This is evident on many levels: liturgical issues, music in the Church, name changes among converts, theological paradigms, and cultural changes. It is undoubted that most Asian Christians are highly westernised and truly feel more at home in Christian lands than in their own homelands. This may partially explain the large exodus of Asian Christians to so-called Christian countries.

The form of the gospel that came to Asia during the great Missionary Movement came with much cultural baggage. Those early missionaries brought their way of life with them and unwittingly confused that with the gospel. To this day, this particular confusion exists in Asian Christianity.

Some aspects of this phenomenon are hilarious, while others are seriously damaging the cause of the Church. Instances where the new believers changed their eating habits can be brushed off lightly. However, changes in name patterns and liturgical ideas have had a lasting impact. In many Asian countries it is still fashionable to add a Christian name to a person's native name regardless of how discordant that may sound. In most countries, Christians still worship with piano and organ at the expense of indigenous instruments like tabla, harmonium, zither, and a variety of others. Asian Christians even sing translated western hymns, as if this brought them closer to the truth.

What all of this amounts to, is a serious form of cultural dislocation. This dislocation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes Christians misfits in their own native societies. On the other hand, it attracts Christians to the so-called homelands of Christianity.

What does all of this mean? I am convinced that, at the very least, it means the gospel must become indigenised to Asia. Otherwise it will always remain a marginal force.

My interest has to do with the reversal of this trend. With this in mind, I am convinced that only when our paradigm for doing theology has changed will there be any meaningful change in the Church. Doing theology in Asia means that we must take contextual methodologies seriously. A basic premise of this approach is the idea that theology must always remain contingent. The classic approach of the western church is to attempt to dogmatise the gospel. Frequently, this means that there is only one acceptable theology, the Church's. Any deviation is treated with derision, at best, or rejection, at worst. To deviate from the Church's stated position could incur the full wrath of the ecclesiastical order.¹¹ Genuine thought is cowed into submission and God is reduced into a little explainable box.

Such a reductionist approach surely cannot work in Asia, as evidenced in the statistics cited earlier. The sheer complexity of Asia demands an approach that is more open to this diversity. Perhaps, as many Asian theologians maintain, we ought to think of 'theologies' rather than 'theology'. This is not a denial of truth. Rather it is an acceptance of the multiplex nature of truth itself. God's inscrutability, as expressed in such passages as Isaiah 55:8-9, clues us to the need to utilise another paradigm, one different from the dogmatic approach of western theology.

This paradigm shift recognises that truth is perceived in a relative manner. Biblical truth is a dynamic and living concept (see Hebrews 4:12). As such, it can neither be easily encapsulated in a few statements of faith nor be given a formulaic expression. Our learning of truth will inevitably be driven by our circumstances. In other words, truth is for our perceptions, and our perceptions will always be relative. This is not to say that there is no absolute truth, but that truth is only available to our perception. It is not something that stands apart from our consciousness.

A contextual approach to doing theology has an inbuilt respect for where people are at. It views the gospel as a partner in the scheme of life rather than its competitor. It offers a gentler, more Christ-like version of the gospel. The confrontational approach often associated with past methods is replaced with more adaptable methods. It seems to me that such an approach will produce better long-term results.

¹¹ The irony is that even Protestants who arose from a 'protest' against such ecclesiastical abuse have themselves become adept at employing the same leverage.

Traditionally, following the classic western evangelistic paradigm, converts are drawn to Christianity through a process of brow-eating. An evangelist and his team would enter a community, set up some meetings, preach a series of sermons attempting to prove the validity of the gospel, and then challenge the attendees to accept Jesus. All this is accomplished with a great deal of fanfare. Once the meetings are over, the evangelist leaves for new hunting grounds, while some poor, underpaid local pastor, or unpaid lay person, is left to try and nurture the new group of believers. Sometimes there is success, at other times there is none. The fall-out rate can also be very high as many of these new converts may return to their former ways. Moreover, many of these new believers have to take the 'plunge' all on their own, with little or no support. Even worse, at times they may have to face up to overwhelming opposition from family or society. Such an approach leaves these new converts in a perpetual state of struggle.

It appears to me, that the vast sums of money expended in such endeavours, is simply bad business. My simple opinion is that Jesus' methodology is probably preferable. Missions, one that involves a live-in experience and has the capability to make the gospel an indigenous experience, is the most viable option for the Church. People need the gospel but they also need to retain their connectedness to life as they know it. They should be able to know the 'Bread of life' while eating rice.

Perhaps an analogy from food will help. In different countries people use different staple foods. In some countries it is bread, in others it is pasta; in some it is potato or cassava, while in most of Asia it is rice. These foods look different and are prepared differently. However, all of them provide the same basic nutrient; they are sources of carbohydrate. Carbohydrate is essential to life but it assumes many forms. There is no correct source of carbohydrate. Yet, the carbohydrate itself remains unchanged. The work of the Church is analogous to this. Jesus is the same, and He will always be the same. The question is, "How do we make Him palatable to a particular culture?"

The hit and run evangelistic methods of the past have to be replaced by contextual methodologies which are capable of producing a recognisable Christ wherever the gospel goes. To return to the food analogy, rice eaters should recognise him as their rice. They should not have to learn to eat bread in order to know him. Because of this, it is impossible to speak of a single formula of missions. Each missiological enterprise must discover its own methodology. This essay is a call for the Church to move away from its dependence upon the traditional model of missions towards models that are more permanent; models that can create Christians who are still truly Asian. Theological reflection must also follow suit. Perhaps, when we are willing to do this, we may also be able to change the trend in Asia and turn Christianity into a truly dominant faith in this continent.

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