

Beyond Orientalism and Identity Politics— Asia as a Common Project

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“Sharing Hope for a New World” is the theme of this conference. While I do not know the reasons and context behind the choice of the theme, it seems to me that this is precisely the heart of Christian mission. We Christians are people of hope, people of optimism. We have an ultimate hope in Jesus Christ, a hope that the victory of justice and peace will come in eschatological time. We also believe that such an eschatological time has already arrived with Jesus, even if it is not completed yet. Our mission is to share with others, through our words and deeds, such a hope and joy in him, and hope for a new world to come. It is indeed this ultimate hope which sustains us in our journey of faith and struggle for a better world (or a new world), even amidst the darkest moment of history. We Christians are therefore invincibly optimistic.

Yet, when it comes to more specific hopes, aspirations and projects, we cannot be simply and naively optimistic. We have to be also “wise as serpents” (Mt. 10:16), or prudent and realistic in our action and intellectual reflection.

What I would like to discuss in my short paper today is such care (or vigilance) in the latter, i.e. intellectual reflection, especially for Asian theology. It is not a presentation of a grand hope, therefore, but a little contribution to clear up the ground for hope in Asian theologizing. In the course of discussion, I make use of other academic disciplines, touching on history, culture and society, or even domination. This is not because such language and analysis have the final word in theology, but they are supposed to help us in pursuing the ultimate purpose of theology: critical reflection and expression of the gospel revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

More specifically, I would like to consider (or reconsider) the notion of “Asia.” What is Asia? What does it mean to be Asian? What difference does Asia make in theology? First, I will review two sets of answers to these questions, or better, two tendencies in Asian theology; and second, I will examine and criticize them, especially the second position; and finally draw our conclusion from such exploration.

Asian theology as decolonization

For most of us Asians, Asia is a given reality. Although its geographical boundary is not always clear, we often do identify ourselves as Asians in relation to people of other regions, especially Westerners. And naturally this Asia-West contrast has been the starting point for many Asian theologies.

Given the history of colonization in Asia by the Christian West,² it is understandable that

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Asian theology often takes a form of reaction to it. It is true that in some parts of Asia, Christianity had existed long before the arrival of Western missionaries; but for the vast majority of Asian people, this religion was brought to them from the West as a "Western" religion. Samuel Rayan, an Indian theologian, wrote, "the churches formed under colonial auspices were replicas of Western churches... ready-made churches, like potted plants, were transported to our land."³ According to him, the situation of Christianity in his country is such that "either the theological soil of our Christian existence has been used to grow foreign crops which we do not need or use; or it has left fallow while theologies raised abroad were imported..."⁴ Hence, Rayan sets out a project of "decolonizing theology" in rather dramatic terms: first, rejecting imports from and imitations of the West; second, reappreciating "our theological soil" with its promise and possibilities; third, "sowing" such a soil with "our own problems, sufferings and struggles, our own need, hopes...;" and finally, harvesting theologies that promote "human life and humanizing visions" and equip people "for action to create the new earth," i.e., the Kingdom of God.⁵

His argument is probably one typical expression of the decolonizing aspiration of Asian Christians. While I share much of his passion and intention, I cannot agree with his blanket condemnation of Western theology as "colonial theology" and the schematic opposition between the demonized "West" and the idealized "East."⁶ A somewhat different approach seems necessary.

Asian Theology as Identity Politics

The second, and more recent tendency in Asian theology, which I treat here, is inspired and informed by another academic discipline called "post-colonial studies," i.e., a discipline specialized in studying and criticizing the effect of (mainly EuroAmerican) colonization especially in cultural and intellectual aspects. The confrontation between the East and the West (or Asia and Europe) has been a long-discussed issue in the post-colonial discussion. Post-colonial scholars agree that it was through the rehabilitation of indigenous or local or national identity that people of the colonized East have restored their independence, dignity and self-confidence. However, these scholars are quick to point out that such a non-Western identity is as much a "European invention"⁷ as the concept of "Europe" itself: the "Orient" or Asia is a name given by the West to its "Other." As much as Europe is a created reality, Asia is a name imposed on the rest of the world. Hence, if we Asians continue to dwell on such a notion, they argue, we would only continue to accept, internalize and perpetuate a colonizers' view of the world (divided into the rational, civilized West and the exotic, backward East) and the power-relations implied in it, the whole of which they call "Orientalism."

²I do not treat Japanese colonialism here, not because it is unimportant, but because the issue here is the relationship or complicity of colonialism and Christianity, which is largely faint if not totally absent in Japanese colonialism.

³Samuel Rayan, "Decolonization of Theology," in *Jnanadeepa* 1, 2; 2.4.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1.3.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Michael Poon argues that similar features are found in the works of C. S. Song as well. See Poon, "Reflections on the Identity of the Church in Asia: An Ecumenical Conversation," in *Trinity Theological Journal* 13 (2005), 1-26.

⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 1.

Along this line, a Japanese historian, Kunihiro Uemura, laboriously and convincingly demonstrates in his provocatively entitled book, "Is Asia Asian?"⁸ How the concept of Asia has been invented by Western intellectuals, and how such an invented image has been internalized in the minds of Asians themselves, including those with the most enlightened minds. The devastating effect of such internalization is that Asians cannot imagine or characterize themselves beyond the image or characterization already provided by Westerners.⁹

This is why a theologian from Hong Kong, Wong Wai Ching, argues that an "absolute demarcation of the East and the West"¹⁰ does not enhance but rather impedes the development of Asian theology. "Asian theology," she says, "must find ways to shake the whole legacy of colonialism, to shake loose from the domination of categories and ideas it produced..."¹¹ such as the East and the West, or Asia and Europe. However, how can we develop Asian theology without the concept of Asia? Wong gives us a solution borrowing insights from a post-colonial scholar, Homi K. Bhabha. Following Bhabha, Wong argues that it is "hybridity" instead of identity that will threaten colonial authority. Hybridity is a term originally used by colonizers to denote the imitation by the colonized people. Basing her reflection on the reality of Hong Kong, Wong states that the hybrid nature of the city, which is itself situated "between two dominant powers and cultures: the colonial British and the communist Chinese,"¹² attests to the creative power of in-betweenness. Although we cannot go into details here, in a nutshell, Wong demonstrates that hybrid subjects eventually "enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority..."¹³ through their mimicry and creativity. She therefore exhorts Asian theologians not to waste time drawing a line between Europe and Asia, but to "build on the rich and creative resources as produced in the reality of 'hybridization' among Asian countries."¹⁴

Put differently, according to this position, when we construct 'Asian' theology, we do not need to have recourse to what is considered 'uniquely (or characteristically) Asian' since culture is always hybrid and hybridizing. In other words, we need not (or indeed should not) confine ourselves to a stereotypical 'Asia', or define Asia by the so-called 'Asian-ness,' since such 'Asia' or 'Asian-ness' is often an invention imprinted on the mind of the colonizers and the colonized and does not truly reflect the complex reality.¹⁵

Does it mean then, that the notion of Asia is of no use and is to be discarded? Should we

⁸ Kunihiro Uemura, *Asia ha Asiateki ka? [Is Asia Asian?]* (Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2006).

⁹ In African context, a post-colonial critic Kwame Anthony Appiah makes much the same point. See, for example, his "Europe Turned Upside Down: Fallacies of the New Afrocentrism," in Richard Roy Grinker and Christopher Steiner, eds., *Perspectives on Africa* (London: Blackwell, 1997) 728-731.

¹⁰ Wong Wai Ching, "Towards an Asian Theological Agenda for 21st Century." <http://www.cwmnote.org/papers/ching.htm> (accessed 19 April 2004).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Therefore, we should avoid a stereotype, for example, that the West is rational and logical, while Asia is intuitive and mystical, and trying to construct Asian theology on such a stereotype. Not that

rather strive to go beyond the West-East distinction? Indeed, when the world is becoming more and more borderless, and even the structure of domination is said to be changing to a de-centered and dispersed network (which some people call "Empire"¹⁶), what is the meaning of sticking to the notion and borders of Asia? The aforementioned historian Uemura, for example, believes that Asian intellectuals should really seek to deconstruct the concept of Asia.

However, this is a very tricky question. If Asians (or people stereotypically called Asians) have to construct their academic discourse in and from their place, but without a collective identity or common denominator such as Asia, how or on what basis can they form and develop their unified voice against the dominant one? More provocatively put, what is the whole point of this congress of Asian theologians? Or Christian Conference of Asia? Or Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences?

This is actually not an isolated question of Asian theology but a common question for all projects of constructing indigenous or local discourse because after the emergence of post-colonial studies, every attempt to give a voice to collective identity is criticized for its "essentialism," i.e., an assumption that a certain identity (such as culture or race or nation) has some kind of static, unchanging essence. Such an essence, according to these critics, does not exist because identities, whether colonizing or colonized, are in reality more complex, intertwined and hybrid. Therefore, rather than setting a clear opposition between one identity and another, they call everyone to join in their tactics called "identity politics," which seeks to undermine the dominant culture or discourse from within by shaking or deconstructing the very concept of identity.

Weakness of the Theory of Hybridity

When we Asian theologians are told that Asian theology as such, pure and simple, is a primitive, unsophisticated attempt to counter Eurocentrism of Western (or even Asian) Christianity, should we then follow "identity politics" in theology in order to invalidate the distinction between the West and the East? That is certainly a possibility. However, such a possibility becomes feasible only when we are aware of a serious weakness of the theory of hybridity.

