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I

Formation of Christian theologies in Asia

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: mapping Asian Christianity
 in the context of world Christianity*

David M. Thompson

The time has long since gone when Asian Christianity could be regarded as simply a development of what happened in Europe. The twenty-first century is much more aware than perhaps the twentieth of the fact that Asian Christianity is either as old as or older than European Christianity. Quite apart from the fact that the Holy Land is part of Asia, there is now greater appreciation of the fact that Christianity spread east as rapidly as it did west, reaching India probably in the first century and China by the sixth or seventh. That is roughly contemporaneous with the second conversion of the British Isles (the first being before the withdrawal of the Romans from Britain). The distinctive context of Asia has been that Christianity has always existed alongside other major world faiths and religious traditions.

Nevertheless the legacy of western imperialism and its relationship to the missionary activities of European and North American churches has also been significant in shaping the current situation. This Introduction considers the significance of the difference between the way in which theology is tackled in the academic context as distinct from the church context, and reflects on the way in which theology has been differently perceived in different regions of the world at different times.

ACADEMIC AND ECCLESIASTICAL THEOLOGY

The underlying approach adopted here is essentially historical, rather than that of the systematic theologian.¹ A systematic theologian usually feels

¹ Because of my own limitations it is also confined to works translated into English, which is a significant disadvantage. There is an invaluable book edited by J. C. England and others, *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources: vol. 1: Asia Region, South Asia, Austral Asia* (New York, 2002). Much use has been made of anthologies such as that

drawn to presenting a picture which is universally true; indeed it is rather difficult within the discipline of systematic theology to find a way of acknowledging that the relative importance of different aspects of the truth may vary from time to time or place to place. By contrast a historian is accustomed to making relative statements. The very variety of different points of view, even when based on the same evidence, forces historians to acknowledge that their discipline is concerned with relative truths. This has not, of course, prevented some historians from time to time affirming that their view is the right one, or indeed the only right one; but generally speaking a historian is more at home in the world of relativities. Thus the variety of interpretations which has to be acknowledged in relation to different periods can very easily be extended to different places in the same period. It does not necessarily mean abandoning hope of reaching absolute truth in relation to certain matters; but it is a fact of life in the history of ideas that some things seem more important in some times and places than others, and the significance of this has to be acknowledged.

Such changes in relative importance may be illustrated by the difference between academic and ecclesiastical (or ecclesial) theology. There was a time when there was no difference. The medieval European universities had Faculties of Theology in which the teachers were approved by the Church; and what they taught was essentially what the Church taught. The change which came was a result first of the Reformation and then of the Enlightenment. In Protestant countries the direct control of the Church over the universities was weakened, and particularly in eighteenth-century Germany, where professors were employed by the state rather than the Church, a difference between academic and ecclesiastical theology gradually opened up.² This difference became most apparent as a result of the development of biblical criticism; and in the nineteenth century books were written by some scholars which horrified many churchmen. The classic example was David Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, written in 1835–6. Strauss lost his job at Tübingen because of this; having secured a position in Zürich in January 1839, he lost it almost immediately as a result of a cantonal referendum, but was able to establish that he was

produced by the Programme for Theologies and Cultures in Asia: J. C. England and A. C. C. Lee (eds.), *Doing Theology with Asian Resources* (Auckland, 1993). There is a good short introduction to the situation in India and East Asia in chapters 3 and 4 of J. Parratt (ed.), *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

² See T. A. Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); W. Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), chap. 7.

entitled to his salary for life; so he never taught again!³ But although Strauss is the most obvious example, there were other theologians whose work caused great anxiety to many in the churches, such as F. C. Baur or J. Wellhausen. This happened more rarely in England because many university professors hoped for and secured promotion to bishoprics. This had two consequences: their university careers were shorter than those of their German colleagues, and they were often more anxious to ensure that they retained a reputation for theological orthodoxy. J. B. Lightfoot and B. F. Westcott stand out as scholar bishops in that tradition, though each spent much longer in the university than some of their predecessors. In the twentieth century it became less common for scholars to become bishops, and university posts in theology were opened to scholars from all churches, though this happened more recently at Oxford and Cambridge than in other universities.

