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Interdisciplinary Perspectives***

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Asian Theological Ferment

Keynote Address

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Part I: The Emergence of New Theological Discourse in Asia in the Post-Colonial Era

The emergence of fresh theological orientations have to do with the social and political developments in its various regions and countries in Asia. We can identify a few general factors:

1. In the first place, Asian countries experienced the emergence of many movements for national independence which struggled against colonial powers. The theme of liberation caught the imagination of the masses and the leaders involved in these struggles. These movements were propelled by the power deriving from indigenous resources and traditions of the people, and their past history. The liberative energies released in the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles waged in different Asian countries, each in its own way, constitute a general point of reference for theological discourses in our societies.
2. In the post-independence period, many of the Asian countries underwent the experience of repressive dictatorial regimes, as for example here in Indonesia, in the Philippines, Pakistan, and Korea. A fresh and prolonged struggles of the people for

freedom and democracy brought new dimensions to the dynamic alignments in the cause of the liberation of the people.

3. There have been the emergence of many voluntary and grassroots movements taking up particular issues at the local level and fighting for liberation. We have been witnessing the fast expansion of these groups to counter the situation of growing economic disparity, social discrimination and political marginalization of the weaker sections in the Asian societies. Through their involvement at the grassroots they aimed at radical social transformation. These groups came into existence due to various reasons, chief among which are the betrayal of the promises of governments at the dawn of the post-colonial period to promote justice and equality, and the general disillusionment with the state policy of development.
4. Another important force has been the awakening of the subaltern groups, marginal peoples and ethnic and linguistic minorities within the different nation-states. This is true almost of all Asian countries, but particularly of South and South East Asian countries. It has been a complex phenomenon, and they range from a demand for legitimate rights through democratic means to a violent and militant involvement in the cause of political freedom and cultural autonomy. We could think of the various tribal movements like the *Jharkand* and *dalit* (formally known as the “untouchables”) movements of India, the *Suiheisha* movement for the liberation of the Japanese outcasts (Burakumin), and the prolonged and bloody conflict of the Tamils for their legitimate rights and autonomy in Sri Lanka. Some of these movements have a long dissent, resistance and struggle to win their freedom. In the post-colonial period these movements have acquired new momentum.
5. A further factor, closely connected with the above, is the re-reading of the history – the cultural, religious, social and political – of the subaltern groups. Through this re-reading the subaltern groups and the backward castes and classes want to reclaim their heritage and their distinct historical and social identity. Particularly, significant has been the reclaiming of folk-traditions and the religious heritage of the marginalized.

In India, for example, the ongoing debate about the nature of Hinduism exemplifies this. While the upper caste and classes want to see Hinduism as an all-encompassing cultural and religious reality of India, forming the basis for its political unity, the marginal people maintain that, what in recent centuries has been known as Hinduism is in fact the amalgamation of many indigenous religious traditions and streams belonging to the tribals and many oppressed peoples. Similarly, in Korea attention is being focused today on the relevance of Shamanistic tradition associated with marginal peoples, and specially women. Such a reading of history and reclaiming of traditions has contributed to the struggles of the marginalised against their long-standing oppression.

6. Of particular significance for Asian theologies are the numerous ecological and feminist movements. Ecological questions in Asia, as in many other parts of the Third

World, are also questions of *equality and justice*. For the over-exploitation of land, sea, forests and other natural resources through modern technological means, and the resultant accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few causes hunger, misery and deprivation of basic necessities of life to millions of Asians. Tribals, peasants and fisher-people are among the most affected. The protection of environment from being destroyed takes the form of reclaiming by the oppressed their legitimate traditional rights over forests, land and sea.

7. In the last few decades, there has been a spurt of actions and initiatives to liberate Asian women both from traditional as well as modern forms of oppression and to uphold their autonomy and freedom. There are many aspects of Asian cultural life that stand in the way of the liberation of women which need to be critically approached. Many women's groups and movements not only claim equal dignity status and opportunities, but go deeper into the very system of patriarchy – both in its traditional and contemporary forms; both in the Church and in the society. Discrimination and violence against women is built into the prevailing patriarchal mode of thinking and acting. Besides, patriarchy, the dominant market and capitalist culture of today have aggravated the oppression of women, we need to also highlight the violence against women, including the state violence, by its police and military. Against the many experiences of oppression, there has emerged a vibrant Asian feminist theology which has its own unique distinguishing marks.

We, therefore, conclude that there is a strong ferment of liberation sweeping through Asia. And this liberation is not the monopoly of Christians. However, a Christian liberation theology makes sense in the context of the general ferment of liberation in Asia. The birth of a Christian liberation theology has been a response to this general mood of liberation in the various regions of Asia.

These theological articulations have strong popular base as they reflect the experiences of some of the most oppressed sections in Asia, and their quest for freedom. Through these theologies, committed and socially conscious Christians have been trying to contribute to the general project of liberation from their faith-perspective. Their reflections on faith and their attempts to re-read and re-interpret it led them to the formulation of Asian theologies of liberation which can never be viewed independent of their context. Much less its origin in Latin America or elsewhere.

However, the original and creative attempts to formulate Asian theologies of liberation found a very inspiring point of reference in the Latin American theology of liberation which has had, as it were, a paradigmatic value. The Latin American theology of liberation, having developed in a Christian continent, could stimulate a refreshing praxis-based interpretation of Christian faith which has benefitted significantly the Asian development of liberation theologies.

Part II: The Spirit of Asian Theology

Researching into the various theological efforts in Asia in the past decades and going through the documents of FABC and of Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), I find certain convergence of concerns and shared perceptions. Asian theologizing has certain quality which may not be always explicitly articulated but could be found underlying. This quality of Asian theologizing I wish to present briefly, instead of going into specific issues.

