

CAN WE LEARN FROM THE "OTHER"?
REFLECTIONS OF A WESTERNIZED ASIAN
MIND

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The theme of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church", elicits diverse reactions from many cultural and geographical contexts of Catholics around the world according to a wide spectrum of theological positions. This paper is a "wish list" of an Asian religious woman from the Philippines whose people are racially and temperamentally Malayo-Polynesian, predominantly Catholic-bred in a medieval (or some would prefer Baroque) form of Spanish religiosity, and formally educated in a residually American type of education. Added to this, I joined a religious congregation with an originally French-Anglo spirituality, trained in theological and religious studies in a post-Vatican II mode of inquiry, have lived in several Asian, Western, and Latin American countries, and have ministered for years to Asian priests, sisters and seminarians.

Limited as my personal perspective might be, my identity is the product of a confluence of diverse cultural and religious streams. I find myself enriched by the historical and contemporary religious currents of both East and West, and hope that my Church will begin to integrate all the riches of its past historical journey in Eastern and Western cultures and now accept the invitation of "new" Asian lands to an even richer and more refined spiritual banquet. For those who have been aware of the censure of theologians or spiritual writers who have attempted such an integration in recent decades, it is seen as a source of tension that puts to a test the creativity and integrity of

those on the theological cutting edge and those placed in official positions in the church.

The names of those involved, both the theologians and the church functionaries, could come and go, but the tension is as old as Christianity, and we could conveniently name the two poles of that tension: Christ and culture. History is full of manifestations of this perennial tension: the "Council of Jerusalem" in the persons of Peter and Paul, the Fathers of the Church of the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools, pioneering monks in the "barbarian world" (often happily resolved by church leaders like Gregory I and Augustine of Canterbury), early modern missionaries like Bartolome de las Casas and Matteo Ricci just to name a few. Since it is of the nature of Christianity to translate itself, its nature flowing from the spirit of Jesus himself, tensions will always be in the interface between what has already been "Christianized" and what remains outside of the purview of the acceptable.

Today, the tension is most felt in theologies influenced by interreligious encounters in South Asia and East Asia particularly in the areas of Christology and theology of religions, and charges of "syncretism" and "relativism" have sometimes been leveled against creative pioneers.¹ This vast geographical area is home to cultures grounded in religious worldviews more ancient than Christianity which have spiritually nourished and transformed peoples over millennia. The Catholics of these countries are indelibly marked by their inherited cultures and no amount of ecclesiastical sanctions or definitions will erase these elements from their identity. To deny this heritage which has shaped their minds and sensibilities is to go against the provenance of God the Creator. Multitudes of Catholics have been faced by the problem of having to choose between their religio-social belonging and their basic identity.

A worldwide synod on the Word must then ponder this issue with seriousness, listen to the groaning of the Spirit in the hearts of Asian Catholics whose fidelity to Jesus Christ is evident in lives of orthopraxis, often in holiness, and who hold fast to the inherited spiritual traditions of double belonging.

Before entering into a discussion, it is helpful to note that the terms "Asian" and "religion" are terms loaded with misunderstandings, both being labels coined by "Westerners" as convenient handles for unfamiliar and remote realities. But at the risk of running into contradictions and generalizations, I will use these terms simply to [put] my points across, using the conventional Western understanding, aware that these are not black-and-white categories especially since we are dealing with complex, multi-faceted realities. In ancient and holistic transformative religions the saying that "East is East and

West is West, and never the twain shall meet" cannot apply; the terms East and West can be used simply for emphases.

Christianity, coming from a Semitic background, was Asian, like all major world religions. However it was transmuted over the centuries into a Western entity whose form is now felt as alien to the Eastern mind. Christianity lost its Asian moorings and is now perceived as foreign to Asian thought and sensibility since its doctrines are conveyed through Greek-medieval European philosophical concepts and terms, and its symbolic world and organizational system regulated by juridical logic formulated centuries ago and uncritically reiterated today.

