

Current Issues in Theology and Their Relevance to the Adventist Church: An East Asian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper comprises three parts: (1) An examination of the missiological challenges that the Church faces in East Asia and the ramifications of such challenges; (2) An exploration of various models proposed by East Asian Christian scholars as to what the Church could do to meet these challenges; and (3) A reflection the significance and impact of these models on the Adventist Church and its mission in East Asia.

Introduction

This paper is an investigation of pertinent theological issues in today's setting but with a geographical delimitation. To examine trends throughout the Christian world is a rather gargantuan task. To provide greater focus to the study, I have chosen to survey the theological issues that confront the Church in East Asia (here designating the area from Myanmar to Japan and China to Indonesia).

The basic start up question is, 'Why East Asia?' There are three principal reasons for this choice. First, I have worked as Bible teacher and pastor for the Adventist Church in East Asia since 1981. This is essentially my home field and one I am most familiar with. Second, this is arguably the most religiously complex part of the world, where all major living religions (we may even include atheistic communism and secularism here) of the world reside and compete for adherents and where the gospel has made minimal headway despite lengthy presence. Third, as will be articulated in this paper, Christian scholars in East Asia have produced volumes of theological reflection. There are many voices wrestling with the demands of doing theology in the region. East Asian theology is remarkably dynamic and is doing its best to aid the growth of God's kingdom.

My purpose here is to engage the various efforts being made by Christian scholars to communicate the gospel more meaningfully in East Asia. I will also consider the progress of Adventism vis-à-vis such developments and analyse the potential contribution of these ideas to Adventist mission in East Asia.

Missiological Challenges of East Asia

A quick glance at demographic ratios in the countries of East Asia heightens the enormous challenge for Christian mission in this region, as the following statistics indicate.

- China: OMF International estimates the Christian population of China at 5.3% of the population, while the CIA's online *The World Factbook* (WFb) puts it at 5.1%, based on a 2010 estimate. It has also been estimated that the number of Christians will reach 247 million by 2030 (Kumar, 2014) but this must be tempered by China's burgeoning population growth.
- South Korea: According to a 2010 survey, the Christian population of South Korea is 31.6%, placing South Korea second only to the Philippines in terms of Christians (WFb).
- Singapore: According to Pew Research Center study on religious diversity (2014; first published in 2012), Singapore is the most religiously diverse country in the world and its Christian population stands at 18%.
- Japan: Based on the 2005 census, the Christian population of Japan is about 2% (WFb).
- Taiwan: Christians make up about 4.5% of Taiwan's population (WFb).

- Thailand: As of 2010, it is reckoned that about 1.2% of the population is Christian (Wfb). Estimates vary substantially from about 1.1% by OMF and 0.5% by CMA.
- Myanmar: Christians make up 4% of the population (WFb).
- Malaysia: As of 2010, Malaysia's Christian population stands at 9.2% (WFb).
- Indonesia: A 2010 estimate puts the Christian population of Indonesia at 9.9% (WFb).
- Cambodia: Based on a 2008 estimate, Cambodia's Christian population stands at about 0.4% (WFb).
- Laos: According to the 2005 census, about 1.5% of Laos' population is Christian (WFb).
- Mongolia: In 2010, Mongolia's Christian presence was around 2.2% (Wfb).
- Philippines: By comparison, Christians make up 92.5 % of the population of the Philippines, according to the 2000 census. This is the only Christian country in East Asia.

Arguably, even the most casual observer is compelled to acknowledge that the task of Christian mission in East Asia has no exact parallel anywhere else in the world. A crucial question at this juncture is, 'What are the missiological challenges of East Asia?' While many suggestions could be made, I will highlight two challenges which I deem the most germane to this paper.

First, for most East Asians, identity is a complex of religious and cultural elements intertwined into a seamless fabric. This evidences itself in a question of a Thai Buddhist, 'If I become a Christian, am I still Thai?' There is an indelible sense of being that renders religious and cultural identity inseparable. To be Thai is to be Buddhist; to be Japanese is to be Shinto; to be Malay is to be Muslim. Mission enterprises which ignore this foundational concept are prone to impotence.

