

Theology for Asia?: For Authentic Asian Expressions of Christianity ¹

Atsuyoshi FUJIWARA

Introduction

- I. Absolutes and Relativities in Christianity
 - Enduring Problem of Christ and Culture
- II. Church connecting Heaven and Earth: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”
 - A. Locus: Where should the Church stand?
 - 1. Margins: Importance and insufficiency
 - 2. Boundary: Between the Kingdom of God and the world
 - B. Identity: How to stand
 - 1. Prophetic community
 - 2. Priestly community
- III. Church living God’s Narrative
 - A. God’s true narrative
 - B. False or inadequate narratives
- IV. Christianity in Japan
 - A. The 1st Encounter of Japan and Christianity
 - B. The 2nd Encounter of Japan and Christianity
 - C. The 3rd Encounter of Japan and Christianity

Conclusions

¹ This lecture was delivered for the Appenzeller Conference at Methodist Theological University, Seoul, Korea (31 October 2023). Its original title was “For Authentic Asian Expressions of Christianity: A Perspective from Japan.”

Introduction

It is my honour and great pleasure to be here for the Appenzeller Conference at Methodist Theological University in Seoul, Korea. I understand that Missionary Henry Gerhard Appenzeller was the first Protestant missionary who landed on the soil of Korea at Incheon on 5 April 1885, along with Missionary Horace Grant Underwood. I would like to express my gratitude to President Rev. Dr. Hoo Jung Lee for the kind invitation. I also thank Rev. Prof. Dr. Insoo Kim, and Rev. Kunwoo Park for looking after the details for my visit.

I would like to bring greetings to all of you from Aoyama Gakuin University in Japan.

Christianity began on the Palestinian soil. Theology in the early stage was largely developed in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Christianity experienced further development in Western Europe. The trend was similar in the case of the monastic movement that started in the 3rd century in Egypt. Amongst the five ancient Churches (Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople), Rome was the only Church in Western Roman Empire. Protestantism, including Methodism, has arisen from the tradition of Western Christianity since the 16th century. Though Protestantism started as a reforming movement within Roman Catholic Church, it had to stand alone since Martin Luther was excommunicated from the Church. As divorced couples share a common past even after their departures, Protestant churches share common elements with the Roman Catholic Church. Protestantism experienced further progress in modern Europe, and then in North America in recent centuries. Protestant missionaries came to Asia, beginning from the 19th century.

Missionary Appenzeller, Missionary Underwood, and many other missionaries sacrificed their lives for the people in Asia for the sake of the

gospel. There is no question that their lives and works should be honoured. We saw that they came with Western costume and mindsets. It is natural that people in Asia should come to be interested in making Asian contributions to Christianity, through theologies “birthed *from Asia for Asia*.”²

Indeed, there were attempts to contextualise Christianity into the Japanese setting. Kazo Kitamori, perhaps the most well-known Japanese theologian in the world, attempted such a theology, *Theology of the Pain of God* (1946). I would say that it was a successful Japanese theology. However, I am keenly aware that there were several inappropriate endeavours united with Japanese nationalism.

Similar notable inappropriate examples outside Japan are *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) in 1930s and 1940s Germany, and the Russian Orthodox Church supporting Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine today. *Deutsche Christen* was aligned with Nazism; and the current Russian Orthodox Church is keen on justifying the invasion by the “Russian narrative.” Nationalistic distortion of Christianity is something we need carefully to avoid. Theologies “birthed *from Asia for Asia*” should contribute to peace in Asia, reflecting the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven.

At the previous institution I served, Seigakuin University General Research Institute, we published several volumes in a monograph series called *A Theology of Japan* in English. Instead of contextualising Christianity on Japanese soil (i.e., seeking *Japanised* Christianity), we intended theologically to deal with issues concerning Japan, such as Japanese nationalism, democracy, and disasters.³

² This was a theme of the conference.

³ The series include *A Theology of Japan: Origins and Task in the Age of Globalization* (2005), *Church and State in Japan since World War II* (2006), *Post-disaster Theology from Japan* (2013). <https://www.seigpress.jp/booklist/b017>

In order to make authentic Asian Christian contributions, I would like to discuss the following: (1) absoluteness and relativity in Christianity, (2) the Church connecting heaven and earth, (3) God's true narrative, and (4) Christianity in Japan.

I. Absolutes and Relativities in Christianity

In the beginning of the semester, I often ask my students a question: "Is Christianity an absolute religion?" Some students think: "Professor of Christianity is asking, so I should answer 'yes.'" Some critical students think, "Christianity is just one of many religions." My answer is "yes and no."

