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## **On Relating Western Christian Theology to Asian Cultures**

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## Review Article

### On Relating Western Christian Theology to Asian Cultures WALTER L. YSAAC

WATERBUFFALO THEOLOGY. By Kosuke Koyama. New York: Orbis Books, 1974. ix, 239 pages. \$4.95 paper.

Rarely do we find a serious attempt to express Christianity in terms of Asian contemporary experience, history, and culture. Actually Dr. Kosuke Koyama's *Waterbuffalo Theology* is the result of a series of attempts on his part, more or less interrelated, over the years, to confront Western Christianity with the realities of Asian life and history, particularly in Thailand and in Singapore where Koyama, a Japanese theologian, has worked in the last decade. In fact, eleven of the twenty chapters in the book have already been published, though they now appear in a revised form. What the book as a whole may lack in terms of unity and clear systematic development, it makes up for by the independent internal unity and fresh variety of content, style, and perspective, which makes each chapter in itself easy and pleasant reading.

The book therefore demonstrates a healthy flexibility of concrete approach and method which grows out of the particular Christian truth and Asian reality it is considering in each chapter. In this way Koyama manages somewhat to steer clear of a number of pitfalls into which some who try to preach Christianity in Asia today often fall.

First of all, he makes a distinct attempt to take Asia seriously. Not only what he says but also how he says it continually reveals an explicitly Asian orientation. Unlike others who bring in the Asian context only as the subject of a practical application at the end, or of an afterthought, he simply takes the Asian context as his starting point.

Secondly, he does not limit the Asian context primarily to the economic. Asian socioeconomic events and conditions come up for theological reflection not as the whole nor the predominant part but as simply a fundamental aspect of the Asian context. The "theological situation" in each Southeast Asian country (pp. 3-19) and the "key theological

issues facing theologians in Asia" (pp. 106–114) are seen as only partly economic.

Thirdly, the Asian context for him means not so much the observable facts and historical occurrences which can be measured and verified empirically and statistically, but the more complex and elusive meanings and values that the Asian peoples themselves give to these facts and events in their lives and history. Thus he speaks of the complexity of human existence and human history that confronts every missionary, not only in himself (p. 211) but even more so in the other living human beings and peoples to whom he is sent (pp. 206–224). In developing one's working knowledge of such complexity, intuitive commonsense generalizations are not a fault but a necessity. What is important is that these generalizations emerge from one's experience of *feeling* these values and meanings in and with the people themselves.

Finally, he does not stop with mere humble appreciation of the complexity and mystery of the total human and historical Asian context, but tries to let the Christian Gospel *speak* prophetically through it by seriously confronting Asian meanings and values with the specific meanings and values of Christianity. In other words, he does not just take Asia seriously but also takes the Gospel and Spirit of Christ seriously. He tries to look at both Asia and Christianity in their own terms, as *real*, as "what I come up against, what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me." (p. 90).

To do both of these adequately and effectively, Koyama proposes in so many words and in so many different ways what in effect we think amounts to a double and simultaneous evangelization, which he calls the putting on of the "crucified mind" of Christ. The missionary or Christian can preach and communicate to Asians the "crucified mind" of Christ only by and while putting it on himself.

I would call the mind portrayed by Matthew 16.24 a "crucified mind." It is the crucified mind that can meaningfully participate in authentic contextualization. It is the mind of Christ. It is not a neurotic mind. It is not a morbid mind. It does not have a persecution complex. It is a positive mind. It is a healthy mind. It is the mind which is ready to crucify the self ("... deny himself", "he emptied himself...") for the sake of building up a community. This mind is a theological mind. It is a free mind. And it is the missionary mind in contrast to the "crusading mind." This mind does not live by itself. It lives by constantly creating the life that practises such a mind. It lives in constant frustration and a sense of failure. Yet, it is joyous. It is resourceful. It is accommodational and prophetic. It knows that only by the grace of God can it be, and remain, accommodational and prophetic at all (p. 24).