Second, for most East Asians, Christianity is viewed primarily as a 'foreigner' religion whose ideas are noteworthy but inapplicable to their context. There is an innate sense in East Asia that the gospel is not for them. This is driven as much by local faiths which are deeply entrenched as by the manner in which the Church presents its message. Being Christian and being western are often viewed as two sides of the same coin. This translates into being Christian as not really being Asian.

The relative smallness of Christian representation in East Asia is indelibly tied to these two issues. Without stretching the point too finely, it may be stressed that there will be no major breakthrough in East Asia until these two issues are confronted and addressed.

East Asian Models

In an attempt to address these missiological realities, Christian scholars have made several proposals to enable the Church to sell the gospel to and inculturate it in East Asia. The buzzword of this enterprise is 'contextualisation', a word which may be argued represents the entire spectrum of Asian theology. The ideas discussed below are, in one form or another, versions of the contextualised approach to mission. Additionally, East Asian theology is by and large missional theology by nature because the two, mission and theology, are viewed as indistinguishable in this context.

I have chosen to divide the various models and/or proposals into two groups: (1) those which have a more macro view of mission and theology, and (2) those which are more focused on ethnic or other related issues.

Missional-Theological Frameworks

In this first group I wish to draw attention to the work of certain selected scholars. These scholars have proposed ideas that may be applicable on a larger scale without targeting any specific context. They could be referred to as Asian not merely East Asian theologians. The models discussed here represent different national and cultural backgrounds ranging from Japan to Korea to Thailand.

Kosuke Koyama

The late Japanese Professor Koyama rose to prominence with his seminal work *Water Buffalo Theology* (first published in 1974 but revised in 1999), a missiological treatise derived from years as a Christian missionary in Thailand. This is a country whose openness belies the fact that it is also one of the most resistant to the gospel.

Koyama's primary contribution is encapsulated in two principal notions. The first is his aversion to an academic style of communication and his penchant for 'vivid imageries borrowed from everyday life and

human history' (Yung, 1997). He attempts to contextualise Christianity via indigenous sources such as monsoon and water buffalo (Peter, 2010). Koyama's prime interest is 'letting theology speak in and through that context' (1999, p. 15).

The second working notion of Koyama is his strong people-centred hermeneutic or community-centred mission. His unique label of 'neighbourology' is an attempt to describe his desire 'to root theology in the various cultural and historical contexts' (Yung, 1997, p. 162). This leads to his well-known axiom that the 'study of *ist* is far more exciting than the study of *ism*' (1999, p. 93). In doing this, Koyama paved the way for a mission approach that leaves out the hard sell method of certain evangelistic initiatives. For Koyama, the only way to sell the gospel in Asia is through the three modes of Christian presence: stumbling, discomfited and unfree. He contends that to present the gospel as triumphal, comforted and free is counterproductive (1999).

Undoubtedly, Koyama has contributed much to the theological process in East Asia. However, his penchant for flowery language means that while there are significant theoretical ideas they are sometimes short on practical methodology. Following Koyama's path implies a degree of uncertainty and makes application harder to come by.

Choan-Seng Song

Song, a Taiwanese, is perhaps one of the most prolific writers in the East Asian theological arena. Works such as *Third Eye Theology* and *Theology from the Womb of Asia* have become standard reading for those who study East Asian theology. Central to Song's theology are three key ideas. First, he subscribes to a radical rejection of biblical salvation history as being normative to theology and views it as more of a pattern of God's salvific work (1974). Within this rubric, he proposes the idea that all religions are part of the same spiritual universe and despite the differences between faiths, there is the possibility of valuing the dignity of each religion (2006).

Second, Song's theological methodology is termed transposition which is essentially another word for incarnation (Yung, 1997). Song rejects the Judeo-Christian centrism of the gospel and asserts it is a roadblock to mission. Since God is at work in all cultures and religions, it follows that the gospel must be fully incarnated into Asia so as to become part of the religious landscape.