I feel it is now our task to rediscover the lost Asian "half" of Christianity by remembering and retrieving the richness of its Middle Eastern past, and by appropriating the new gifts offered by its adherents rooted in the cultures of South, East and Southeast Asia whose contribution to the universal church still needs to be recognized, accepted and embraced. As the bishops of Asia have repeatedly declared through the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, inculturation in Asia is an imperative and the churches must engage in a triple dialogue: dialogue with cultures, dialogue with religions and dialogue with the poor. The apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* itself declared: "The Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. They pointed out that such an inculturation involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus" (EA 20).

It is no longer enough to portray Jesus and Mary with Asian faces or to adorn churches and liturgies with Asian-style decorations, worship implements and music, as is the wont today in communities across Asia after encouragement to "inculturate". What is needed is to respond to the action of the Word of God in Asian hearts and minds and let flow authentic expressions of their religious experience through art and ritual, theology and spirituality, missiological and pastoral practice so that Asian Catholics can really feel deeply at home in their religion, finding their hearts resonating with these expressions. Christianity, having "passed over" to Western religious forms, can now move to another level of its journey, bearing gifts from the West, and as in a never-ending spiral, move out again to "new" Asian cultures. By allowing the Spirit free rein in the churches of Asia, there can be a new flowering of Christianity as never before.

This task is not to be seen only as a hoped-for and beautiful ideal; it is urgent that the church take stock of its fidelity to the incarnational nature of Christ's mission among the peoples today. Preaching Jesus Christ in thought patterns and language understandable to peoples of different cultures is an

imperative today as it was in the time of the apostle Paul. Contemporary social and religious sciences have provided us with better tools at our disposal for more aptly spreading the Good News if only we had the passion, daring and freedom of Paul.

Aside from the discomfort felt by many Asian Catholics in their religion, the inadequacies of Western Christianity have also been shown by a decades-old symptom in Europe and the US. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, many of them Catholics, have moved to Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, in search of spirituality that would lead them to wholeness and depth. This movement—for many a literal, geographical one to India, Tibet, Japan, Thailand—echoes the earlier “flight to the East”, to the deserts of Syria and Egypt of the third to the fifth centuries of men and women in search of radical personal transformation in silence and solitude. This exodus was not simply from the towns and cities in Asia or northern Africa to the fringes of villages or to the outlying wilderness; many from Europe went in search of this new learning from monks who had honed their spiritual skills, and eventually returned to Europe to lay the foundation of western monasticism, that gem of Christianity which today continues to offer many of us a deep well of spirituality. Interestingly, this very monasticism and the more recent forms of religious life have of late also been reinvigorated by the waters of Eastern religions.

Despite the oft-repeated rhetoric of entering into dialogue, there is a hesitation on the part of institutional churches to venture across religious boundaries mainly for two reasons: the sense of sufficiency and superiority of one’s religion, and the fear of the “other”. In spite of this many individuals have crossed this divide with the intuitive sense of the beauty and truth to be found in the “other”; what individual seekers have gained from their daring can now be helpful to the wider community.

All great world religions with a message of spiritual transformation (or “salvation”, to use the Christian term) are rooted in primal religion or cosmic religiosity; their symbols have power precisely because they emerge from personal encounters with the Sacred in “nature”. Human beings, as part and parcel of “nature”, deeply resonate with symbols condensed from elements in “nature”. But unlike Asian religions, Christianity has so stylized, categorized and numerically limited its symbols that these are now often abstract and artificial, encountered only in space and time that have been sacralized through ritual action regulated by a highly centralized church authority. It has distanced itself from the raw quality of life in general so that one meets most of these symbols only through a process of explanatory thought provided by religious training in the home or church. When symbols lose their immediacy

and spontaneity, when they need to be "thought through", they generally lose their power to evoke contemplative feelings. Such has not been the case with the Sino-Indian religions which flourish and renew their vitality through song, dance, and other art forms fed by religious feelings continuously preserved by their closeness to "nature".