Sense of Divine Mystery

One of the important things Asian theologies imply is the sense of the inexhaustible mystery of God. This has been conveyed differently whether Asia deals with Christology, mission or theology of religions. This sense of the divine mystery inspires Asian theologies not to follow paths of exclusion but of integration and inclusion. This sense of mystery is also behind the spirit of pluralism that characterizes Asian theologies. This pluralism is not simply a reaction to dogmatism, but something born of the realization that the mystery of God is endless and innumerable are the ways in which it comes to expression. Asian theologies celebrate this pluralism and have tried to understand Jesus Christ and Christian faith from this perspective.

Reconceptualization of Mission and Evangelization.

Asian approach to mission is inspired by the sense of mystery, as well as the importance of the *subject* in mission. The people, their aspirations, their perceptions are important. Mission is not simply a teleologically oriented project. People are not object of mission, but subjects. It is they who in freedom appropriate faith, a process set in particular social, political and cultural processes within their history. Hence, it is important to enter into the world and know the story of their experience of faith and understand the expressions they give to it at various levels. There is an effort today to rewrite mission history by foregrounding the subjecthood of the people. Moreover, the realization of the presence of God and the Spirit in peoples, cultures, religious traditions, etc. have contributed to view mission in a unique manner by the Asians. It became very evident during the preparation as well as in the various interventions of bishops during the Asian synod. This broad vision of mission and evangelization is in stark contrast to the Christomonistic understanding of mission in Roman documents including *Ecclesia in Asia*. This was clearly seen in the response of the Japanese bishops to the lineamenta for the Asian synod. Referring to the Christological statement in the lineamenta, the Japanese bishops noted,

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the Truth, we must search much more deeply into how he is the Way and the Life.¹

¹ For the text of the response of Japanese Bishops, see Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Asian Synod. Texts and Commentaries* (New York: Orbis Books), pp. 27-32, p. 30.

Integral Understanding of Salvation and Liberation

Asian theological efforts show more and more an integral understanding of salvation. It means the well being of the whole person without any dichotomy of body and soul, and the welfare of all without distinction of caste, class, religious belonging. Moving towards salvation implies progressive liberation from all that maims, corrodes or negates life in any form. It is a freedom from whatever binds the self as much as the society and the world. Integral salvation and liberation imply that there are no two histories – one history of salvation and the other of the world moving on parallel lines. Some would even oppose one to the other. There is but one single history which all the peoples share across borders and boundaries, testifying to the universality of God's grace and dealings.

Realization of Diversity the Pluralism

Asian theology is infused with the positive affirmation of diversity and spirit of pluralism, not only as a fact but as a value to be fostered. Few continents have such diversity as Asia in its composition of peoples, cultures, traditions and the variety of gifts of nature. The traditional recognition of pluralism and value of a life of harmony resist trends of uniformity and homogenization. There is no attempt to streamline all this diversity into one common point of unity, there is a mystical feeling that all the differences and plurality we experience meet somewhere and are somehow interconnected, though we are not able to identify the bonds that bind them together. Asian theologies have cultivated this spirit of millennial diversity and pluralism of the continent. It is this which also inspires Asian theology to recognize the infinite faces of the divine mystery.

Pluralism derives also from the fact that human beings are subjects and their perception of reality and their judgements are shaped by their differing world-views, experiences, diverse contexts, histories, etc. This realization has led Asian theologies to view the diversity of perspectives not as a hindrance but as a great enrichment to the life of faith. We may recall here the *syadvada* heritage of Jainism, at a time there were many competing schools in conflict with each other.

There is today a feeling of threat whenever pluralism is talked about. It derives from a false conflation of pluralism with relativism. FABC has clearly distinguished the two.

A pluralism which claims that all points of view of reality are of equal value surely up in relativism. When a point of view lacks a common reference to reality, it amounts to the mere opinion of the subject who holds that opinion. When each and every such point of view that is cut off from a common reference to reality is assigned an equal value, then it amounts to relativism. In other words, relativism holds that there are many truths which vary according to the subjects who hold different opinions of reality.... The affirmation of plurality rests on the human search for an underlying unity that enables us to understand reality better. Many Asian philosophies and theologies have shown the unity and harmony behind pluralism.²

² Vimal Tirimanna (ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil. Collection of TAC & OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007), p. 258.

Partnership in Salvation and Liberation

If all the people in their diversity of cultures, traditions and religious paths participate in the single salvation, they become partners in salvation and liberation. People of different religious traditions converge to experience and bear witness to the grace of God, and God's salvation. They engage themselves in bringing about ever greater freedom to the human family and for the protection and flourishing of nature and all of God's creation. Religious traditions are not opposed to each other but are partners in the project of God's salvation and liberation. Let us reflect on the basis of this partnership of religions further. Let me share a few of my convictions that have developed in the course of many years.

Universal Destiny of Every Religion

All religions belong to the entirety of humankind, and no religion is the sole possession of the immediate community of its believers. From a Christian perspective we could reflect on the foundations of this truth. The narrations of the fall in the account of Genesis (Gen 3:1-24), the depiction of the times of Noah (Gen 6:11-13), the construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:3ff.) – all these refer to the common experience of humankind across nations and races. The question is not what happens to a particular religion, but what it has to contribute to the welfare of the world and the future of humanity.

“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it” (Ps 24:1); so, do all religions belong to humankind, under divine dispensation. No religion can claim full ownership of its beliefs and practices. Ownership in the Christian tradition, after all, is justified only when it is for the purpose of *autarkia* and *koinonia* (self-governance and communion).³ Therefore, belonging to a religion does not close the doors, rather, it acquires meaning only in so far as it is a means for communion. As for understanding of religions, precisely because they and their Scriptures belong to humankind, they are open to a wide spectrum of interpretations. The classical Indian hermeneutical tradition compared texts to a woman and said that the fact that because a father has generated a daughter need not mean that he is also the best judge of her beauty; the best judge could be her admirer, lover or husband. The modern hermeneutical tradition of autonomy of texts⁴ could be profitably applied to the religious traditions whose interpretation need not necessarily be confined to the group of believers, but is open-ended.