Third, and as a direct consequence of his second proposition, there is a need for major reconstruction of Christian mission so as to avoid the Western centrism and individualistic gospel that is the hallmark of Western Christianity. In short, Song rejects any form of mission which focuses on individual conversion as this merely renders the convert rootless in his or her own culture (Yung, 1997). Instead he suggests that the fundamental task of mission is the re-formation of Asian spirituality and society through 'the love and compassion of God in Jesus Christ' (1979).

A further consideration of Song pertains to his contribution to *Minjung* Theology. He suggests that Asian spirituality equals life; it comprises the totality of being. This stands in sharp contrast to Western theology which he views as flat theology comprised of reason and experience. He proposes that Asian theology requires a third eye, mystery (insight, enlightenment, numinous) (1979).

In another work, Song proposed a four part theological 'adventure' for Asia. He advocates four ideas: (1) imagination which is part of the image of God in humans; (2) passion which enables us to encounter God's compassion; (3) communion as a way of interacting with each other and (4) vision of 'God's redeeming presence' which opens a new course in theology (1988, p. 3). This adventure provides 'freedom to meet God in Asian humanity' and 'to encounter Jesus the savior in the depth of the spirituality that sustains Asians' (1988, p. 3). He concludes with

Theology is poetry of God in the prose of the people. It is God's hymn in the songs of men, women, and children. It is God's story in the parables and folktales of our brothers and sisters. . . . Theology is confession. It is witness. It is testimony. And above all, theology is prayer: "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (1988, p. 227)

Song has been a stalwart of East Asian theology and his rejection of Western theology in general may be somewhat biased. Divorcing Western theology and Asian theology may not be such a simple exercise. Further, his tendency to pluralistic universalism may not be acceptable for Adventists who have a strong sense of calling as 'remnant' church.

Kim from Korea adopts one of the most strident views of what Asian theology should be doing. His starting point is Christology and he maintains that traditional Christology is essentially a process of enculturation of Jesus who was Asian into Western culture. When Christianity made its way back to Asia, it brought with it this reconstructed Christology whereby Jesus served as a symbol of Western colonialism. The imposition of Western culture was integral to the missionary endeavour (2005). With this in mind a question is raised, 'Is Jesus a Westerner or and Asian?' (2005, p. 24).

Kim then proceeds to list a number of ways which demonstrates that Jesus was truly Asian (but lost to Asians). He asserts that Jesus is physically and historically Asian and was born among poor Asians. Jesus is also culturally Asian who in actuality was a cultural alien in Europe. This Jesus should be seen as the liberator of Asian people (2005).

The principal suggestion made by Kim is the need to fully recover and resurrect Jesus for Asian. He states

We need to excavate Jesus the Asian who has been buried in the history of Asia, while we dismantle the Christianity and Christian heritages that are subjugated under the powers of Christendom and Empire (2005, p. 34)

This is Kim's call for a totally radical rethink of Christian mission, not as replication of Western methods but as discovery of things that are truly contextual.

There is much of value in Kim's suggestions about excavating Jesus in Asia. Granted, his call is a genuine one as the Jesus of Christianity looks and sounds a little too Western. Nevertheless, this too is integral to the image of Jesus even though we may concede that that image was invented in Europe. It may be better to err on the side of caution in this respect for Jesus is a universal messiah. He is not exclusive to Europe or Africa or Asia; Jesus is for everyone.

Kwok Pui-Lan

In one of her works (2000), Kwok, from Hong Kong, proposed a post-colonial and post-modern approach that may be termed 'narrative hermeneutics'. With an eye on women's issues, Kwok argues that there is a need for oral interpretation and re-telling of biblical stories. She posits that oral transmission is the principal mode of religious communication, is more fluid in nature, is more participatory and affords a dialogical process between storyteller and audience (2000). She suggests that such re-telling should take into consideration the urgent questions of contemporary reality. It is in this re-telling that the Bible may be brought back to contemporary relevance and applicability.

Her approach has been ardently feminist in its outlook as Kwok believes both in the need to rediscover the role of women in the Bible (2000) and the urgent need for more women to participate in the 'work of religion' today (2014). She contends that scholars in the field of feminism and religion are frequently marginalised by mainstream media and efforts akin to hers are needed to address the imbalance.

