

LIVING OUR FAITH IN ASIA'S SOCIAL CONTEXT

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I. Suffering - the Most Distinct Social Attribute of Asia

Asia is probably the most difficult area of the world to make generalisations about. It is fraught with a series of diverse realities which the Christian church has to constantly grapple with. 1) Asia experiences *economic diversity*. The polarity of this economic diversity is incredibly broad, ranging from the poverty of Bangladesh (one of the poorest nations in the world) to the wealth of Japan (one of the economically most affluent nations in the world). The majority of the economies are linked to those of the developed world, particularly the West, in a relationship of dependence. 2) Asia experiences *political diversity*, for within it we find socialist regimes, monarchies and liberal parliamentary democracies. One important trait of Asian politics (which frequently remains little understood by Western political entities) is that the masses of Asia are generally excluded from the decision-making process of society. 3) Asia experiences *cultural and religious diversity*. Religion is indelibly entrenched within the life and history of Asia. Asia constitutes the homeland of the great religions of the world - Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Other religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and various less prominent religions also find their birth in Asia.

In attempting a more detail delineation of these various diversities within the social context of Asia, one finds a most distinct attribute of Asia's social context - *suffering*. Suffering is inescapably innate within each of the Asian social dimensions identified above. 1) Asia experiences *economic suffering*. More than 85 percent of Asians are said to be suffering from poverty and oppression of some kind. Within the economic arena, the gap between the rich and the poor is ever escalating rather than decreasing. 2) Asia experiences *political suffering*. Countries such as North Korea, South Korea, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia have all experienced suffering in the form of wars. Japan has constituted both a source of suffering (particular through the World War II) and a recipient of suffering (for example, through the loss of two major cities from being wiped out by atomic weapons during the World War II). 3) Asia experiences *religious suffering*. Countless Christians in Asia, for example, are suffering for their faith. In China, underground seminaries train their pastors methods of withstanding persecution in the event that they get arrested. In Muslim-dominated countries, evangelism and conversion are deemed punishable by execution. In such countries, non-Muslims (or *dhimis*, to apply the traditional designation) are accorded nothing more than a mere second-class status.

II. Suffering - the Most Distinct Challenge to Christianity in Asia

The church in Asia may interact with the challenge of suffering at three levels of engagements. The first level involves literary engagement through which the church writes about those various expressions of this reality, providing descriptions, analyses and theological responses towards them. The second level of engagement involves grassroots activism through which the church takes proactive measures to participate in the suffering of the people, and (where possible) attempting to contribute towards the

alleviation of such suffering. The third level involves structural activism through which one seeks to effect systemic changes in socio-political structures.

Level One: Literary Engagement. Much writing has been done from within Asia in the last 50 years. A wealth of contextual writings has emerged from East Asia, South Asia, and South East Asia. But this endeavour still leaves much to be explored. For example, much of the contextual theological writings in Myanmar has been preoccupied with a particular social struggle, i.e. the role of women in society, and rightly so. But little has been written on the economic struggle of the people, i.e. poverty, which is by far the most rampant expression of the people's suffering there.

Beyond that, many of these Asian writings also need to find a deeper sense of resonance from within the Great Tradition. Whilst it is right that most of these writings are spurred by their socio-political contexts, there is a wealth of articulations from the Great Tradition (referring to the synergistic contributions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism) which contains wisdom for these socio-political realities. An example of this is the rhetorics of John Chrysostom, the fourth century Bishop of Constantinople, in regard to the alleviation of poverty.

Furthermore, at this point of time, most of the Asian writings find their circulations within academic theological circles and have yet to infiltrate the level of grassroots Christians. The possible problem may be that of the language employed in these writings, which does not reflect the linguistic expression of the populace. It is perhaps important that the thinkers within the Asian church express their observations and theological responses in the language of the people (popular language).

There is also a sense in which we need to re-examine much of the theology we have received from our colonial missionaries. Whilst we appreciate the beauty of the gospel we have received from them, Christianity has come to Asia together with a seemingly inseparable Western cultural and theological expression. There is something of Protestant evangelical eschatology, for example, which contributes to our Asian Christian indifference towards socio-political realities. The dualism in which our faith is entrenched has likely given rise to this phenomenon of indifference towards social affairs in the present scheme of things. This calls for a re-examination, and if necessary, a revision of our eschatology in a way that is truer to the tradition of the church catholic.

Level Two: Grassroots Activism. Grassroots activism is an arena of social action which has yet to find the wide support of the Asian church authorities. Many organisations participating in the suffering of the people in Asia are either non-religious NGOs or Western mission agencies. There is little, if any, orchestrated grassroots activism at the ecclesiastical levels.

Perhaps the Asian church's most apparent concerted effort was rendered observable in her response towards the catastrophe of the Asian Tsunami which occurred on 26 December 2004, one of the deadliest disasters in modern history. The earthquake and resulting tsunami affected many countries in Southeast Asia and beyond, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Maldives, Somalia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Seychelles and others, causing some 300,000 deaths. This event witnessed an orchestration of joint efforts and various local churches coming together to contribute to the restoration of demolished cities like Banda Aceh. Donations were sent

through various organisations and voluntary relief workers from the local churches were also sent in batches.

