

# Introduction

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## From Asian furrows sprung . . . : Christian theology in Asia

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With the shift in the gravity of world Christianity towards the 'Global South', the needle of the compass of Christian theology can no longer be oriented towards the North. In such a context there is an urgent need to revisit Christian theology from a Southern perspective. If the distinction between Global North and Global South is taken seriously, this reader might be seen to belong to a series of theological books focusing on 'Theology Facing Southwards'. It is designed to replace *A Reader in Indian Christian Theology*, edited by Cecil Hargreaves and R. S. Sugirtharajah, and, following Diane Stinton's reader in African theology, titled *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, revisits the various paths that Christian theology has trodden in Asia.

However, rather than retreading the paths of Asian theology, this reader is more about *following the furrows*. It is about theology sprung from the furrows of Asia. But why an agricultural metaphor? And why the metaphor of 'furrows'? A simple answer is that Asia is a predominantly agricultural continent where furrows are a familiar sight. Asian Christian theologians have always playfully engaged with agricultural metaphors and therefore the present attempt can be understood as falling in line with that tradition. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama writes of theology as 'an exciting report on our having rice with Jesus' (Koyama, 1972: 19). Agriculture sustains the livelihood and lives of countless Asians, many of whom have rice as their staple food. Therefore the use of an agricultural metaphor should be understood as an attempt to interpret Asian Christian theology as a theology of life which is both life-giving and life-sustaining.

In introducing Asian Christian theology, however, there are several other reasons why I chose the agricultural metaphor of furrows. The image of furrows in my opinion captures one defining characteristic of Asian Christian theology – that it is *embedded in* and *emerges from* its context. The metaphor captures the element of 'contextuality'. Of course all theology is contextual, but in some contexts the theological task involves less toil and struggle and

is less connected to the dirt and soil of life's earthliness. The metaphor of the furrows captures the hard work, the patient waiting and the potential risks that are involved in bringing something like Asian Christian theologies to life. The metaphor of the furrow from which new life sprouts resonates with another metaphor – the metaphor of the womb – which is also a source of new life. C. S. Song has already written about 'Theology from the Womb of Asia'. The metaphor of the furrow is chosen to convey this idea – of a theology birthed from the eclectic Asian context. The furrow is a metaphor which can hold within its embrace concepts which have often been used in connection with theologizing in the Asian context, such as 'theology from the grassroots' and 'theology from the dusty soil' by Wilfred.

The furrow is not only an agricultural metaphor, it also has theological connotations. We find references to furrows in the book of Psalms. I would like to highlight two uses of the metaphor in the Psalms. The first reference comes in Psalm 65.10 where God is portrayed as the one who waters the earth's furrows abundantly, settles its ridges, softens it with showers and blesses its growth. The metaphor of the furrows has also been chosen, therefore, because this volume not only seeks to celebrate the abundant growth of Christian theologies in Asia but also to emphasize that the story of the shoots of Christian theology flourishing in the Asian context is the story of God's gentle tending of the soil – of God's watering and weeding, nurturing the seedlings as they take root and spring forth to life.

The metaphor occurs again in the Psalms, although in a different context. In Psalm 129.3 it is used by the Psalmist as a metaphor of affliction: 'Those who plough ploughed on my back; they made their furrows long.' The use of the metaphor here connotes pain and distress. It is a poignant reminder of the various struggles for life and dignity that have taken place in Asia. Christian theology in Asia has been 'marked' by such furrows on its back, especially in the case of Minjung theology in Korea, Burakhuman theology in Japan and Dalit theology in India. It is in the midst of these struggles – the furrows that hurt sharply and deeply – that Asian Christian theology was born.

This volume is in one way a 'theo-story' – the story of God finding and making a home in Asia. It is also a 'peoples-story' – of how Asian Christians have discerned God's presence and decried God's seeming absence in their own (hi)stories, of how they have related God and represented Jesus Christ to their neighbours of different faiths and of how they have sought to foster avenues for peace and forge visions of justice as part of their faith-commitment to follow Christ. As you read the accounts of theology presented here, ask yourself which approaches come closest to how you discern God's presence and how you relate to Jesus Christ in your own context. And then ask why that is.

Returning to the central metaphor of this volume, a furrow is made by a plough which is drawn by a pair of oxen yoked together. The story of Christian theology in Asia has been a story of its yoking with Asia's cultures and religious traditions. Christian thought has been co-yoked with

aspects of Asian culture and religiosity; the Bible has been co-yoked with other religious texts and oral traditions in order to prepare the furrows from which enriching and edifying theological discourses have sprouted to life. Christian theology in Asia has often been a conversation between the co-yoked. Do you have aspects of culture and tradition that are yoked to your Christian thought in your own context? Do you see such yoking as helpful or unhelpful for understanding God's work in the world? Why do you make this assessment?