Having taught at the secondary and tertiary levels in East Asia for nearly 30 years, I resonate with Kwok's narrative hermeneutics. The learning style of most East Asians is inductive and students are less likely to think in linear terms. This is a methodology that is readily applicable for Adventist mission but cannot be used exclusively. The great Gospel commission (Matt 28:19-20) distinctly calls for teaching as part of the task to make disciples. Perhaps a blend of narrative and didactic elements may be more desirable.

Ubolwan Mejudhon

A final model in this brief survey is one proposed by Thai scholar Ubolwan Mejudhon. She propounds a contextual approach to mission that she terms 'Life Exegesis' (2006). Life Exegesis comprises primarily of two aspects, contextual theology and local cultural context. These two underpin the conceptual framework for life exegesis. At the practical level, life exegesis employs such tools as story exegesis, inductive Bible studies and inductive preaching/teaching (2006).

Mejudhon envisions this form of exegesis as something which 'derives from the Asian context' and is able to elucidate 'oral tradition, narration, and lives rather than concepts' (2006:24). She suggests two primary benefits of life exegesis: (1) it is a more appropriate fit to the worldviews of Asians, and (2) it enables Asians to more easily understand Jesus, who is by context also Asian.

I admit that Mejudhon makes good sense. Thais have a life-based approach to their religion which is practical and non-obtrusive. Her suggestions are worth exploring if they are accompanied by a proper re-definition of exegesis.

Contextually-focused Ideas

An emerging pattern is the desire by East Asian theologians to drive the gospel story home at a more down-to-earth level. There is a growing realisation that it is insufficient to suggest broad-strokes theological concepts. In the words of many,, such theories should be brought down to earth. The overriding concern pertains to the application of such macro suggestions to a specific local context.

The specificity of contexts in East Asia poses a tremendous challenge to Christian mission. The sheer geographical, linguistic, cultural and religious complexity of the region makes it unthinkable that any single method can apply to every situation. With this as backdrop, there is a surge of scholarly energy from various corners seeking applicable ideas to a more micro, focused context.

Thai Example

A good example of this type of approach is Nantachai Mejudhon's proposal of using meekness as a missiological methodology or philosophy within Thailand (1997). He posits that meekness is the better tool for Thai people but requires application. Such an approach should maintain a humble attitude towards Buddhism and adopt a new attitude to Thai culture. Furthermore, the approach should present the gospel as something which brings benefits and help rather than challenge and threat. He also contends that this approach requires time and indigenisation (2005). The aggressive methods employed by missionaries and Thai Christians in the past 'is viewed as having violated the cultural and religious values of reciprocity and harmony' of life in Thailand (2005, p. 150). He categorically states that 'Thais, without exception, ranked the hardworking achievement value much lower than the group of social relationship values' (2005, p. 159). Mejudhon suggests that long-term, genuine relationships with Buddhists, with no strings attached, will yield more permanent results (Johnson, n.d.).

Having lived in Thailand for 14 years, I fully resonate with his views. Much damage has been done to Christian mission as a consequence of aggressive missiological methods. The favoured way of describing the Thai approach to life is the word *sabai sabai*. The term essentially depicts life as something that should not be rushed and good things should be gradually and carefully embraced. Christian mission often comes across as rushed and therefore foreign. Moreover, the innate arrogance of Christians is difficult for Thai Buddhists to swallow. Mejudhon's approach is a truly helpful one and should be embraced.

Cambodia Example

A similarly focused approach is Gerard Ravasco's proposal for Cambodia (2004). His basic premise is that Christian proclamation in Cambodia can only be carried out 'in a spirit of true dialogue with our Khmer Buddhist friends' (2004, p. 56). The starting point of such dialogues is to discover the areas which unite Christians and Buddhists. Ravasco enumerates several of these bridges and proposes several theological and practical possibilities. At the practical level he lists ideas such as social awareness programmes, education programmes and a heart for the poor as potential bridges to unite Christians and Buddhists (2004).

Cambodians approach life in much the same way as Thais do since both nations are closely linked by linguistic, religious and cultural elements. Ravasco has hit the nail on the head when he recommends relational approaches above all other possible techniques. This is not dissimilar to what Jesus and the early apostles did.