Christianity originated in the revelation from the Absolute God. But that revelation has been received and interpreted later on by not only finite but also sinful human beings in our own cultures and circumstances. That is "Christianity." There is an inevitable relativity. When we look at church history, we can easily see not only cultural diversity but also a multitude of sins. And it is in that relativity and sin that the absolute God of love works. As we are sinners, the Church has always had problems. The Church must always be reformed (*Ecclesia semper reformanda est.*), as Protestant reformers said.

The Roman Church in the West and the Church in the East mutually excommunicated each other in 1054 after centuries of tension. After several attempts at reform in the Catholic Church, a major critical movement started in the 16th century. Partly due to the survival of the excommunicated Martin Luther, unlike Jan Hus who was burned at the stake in 1415 during the Council of Constance (1414-8), the Protestant churches were birthed, which placed biblical authority above the Pope and tradition.

However, Luther and Zwingli, the leaders of that early Protestant Reformation Movement, could not agree on the sacraments and parted

company. In Zurich, where Zwingli was leading the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement arose. They criticised Zwingli that he failed to faithfully follow the Scripture and compromised with the city authorities. Zwingli went to the Second Kappel War with his sword and was killed in battle (1531). The Anabaptists remain pacifist to this day.

In England, after Henry VIII's Catholic renunciation (Act of Supremacy, 1534) and his daughter Mary I's return to Catholicism, the Church of England chose to take the middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism (Via Media).

All Christian churches embrace the core doctrines, the Trinity, Jesus Christ as God Incarnate (the Son of God), and salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. However, the institutional Christian Church takes various forms, and those churches have a variety of different emphases which express the Church's relativity. Here, we see room for Asian expressions of Christianity.

H. Richard Niebuhr dealt with this issue in *Christ and Culture* (1951) (hereafter *C&C*).⁴ It has become an influential classic of Christian social ethics. Niebuhr believes that "Christianity" is formed in the context of "culture," which is a situation relative to "Christ," the absolute revelation. The issue is, therefore, not "Christianity and culture" but "Christ and culture."⁵

The Enduring Problem of Christ and Culture

Niebuhr argues that this tension between "Christ and culture" persisted not only in Palestine in the 1st century when Christ became incarnate but that

4 According to H. Richard's son Richard Reinhold Niebuhr, the most read of his works was *Christ and Culture*. Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 9.

5 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York, NY: Harper One, 2001), p. 11.

it continues to this day.

The Christ and culture issue was present in Paul's struggle with the Judaizers and the Hellenizers of the gospel, but also in his effort to translate it into the forms of Greek language and thought. It appears in the early struggles of the church with the empire, with the religions and philosophies of the Mediterranean world, in its rejections and acceptances of prevailing mores, moral principles, metaphysical ideas, and forms of social organization. The Constantinian settlement, the formulation of the great creeds, the rise of the papacy, the monastic movement, Augustinian Platonism, and Thomistic Aristotelianism, the Reformation and the Renaissance, the Revival and the Enlightenment, liberalism and the Social Gospel-these represent a few of the many chapters in the history of the enduring problem. It appears in many forms as well as in all ages, as the problem of reason and revelation, of religion and science, of natural and divine law, of state and church, of nonresistance and coercion. It has come to view in such specific studies as those of the relations of Protestantism and capitalism, of Pietism and nationalism, of Puritanism and democracy, of Catholicism and Romanism or Anglicanism, of Christianity and progress.⁶

And this "Christ and culture" tension is also manifested in how the Church responds to the migration crisis in Europe, the Ukrainian War, and the Israel-Hamas War, and the situation in Northeast Asia today.

6 Ibid., p. 10.

II. Church connecting heaven and earth: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

A. Locus: Where should the Church stand?

1. Margins: Importance and insufficiency

When you enjoy the tea ceremony while listening to the sound of the koto (Japanese harp) in Kyoto in the autumn foliage, you feel the beauty of Japanese culture. In such a circumstance, you evaluate Japanese culture very positively. But when you stand on a margin of Japan, you sometimes see it differently. When you look at Japan from Okinawa, you see things that you could not see in Nagatacho, where the House of Parliament is located. Theology has long been done by educated middle-class European men. Liberation theology revealed something that can only be seen from the perspectives of the oppressed and poor in South America.

Jesus embraced people on the margins, such as tax collectors and prostitutes. It is important for the church to place itself on the margin of society, to be close to the oppressed, the grieving and the suffering, and to see society from their perspectives. Japan's sin becomes clearer, perhaps, by going to the margins of Japan. The sin of England becomes clearer by going to Scotland.