There is no linear development from cosmic religions to metacosmic religions such as Hinduism (which is more a way of life than a religion) or Buddhism for their histories are punctuated by irruptions of the Sacred or theophanies to spiritual geniuses such as the foremost rishis of India or the monks of China, Tibet, Burma, Japan. But worldviews that have evolved from these encounters with the Sacred have not severed their ties with the cosmos, and their language and symbols for divinity express the oneness and interdependence of the whole—the human, the cosmic and the divine. Hinduism speaks of God as the womb of the universe, and all things are in that womb, a mother. God is

"That from whence beings are born, that by which, when born, they live, that into which they enter at their death." (Taittirīyaka-Upanishad, 3.1.1).

"the father of this universe, the mother, the support and the grandsire. (Bhagavad Gita 9.17).

The Tao te Ching (6) says:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:

empty yet inexhaustible,

it gives birth to infinite worlds.

The neo-Confucianist Chang Tsai wrote:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.²

All beings are in God, God is in all beings and permeates them with life. God is immanent, to be found in the universe, and at the same time is found inwards, in the center or depth of one's being. All dualities are mere illusions of the superficial mind, which like the sensory and emotional levels are always besieged by passing phenomena, but these mentally-constructed dualities can be overcome through deep awareness.

Asian philosophies limit the capacity of these levels. Rationality—which in the West has dominated religion—is held as a tool that objectifies,

analyzes and divides, but there is a level beyond thought, the transcendent, where subject-object polarities do not exist, and instead, there is a oneness with all beings, including the divinity.

This holistic and inclusive worldview that emphasizes unity has been named by contemporary Asian Christian theologians as "theanthropocosmic" or "cosmotheandric" theology. Here the laws of Western logic of non-contradiction do not hold sway since reality is whole and complex, and the contradictions that could be posited by the Western mind are overcome by a "both-and" position that comprehends all seeming oppositions.

God, the womb of all being, is therefore apprehended not primarily as Word but as Silence. Hinduism's "*neti...neti*" ("not this, not this") indicates the inability of the human mind to grasp God.

This, which rests eternally within the self, should be known; and beyond this not anything has to be known. As the form of fire, while it exists in the under-wood, is not seen, nor is its seed destroyed. Man, after repeating the drill of meditation, will perceive the bright god, like the spark hidden in the wood. (Svetasvatara Upanishad 1.12)

He cannot be seen, for, in part only, when breathing, he is breath by name; when speaking, speech by name; when seeing, eye by name; when hearing, ear by name; when thinking, mind by name. All these are but the names of his acts. And he who worships (regards) him as the one or the other, does not know him, for he is apart from this (when qualified) by the one or the other (predicate). Let men worship him as Self, for in the Self all these are one. This Self is the footstep of everything, for through it one knows everything. And as one can find again by footsteps what was lost, thus he who knows this finds glory and praise. (Brihadâranyaka Upanishad, 1.4,7)

In Chinese religion,
The Tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
 The gateway to all understanding.
 (*Tao-teh Ching 1*).

Buddhism conveys a parallel idea in the notion of "emptiness", hence Ultimate Reality is Silence, the ground of Being which holds all phenomena as transient and illusory:

A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
 A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
 A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream. (*Diamond Sutra 32*)

These notions were shaped not through analytic or philosophical discourse but through experience of the depths of reality and of human consciousness. The inner life of God is not the object of discourse or dogmatic formulations or definitions since all these are obstacles to experience of God or Ultimate Reality.

Some Western theologians and spiritual writers these days, taking their cue from earlier mystical literature and the findings of contemporary physical sciences, speak of pantheism, God-in-all, where God is not a Being outside of the created world and humanity, and therefore, properly speaking not an object of thought or worship. This is so much more faithful to the Christian belief in God the Creator of all, in "whom we live and move and have our being".