Furthermore, local or native theology, according to him, cannot come out instantly when theology is recast in a local or native category from a Western category. "If that were all that it took to inculturate theology," he observes, "it would not be such a difficult arrangement." Inculturation takes place "with the emergence of a theological work engaged in by a local or native crucified mind" (p. 24). In other words, the great need is not only for a missionary or Christian crucified mind ready to crucify the self in order to take the Gospel and Asia seriously, but also a Chinese or Japanese or, in our case, Filipino crucified mind ready to crucify even his Asian self (which, presumably, he already takes seriously) in order to take the Gospel seriously.

This double and simultaneous evangelization of the missionary as well as of the Asian mind Koyama attempts to explain more explicitly and treat more formally in the final chapter of each of the four sections into which he divides the book. The twentieth and last chapter, an article on the "Three Modes of Christian Presence," more or less sums up the shape that he thinks Asian Christianity (or the whole of Christianity in so far as it becomes also Asian) can take in the future, as a result of the work of the missionary and/or Asian crucified mind.

The first section of the book deals with the "Interpretation of History," that is, the history of Asia as an Asian reality. Koyama suggests that even as a "raw theological situation" of directly observable and verifiable data, Asian history is not purely or even primarily economic or political but a much more complex and richly diversified reality (chapter 1), that its Christian meaning must take the Asian or cyclic view of history as *within* the biblical or linear view, in order to form an ascending spiral view (chapter 2), or face the consequence of a ghetto Asian Christianity alien to the Asian understanding of its history (chapter 3). It must also perceive not only the "gun" or the "ointment" but both the "gun" and the "ointment" present in the impact on Asia of Western colonialization (chapter 4). But above all, it must not only reject the 'gun' of Western economic and cultural domination, but also transform the "ointment" of Western technological efficiency with the Christian "ointment" of the paradoxical "efficiency" of the Crucified One, as this latter ointment becomes more and more present in Asian spirituality (chapter 5).

The second section of the book deals with "rooting the Gospel", that is, taking the Gospel seriously and really rooting it in Asia. Here again the author follows his implicit fundamental apostolic model of double and simultaneous evangelization of the missionary as well as of the Asian mind. The spontaneously Asian "Bangkok" attitude of understanding the Gospel as the sure, simple, and inevitable divine fulfilment to every real deeply felt need and fundamental yearning of human love could result in an Asian theology of faith as deep and unshakeable as the Cannanite Woman's and just as amazing to the Saviour Himself. Such an indigenous Asian attitude and faith can lead to a

deep Asian awareness and participation of the presence of the Saviour just as much as a more Western "Wittenberg" attitude or faith, namely, a faith so strong that it can speak to an angry God and praise Him as its helper and its glory in spite of its continuing helplessness and apparent spiritual abandonment (chapter 6).

An "unseasoned" and "raw" Christ or Gospel would, he observes, not be palatable to Thai or Asian taste but only a Christ or Gospel that is already being "seasoned" with local "pepper and salt," with Asian meanings and values, either inadequately in the common people's concrete down-to-earth "kitchen theology," or more adequately in a highly nuanced and balanced "local Church"-developed theology. A Christ or Gospel seasoned with the wrong kind of "foreign pepper and salt" might be courteously accepted in Asia but it will not go beyond the limited polite circles of the missionary's own abstract "living room theology" (chapter 7). To take Christ or the Gospel seriously in Asia is to permit Him or His message to be seasoned with local "pepper and salt." To leave Him or His Gospel raw and unseasoned or seasoned with the wrong kind would be equivalent to not taking Him seriously at all.

Similarly, Christ and His Gospel become "real" to both the missionary and the local people in Asia in so far as the missionary makes himself a real "neighbor" to the Asians and expresses Christ to them in terms of his "real neighbor" relationships to them (chapter 8).