First and foremost, all religions belong to humankind as a whole and *in a primary sense*, while a particular religion belongs to the limited community of its believers in a *secondary and derivative sense*. This is similar to what has been said by the Christian tradition on the universal destiny of earthly goods which takes precedence over the right of private property.⁵ Two things follow from this approach: (i) every religion needs to consider

3 Cf. Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

4 Cf. Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

5 This we find in the Scriptures in connection with the injunctions on the year of Jubilee. Everyone is to get back their original possessions and lands (Leviticus 25: 8-55). Several Fathers of the Church like Basil, Ambrose, Chrysostom were critical of the rich who amassed wealth at the expense of the poor. In this context they reminded the rich that the goods of creation are the gifts of God to be shared among God's children equitably. Drawing on the Scriptures and the patristic tradition, Catholic social teaching has underlined the

itself as being addressed to the whole of humanity, and (ii) consequently, every human being could draw on the heritage of humanity to the extent that it enhances her quest for life and spirituality.

Second, the mystery about which all religions are concerned is not the possession of any particular religion. It belongs to the entire human family which participates in that mystery. Obviously, no religion can claim to exhaust that mystery, much less to possess it. It would be a sin against humankind to claim for oneself what, in reality, belongs to all. Moreover, to be believers means to be *witnesses*. Belonging to a religious group does not entitle the possession of that particular religion, because believing is, in point of fact, a witnessing to what one has experienced of the mystery. It follows that, that which the witness experiences surpasses the limited realm of herself and of her community or religious group in which this witnessing takes place.

Third, the various experiences of religions – creeds, rituals, laws etc. - are not an end in themselves, but only a means. Even Scripture is only a means, according to Saint Augustine who distinguishes between *use* and *enjoyment* – the latter identified with the experience of God.⁶ Religion is a penultimate reality, and not the ultimate one. It is a means for something greater – and this ‘greater’ is the mystery that surrounds us all. For, the mystery is that which unites all religions and confers meaning and sustenance to them. The experience and enjoyment of the ultimate mystery to which the whole of human family is called is nourished with a wide variety of spiritual foods offered by the religions, and no one has full control of the spiritual metabolism of the experience and enjoyment the mystery causes.

Practicing of a Different Theological Methodology

Theology is not simply a learning of faith-propositions or interpretations of the same. Conscious of this fact, Asian theology follows a method of dialogue and mutuality. Its methodology is not aimed at simply communicating the truths of faith but dialoguing with the larger world. Asian theological orientation is not marked by any sense of closure and easily attained certainties, but rather is imbued with *the spirit of a movement*. The images of journey, pilgrimage could be more aptly characterize Asian theologizing than images of frames and architectures. In fact, Asian theologizing has broken the conventional frames and architectures as it moves into new avenues of reflection and travels on untrodden paths.

Such being the nature and orientation of Asian theology, it has called for also a significant transformation in theological methodology. This methodology can be characterized as dialogical and open-ended, experimental and transformation-oriented. The integral character of Asian theologizing has come out also in the fact that it does not rely

social mortgage on private property which cannot be claimed as an absolute right. This tradition is continued in *Gaudium et Spes* which spoke about the universal destination of earthly goods (no. 69) and the same is to be found also in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*. See Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor*, WCC, Geneva, 1977; Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002); Felix Wilfred, “Theological Significance of *Laudato Si*: An Asian Reading” in *Vidayjyoti Journal of Theology*, September, 2015 (to appear shortly).

6 Cf. Jeanrond Werner, *op.cit*, 22-23.

simply on reason. Reason is not the sole instrument, theology involves other faculties and dimensions of human life. The sources of this Asian theologizing includes the religious traditions of the neighbours of other faiths, the riches of cultures as well as the new forces at work in the life of the Asian peoples. These realities of the context, as rightly pointed out by the document of the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of FABC, form part of the resources of theology along with Scripture and tradition. Asian theologians have been using these resources in their theological endeavours, and this had made a difference and has given a distinctive character to their theologizing. OTC sums up the Asian methodology when it states:

The Asian way of doing theology is historically rooted and concrete, a method in which we learn to face conflicts and brokenness, a method we value as one of liberative integration, inter-relatedness and wholeness, a method that emphasises symbolic approaches and expressions, and is marked by a preference for those at the periphery and “outside the Gate” (Heb. 13:3).⁷

Interdisciplinary approach in theology is indispensable since it does not have the means to mine the richness of truth which is multifaceted, nor has the tools to analyse and understand the various aspects of life - individual and collective. When theology interacts with other disciplines and is supported by them, will it be able to make its contribution to the people in a particular context, and at a specific historical juncture.

Part III: Moving in a New Direction

Developing an Asian Public Theology

In spite of the innovative character of Asian theology, it is a fact that theological reflections have remained mostly internal to the Church and its pastoral needs. I am not saying that the concerns of the world and society are absent. But the point is that these are treated as realms or fields for the application of faith and theology. It has been more a theology in service of public life. The understanding of the nature of theology is basically the same, while the applications differ.

Public theology represents a new genre in theology, so to say. It affects the understanding of theology itself and the way it is pursued. In the context of multireligious and multicultural societies with fast transformation in the field of culture, economy, politics, etc., theology needs to interrogate itself regarding its responsibilities to the larger world. Traditional theology tends to cut everything – the world, society, and culture – to its size, reminding us of the Procrustean bed! Asian public theological reflection needs to be open-ended and should begin from the world. It will endeavour to respond with others to the question and issues thrown up from the life-situation of the people and societies. Such a theology can be characterized as public theology which needs to be promoted increasingly.