However, the kind of help described above is sporadic in nature; hardly anyone from within the Asian church is now heard expressing concern for the forgotten effects of the tsunami. At the heart of the matter is a need for locally inspired and orchestrated efforts within the Asian church to participate in a redemptive work among the peoples of Asia in various concrete ways. These efforts should not merely be sporadic and *ad hoc*, but rather, sustained over a long-period of time. And more than that, sustained efforts should be orchestrated at an ecumenical level, for it is within such an ethos that power in unity can truly project the heart of the Christian gospel in concretely visible ways.

Level Three: Structural Activism. The Protestant tradition in Asia has perhaps not been entirely well-known for attempting to influence changes in political structures. Rather, much of such attempts has been attributed more to Roman Catholic endeavours, although this awareness is now becoming increasingly apparent in Protestant circles as well. Structural activism is commonly associated with the Liberation Theology movement, which refers to a family of theologies that treat the plight of the socially oppressed as a point of departure for their theology and praxis. Liberation theologies within Asia are sometimes held suspect by political entities because of the perceived employment of Marxist rhetorics in their constructions.

In highlighting some examples on how structural activism in the form of liberation theologies has affected the life of the Asian church, allow me to cite some examples from Singapore. In the 1970s, Christian students at the local universities in Singapore activated, among themselves, action for the cause of social justice despite their awareness of the impending dangers of doing so. They sought to support the cause of the working class in their struggle against poverty, injustice in income distribution, and political oppression. The state was being criticised as utilitarian and meritocratic such that materialism and selfishness had become ingrained in the psyche of the people, whilst the interests of the underprivileged continued to be ignored. English language classes were conducted for Chinese-educated industrial workers and used as a platform for arousing their awareness towards the need for social justice. By this point, suppression by the authorities had infiltrated the student movement efforts. Spies were sent into student groups, leaders were questioned by the internal security branch, and foreign workers who were deemed threats to social stability were deported. In 1976, a Parliamentary directive was issued for the student union of the University of Singapore to be directly accountable to the education minister.

On 21 May 1987, sixteen young professionals in Singapore were detained for allegedly having been involved in a Marxist conspiracy; a second arrest brought the figure to twenty two persons. The alleged leader was a prominent participant in several Catholic Church groups including the Justice and Peace Commission, Vincent Cheng. This event was deemed to be connected to the prior student movement in that the government claimed that Tan Wah Piow, the student leader from the 1970s and who was now based in London, was the mastermind of the conspiracy. The activists were said to have infiltrated the community with Marxist ideas through bible study classes, religious group meetings, and religious publications (much of which, in the opinion of the government, had little to do with religion). An aggregate of twenty two Singaporeans were eventually arrested consisting of human rights lawyers, church activists, and theatre producers. In August 1987, in allusion to this event during the National Day

message, Lee Kuan Yew heightened the public's awareness of the necessity of avoiding the intertwining of religion and politics. The role of religious communities in Singapore, he added, was confined to the practice of charity and community services. Religious clergy were warned to "take of [their] clerical robes before [they took] on anything economic or political".

In December 1987, the Christian Conference of Asia (at that time based in Singapore) was expelled from Singapore upon having been charged with several accusations, one of which was the insertion of articles on liberation theology in their monthly publication. Later on, Lee Kuan Yew specifically emphasised that the ideas of liberation theology should not be allowed to translate into action in Singapore.

These examples are cited to highlight the reality of structural activism – it entails a high price, a cost to be borne by the Christian community within a nation. It is perhaps this reality that intimidates the Christian community, thereby causing the church in Asia to pander to a state of political passivism. At the most critical moments, official statements are issued by the church and circulated with little or no impact upon the structural realities of the societal government. This has been most apparent in Malaysia in the recent case of Azlina Jailani, a Muslim girl who became Christian at the age of 26 and subsequently changed her name to Lina Joy. In 1999, she managed to change her name in her identity card, but her religion remained stated as Islam. In a majority verdict delivered on 30 May 2007, the Federal Court rejected her appeal for the religious status to be changed. The various ecclesiastical authorities of the church in Malaysia have issued statements in response to this verdict which is deemed to have violated the right of religious freedom of the Malaysian people. But that is as far as the church can go, for to further engage in structural activism would entail a cost perhaps beyond that which we are ready to face.

III. Concluding Remarks - The Suffering Church

The church in Asia does not – and cannot – exist in an illusive Christendom which has never constituted a part of her historical reality, functioning as if she were the centre of reference for the regulation of the Asian society. She exists amidst a plethora of social realities, much of which brings deep suffering to the Asian people. And to these realities, she must respond.

This response needs to be well thought through, well executed, and expressed in a spirit of unity with the church catholic in Asia. This must be how we pray with the rest of the saints – in ages past, in the present, and in time to come – "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Then truly will the gospel be a gospel for the Asian people and the Christ of the church be truly understood as the liberator of the suffering people of Asia.

Could it be that we in Asia are called to be the suffering church?