Malaysian Example

A Malaysian example is presented by S Batumalai (1988) who begins his discourse by speaking of the difference between Western and Asian theology and envisages the theological enterprise as a cross-boundary task involving Christians and non-Christians, professionals and lay persons. He calls upon the Church to open itself to another way of doing theology, to cease looking at 'Christian theology as a monopoly of Christians' (1988, p. 15). Instead the Church should consider the new voices of God and he suggests that theology is a collaboration with cartoonists, novelists, trade unionists, intellectuals, nationalists, freedom fighters and

journalists. He surmises that such collaboration is a necessity if the Church is to carry out its mission of incarnation.

Batumalai's ideas may be problematic for Adventists because of his willingness to utilise tools in doing theology that are somewhat foreign to the Church with its penchant for exclusivity. Nevertheless, it may be possible to adapt his ideas so as to widen the field and make it possible for a more inclusive process.

Exegetical Samples

Of note is an emerging trend whereby biblical exegesis is employed to address a specific context or situation; a sort of contextually driven exegesis. Examples of such focused approaches may be gleaned from papers presented at theological conferences in East Asia. At the Meeting of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies (SABS) on 23-25 June 2014 in Chiangmai, Thailand, certain presentations may be viewed as potential representatives of this developing trend.

- James Ha Tun Aung's (2014) study explains how Acts 6:1-7 may inform the work of the Church in Myanmar. He warns of the danger of repeating the same error in today's world as the Church in Acts did. He states that the Church should pay close attention to the admonition to care for those in need (the widows).
- Also from Myanmar is Seng Tawng (2014) who provides a contextual re-reading of Prov 31:10-31 by drawing attention to the similarities and differences between the ideal wife in the passage and the traditional Kachin wife in Myanmar. Seng calls for a re-think of the role of the rural Kachin wife so as to allow her to fully develop her God-given gifts.
- Batara Sihombing (2014), from Indonesia, places 1 Pet 2:11-12 within the background of violence against Christians in Indonesia and wonders whether the government concept of *Pancasila* (Five Principles) may be drawn upon to allow better treatment of Christians in the country and to enable Christians to shed the image of being looked upon as pilgrims or strangers.
- Kyung Sook Lee (2014) of Korea addresses the case of the tragedy of foreign queens in the Hebrew Bible and applies this to the situation in modern Korea where the Bible is used both as a text of liberation for and a tool of oppression against women. She contends that the Church in Korea has often used the Bible to put women down and calls for this situation to be changed so as to fully develop the role of women in the country and Church and provide a more relevant post-colonial reading of the Bible.

The application of biblical exegesis to missional issues is highly commendable and beneficial. While it may not be possible to apply the specifics of these papers, it may be possible to detect useful principles. These could be invaluable tools for the Church. At the very least such tools may move the Church closer to a truly contextual base for doing theology and mission.

Implications for Adventist Theology

The striking aspect of these theological movements is the virtual absence of Adventist voices in the mix. It is unclear as to why this state of affairs exists. Possibly this is partly a reflection of the theological isolation that surrounds the Adventist theological enterprise in East Asia. At the SABS meetings in 2014, Adventist representation was visibly absent. Apart from my wife and I, there were no other Adventist scholars from any of the East Asian countries. It is difficult to ascertain the level of expertise we may be developing or the ideas we may have when we are not prominent in the theological discussions of East Asian scholars.

Perhaps, this absence may also reflect the lack of any critical work along similar lines. It appears that Adventist work has a certain 'one-shoe-fits-all' approach that renders moot any attempt to re-think our methodology. Or, at the very least the Church discourages any creative or critical thinking which may add impetus to Adventist missiological and theological considerations.

Nevertheless, the situation is not entirely hopeless. The setting up of the Centre for East Asian Religions (CEAR) is a small step in the right direction. CEAR is making attempts to engage the developing trends in missiological and theological reflection in East Asia. On 20-22 May 2014, CEAR conducted its annual conference in Bangkok, Thailand, with a good number of Adventist teachers, thinkers and leaders from the two East Asian divisions, Northern-Asia Pacific and Southern-Asia Pacific, attending and presenting papers.