What is more important, however, is that the agenda of academic theology is now significantly different from that of the Churches. The doctrines of the Church, the sacraments, salvation and justification are much less important for academic theologians than they are for the Churches. By contrast academic theologians are more interested in the way in which the Bible should be understood, the way in which biblical insights relate to theology more generally, and the way in which theology relates to contemporary science and philosophy. When that extends to economics and social questions, there may be a new intersection between academics and church leaders; but this depends very much on the view that is taken, as issues relating to contraception, abortion and economic justice demonstrate. That difference, however, is still very much characteristic of the west – Europe and North America. Indeed in North America, because of the separation of church and state, theology is usually taught in divinity schools, which are separate from universities, rather than in faculties of divinity as in Europe; university departments in North America tend to be departments of religious studies. However, in other respects the difference of agenda between academic and ecclesiastical theology remains true in North America. Very often when people refer to a western-dominated theological agenda, they are referring to the agenda of western universities, and it helps to understand that relationship in any discussion of the responsibility of the churches. Furthermore the sense that others, whoever the others may be, are determining the agenda is not

³ D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: SCM, 1973), p. xxxvi; H. Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 58–65, 123–33.

unique to Asia, Africa or Latin America; sometimes in Britain it is felt that the theological agenda is determined by Germany, France or the USA.

The churches in the west have been largely content to accept the academic agenda, whilst reserving the right to discuss more specifically ecclesiastical concerns in their own way. The most significant exception to this are the Orthodox Churches, although Orthodox scholars with academic posts in western universities will usually work within the framework of the academic agenda. Moreover, the contribution of Orthodox theology and tradition has generally been welcomed as an important contribution to a broader understanding of theology, even though the methods of the interpretation of scripture in the Orthodox tradition perhaps raise more questions than have yet been answered. One important aspect of the western theological tradition that deserves a little more comment is precisely the issue of the way in which scripture is used. Within the Roman Catholic Church the teaching authority of the Church has generally remained decisive for Roman Catholic theologians.⁴ Protestants, however, rejected that form of teaching authority for the Church, and instead turned to scripture. Although in the sixteenth-century context there was never any intention that scripture would be anything other than a corporate authority, in practice it proved extremely difficult to prevent more individual interpretations appearing, not least because of the right of private judgement that was affirmed in several churches of the Reformation. The consequence was that over time it became possible for individuals to appeal to scripture to support their particular theological viewpoints, regardless of the extent to which these were shared by the Church as a whole. When this tendency was reinforced by the suggestion in the nineteenth century that the text of the prophetic books of the Old Testament was generally older than that of the books of the Law or history, the idea that a prophetic appeal to the Word of the Lord was likely to count for more than anything that the Church might say proved almost irresistible. The significance of this development for particular styles of Protestant theology in the twentieth century can scarcely be under-estimated.

This point may be illustrated with a Latin American example. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest working with the poor in Lima, achieved fame as a theologian by his development of 'liberation theology'. His book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) was based on a paper

⁴ Thus the valuable report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission is entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993); cf. the constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council, 1965.

originally given in Chimbote, Peru, in July 1968, entitled 'Notes on a Theology of Liberation', and given in a revised form to the Consultation on Theology and Development organized by the joint committee on Society, Development and Peace in Cartigny, Switzerland, in November 1969. The original paper was a few months before the epoch-making Latin American Bishops' Conference at Medellín, which described the new epoch in the continent as 'a time of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity and of collective integration'.⁵ Gutiérrez was reacting against the predominant view that economic development was the way forward for the poorer countries of the world by pointing out that there were fundamental injustices in the societies, which could not just be developed away. Instead a more dramatic break with the past was needed, and Gutiérrez used the idea of liberation from slavery in the Old Testament as a dominating theme, or *leitmotiv*, in scripture, over against more traditional understandings of theology within the Church. In this way he sought to identify the Church with the situation in which many of the Latin American poor found themselves, and to offer a tangible demonstration of what it might mean to speak of God's preferential option for the poor. The Latin American bishops' conference was persuaded to follow this line, and initially the Vatican did not condemn it because it picked up on a sermon of Pope John XXIII.⁶ Subsequently liberation theology attracted many followers in Asia and Africa as well as the West. Moreover, this became as much part of the Church's theological agenda as that of academic theologians. As such it may stand as an early example of the twentieth-century wish to read theology in the light of a particular perspective – the action-reflection model, rather than the deductive model. The 'base communities', which had already been initiated in Latin America, were attempts to create meeting places within larger parishes, where Christians would talk together about the implications of their theology, instead of simply listening to sermons.