In the last three chapters (9, 10, 11) of this second section, Koyama moves deeper into the field of taking the Gospel seriously in Asia by critically relating it to Asian meanings and values. The biblical meaning of the "wrath" of God (chapter 9) is juxtaposed with the Thai "no pathos" (*apatheia*) ideal world of tranquillity which derives from Buddhism and the Thai experience of the cyclical flow of time as a result of their life in closer contact with nature. What he believes to be the Thai experience and ideal of an apathetic God *outside* of history needs to be shaken by what he thinks is the contradictory biblical message of the wrath of God, and therefore of God not outside but in history, since "only God in history can be meaningfully moved to wrath" (p. 104). This dialectical juxtaposition is then to be "deepened and substantiated by the sense of the presence of God who came into history in person, Christ, the God incarnate who was not *Christos apathes* (Christ without pathos)" (p. 104).

Such a relationship by dialectical opposition, as proposed by Koyama, might unnecessarily render the Gospel unpalatable to Asians. Much better, we think, and much more nuanced is Raymond Panikkar's attempt to evangelize, i.e., clarify, transform, and integrate, the same Asian cultural reality in his little book, *The Trinity and World Religions* (Madras, 1970), especially as interpreted in Cecil Hargreaves' *Asian Christian Thinking* (Delhi, 1972) pp. 79-92. Briefly, Panikkar would locate the "contradiction" or tension

between history and nature, between involvement and passivity, between "pathos" and "no-pathos," in the three "spiritualities" of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and point to the *advaita* ("non-duality") of Hinduism as an authentic development of the Asian "no-pathos" ideal corresponding to the "spirituality of the Spirit," which, together with the "spirituality of the Father," he claims, has been little explored in Western Christianity. He holds that it is precisely a strong authentic *advaita* experience of this Asian "no-pathos" ideal that leads to authentic involvement in the life of the world. In other words, it is the Asian spiritual experience and conviction of the *advaita*, or non-monistic and non-dualistic character of all reality, that will bring about (for the Asians, at least) the deepest involvement in the history of the world. Koyama himself seems to move toward this new and more sympathetic interpretation earlier in the book, in his chapter on "The Theological Situations in Asia," a paper incorporated here as chapter 1 but actually written eight years later than chapter 9. He writes:

Ordinarily it is said that Buddhism does not take history seriously. Such a remark has become a favourite saying among Christian theologians. My eight years in Thailand, the land of Theravada Buddhism, radically changed this view. Often Buddhists take history more seriously than Christians! Whatever one sees in the 240,000 monks throughout the kingdom of Thailand, one cannot fail to see the ideal and commitment to poverty . . . This is the right way to live in this evil historical time, free from all the snares of history. Don't they take history seriously? They are committed to overcome history. If history is not taken seriously, what is the use of practising renunciation to overcome history and to reach the salvific tranquility of *nirvana*? (p. 22)

Chapter 10 confronts the Gospel with what Koyama considers the "Ten Key Theological Issues Facing Theologians in Asia." Chapter 11 is an attempt to express more forcefully the Christian message of the Cross in terms of two powerful and untranslatable words in Japanese culture, *tsusumu* (to embrace all, even the undesirable) and *tsurasa* (to bear deeply yet silently the undesired pain for the sake of loving and making others live). This latter is a commentary on Dr. Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God*, a treatise on the analogy of all suffering, which appeared after the Second World War (1946). It is the "crucified mind" that experiences this analogy more than any other mind.

The next three chapters comprise the third section, Koyama's "Interpretation of the Thai Buddhist Life." After recalling that the living Buddhist is far more important and complex than the Buddhism abstracted from him (chapter 12), he again attempts a serious juxtaposition, but this time a more particular and nuanced one, between the Buddhist ideal of the cool *arahant* ("worthy one") or *apatheia*-man and the biblical message of a hot or covenant God (chapter 13). Again, as in chapter 9, his attempt suffers from over-

concentration on their apparent contradiction rather than on their intriguing complementarity. In this second attempt, however, there is a very noticeable shift of emphasis to the latter. There is a much more detailed and vivid study of the Buddhist ideal *apatheia*-man or cool *arahant*, and his development in "mindfulness" and "insight" through the three marks of *dukkha* (realization of the unsatisfactoriness of the present existence and life of suffering), *anicca* (realization that all salvation or relief without the elimination of the I-concept is only temporary and transitory, since man would then not yet be free from *patheia* which has its home precisely in the "illusion of I") and *anatta*, that mental state of holiness and tranquillity, free from all suffering, which transcends and supplants the I-concept, the subject and home of *patheia*. While there is still rebirth, old age, death, grief, etc., for the *anicca*, there will be no more of these for the *anatta*.

