

Response

by

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The paper by Hitoshi Fukue is stimulating and challenging. Engaging the reader by raising issues of culture, biblical interpretation, and Wesleyan theology, it begins to address questions that are vital to the church. The main thesis of the paper — that the church needs to develop an interpenetrative approach regarding Christ and culture — is significant if the church is to move forward globally. The paper raises, but does not fully address, other significant issues. I address these as issues of culture, biblical interpretation, and History / Wesleyan theology.

Issues of Culture:

Fukue speaks of the typical understanding of the dichotomy between Western thinking and Asian as an overgeneralization. I wonder, however, if there are more distinctions than the typical understanding allows. The development of increasingly post-modern thought makes a straightforward juxtaposition even more difficult to sustain. West — in the definition of the paper — corresponds to a worldview that is modern. Post-modernity is vastly different, open to intuition and narrative in ways that mirror Fukue's perception of *Asian* thinking. But what is Asian?

Fukue's thesis of "an interpenetrating approach in matter of Christ and culture," in which the western understanding is learned from, but in which emphasis is placed on Asian culture (and vice versa) is crucial to the whole. Again, however, I suspect that there is a challenge: Is the role of an Asian observer of western thought to be a critical and prophetic voice — searching for interpenetration (and interdependence) — and at the same time a voice crying out in the wilderness? If so, is there not a role for the western visitor and explorer of Asian thought to see, hear and embrace, but also to be prophetic? Of course, that begs the question: Who decides what is prophetic and counter-cultural (indeed biblical), and who decides what is an imposition of yet another cultural perspective, normally the dominant one, on the whole?

Other questions arise concerning the issues of culture and the **both / and** of the paper: What is to be the common ground? If we perceive that there is indeed a possibility that key aspects of each culture are embraced (or examined and denied), how do we collectively determine that? For example, my 'western, post-modern, European, Christian' understanding of a perceived Asian concept — e.g., saving face — may suggest that it is non-biblical, and, therefore, outside of the parameters of Christianity. Is that an accurate perception and understanding? Or, is my perception itself a reflection of my cultural preconditioning? "Mission" consistently grapples with this; and, perhaps, the challenge is not only to be interpenetrative, but to be observers and listeners, rather than commentators at all. Even so, is our ability to listen / observe not at times obscured by our own cultural context?

Biblical Perceptions:

The call to listen to the “word of God directly and sensitively” as “the primary task for any Christian” is clear. But there is always the intersection of two realities — the Bible’s culture and the readers’. Moreover, the normative gospel (in particular) serves as the *prima facie* model of interpenetration — the Hellenistic and Jewish cultures interacting in ways that, at the least impact, and at most transform one another. Scripture already exemplifies interpenetration.

I wonder whether there is a comparison / connectivity between Middle Eastern and Asian theology that makes Asian theology a more natural (or equally natural?) expression of biblical Christianity?

I suspect that true listening to a biblical understanding of culture demands not only interpenetration and interdependence, but beyond that — a rejection and re-culturalisation. Surely there are elements in every culture that are directly opposed to a culture of Christ and should not be permitted to interpenetrate, but should be rejected.

History and Wesleyan theology:

Fukue’s paper does not call for discarding 2000 years of western Christian understanding and theology. Indeed, he refers positively to the heritage of the West and the “salt and light” that it has been, enabling a deeper meaning of Christian faith.

Perhaps the paper is not critical enough. Throughout history some Western theology and, certainly, Western missions have been thoroughly culturally prescriptive in their understanding of the appropriate ways to develop the Christian faith. The “deeper meaning of Christian faith” is couched in cultural issues and clothing. At points in this history there has been little acknowledgement of the need for responses to the gospel to be culturally appropriate. All have conformed — or been condemned, explicitly or implicitly. Of course, this has happened within cultures, as well as cross-culturally.

Fukue alludes to Wesley, and to his meditating way as a helpful approach. Indeed, a true reading of Wesley shows that there are principles that may be helpful for allowing a breadth of Christian experience to exist legitimately. This raises a further issue: Can the Wesleyan quadrilateral be a useful tool for cross-cultural interpenetration? Can “experience” make space for cultural exploration that legitimises cultural experience of faith, without diminishing the “interpenetrative” nature of faith? Is there room for understanding *some* cultural experiences / understandings as more critical and relevant than others appear to be?

Can “tradition” and “reason” be critically examined to determine what we mean by tradition and reason? Is “reason” able to be understood as encompassing intuitive, relational, concrete **and** deductive, conceptual, philosophical and analytical thought? Can “tradition” be understood as focussing on seminal points in the development of the church universal — rather than adopting and embracing the “tradition” that is so often shrouded in Western terms?

Conclusion

Fukue’s paper challenges us to think more fully about our perceptions of theology and faith; it encourages us to learn from, and be transformed by other cultures, as we allow interpenetration to occur. Thanks, Dr. Fukue, for your stimulating paper.