⁷ Vimal Tirimanna (ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil. Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007), p. 343. See also Vimal Tirimanna (ed.), *Harvesting from the Asian Soil. Towards an Asian Theology* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2011).

At the root of this theology is the conviction that the greatest challenge to Christian faith today is to interpret and practice the Kingdom of God in the world.

To understand more closely what is meant by public theology, it is better to see what it is not, and how it distinguishes itself from other related forms of theologies. First of all, we need to draw a distinction between *theology for public life* and *public theology*. The former speaks about faith-motives and convictions for involving oneself as a believer in the affairs of the world – politics, economy, culture, violence, war and peace, etc. It is a discourse within the Church about the world.

From a methodological point of view, in theology for public life, theology is already made and then applied to public life. Though it talks about issues in the world outside the boundaries of the Church, yet it is a discourse meant for consumption within the Church. On the other hand, in public theology, the concrete life-situation and the questions emanating from it are taken seriously, and an effort is made to respond to them in faith – a faith that understands itself in relation with others and not as a private matter. It is a theology strongly based on God's creation and on the Kingdom of God which have no boundaries. Besides, in public theology we try to create a discourse and language which is understandable for others, and therefore can be shared with them. This new language breaks forth when we hold aloft the truth of creation and the great vision of the Kingdom of God.

How come that, even though theology speaks about the world, history and various issues affecting the society, yet it remains a discourse within the Church? Why does this isolation happen? It could be explained in great part by the fact of the strong clericalization theology suffers from. Theology is not only pursued by clerics, but is also mostly oriented to the training and education of the clerics. Hence, it looks to me that along with the vision of the Kingdom of God, there need to take place a process of de-clericalization so that theology be freed to see and identify the presence and action of God in the society, world and history. Then theology will not speak about these realities within the clerical or clerically-conditioned milieu, but will become really a discourse about God in relationship to the world with a language the world understands and grasps as something relevant and meaningful.

Public theology is related to but different from *liberation theology*. This latter theology broke the privatization of religion and made its way to the public realm. The motivation for praxis of liberation came from Christian roots, and the methodology and tools of analysis were by and large Marxian in character. Public theology incorporates the concerns of liberation theology but its approach is much wider and its premises lie in the kind of relationship of religion to common good. Some comrades may be sceptical of public theology, and wonder whether it is an attempt to hijack liberation theology, and even a conspiracy of capitalism! The point we need to remember here is that liberation is the goal to which God's Word is beckoning us. Moving towards that goal calls for continuous rethinking of our analysis of the society and the tools we use to uncover oppression and bondage. In today's world of globalization we live in much more complex society than was the case with the feudal society or industrial society of the past. The manifold forms of oppression today may not be adequately accounted for by a social analysis in terms of labour-capital conflict. Think of the issues of women, environment, ethnic minorities, immigrants, etc. Consequently, the analysis of the past requires a thorough revision in pre-sent-day circumstances of globalization. Public theology will explore new methods to assess the nature

of oppression with regard to specific issues and questions, and seek a multipronged approach to overcome them.

Public theology is also different from a theology relating to public life pursued by Protestant *neo-orthodoxy*, as for example, by John Milbank, Max Stackhaus and others. Here we have a theology of Barthian inspiration, rather than a contextual theology bearing upon culture and society. This theology concerns itself with public life so as to make it conform to transcendental values, to the Kingdom of God, to God, who is “totally the other” and who challenges and judges the world. It rests on the assumption that instead of God’s Word coming in encounter with the world, it is the world which needs to conform to God’s Word.

Public theology refers to a theology that focuses across borders. In the process, it frees itself from doctrinaire moorings that have no or little bearing on the shared life history with others in a society or polity. Since public theology needs to be done differently depending on the concrete situation, it cannot but be *contextual*. Public theology culls out from tradition and sacred sources those elements and insights that could contribute in the concrete context to the wellbeing of the people and of nature. This is a theology which has a language that is inherently dialogical and is ready to cooperate with all forces contributing to common good, something we understand when God’s Kingdom becomes the point of reference. The ideal of God’s Kingdom will serve also as the point of reference to distinguish a good theology from a mediocre one. Public theology firmly based on this ideal will serve to prune dominant theologies, and convert them to the core of faith and what is most important.

Public theology is concerned about the world, the history and what pertains all. As such, it calls for some basic reflections. Since it is a theology through and through in dialogue with the world and history, we are led to the fundamental question of how to relate religion and the public realm. Public theology cannot escape this issue. As I noted earlier, to create a form of theology and a theological language which others can understand and perceive as relevant and meaningful, we need to clear the ground of this relationship of religion to society and public life. In other forms of theology, such a question may not figure at all, or only marginally. Here in public theology it becomes a crucial issue. Even more, effective construction of public theology – whether in the East or West – will depend on how this question of religion and public life is broached. We shall begin from the case of the West.

The Western Case

In the last couple of decades there has taken place a shift in the perception of the relationship between religion and public life. With the decline of the thesis of secularization and the progressive abandonment of the thesis of religion as private, there have come about new equations between religion and public life. Instead of going into an analysis of how this has taken place, what I intend to do is to examine two most significant voices in the West – Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls – whose position on the relationship of religion to public life has become the core issue in public theology today, and at the same time most vigorously discussed and debated.