The above characteristics of Asian religions are also present within Christianity, beginning with the first book of the Bible where God is portrayed as breaking the silence through the words of creation all the way to the book of Revelation. Throughout the centuries mystics have produced literature whose language is akin to that of Asian religions, but theology that has emerged from mystical experience in Christianity has often been relegated to piety or even sidelined as suspect and unreliable, hence, not a source of mainstream teaching about God unlike in Asian religions. The conventional image of God is still reminiscent of the Greek scheme of the universe where God is the Prime Mover who set creation into action, an Other who is not only transcendent but also separate and distant, "in heaven", whose remoteness is only bridged by the humanity of Jesus and the mediation of Mary and the saints. This God has been the object of philosophical speculation and formulation of a belief system grounded in metaphysical categories and ratiocination, hence, the emphasis on orthodoxy in Christian churches. However, these concepts are unintelligible to ordinary Christians, whose longing is for a God who is near, someone of whom they can say "we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked at and touched with our hands". For the most part

these doctrinal formulations can become a stumbling block, not just to simple Christians, but even to those who have experienced God as Silence. It is these two types of Christians who can most resonate with the God of Asian religions, a God who is infinitely available to them in all their desires and longings.

A major difference seems to be that in Asian religions, the basic framework for their religious systems is mystical; silence is prior to thought and word, hence a strong apophatism, a reticence towards Mystery predominates. God is Being is Reality is Silence. Mysticism is ontology. Logic and scientific method are important but come second, utilized not in defining divinity, but in mapping the stages of the journey and applying time-tested strategies or techniques of the journey the human being takes towards the divine. Method flows organically from the subject matter and the dynamism of the movement towards Mystery is maintained.

The reverse seems to be the case in western Christianity. Prescinding from its ultimate origin, the framework and system is basically rational, with dogmatic formulations taking priority and applied even to the mystery of God. Mysticism is a peripheral phenomenon, and silence is seen as a means to still the mind to prepare it for contemplation, coming into contact with God. There is a hiatus between faith-life and its explication since the latter was not an organic development from within but an appropriation from without. This is perhaps due to the "historical accident" of Christianity's development within the context of Hellenism.

This split between *mysterium* and *ratio* was not always there in Christian thought, even after the embrace of Platonic and Stoic thought by the Fathers of the Church and monastic theologians. Intellectualism came with the use of Aristotelian metaphysics and method, with emphasis on rational clarity and precise terminology demanded by medieval scholasticism which later exercised hegemony and virtual monopoly:

Being became an entity among other entities, hence subject to the manipulations of propositional thinking, or "logic". The logos became identified with the rational part, and the adequation of thought and thing was assumed. In this way, primary ontology became inscribed within "metaphysics", and Being, in its pristine sense, became masked, screened off, and forgotten...Alliance with Christian dogma gave rise to binary opposites with polarized ways of thinking, privileging the noetic principle as over against the natural order.³

Christianity is now imprisoned in this Greek conceptual universe, unable to free itself from its vise. No amount of deconstruction by Western

theologians, heirs to that conceptual universe, can free Western theology since they are all bound by its discourse. Having no other means at their disposal, they cannot "bring down the master's house by using the master's tools" unlike religionists and thinkers from the non-Western world who offer alternatives precisely because they come from a different world.

Can the Roman Catholic church recognize the limits of Greek metaphysics for conveying notions of God? Can it realize that not even the whole of the Semitic-Greco-Roman religious system can encapsulate God? Can it move the boundaries built over the centuries so as to allow Christians a glimmer of the God of all the universe and humanity and religions through other sources of revelation? Can it trust in the fidelity of Asian Christians who are genuinely committed to searching for alternative ways to communicate their faith in Jesus, his Abba and the Spirit? Can it allow these Christians to find a home in their chosen religion? Can it accept the fact that Asian theologians have a tremendous gift to offer to the universal church that will keep it from becoming moribund by renewing itself through dialogue—humble, active listening and a kenotic attitude toward the other? Can it let go its obsession with a rationality that impedes persons from fully encountering Mystery?