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

The example of liberation theology leads into the second area of discussion – the extent to which theology has different emphases according to

⁵ Quoted in G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Introduction to the revised edn (London: SCM, 2001), p. 5.

⁶ 'In the face of the underdeveloped countries, the church is, and wants to be, the church of all and especially the church of the poor', John XXIII, Address of 11 September 1962: Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 17.

where Christians live. There was a particular relevance in the development of liberation theology in Latin America. Virtually all the Latin American countries were dominated by the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s, and many of them were political dictatorships. The theology of liberation had inevitable political implications, which were immediately appreciated. Moreover the Roman Catholic Church had scarcely ever found itself on the side of political revolution – Belgium in 1830 is the most obvious exception. It had indeed been more common for Protestants to find themselves backing political revolution, though the extent to which this was so should not be exaggerated, notwithstanding the example of the English Civil War. But the theological issue was not so much the question of political revolution as such, as the question of whether and to what extent the state should follow the moral teaching of the Gospel. From this point of view the fact that theologies of the state were often based on the example of the Old Testament monarchy was something of a weakness. The New Testament contained various injunctions by the Apostle Paul concerning respect for authority, teaching by Jesus which was often somewhat obscure – the classic example is ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’ (Matthew 22:21), where what is due to each is not defined – and an apocalyptic picture in the Book of Revelation. The result of putting all this together was not so clear as, for example, a simple appeal to Micah:

He shall judge between many peoples,
 and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
 they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
 and their spears into pruning-hooks;
 nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 neither shall they learn war any more. (Micah 4:3)

At first theologians from Asia studied in Europe or North America – this was true of a whole generation of Indians. The situation in East Asia was rather different. Here the very point at which things were opening up further west was when things closed down in the east. The Communist revolution in China in 1949 put an end (albeit not immediately) to more than a generation of hopes about the future for Christianity in East Asia. Japan was still recovering from the Second World War. The Korean War in 1950–3 disrupted the peninsula, though ultimately the outcome made possible Christian growth in South Korea. Before the war the strength of Christianity in Korea had been in the north. South Korea moved towards democracy between 1987 and 1992. Indo-China was to be involved in war

until the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1975. The Philippines had secured political independence, but were under a dictatorship until 1986, or 1992 (depending on whether the date of the first multi-party elections is regarded as crucial). Indonesia became the largest Muslim state in the world.

The story of a specifically contextual Asian theology is largely a Protestant one. This is not to minimize the significance of the Roman Catholic Church. But in the pontificate of Pius XII there was still a suspicion of anything which might be called modernism. After John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council the atmosphere eased, but the international character of the Church, and specifically of its theological education, meant that the opportunities for a truly contextual theology were more limited. Among the Protestant churches, however, the gathering pace of effective independence from western missionary domination created new opportunities for the development of indigenous theologies.

The pace was originally set by India. The Church of South India (1947) and later the United Churches of North India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (1970) provided contexts for the development of an Indian theology. It is true that many of those who took the lead in these developments in fact received their theological education in the west. But the World Council of Churches was particularly supportive of such people, and also encouraged the formation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in 1976.⁷ Stanley Samartha was Director of the Karnataka Theological College, the United Theological College and Serampore College in India, before going to Geneva to be the first Director of the Dialogue Programme of the World Council of Churches. He subsequently returned to India to the South Asia Theological Research Institute in Bangalore. His book, *One Christ – Many Religions*,⁸ suggested a revised Christology in the light of the contact between Christianity and other world religions; but it was far more than that. Out of ten chapters, the last five concerned the construction of a new Christology and its implications for mission; the first five considered the general issues for Christianity in a situation of religious pluralism and dialogue.

The lead in East Asian Christianity in the later twentieth century was taken by Korea. This was partly due to a long-standing tradition in Korea of sending missionaries outside the country, going back to the beginning

⁷ See the brief account in the Introduction to K. C. Abraham, *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. xv–xvi.

⁸ Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.