From denial to the recognition of Public Role for Religions

We could identify three phases in the thinking of Habermas in relation to religion: a) Suppression of religion through communicative reason, b) co-existence of religion and reason, c) cooperation of both for upholding the gains of modernity. The new turn to the third phase can be discerned in his works since 2001: *The Future of Human Nature, On Faith and Knowledge, Between Naturalism and Religion*. In the third phase of his thinking, Habermas shows his openness to the contribution of religion to the public sphere, challenging the claims of a narrow secularity. He notes:

(S)ecularized citizens may neither fundamentally deny that religious convictions may be true nor reject the right of their devout (*gläubig*) fellow citizens to couch their contributions to public discussions in religious language.⁸

By way of example, I may adduce here how Habermas shows the importance of Christian doctrine of creation for the strengthening of human dignity and rights. He also sees its importance in addressing biomedical technological issues such as the generic enhancement. Theological beliefs could throw light on this intricate question and contribute to the present and future wellbeing of humanity.

The Question of “Comprehensive Doctrines”

John Rawls speaks of “*comprehensive doctrines*” and “*overlapping consensus*”. By comprehensive doctrines he means articulated systems of thought or explanations that claim to give a full-range of ultimate explanation of the world, nature, society, bearing upon their origin, value, their future, etc. And this is done by philosophy, religion, moral beliefs, etc. In simple terms, comprehensive doctrine means a theory of everything. Religions are habituated to present such a theory of everything – about God, humans, the world and so on. These comprehensive doctrines shape the way we look at the world, others and ourselves.

To be able to understand Rawls’s political theory and his conception of the role of religion in relation to public life, we need to grasp how he transforms Kant’s ideal of moral autonomy (*Critique of Practical Reason*) in an inter-subjective manner. Here is a question of abiding by those laws and arrangements that find acceptance among all concerned in a polity on the basis of their public use of reason. Moral autonomy is not simply a matter of freedom from coercion; it has a necessary reference to the other and to the public. This moral autonomy is linked to political autonomy. A religious group is politically autonomous not simply when it is beliefs, but when it is able to abide by what the common good requires and what finds acceptance among all concerned in a particular society. In this sense, religious freedom today needs to be defined not in isolation from the other, but in relation to the other and to what concerns the general good of all concerned.

⁸ As quoted in Maureen Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology* (London-New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), p.137. See also Jürgen Butler et al., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Religion and Public Reason

In the context of the discussion on public theology, a question of paramount importance is the relationship of religion to public reason. Here is an issue that allows a wide interpretation but also raises many intricate questions. Contribution to public reason means that religious traditions do not get bogged down by their internal convictions and belief-system but raise their heads above and hold before their eyes the general interest of the people. It would also involve a kind of translation into secular language of these beliefs that have public significance. The beliefs and convictions held by religious groups require to be supported by public reason. If they are to have any role in public life. The creation narrative of the Bible, for example, can support the equality of woman which is a secular issue in the polity. The same creation story can be deployed to support the cause of human rights. According to Christian belief, human beings are endowed with dignity since they have been created in the image of God. The question then is, should religions be stripped off their beliefs to reach a common ground of neutrality where they could enter into conversation with other similar religious groups. Don't we lose, in this way, the richness the religious beliefs, myths and symbols contain? Why not the religions carry these roots with them and enter into conversation with others, and thus through a mutuality that touches deeper chords reach consensus and understanding? This is a point which some Western theologians like Linda Hogan and Nigel Biggar contends, when responding to the position of Rawls and Habermas in relation to public reason or overlapping consensus. Linda Hogan notes, for example: "[A] fundamental flaw in the ideal of public reason lies in the manner in which it requires the speaker and listener to believe both the self and the other to be, or to act as though he or she is *rootless*."

The Normative and the Factual

The position of Rawls and Habermas are at the level of the normative, and are abstracted from concrete context. They follow a procedural reasoning in determining the relationship of religion and public sphere. But the factual reality does not correspond to this theorizing. As a matter of fact, in many European countries, there are the so-called established religions. The clearest example is that of UK. There, the bishops form part of the House of Lords. Similarly, in the Scandinavian countries, Lutheranism is the establishes religion. In these cases, as well as in Germany, Belgium and Holland what we find is a kind of accommodation of religion and its continuing role in the public sphere. It is expressed in different forms, such as state-funding for educational institutions managed by Catholics, Protestants, Calvinists, etc., and collection of tax for the Church by the state.

Situation in Asia

We do not want to begin the discussion from a normative and procedural plane, but rather start from the empirical situation of differences in the relationship of religion to public life, as it obtains in Asia. Looking at the empirical reality, we could identify three basic types in regard to the relationship of religion to the public sphere.

1. Religion Controlled by Centralizing State Authority

This is the model we could identify in the so-called “socialist countries” (China, Vietnam, Myanmar, North Korea, etc.). While religions are allowed freedom for worship and for carrying out certain limited activities, they are strictly controlled, so that they do not become any threat to the centralized authority. Such a situation allows little room for religions to play any effective role for common good and welfare of the whole society, going beyond their religious confines.

In the case of China, we need to refer to the cultural revolution of Mao Zedong. One of the ideological components of this revolution is the belief that religions are counter-revolutionary forces, and against national goals. Along with the bourgeoisie, religion also need to be suppressed for the growth of the country, so it was argued. The ideology of Cultural Revolution viewed religion as enemy to be fought against. Senseless destruction of religious places of worship and symbols followed. The reforms of 1978 in that country allowed, indeed, some space for the existence of religions, but under the watchful eyes of the state authorities. The vicissitudes in the relationship of the Chinese state with Vatican illustrates the various shifts in the position of the state.

Zhibin Xie who has researched on the public role of religious in China enumerates three important reasons for greater role of religion in public life, in the future.⁹ First of all, there is the traditional religious character of Chinese societies which is to be seen today also in the revival of religion in that country. Secondly, religious groups show increasing interest in participation in public life, which also involves dissent and protest. Thirdly, according to Zhibin Xie, with greater democratization in Chinese political life, there will be room for the voices of different religious groups to be heard. The view of this author may sound optimistic. What is important to note is that even in a centralized Asian country like China, the prospects of religion playing public role has become increasingly greater. This calls for a theology of public life attuned to this new situation. The historically inherited models from the West may not respond to the unique nature of the relationship of religion and public life in China.