What was unique about these proceedings was the specificity of the Conference. The 2014 CEAR Conference was titled 'Ministering to Mourners: Funeral Rituals and Christian Witness in East Asian Contexts.' The Conference intentionally addressed just one issue that impacts Adventist church work, funerals. This attempt to uncover missiological and theological principles which may enable the Church to use funerals as a mission tool can be seen in several of the papers presented. Below is a sampling of some of the presentations.

Danielle Koning

Tackling the subject at hand from an anthropological viewpoint and with a Southeast Asian context is the presentation of Danielle Koning (2014). She discusses the importance of Christian service in relationship to those who grieve the loss of a loved one. Her primary concern is to encourage the Church to 'move closer towards an educated ministry to mourners.' In doing so she outlines some beneficial steps in research which will foster a movement towards this stated goal. The paper was appropriately titled 'Towards an Educated Ministry to Mourners: Research Tools for Understanding Funeral Practices in Southeast Asian Mission Contexts.'

Koning's introduction of research tools is laudable but it would take more training and follow-up. It could lead to a more professional approach to mission whereby the cultural and sociological factors encountered are not ignored.

Khamsay Phetchareun

Phetchareun discusses the Lao and Hmong practices which are part of their funeral traditions in 'How to Honor the Dead and Minister to the Living in Laos' (2014). The paper tackles such practical considerations as viewing the dead, the burial or cremation dilemma, the use of song and food in the funeral and the role of grief. The Laos backdrop comprises two divergent religious realities, Buddhism and animism and, according to Phetchareun, it is crucial for pastors and missionaries to come to terms with these elements so that appropriate explanations could be provided when Christians are compelled not to follow traditional practices.

He draws attention to the need for caution with what is done at funerals as the bereaved are in a highly sensitive state of mind. His overriding concern pertains to the mental and spiritual health of the survivors (as suggested in the title of the paper). He contends that funeral rites do not matter to the deceased, but they do have a great impact upon the living mourners. He concludes with these words, '... funeral rites do not determine the fate of the deceased so accept any practice that is not forbidden by God for the sake of the surviving family members, even when you don't feel comfortable with it.'

Funerals are a definite missional opportunity even though the Church may not have looked at it this way. In countries where relationships are held at a premium, any type of relationship building is invaluable. Maybe it is time to pay closer attention to how the bereaved are treated as this will engender a more caring image for the Church.

Samuel Wang

Wang's paper, 'A Missiological Reflection on Chinese Qingming Festival' (2014), offers a very Chinese view of the proceedings. Wang postulates that 'one of the biggest stumbling stones in the path of the Chinese embracing the Christian faith is related to the way the dead are treated by Christians.' The extreme veneration for the dead (of ancestors) among the Chinese is encapsulated in the annual festival called Qingming. The Qingming festival is widespread in East Asia and is a time to reflect, honour and give thanks to one's forefathers. The essence of Qingming is the underlying concept of filial piety which is a mainstay of Chinese culture. For many Chinese this is something sorely lacking among Christians.

Wang makes four suggestions for Christians to improve understanding and remove the barrier created by this veneration of ancestors. First, the Church should present itself as keeper rather than destroyer of meaningful traditions. Second, Christians should exhibit sincere respect and heartfelt memorial towards ancestors without overstepping their faith boundary. Third, the Church should be prepared to capitalise on life and death opportunities to communicate biblical teachings. Fourth, Qingming can be used as a family time to reflect on God's creative and redemptive works. Wang makes a poignant appeal, 'When ministering to the Chinese, be like the Chinese.'

His appeal sounds so much like Paul's statement in 1 Cor 9:20. 'To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law . . . that I might win those under the law' (ESV). Clearly Paul imbues the same sense that Wang is trying to communicate; the need to be contextually relevant.

Soontorn Thanteeraphan

In 'Funeral Homily: A Fresh Look at Sermons in Thai Christian Funerals' (2014), Thanteeraphan zeroes in on the use of funeral sermons and warns about the danger of being misunderstood or giving offence with funeral sermons. First, he contrasts typical Thai Buddhist funerals with Adventist ones. The highlight of a Buddhist funeral is the chant by monks which brings words of blessings to the bereaved. In contrast, Adventist funerals, following Church practices, contain a number of preliminary items which leave the bereaved almost numb by the time the sermon is delivered.