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of the twentieth century. It was also related to the tangled situation following the Korean War and an increasingly ambiguous relationship with the USA as the main supplier of foreign missionaries. The Korean Churches had been divided as a result of the Japanese occupation, when ecumenism was discredited by association with the Kyodan – the United Church of Christ in Japan – which the Korean churches had been expected to join. Then the strong links between anti-communism and evangelicalism on the part of US missionaries in the 1950s and 1960s complicated the internal dynamics of the Korean churches.⁹ One reaction to this situation was the development of minjung theology, which began as a simple telling of the stories of those who were suffering under the South Korean dictatorship.¹⁰ It should be emphasized that this was not simply an imitation of what was happening elsewhere; it was rather an attempt to see how similar insights related to the rather different economic and political situation in Korea. This was also a theology with politically revolutionary implications.

The political relaxation in China made it possible to see what had been happening to the Chinese church while it was concealed from western eyes. The Church of Christ in China early in the twentieth century united most of the major Protestant churches on a federal model. Under communism in 1954 this was transformed into the Three-Self Patriotic Church (self-supporting, self-administering and self-propagating).¹¹ The insistence that the Church should not acknowledge any authority outside the Chinese state presented problems for the Roman Catholic Church, but not to the Three-Self Movement. Indeed the three selves could be traced back to the early missionary thinking of Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society and Rufus Anderson of the Overseas Board for Foreign Missions in the nineteenth century.

One overwhelming reality, which the Christian Gospel had to address, was war and the consequent suffering. Asia suffered even more from war than Europe in the twentieth century. Troops were recruited from

⁹ I have learned much about the Korean churches from my research student, K. S. Ahn, who is writing a dissertation on the development of the Presbyterian Church in Korea in the twentieth century.

¹⁰ A classic source for this is D. Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, 2nd edn (Hong Kong: Commission on Theological Concerns, 2002).

¹¹ P. L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); P. Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 101–5; R. L. Whitehead (ed.), *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writings of K. H. Ting*, Maryknoll (NY: Orbis Books, 1989) pp. 9–10.

Mapping Asian Christianity

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western imperial territories to fight in the First World War, but Asia was not a major theatre. Asian politics followed a different track with the consequences of inner turmoil in China after the fall of the Qing dynasty in China in 1912. A developing Japan took advantage of this in launching the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, after the occupation of Manchuria from 1931. Japan's political ambitions made it ready to take advantage of the British and French distraction after 1939 to attack western imperial territories, most memorably Singapore in 1942 following the attack on the US Navy in Pearl Harbour in 1941. Even after the final defeat of Japan with the first use of atomic weapons by the western allies in 1945, war persisted in Korea until 1953 and in Indo-China until the 1970s. The scale of casualties in these wars is only paralleled by those on the Russian front in the west.

The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori published his book *Theology of the Pain of God* in 1946 and it was translated into English in 1965. Described as 'the first strictly theological Japanese book to be introduced in the English-speaking world',¹² it was written in the aftermath of Hiroshima. Although strongly influenced in certain respects by the categories of Lutheran systematic theology, it nevertheless also represented an engagement with Buddhist ideas, not least in the particular understanding of pain. Kitamori's approach was re-appraised by Kosuke Koyama in his *Water Buffalo Theology* (1974). He also engaged with Buddhism, in his case in Thailand, in order to discuss the possibilities of 'theological re-rooting' for those brought up in different cultural and religious *milieux*.¹³ Koyama did so in order to affirm what he took to be Kitamori's main point, that what Christ achieved went beyond the categories of Christian theology alone. Is that religious pluralism or a new kind of Christian imperialism?

Politically and economically Asia shared some characteristics of Latin America and Africa, but was in other respects strikingly different. The most obvious common feature was poverty, which affected as much as eighty per cent of the population in some countries such as Bangladesh and the Philippines. When it is remembered that Asia has nearly sixty per cent of the world's population, both the relative and the absolute significance of poverty is clear. With the partial exception of Japan, even

¹² K. Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (London: SCM, 1966), p. 7.

¹³ K. Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, revised edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 82–9. (Readers should be warned that in new on-line library cataloguing systems the title of the first edition is usually *Water-Buffalo Theology*, which does not necessarily appear if the hyphen is omitted.)