Christians in China and other countries with centralized rule are in a dilemma, of having to contribute to the common good and public life and at the same time not conforming uncritically to the state and its politics. It is from this situation that we need to think of Christianity vis-à-vis the public sphere. It is very complex. For some Christian groups, especially from among the Protestant Churches, things seem to be rather simple; Religion contributes to public life by aligning with the state and its programmes, and one speaks about “common ground” of national goals where state and Church converge. Public role of religion here ends up in endorsing and promoting uncritically the programmes of the state and the goals of the society it defines. We see then how urgent and important is a reflection on public theology in such contexts.

⁹ Cf. Zhibin Xie, *Religious Diversity and Public Religion in China* (Burlington: Ashgate. 2006).

2. Established Religions

We have in Asia also situations in which religions openly determine politics and public life. There are many variants to this model. Heavy determination of politics and public life by Islam can be seen in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, etc., and somewhat tenuous intervention of Buddhism in politics and public life in Thailand. In these countries, one could hardly separate majority religion from public life. On the contrary, in many respects it defines public life. Sri Lanka has not made Buddhism the state religion, but the constitution gives it “foremost place”. In some of these countries with established religion, like in Pakistan, certain public offices cannot be held by any person other than a Muslim. The state support and preferential treatment of a particular religion conditions the scope for other minority religious groups. Often it is the case that the role in public life is reserved to the established religion, and other religious minorities are tolerated in the practice of their religion, but may not claim any intervention in the public sphere.

3. Principled Distance

In this model, the secular is understood as non-privileging of any one religion by the state. Religions are allowed the freedom of worship and the freedom to propagate and be engaged in social and developmental activities, without prejudice to public order, morality and hygiene. We have such a model for example in India, Philippines, South Korea, etc. This model allows in theory the possibility of religious coming together and jointly contributing to the promotion of common good. But in reality, this does not seem to happen. For, religions and religious bodies are often in conflict with each other to secure greater power and privileges for their own groups. Therefore, there is endless discussion and debate on secularism, as for example in India.

All the three models and the underlying situations we have seen leads us to the conclusion that we in Asia urgently need a public theology in new terms, in fresh and unique contexts.

Asian Debate on Religion in Public Life

Unlike in the West, there has been relatively little debate in Asia on religion in relation to public life in its various aspects and dimensions. The discussion has been almost exclusively focused on religious freedom and the understanding of secularism. This is clearly the case of India. Some intellectuals like Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan debate this often in a polemical manner against the Western concept of the secular. They maintain that in India religion has an important role to play. But then, there but few constructive theories and suggestions coming out from these circles as how and in what manner religion could play a role in public life in a multi-religious society. The discourse in this matter needs to be initiated and advanced. Let me put forward a few thoughts and views in this regard by way of a foreword to Asian public theology.

The Understanding of Public – Cultural Determination

When we speak of public theology in Asia, we need to be also conscious of the way “public” is understood and defined. This has important consequences for the role of religion in general, and Christianity in Particular, vis-à-vis the Asian societies. Here is something which distinguishes Asian approach to the understanding of public and public theology. Hence, not only the history of relationship of religion to state is different from the West, but different also is the way public comes across to peoples of the Asian continent. Everyday experience shows that what the Western cultural world would consider private is blatantly public for Asians, and the reverse is also true. The cultural determination explodes the conventional demarcation between the public and the private. Without going into the details of the cultural determination, we may say that religion in Asia is *both public and private*. In certain sense it is private; in another sense it is public. It is the intermingling and criss-crossing of the two that is something uniquely Asian.

Difference in the Understanding and Approach to Religion

As I noted, public theology presupposes the current debate on the role of religion in the public sphere. The discussion in the West on this question may trigger our reflections, but may not be able to come to terms with the Asian situation. One important reason for this is the fact that the concept of religion in Asian traditions has been quite different from the dominant conception of it in the West. To cite an example, religion is not viewed in Asia as a set of beliefs or doctrines. But as a way of life – a path, a journey. Religion is embedded in the culture and daily life of the people as the folk traditions of Asia manifests. This makes it already extremely difficult to create any “wall of separation” between religion and public life. But the point is that often the Constitutions of States do not reflect this Asian reality of religion, but seem to be attuned to the Western understanding of religion.

Moreover, the relationship of religion to state and public life has had a different trajectory in the West which may not be replicated in Asia. This trajectory, to put it summarily, had three stages: the distinction between the Church and the state; separation of the two; and finally, marginalization of the Church and religion from public life as of no consequence.

Public theology will go deeper into the relationship of religion and public life in Asian societies, and its contextuality different histories. This history is by and large one of *accommodation of religion in public life* as the development of Indian secularism shows. This type of Asian accommodation cannot be fitted into any three stages of the Western trajectory.

Political Justice

In the context of our present discussion, by political justice I mean the rightful participation of various segments of the society with their different conceptions of good life in the construction of the common good. Since religions in a very significant way determine the outlook on life and values, it is important that religious groups also play a role in contributing to the common good which means that they go beyond the interests of the receptive groups. This way of considering breaks the framework of *minority and majority*.

A second related question concerns specifically Christianity and its participation along with other religious groups for the public good. The difficulty with Christianity is that it is viewed as religion “foreign” to Asian societies. So, the question is, should a foreign religion life Christianity be considered on a par with other religious traditions and therefore having a share with others in deliberating on public good. This issue gets accentuated where there is an established religion. *Christianity is not viewed as a partner in the deliberation for common good.* The problem then is how Christians and Christian communities bring to bear upon the public life, the values and ideals which they believe are important and necessary for the general welfare of the people. The same attitude and practice of exclusion exists in practice also for Christianity in India in spite of a secular Constitution and the absence of any establishes religion.