It is true that religions are whole universes of symbols and meanings, and to admit into its system elements that are new or seemingly foreign presents the risk of a tear in its seamless robe or set in motion its collapse, like a house of cards. But, it is also true that religions and cultures are dynamic, and creative change adds to their continuing vitality. This is so evident today in the Asian religions that have been transplanted in the West, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, which have absorbed the best influences that the West has to offer; these religions have been revitalized in Europe and the US through Western-born adherents bringing their particular mindsets and language to their new religions and enabling these religions to develop to a level not found in their original dwelling places in Asia. These religions have translated themselves while maintaining their "essence", they have been "trans-formed" and surpassed their previous limited and limiting cultural forms, now making themselves available and easily accessible to non-Asians. If we could apply the term "Pentecost" to these religions, it is this which has transpired and now they have become truly universal, speaking the tongues of many nations.

It is sufficient to survey the historical journey of Christianity across cultures to see that it has been transforming itself through the centuries. Hans Kung graphically demonstrates this fact in his charting this journey through six macro-paradigms in the development of Christianity: early Christian apocalyptic paradigm, early church Hellenistic paradigm, medieval Roman Catholic paradigm, Reformation Protestant paradigm, Enlightenment modern

paradigm, and contemporary ecumenical paradigm⁴ (However, he acknowledges that authoritarian Roman Catholicism today has not moved away from the earlier medieval paradigm).

In fidelity to this tradition of culturally translating itself and to the Spirit that has guided these different transformations, Asian theologians and spiritual leaders attempt to speak a language comprehensible to their compatriots, in symbols that find resonance in their hearts rather than making them go through intellectual somersaults that in the end prove futile. To make them adapt Western rational discourse as a sign of religious belonging is tantamount to a subtle, "spiritual" latter-day circumcision imposed on modern Gentiles!

The task for contemporary Asians Christians is not to untie the knots in which they find their religion for that would be useless, nor even to try to construct a theological system based on their own inherited philosophical and cultural patterns as Aquinas did since it is too early for that. What is available now are fragments gathered from the depths of experiences of theologians and pastoral workers of reading the bible through Asian eyes through dialogue with their peoples, "organic fragments, namely, through the questions and challenges that face us immediately in our experiences, but which nevertheless lead us to the larger horizon of the whole".⁵ These fragments are the first steps, hesitant perhaps because Asian theology is in its early stages of exploration, of creating paths that did not exist before, a situation similar to the tentative but discerning attempts of the earliest dogmatists and doctors of the church. But they are authoritative in the sense that experience is an undeniable authority when confirmed by the faith community that shares the cultural and religious mindset. In this instance, authority will be synonymous with the integrity of the search and its outcome. Authority will not proceed from the clarity of logical deductions and proofs, and repetitions of previous "ancient authorities" such as gave stability to medieval theologies couched in the language of scholasticism that eventually received incontrovertible acceptance by those in ecclesiastical positions. Here, truth is not a matter of logic or clarity of method. We are faced by the interrogation "What is truth?" For many Asians the answer will perhaps come from the non-answer of philosophies that emerge from experience, that do not do not define but simply evoke and point to Reality, as in yin-yang philosophy and non-dualistic thought patterns, and that do not subscribe to principles of Western logic.

Unlike most Western theologians whose skills have been honed in the discipline and rigor of only one tradition—that of the West—Asian theologians are equipped with both tools of Western theological methods and of their own educational training in Sino-Indian philosophies that developed before those

of the West. "Asian" theologies will, therefore, not suffer from lack of rigor but will flourish from the freedom of creative thought that is also subjected to self-criticism.