According to Arif Dirlik, a historian of Turkish origin and one of the most severe critics of post-colonial studies, there are two major drawbacks in the hybridity theory.¹⁷ First, it tends to reduce the issue of domination or colonization to that of culture and ideology, and thereby to overlook its historical, political and economic dimensions. Post-colonial discourse, which is under the strong influence of postmodern philosophy, tends to

such a description is always and in every aspect wrong, but we still need to be attentive about the powerful effect of such an assumption on our conscious or unconscious production of ideas.

¹⁶ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2000).

¹⁷ Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997). It should be noted that his criticism is mainly directed to the theories of Homi Bhabha, and not all scholars in post-colonial studies.

reject the so-called “grand narratives” i.e., a universal, overarching theory or account of history and human society. Post-colonial scholars instead prefer to speak of difference, heterogeneity, and the local/contextual, in order to save what is marginalized in the sweeping categorization of universalism. A dangerous pitfall of this move is, according to Dirlik, that this tends to lead them to overlook hegemonic forces at work on a global scale to create and perpetuate the structure of domination. More specifically, in such an overlooking, “there is no mention...of a capitalist structuring of the world, however heterogeneous and ‘discrepant’ the histories within it, as a constituting moment of history.”¹⁸ This is a fatal error, continues Dirlik, because it will neutralize or compromise the very objective of post-colonial studies, i.e., resistance against and critique of (neo-) colonialism of the West, or simply Eurocentrism.

Without capitalism as the foundation for European powers and the motive force of its globalization, Eurocentrism would have been just another ethnocentrism (comparable to any other ethnocentrism from the Chinese and the Indian to the most trivial solipsism). An exclusive focus on Eurocentrism as a cultural or ideological problem, that blurs the power relationships that dynamized it and endowed it with hegemonic persuasiveness, fails to explain why, in contrast to regional or local ethnocentrism, this particular ethnocentrism was able to define modern global history, and itself as the universal aspiration and end of that history...¹⁹

Hence, when we consider EuroAmerican domination in any specific fields, including theology, we have to remember that Eurocentrism is not simply some kind of bias, attitude or ideology which can be politely ignored or quickly dismissed by “political correctness,” but is an extensive reality to be challenged which has political, economic, cultural and intellectual substance. Hybridization occurs in such reality of concrete power-relations. In other words, the theory of hybridity could end up in a new ideology of global capitalism unless we attend to the fact that not all elements, which are to be “hybridized,” are equal in power.

Secondly, the hybridity theory tends to undermine the systematic opposition to capitalism and its globalizing forces by refusing the validity of any collective identity in favor of hybridity.²⁰ Therefore, by the same reason why they overlook capitalism, post-colonial theorists tend to quickly invalidate a collective identity which seeks to challenge the dominating forces of the world. The net effect is that the post-colonial “preoccupation with local encounters and the politics of identity rules out a thoroughgoing critique of the structures of capitalism while also legitimatizing arguments against collective identities that are necessary to struggles against domination and hegemony.”²¹

Asia as a Common Project

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰ Dirlik wrote of the post-colonial approach, “indeed, insistence on structures, or master narratives of any kind (from capitalism to imperialism, from nationalism to revolution to ethnicity, class, and gender) implies an essentialism that subordinates the local to imagined and invented categories that hegemonic structures of power have imposed upon the world” (*ibid.*, 6).

²¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

The fact that the concept of Asia was invented by Europeans does not necessarily mean that it is wrong or impossible to make use of it, nor that we are destined to accept the EuroAmerican mapping of the world. It is true that indigenous identities which Asian and African people invoked in their struggle for independence from the Western (or Japanese) colonizers can be considered as mirror-images of colonizers. But it is also true that these invented identities are precisely what enabled those people to unify their efforts to counter colonization and its legacies. Theologians in a region called Asia then need not give up this option to construct "Asian" theology, while they do not have to (or indeed should not) essentialize or privilege or mystify it. Rather than throwing it away or being entrapped in its alleged essence, they instead can keep inventing the content of Asian theology, which could be richly pluralistic and heterogeneous. In this way, Asia will not be a mirror-image of Europe, nor an illusion to be eliminated, but becomes our common project, common working place where we Christians, under the guidance of the Spirit, keep creating our life as (a part of) the body of Christ. Whether such an effort will bring about a difference in theology, we do not know in advance. What we know however is that theological efforts and ecclesial initiatives that have come under the label of "Asia" have made positive contributions to the whole body of theology and of the church, not so much because they are exotic enough to meet the Western appetite, but because they have had a say from their own specific historical, political, economic and cultural setting. And we have no reason to doubt that this laboratory called Asia will keep producing "contextual" fruits with inter-contextual values and relevance, which may bring about a sound balance and healthy plurality within global Christianity.