The principles of democratic governance which recognize equal rights to individuals and groups would go against any such exclusion. But then, here historical memory overtakes any theory of equal participation. The alleged connivance with the colonial rule makes many citizens sceptical about the participation of Christians and their contributing to the welfare of the nation. There is an undercurrent that a religious group cannot participate in the common good unless it subscribes to the nationalist expectations.

“Foreignness” and being “different” alone does not seem to be sufficient reason for the exclusion of Christianity from being part of a national dialogue on common good. For, the same societies have had no difficulty to accept Western science and technology as contributing to the welfare of the nation. And in the case of China, it is not only science and technology; its ideology of Marxism was a Western import, but then it has been deployed to construct the political framework, ironically, when socialist systems have been abandoned in the West – in its place of origin.

Public Accountability of Religions

Public theology calls for an internal critique within Christianity. It raises a crucial question: What is being discussed as theology in the Churches, how relevant is it to the public? Public theology makes theology answerable to the people, and in this way justifies its interpretation of God’s Word for today: when there are conflicts between religions, it is a clear sign that their theologies have failed in their mission. However, much they may explain and interpret the truths of religion, when theology does not bear upon public life, it is a failed theology. Such a theology is not only irrelevant, but could be most dangerous. Views maintained at theological level have serious social and political consequences.

For any religion to have significance beyond the pale of its believers, it needs to demonstrate what contribution it could make to the well-being of all. Sometimes the claim is made that by the very announcement of its faith, Christianity contributes to humanity. That could be a well-meant statement. But often this is stated as a protective cover against undergoing any influence from the society and the world, as a refusal to learn from the world. What needs to be said is that Christianity cannot limit itself to expounding doctrines and beliefs which have universal scope, but needs to show how those beliefs concretely affect the life together in the public realm and contribute to the common good.

Public Theology and the Strengthening of Democratic Process

Democracy as a value and as a mode of governance is indispensable for sustaining a society in equity with full recognition of every segment and group in the polity. It is the antidote to exclusion which is the root cause of injustice. The understanding of collective life and community presupposed in democracy (understood as a process and culture) as well as the dignity of human person and human rights it implies, reflect Christian faith as found in the belief in creation and its understanding of human being and human community. Such being the case, public theology could contribute significantly to strengthen the democratic process. This contribution will be at the same time one towards social justice. Unfortunately, we have not reflected on this aspect in Asia. There is a lot to do along these lines.

Public Theology vis a vis Religious Fundamentalism

If, as we said, public theology could contribute to democratic process, we need to at the same time take serious note of the religious fundamentalism characterizing many Asian nations – Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Malaysia and so on. How do we come to terms with the growing Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalism which affect all aspects of the life of our nations?

There is no denying of the situation of fundamentalism and oppression of minorities under which Christians suffer. I do not want to undermine the ground realities.

What I would like to emphasize are two points:

1. There are a lot more spaces for joint involvement on the part of Christians and Christian communities. These spaces of dialogue and involvement could be infused with the spirit of the Gospel to create a new and different world, the mirror image of the Kingdom of God, the central message of Jesus
2. In responding to religious fundamentalism – whether Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu we need to look at them not simply from the angle of their antagonistic attitude and practice towards Christians as a minority. Rather we need to direct our attention to *what lies behind the religious fundamentalism and address those issues which are fundamental for Asian societies*. Let me name some of the underlying issues:
 - a) Belief in the past as the golden age and hence the agenda of restoration of the old – “the temptation of the golden age”. Whatever comes after that is only decline and disintegration “après six mois le déluge” – after me the floods (King Louis XVI?). Revolutionaries intend to change and transform the present order, whereas fundamentalists seek to re-establish the past glory, *the status quo ante*. In the New Testament times, we have the Zealots and the Sicarii of the second temple Judaism, who, in spite of the impression of their being revolutionaries, were in fact a group that was intent on restoration of the past. Jesus' movement of the time makes a departure from such restorative movements, as it is focused on the (then) present and future of the coming of God's Kingdom. It was a forward looking movement of hope.

- b) This was what the Zealots were doing in Jesus' times. They were the fundamentalists and terrorists of the time. Jesus goes not to restore the old, but create something new and different in response to the call of God. Thus we have new testament, new heaven and earth, new Jerusalem, new man and so on. Creating a new world for the poor and the oppressed, those who are victimized
- c) Divisive policy: We versus they. It is an attempt to create exclusionary identity. Fundamentalism seeks to demarcate clear religious boundaries. It lays down in their practices, fundamentalist movements aim at purity of identity which it believes is safeguarded by erecting borders. Such a view suffers from an essentialist conception of religion unambiguous terms who is in and who is out, and establishes criteria for religious belonging. Whereas in reality, as a result of encounters and exchanges, fluidity has characterized the life of religions and an exclusionary theological conception
- d) Most fundamentalist groups target women, and seek to control their bodies by intervening in issues of reproduction, and control their minds by imposing severe restrictions on their thinking and free expression.¹⁰ These groups flaunt patriarchal values to subjugate women, and seek to stunt their free development as human persons. There is little difference in this among the Islamic, Christian or Hindu fundamentalist movements. The Hindutva fundamentalists, for example, would call for Hindu women to produce more children so as to counter the threat represented by the Muslims and their fast growth.
- e) Moral policing and infringement of legitimate individual freedom of choice and expression.

These are very serious issues, and go beyond the issue of minorities. The issues we named affect the entire society and nations, calling for faith-inspired response and intervention. The best response to religious fundamentalism is to address the issues behind them as we tried to indicate.