I will conclude by making suggestions for an Asian biblical hermeneutics, hermeneutics broadly conceived as theory and art of interpretation of texts. Not being a biblical scholar, I am strongly aware of my lack of expertise in this matter, but being an outsider has its merits in perhaps having the objectivity and perspective of distance, the daring of someone who has no professional reputation to lose, and having only the desire to widen the parameters for understanding the Word of God in Asia and the non-Western world.

At this point in time, to craft an "Asian biblical hermeneutics" is a daunting, if not an impossible challenge. It has to gather in the ancient, traditional and contemporary methods of the past 2000 years of biblical interpretation, both "Eastern" and "Western", selecting what is relevant, and moving forward to the present situation in Asia, therefore making extensive use of both diachronic and synchronic approaches, presuming that sound and meaningful hermeneutics today has to be both contextual and interdisciplinary if it will be of use to theology and pastoral practice.

What will be specifically "Asian" is precisely what comes from peoples' experiences of socio-political-economic struggles for liberation from colonialism and other forms of oppression, and "salvation" or spiritual transformation in the context of a diversity of dynamic cultures and religions. Indigeneous popular forms, such as myths and stories expressed through folk narrative, music or dance are receptacles of accumulated wisdom highlighting experiences of God. Classic "mystical" literatures meditated on over centuries and millennia have offered pathways to the evolution of human consciousness. A most fruitful novel approach is "cross-scriptural exegesis" of the symbiotic type:

For here a seminal teaching in the Scriptures of one religion, sown and buried in the texts, when exposed to the warm light that comes from the teachings of another religion's Sacred Writ, sprouts forth and grows into a fruitful source of new insights. In this "symbiotic" approach, no room is left for diluting or distorting the basic teachings of either religion; and no effort made to indulge in easy equations or odious comparisons.⁶

Such a reading opens us exponentially to new horizons of understanding:

There are multiple universes of wisdom, each capturing something of the radiance of being and refracting it into the lives of its followers, none refuting or excluding the others, each as it were the native language of its

followers, but combining in a hymn of glory to the creator.⁷

Hermeneutics that attempts to convey depth and wholeness necessarily demands the tools and perspectives of many disciplines which heretofore have not been utilized in aid of interpretation of scriptures, especially the various sciences of religion (history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy of religion), as well as disciplines that apply to more secular fields like economics and the natural sciences. Hopefully, such a gathering of tools would help illuminate the action of the Spirit through the Word in scriptures. It would also advance our understanding and following of Jesus who repeatedly crossed the boundaries of his religion and learned from the outcast and the stranger of his time, including the "heretical" Samaritans.

John Paul II himself invited the church to be "open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia" and to "take heart from the experience of Saint Paul who engaged in dialogue with the philosophical, cultural and religious values of his listeners" (*EA 20*).

Note: The author would be interested to have your comments. You could send them to her e-mail address: advasquez@yahoo.com

¹ "Asia is the bone of contention because it is the cradle of all modern heresies, as the head of the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples stated with reference to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*", Pim Valkenberg, "Jacques Dupuis as a Theologian with a Reversed Mission" in Frans Wijssen and Peter Nissen, eds., *Mission is a Must: Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p.148.

² Chang Tsai, "Western Inscription", *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* by W.T. Chan (Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 497.

³ Stanley Hopper, "The Word as Symbol in Sacred Experience", E. D. Blodgett and H. G. Coward, eds., *Silence, the Word and the Sacred* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989) pp. 85-86.

⁴ Hans Küng, tr. by John Bowden,

Christianity: Essence, History, and Culture (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1995).

⁵ Felix Wilfred, "Jesus-Interpretations in Asia : Fragmentary Reflections on Fragments", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 43 (2006) 4, <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr006/wilfred.htm>

⁶ Felix Wilfred. Also see Pieris, Aloysius "Cross-Scripture Reading in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: A Search for the Right Method," in *Scripture, Community and Mission. Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles* edited by Paul Wickeri (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia – The Council of World Mission; London: second printing, 2003) p. 253

⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum 2003), p. 204