The intention of this volume is to introduce its readers to the conversational, the concrete and the contextual dimensions of Asian Christian theology, by which is meant Christian theology in the diverse Asian contexts. As a theology which has undertaken the 'Double Baptism' of which Aloysius Pieris speaks – the baptism in the Jordan of Asia's multi-religiousness and the Calvary of Asia's poverty – Christian theology in Asia has on the one hand conversed with the continent's diverse cultures as well as its multi-religiosity and on the other critically and constructively engaged with the challenges posed by its various social, economic and political contexts. Thus, Asian Christian theology has been necessarily concrete, contextual and conversational.

In its attempt to re-present the narrative of Jesus, the journeying Christ, finding a home within Asian thought and amid the paradoxical reality of Asian life, the essays in this volume are categorized in four parts. Part 1 gives us a broad overview of Christian theology in the Asian context. Like birds eyeing the furrows from a distance, the views in this section are broad and comprehensive in terms of what they cover and focus on different aspects of Asian Christian theology. The first chapter, by Sathianathan Clarke, is introductory in nature. It sets the scene by discussing three important themes of Asian Christian theology, namely solidarity with neighbours of differing religious faiths; hope for the poor and marginalized; and Asian biblical interpretation in the multi-scriptural and postcolonial context of Asia. These themes are discussed in the three chapters which follow, by Chia, Peacock and Lee.

Part 2 introduces us to the influence of postcolonialism on Christianity and Christian theologizing in Asia. The furrows of Asian Christianity have undergone phases where harmful foreign fertilizers have been used 'for the flourishing' of Christianity and Christian theology and to get rid of the 'pests' of native culture, customs and practices. The four chapters in this section by Kwok, Sugirtharajah, Wong and Joy highlight how Christianity and Christian theology have engaged with the challenges posed by the legacy of colonialism which permeates Asian Christianity and is an inescapable reality in Asia. 'From Orientalism to post-colonial: notes on reading practices' by R. S. Sugirtharajah, originally published in the *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 20–7, is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author and publisher.

Part 3 focuses on themes and trends in Asian theology which have not been adequately represented in general introductions to Asian Christian

theology and have remained 'specialist concerns'. While Gemma Tulud Cruz introduces us to how marginal groups in Asia skilfully forge their survival amid everyday struggles and suffering, Wati Longchar brings out the distinctive features of indigenous theologies which are counter-intuitive to the contemporary notions of growth and development in a globalized world that pose threats to indigenous ways of life. Sunder John Boopalan complements the other two essays in this section by bringing out the multi-faceted dimensions of Pentecostalism in Asia, which has experienced exponential growth in recent years. Since these are themes which many new readers of Asian Christian theology will not be familiar with, the space allotted for these three articles is relatively generous.

Part 4 gives us glimpses of certain modes of contextual theologizing in Asia. I am indebted to John Boopalan for the idea of the 'worms'-eye view', which I borrow here. Of the four essays which comprise this section, 'Minjung theology: whose voice, for whom?' by Sebastian Kim earlier appeared in Israel Selvanayagam (ed.), *Moving Forms of Theology: Faith Talk's Changing Contexts* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author and publisher. I am aware that this section could have been more exhaustive. For instance, given the fact that Philippines is probably the only Asian country where Christianity is the predominant religion, a chapter on Filipino contextual theology (which was originally planned) would have been appropriate. A focus on Christian theologizing in countries like Vietnam, Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia could have greatly enhanced the comprehensiveness of this reader. The incompleteness of this selection is embraced in the hope of completion in the future. The worms'-eye views in this section by Kim, Dayam, Braschi and Rajkumar are focused on specific contexts and are, so to speak, 'closer to the ground'.

The four parts of this volume seek to capture the various modes of *doing* and *living* theology in Asia. Not only do they draw our attention to the different furrows from which Asian Christian theologies have emerged; in the process they also introduce us to the forces which have, like the oxen carrying the yoke of the plough, given shape to the furrows of Asian theology. They also introduce us to the several *agents* who, like the earthworms in the soil, have not only enhanced the fertility of the furrows of Asian Christian theology but also offer, despite their threatened existence, visible signs of life, bearing testimony that Asian Christian theologies are living and life-enhancing theologies. It is to this testimony of life – the fruits of the furrows – that this volume seeks to bear witness.

Friends, this book is intended not simply to extend your knowledge about Asian theologies. It is also intended to provide you with some tools with which to do your own theologizing. As you read the book, think about how each chapter might help you in your own thinking about God and action with God in your own context. The intention of this volume is to prompt both thinking and discussion on living out the Christian faith in context.

Therefore, in some ways it is an invitation to each one of us to become worms ourselves – worms which are relentlessly and tirelessly involved in fertilizing the soil of faith and which, despite the risks, are engaged in maintaining a resolute and resilient presence which bears witness to the life-giving dimensions of Christ's gospel of life in all its fullness.