This will help us to adopt a different perspective and attitude than paying them in their own coin, or retaliate them. I want to read out a passage from a situation of early Church when Christians as a minority were oppressed, marginalized and even ridiculed. This is from a letter of St Ignatius of Antioch writing to the community of Ephesians:

Now for other men "pray unceasingly" for there is in them a hope of repentance, that they may find God. Suffer them therefore to become your disciples, at least through your deeds. Be yourselves gentle in answer to their wrath; be humble in mind in answer to their proud speaking; offer prayer for their blasphemy; be steadfast in faith for their error; be gentle for their cruelty, and do not seek to retaliate.¹¹

¹⁰ Moghadam, V. M. "Violence, Terrorism and Fundamentalism: Some Feminist Observations." *Global Dialogue*. 4, no. 2 (2002): 66-76; Feldman, Rayah, and Kate Clark. "Women, Religious Fundamentalism and Reproductive Rights." *Reproductive Health Matters* 4, no. 8 (1996): 12-20.

¹¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* 10:1-2).

Retaliating and revenge are general problems; it is not only in the sphere of religion. Here is something which is a matter of value and disposition of the mind. The book of Rajmohan Gandhi on “Revenge” notes how the great Indian epics are dominated by another set of values and spirit of revenge, whereas the advent of Buddhism in India introduced *karuna* (compassion) as central principle of life.¹²

A Public Theology in Service of Social Advocacy

Cooperation with all people of good will could take different forms and expressions. One important public dimension is to be involved jointly in the projects of advocacy. Advocacy aims at influencing decisions and policies which affect the lives of the people and common good. Promoting advocacy is a civic engagement that will exert influence on the various systems in a society – political, economic, social and cultural and transform perspective and values of individuals and institutions and effect changes in public life.

Christians will play advocacy role in numerous areas of public life. Advocacy resonates with the spirit of the Gospel. A tiny minority Christians do not have the necessary human and material resources and structures to alleviate poverty, nor provide welfare measures. What Christians do could be viewed as symbolic gestures in terms of succor to the poor and the marginalized. The need of the hour and context in Asia calls for Christians and Churches to play advocacy role in promoting human rights, for the protection of weaker sections – women, children, Dalits, tribals, and so on. This should be coupled with willingness to take initiatives that will involve others, and not run parallel to other initiatives. They can open up spaces for public argumentation. Participation in debates, planning, policy framing of issues that affect people. Here is a new form of prophetic role Christians could play in Asian societies. Here Asian public theology could be an invaluable resource and inspiration to sustain various forms and expressions of public advocacy.

The approach to evangelization through advocacy comes out clearly in the vision of Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Widening the Scope of Religious Freedom

This is a presupposition for a meaningful public theology in Asia. Religious freedom has many dimensions. Unfortunately, it is often reduced only to the relationship of a particular religious group to the state. Obviously, this is still a major issue in several parts of Asia. Religious freedom is not to be viewed simply as freedom from the coercion of the state enjoyed by a particular religious groups for its activities in conformity with its beliefs and convictions. *Religious freedom needs to contribute to the attainment of public good* through forging relationship with other groups – both religious and secular. Public theology could help in the developments of a deeper understanding of religious freedom and its practice.

¹² Rajmohan Gandhi, *Revenge and Reconciliation. Understanding South Asian History*, (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 1999).

There are various kinds of restraint on religious freedom. In India, religious freedom, according to the Constitution, is to be exercised without any prejudice to public order, morality and hygiene. But we need to spell out the positive contribution the freedom of religion enjoyed by a religious group needs to make. The freedom of one religious group needs to be related to other religious groups and all of them together point to the attainment of common good. Here is then the *horizontal strengthening of religious freedom* as freedom for something which goes beyond the interests of a particular group. In other words, a religious group has real religious freedom when the space is open for it to be able to freely engage with others in the pursuit of the wellbeing of the entire community. I would say that this wider understanding of religious freedom is a necessary presupposition for public theology.

The wider understanding of religious freedom challenges the control of religion by the state as well as the established religion, or the idea of official religion which can be discriminative and curtail the freedom of other groups, and hence stunting the potential they have for contributing to common good. Public theology in Asia will address the issue of religious freedom as a necessary condition to bring out the contribution of religious groups to the larger community and to common good.

Conclusion

To speak of public theology is to speak of the future of Christianity in Asia in multicultural and multireligious societies in the larger horizon of the Kingdom of God. In these societies there is need to foster communion and build inclusive communities. Theology will help in this project by taking up for its praxis and reflection issues of common interests that affect everyone. This will help theology to be truly catholic in its original sense of comprising all, and it will not have the mark of being a sectarian enterprise limited to the faith-life of the Christian community. Asian Public theology will tell us what it means to live and understand the Kingdom of God in dialogue with the realities and experiences of this continent.

Public theology is a challenge to traditional theological pursuit, which had mostly the Christians and Christian community as its focus. Traditional theology, by its claim to be a science, it was thought, had come to the public realm in the comity of other sciences. Today, when the understanding and approach to science in general has undergone a sea change and when it operates with new epistemological promises, it would be futile to believe that the public character of theology is acquired by proving it to be a science in the traditional understanding.

Today, theology acquires public character because it relates to the reality of public life with peoples across religious borders and boundaries. It starts with experiences that go beyond the Christian communities, and it asks what contribution it could make to sustain and enhance the quality of public life. This way of pursuing theology could have great repercussion in rethinking its methods and sources.

Public theology will be pursued differently in Asia and in the West, which have differing histories of relationship of religion to society and to the public realm. However, dialogue and conversation among public theologies of Asia and the West could be enlightening and mutually beneficial. But we need to be also aware of the fact that there is a

certain asymmetry here. Whereas, in the West, public theology has been object of reflection since the last few decades, it is only just now that Asian public theology is beginning to emerge. Asian public theology could be stimulated by the Western discussion, and could go deeper into a reflection on the role of religion in general and theology in the multi-religious and pluri-cultural societies of Asia.

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