Next, Thanteeraphan suggests that Adventist funerals should concentrate more on the sermon to parallel the chant so as to achieve the same effect, the passing of words of blessings. He also proposes that careful attention be paid to the type of sermon being utilised in funerals. He contends that the funeral sermon ought to be relatively short and serve as the crux of the funeral service. Moreover, funeral sermons should not be evangelistic in nature but serve as words of comfort and blessing.

The concern that the effect of the funeral sermon has not been sufficiently attended to is notable and Thanteeraphan's call to be more therapeutic in funeral sermons is noteworthy. Here is another example of what the Church could do to enlarge its missional scope and effect.

While these presentations are by no means definitive, they do reflect an advancement of sorts. There is now a concerted attempt to reflect on the mission of the church and to do this theologically and biblically. In an exegetical approach to the subject, 'Death and Burial in the Hebrew Bible', presented at the same Conference (2014), I examine the twin forces which make up funeral practices, Scriptural material and cultural milieu. I suggest that the Hebrew Bible (HB) indicates a blending between these two forces and that is what we observe in HB. Further, we also see a reflection of the cultural norms of Israel's neighbours in funeral rites as well as distinctive elements. I see a dual-edged version of contextualisation at work in HB and this affords us some flexibility in making Christian funerals less offensive to the local culture. At the very least, we may be able to view funeral practices as missional opportunities for ministering to the bereaved and for growing the kingdom of God.

Reflections

In an article published in 2008, I put forward certain propositions in an attempt to engage this emerging theological discussion. My first step is to examine the challenge of Asia which Christian mission must confront. At the time the article was written, the Asian Christian population stood at under 3% with even China's supposedly burgeoning Christian membership making up only 5.7% of the country's population. There are a few countries in Asia (e.g., Afghanistan) where Christian presence accounts for less than 0.2% of population. As earlier presented, all the major religions of the world are entrenched in Asia. The exception to all this is the Philippines whose population is approximately 93% Christian (2008).

In wrestling with these issues, I propose a 'Middle Path of Missions'. I contend that we cannot pretend we know everything about God's salvific work and that perhaps the only thing we can say with certainty is, 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. However, we cannot assume that the absence of further knowledge is equivalent to the absence of other methodologies. This is a call for the willingness to admit that God ultimately controls the issue of salvation; not us (2008).

Therefore, for me, doing theology in Asia means that we must take contextual methodologies seriously and the gospel must become indigenised to Asia. I also suggest that Jesus' methodology is probably preferable (White, 1942, p. 143). This is mission that involves a live-in experience and has the capability to make the gospel a truly indigenous experience. I see this as the most viable option for Christian mission (2008).

It may help to compare this approach to one of East Asia's enduring martial arts form, Tai Chi (see Deavin, 2010, for a useful survey of Tai Chi history). Today, Tai Chi has become primarily an exercise form which blends opposing concepts. 'The philosophy of Tai Chi is simple yet profound. In short, the idea that everything consists of two opposing forces that harmonize with each other to create a whole' (Shifu, 2011). Similarly,

Christian theology is an attempt to make sense out of two very different realities, biblical truth and cultural/religious traditions. The soft and strong approach of Tai Chi affords a lens through which the mission God has placed on the Church may be viewed. Undoubtedly, the theological enterprise is very much tied in to missional concerns.

East Asian theology is intentionally contextual and missiological. I affirm this approach and suggest that Adventist theology should also become more missional in its endeavour. It is time to shed the propositional approach to theology so long identified with Western Christianity and adopt a more mission-driven theological approach in Asia. I resonate with Hwa Yung's assertion that in order for the Church in Asia to fulfil its divinely appointed destiny, we should always be cognizant of two unavoidable premises: (1) 'we must learn to depend fully on God, and not ourselves' and (2) we must recognise 'the need for genuine commitment and sacrifice' (2009).

My hope with this paper is that it may ignite interest in pursuing these matters further and that those entrusted with gospel ministry become better informed about the issues involved.

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