

Beyond Christ and Culture

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There are not a few Asian Christians who assert that theology developed in the Western countries during the past two thousand years is too rationalistic and abstract for Asian minds, which are more relational and concrete. They claim that Western theology (if there is such a thing) is too philosophical, too analytical, and too conceptual. I believe these claims are overgeneralizations of Western theology. But there is some truth in their claims. There may be some fundamental differences in cognition — how persons perceive truth.

Once a group of Japanese Zen Buddhist monks stayed at a European Catholic monastery on the occasion of spiritual exchange. To their amazement, Japanese monks found that they had much in common with the European Catholic monks in their daily religious disciplines, daily labors, and life style as a whole. But they discovered one fundamental, and perhaps decisive, difference between them. It was in the fact that in the European monastery there was a library with a large collection of religious books, which were intended to assist the monks with their spiritual and intellectual lives. In the Zen monastery in Japan, there was no library and no books at all. In fact, the Zen monks try to rid all books and human knowledge from their minds. They attempt to search for supernatural enlightenment only through wisdom beyond human knowledge — through meditation under the guidance of a Zen master. This may be extreme; but it illustrates the stronger inclination for rational knowledge in the West, and the stronger inclination for intuitive knowledge in the East.

The need for Christian faith through Asian perceptions has been voiced no more strongly than by C. S. Song, a well-known Asian theologian. He says that “a journey from Israel to Asia needs to be undertaken all over again.” He emphasizes the need for theology with Asian sensitivities, by saying parabolically,

The airplane ticket purchased for us to reach Asia from the biblical land was a nonnegotiable discount ticket ... It had many intermediary stopovers. The most frustrating part of it was that the itinerary could not be altered. Everything had been decided in advance at a travel agency in the West. It is true that ... there was much to see and learn on the way ... We also found ourselves in the company of very learned persons who seemed to know Aristotle and Kant, as also the Christian Bible, inside out. On the whole, it was a rewarding journey. But it took too long and there were too many interruptions.

Then he asserts that “it suddenly occurred to us that there must be a more direct flight from Israel to Asia, a flight which would have fewer stopovers and would allow changes of itinerary when allowed demand.” Song's thesis is a strong criticism of Western theology and assertions of Christian faith in a radically different manner of expression from that of Western Christianity. Positively, he encourages Asian Christians to listen to the Bible directly with our minds and hearts in our cultural context. God speaks to each of us directly through the Scripture by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The “direct flight from Israel to Asia” in Song's words means that we can, and must, listen to and discover the meaning of

the Word of God directly, without having to rid ourselves of the cultural and intellectual and religious legacies of Asia.

Listening to the Word of God directly and sensitively is the primary task for any Christians. But I cannot go so far as to suggest that we discard two thousand years of Western Christian understanding and theology. I cannot agree with Song that a direct flight from Israel to Asia is enough. We owe much to the theological legacies of the West. The long and complicated Christian history of the West represents Christian faith from a remarkably comprehensive range of human experiences. No doubt the history of the Western church reveals human weakness in religious wars, colonialism, and even oppression and exploitation in the name of God. But Western Christians have also served faithfully as salt and light in the world. Through their witness, spiritual life, and missional passion the majority of Asian Christians came to know Christ. Through ministers like John Wesley and his followers we came to know the fuller and deeper meaning of Christian faith. We owe Western Christians and theologians a debt of gratitude for our salvation and hope in Christ. For these reasons, I have reservations about some parts Song's thesis.

I prefer an "interpenetrating" approach to the tension between Christ and Culture. In the interpenetrating approach, Asian Christians may continue to learn from the Western understanding and history of the Christian faith. But we can at the same time explore Asian expressions of faith with their keen sensitivity to Asian culture and history. Western Christians and theologians may also learn from Asian expressions of faith and, perhaps, find fresh perspectives in their understanding of faith. Asian and Western Christians will interpenetrate each other with their own unique understandings of faith and contribute to each other. As much as Asians learn from Western theologies, the latter may learn from the studies of the emerging theologies of Asia. By this interpenetrating approach we may be able to edify each other and appreciate the width, length, depth and height of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The mediating way of John Wesley's approach seems to be practical here again in this crucial matter of Christ and Culture. It is not an either / or but both / and approach. This approach may allow us to become more authentic Christians for the twenty-first century.

An illustration from *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* by David J. Hesselgrave will, I hope, reinforce my contention. Hesselgrave was once a missionary to Japan. He tells about a Japanese pastor named Ryouin Kamegaya, a converted Buddhist priest. Kamegaya was a well known pastor in Japan and an extremely effective communicator of the gospel. He wrote the classic book, *From Buddhism to Christ*. Hesselgrave tells of an incident that occurred when he was with Pastor Kamegaya for evangelistic meetings in Urawa City, Japan.

As a small group of us walked down the street and headed out across the rice paddies one day, it became apparent that something within Pastor Kamegaya reached out in profound appreciation for the simple beauties of nature that surrounded us as the sun settled behind the soft clouds in the western sky. The cherry blossoms with their ever-so-delicate pinkness were the special objects of his fascination. Sensing this, one Japanese youth made a move to pick a small branch... Quickly the Sensei raised his hand, saying, "Please ... let them be." His would-be benefactor stopped short and in an apologetic tone explained that he wanted just a few for the Sensei's

room. Pastor Kamegaya smiled, thanked him, and added, "You must understand that they are the gift of my heavenly Father. Since He has given me all things in Christ, they are mine. I prefer to keep my blossoms right there on the tree."

Hesselgrave was amazed at the faith of Pastor Kamegaya and describes his surprise in the following words.

With him (Pastor Kamegaya) this was indeed his Father's world in an arrestingly practical and yet profound sense ... It was little wonder that he had so effectively communicated the greatness of God, the grace of Christ, and the wealth of true Christians. This was beyond the West and beyond the East. It was biblical Christianity. What made it important was that God had said it. But Kamegaya Sensei had repeated it in a way that most effectively communicated Christ to the Japanese.

This is the goal of my approach of interpenetration. This is the kind of authentic Christians for the twenty-first century. And this is the genuine Christianity that touches the hearts of both Western and Asian people.