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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN ASIA

The majority of the world's Christians now live outside Europe and North America, and global Christianity is becoming increasingly diverse. Interest in the history and theology of churches in non-western contexts is growing rapidly as 'old world' churches face this new reality. This book focuses on how Asian Christian theologies have been shaped by the interaction of Christian communities with the societies around them and how they relate to the specific historical contexts from which they have emerged. The distinctiveness of Asian Christianity is shown to be the outcome of dealing with various historical challenges. Questions addressed include:

- How does Asian Christianity relate to local socio-cultural, religious and political environments?
- What is distinctive about the historical development of Asian theologies?
- How have Asian theologies contributed to contemporary theological discussions within world Christianity?

SEBASTIAN C. H. KIM is Professor of Theology and Public Life at the Faculty of Education and Theology, York St John University. His publications include *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (2003).

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Perhaps the most striking single feature of Christianity today is the fact that the church now looks more like that great multitude whom none can number, drawn from all tribes and kindreds, people and tongues, than ever before in its history. Its diversity and history lead to a great variety of starting points for its theology and reflects varied bodies of experience. The study of Christian history and theology will increasingly need to operate from the position where most Christians are, and that will increasingly be the lands and islands of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific.¹

As Andrew Walls rightly points out above the rise of world Christianity has led to much greater diversity, and also generated interest in the history and theology of churches in non-western contexts. The purpose of this volume is to examine the emerging forms and themes of theologies in Asian Christianity, which have been shaped by the Christian communities in their interaction with the societies around them. The question this volume wishes to address is not how the churches in Asia have expanded in terms of numbers but how they have sustained their identity by developing their own theologies.

The focus of this volume is on the relation of these distinctive theologies to the specific historical contexts from which they have emerged. Considerable study has been done, both in English and vernacular languages, on the history of Christianity in different Asian countries. There are also a number of works on the theologies of particular countries in Asia. The particular appeal of this volume to contemporary readers is the way it relates theology to local socio-cultural, religious and political environments. The forms and themes of distinctive Asian Christianity are shown to be the outcome of dealing with various historical challenges.

¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 47.

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The volume is divided into two parts. The first part explains the emergence of Christian theologies in different countries of Asia: India, Indonesia, China, Japan and South Korea. Using an historical framework, contributors identify theological trends and responses to the problems Christianity faces and highlight major areas of debate. The second part deals with theological themes emerging out of Asian Christian experience: namely, religious pluralism, hermeneutics, Asian feminism, ecumenical and communal conflict, mission and evangelism, and subaltern theologizing. The authors discuss topics with special reference to particular regions or movements, and also interact with the main protagonists of these themes.

In examining the forms and themes emerging from Asian theologies, the contributors identify five questions for Asian theologies. First, whether a particular theology or way of Christian thinking is *distinctive* or *different* from others. Christian theologies in Asia are unique in the sense that they have arisen out of a particular context. However, the question is whether they are essentially different from 'traditional' theology, and in what sense they are making new ground. Beside the distinctiveness drawn from its unique environment, a theology may need to exhibit something qualitatively unique in its ideas and insights.

Second, whether a particular theology is *contextual*. In one sense every theology is contextual: it reflects a particular context. The question the contributors of the volume ask is whether a particular theology has a dynamic nature which will enable it to continue to be relevant to people in a context which is always changing. In what way does a given theology authentically arise from the particular context? And what is the nature of the interaction between the Christian text and the context? This does not mean disregarding rich insights from other religious texts, but Christian theology requires constant engagement with Christian scripture in an on-going process.

Third, whether a theology fulfils its *prophetic role*: in other words, not only should theology be contextual, arising from a given situation, but it should also provide tools and a framework for people to act. Does it change people and society? Does it challenge the social norms? Does it formulate any new thinking and ethic for both the Christian community and the wider society? Or does it go along with authorities and remain content with the *status quo* or even give moral justification for an unjust system? In time of crisis, prophetic voices both within and outside the church become instruments of God for transforming unjust systems.

Fourth, whether a theology is *ecumenical*. Here the meaning of ecumenical is in its wider sense – interacting with and sharing resources with communities other than one's own across a variety of boundaries.

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Just because theology is contextual, that does not mean it should not be shared. It should make a contribution to other communities who may be experiencing similar struggles. Furthermore, the emphasis on being contextual is not an excuse to avoid the scrutiny of the tools of theological and historical method and criticism, which have been developed through the centuries. These need to be actively employed for the furtherance of theological thinking in Asia.

Fifth, whether a theology addresses the questions of *transcendence and mystery* people are asking. The emphasis of Asian theologies on either liberation from socio-political and economic injustice on the one hand or inculturation of Christian faith and practice on the other needs to be balanced by addressing Asian people's desire for the transcendental aspects of life. Questions of truth, spirit-worlds, sin, death and evil do not evaporate in modernity or post-modernity but revisit people either in their desperation or in their affluence. Asian theology, with its rich religious and cultural resources, can draw out a new appreciation of transcendence and mystery.

This volume is a product of the Christianity in Asia Project (CAP) at the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Cambridge. Three Directors have each contributed: Archie Lee initiated the idea of a publication, Namsoon Kang developed it and the present Editor has shaped it in its present form. I would like to express my gratitude to David Thompson for his leadership as the Director of the Centre for the Advanced Theological Studies (CARTS), and to David Ford for his sustaining support and encouragement as the Chair of the CARTS committee, and to Rosalind Paul, formerly Coordinator of CARTS. At York St John University, I wish to thank Dianne Willcocks, David Maughan-Brown, John Spindler, Pauline Kollontai and Richard Noake for their support and Esther MacIntosh for her efficient editing work. I also would like to acknowledge those who helped in various ways: Kirsteen Kim, Sue Yore, Richard Andrew, Joshua Kalapati, Peter Ng and Alan Suggate. Kate Brett and Elizabeth Davey of Cambridge University Press have provided much inspiration and advice for the book project.

The contributors to this volume discuss the distinctive characteristics of Christianity in Asia: its concepts, historical setting and its place in the religion and society of Asia. It is hoped that it will provide a prospect for conversation between Asian Christian theologians and those in other parts of the world, identifying some commonalities and diversities, and suggesting methodologies for further interaction.

Sebastian C. H. Kim, Editor