Koyama's attempted synthesis or 'Hebraization' of the Buddhist ideal of the cool *arahant* with the hot Hebraic covenant-God is, though flawed, quite fascinating. He calls it, not the rejection, but the heating of the cool ideals of *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*. The realization of the unsatisfactoriness, transitoriness and self-destructiveness of human existence and history is transformed into the more specific realization of the unsatisfactoriness, transitoriness and self-destructiveness already present, not so much in man's existence, but rather in man's actual life of imperfect commitment and devotion ("attachment") to God in the light of God's unfailing fidelity (attachment") to His covenant with man. One can hardly find fault with such a synthesis.

Fascinating also is Koyama's Buddhist exegesis of the epistle of James as both 'cool' and 'hot', though he still tries to speak here of the "primacy of attachment" when attachment is motivated by the holy fear of God and so "contains within itself a special kind of detachment, a detachment not from the world, but from the corrupting influence of the world" (chapter 14).

The fourth and final section of the book is a loose collection of six articles presenting Dr. Koyama's "Interpretation of the Christian Life" in Asia. In the first article (chapter 15) he ventures to say that Asian Christian theology must find its centre and "personality" in the word of the Cross, in going outside the "regular" and "approved" theological investigation, in "becoming the scum" of humanity, in "bearing the marks" of the Crucified "for the sake of the many," for the sake of the poor and the outcast, at the very depth of our Asian "hearts" (the seat of the whole of man's emotions, reason, and will) and our Asian "kidneys" ("the most secret stirrings of the soul": Ps. 73.21; Jer. 17.10). At the end of the next article (chapter 16) Koyama surprises us with his clear affirmation of an otherwise overlooked truth in Christian life, that God can place a Jeremiah not only outside of the institution to protest the deceptive theology of we-are-in-God's-institution-therefore-we-are-safe, but also within the institution, to reject the unauthentic protester who claims to be a Jeremiah (p. 190).

In the third article (chapter 17) he faces the problem of the proclamation of a divided Christ in Asia. And his solution runs along his favourite theme of Christ's and the Christian's "crucified mind." All Christians must first be ready to set aside their own denominational (Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, etc.) Western historical experience of Christ Crucified as embodied in their confessional traditions, in order to give Asians a chance to have *their* own historical and cultural experience and memory and tradition of Christ Crucified. And this readiness to "become refuse," to be set aside and become provisional, he suggests, is *part* of the Christian's proclamation of Christ Crucified. In fact it is the most effective way of preaching Christ Crucified and *contributing* to the Asian experience of Christ Crucified. This, he says, seems to be what Asians feel about this issue.

The fourth article (chapter 18) is another fresh attempt, again in Dr. Koyama's disarming and inimitable Asian style, to express the truth of the complexity and mystery of man as the image of God. The fifth essay, "Towards a Crucified Mind" (chapter 19), is his most systematic and comprehensive effort to expound on his favourite theme of what a missionary and a Christian should be and do, especially in Asia, if he is to communicate Christ to the Asians. This and the last chapter on the three modes of Christian presence in Asia are by far the most important articles in the book. They not only sum up Koyama's specific contribution of pointing out with disarming honesty the false presuppositions of his Western and his fellow Asian Christian colleagues. They also propose a possible (and Christian!) way out for the evangelization of Asia.

Reflecting on the possible impact of this gentle book on the still very Western approach to the Christian evangelization of Asia, this Western-educated Filipino reviewer was reminded of these beautiful, sad, yet hopeful lines in one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?