However, while the “marginal perspectives” are helpful, they are not sufficient. The people on the margin have their own sins as well. Okinawa has its own problems. It is not enough to stand on the margin, though helpful. We need a perspective more radically comprehensive beyond margins.

2. Boundary: Between the Kingdom of God and the world

The Church exists in society but is not merely a part of it. Where is the Church's locus? Where does the Church need to stand in order to engage with society, to present God's standards without compromise, and to transform it? And what kind of identity is needed?

I have argued that the Church needs to consciously stand “on the boundary between the Kingdom of God and the world.”⁷ This means not only that the Church is already situated in such a place (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), but also that the Church must continue to consciously choose to stand on such a boundary.

B. Identity: How to stand

How then should the Church stand on the boundary? In the Old Testament we can see a prophetic tradition and a priestly tradition. It is necessary to be aware of these two traditions as the nature of the Church.

1. Prophetic community

Kings and emperors in the Judeo-Christian tradition have not been given unconditional authority but have been expected to lead their people with righteousness and responsibility. When the king sins, the prophet must speak to the king a message of divine judgement and repentance. The prophet distances himself from the king, becomes independent and sometimes dwells in the wilderness. The prophet is required to transcend (in modern terms) nationalism. John the Baptist preached repentance to the people and prepared the way for the Saviour to come. When King Herod sinned, he pointed it out. He was arrested, and beheaded. If you speak like John the Baptist, you may end your life like him.

This is true even in modern dictatorships. The prophet endures suffering for the fulfilment of God's will and transcends peoples and nations from God's perspectives..

7 Atsuyoshi Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context: A Believers' Church Perspective*, Princeton Theological Monograph series 179, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

We are citizens of heaven. This is our primary identity beyond Korea, China, and Japan.

If I had to choose either Japan or God's Kingdom, I would gladly and painfully choose God's Kingdom.

2. Priestly community

The Church also needs to play a priestly role. The priest is with the king and intercedes for him. The priest prays for God's forgiveness, blessing and protection for the earthly kingdom. The Church not only seeks repentance for sins as a prophet, but also loves the nation and intercedes as a priest for it.

I see this in Apostle Paul's heart towards Israel. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." (Rom. 9:2-3) The post-war Church in Japan is weak on this aspect. It takes every opportunity to criticise Japan, but rarely speaks of loving Japan.

God participated in our suffering to save us (God's redemptive suffering). The Church, as a connecting link between heaven and earth, is called to participate in God's redemptive suffering.

III. Church living God's Narrative

The Church is also a community living God's narrative. It transcends the story of the world. It is the true story that leads us to the Kingdom of God. Our worldview, our character and our values are shaped by the story we live. Through that story we see the world and ourselves. Narrative theology in the 20th century has discussed it. Every country, ethnic group, company, denomination, university, and seminary has a story. And stories shape people's identities and communities. That story shapes a community; and the

community shapes our character and virtues.

A. God's true narrative

The Church lives God's story. God made this beautiful universe with love, made us in his likeness, and delighted in us. God loves us to the point of being jealous. God is enamoured of His creation and loves us as if He could not live without us. When God made us, He wanted us to love Him in His love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love one another. He wanted us to guide His creation with care, and to fill the whole earth with His love. But the path of eternal joy was destroyed by Adam and Eve's disobedience. We had to experience conflict with creation that would not have occurred if we had remained within God's original intentions.

However, God unreservedly lavished His love and mercy on Adam and his children, who brought misery on themselves, their neighbours and creation. God did not leave us to suffer. But He participated in and bore our pain and suffering with love and tried to redeem us. His Son Jesus Christ came to earth to save us from the sins that insulted God and corrupted all mankind and creation. Christ came to love, teach, guide and lead people to salvation. He endured the suffering of the Cross, loved us all to the end, and paid for our sins. But we killed the Saviour on the Cross.

God the Father raised the Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, from the dead, and opened the way of salvation for us through His sinless life of love and suffering. We are all precious children created in the image of God, and loved by God. We are to love God in His love and to live a life of loving our neighbour as ourselves. We are to forgive one another, just as God forgives us. Christ has broken down all walls of separation so that all people love one another. And He is leading us to the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is God's story; this is the story of God's people. The Christian sees

people and the world through this narrative, the true story of God, and lives on earth towards the Kingdom of God.

B. False or inadequate narratives

But there are many false narratives in the world. Those who are capable are of high value. Those with low ability have less value. The stories of this world tell us to live to win in the world. But Jesus Christ is the one who has overcome the world (John 16:33). And we call Him our Lord.

There is a story that nations tell, a story that peoples tell. “Make America great again; Make Russia great again; Make China great again.” “Make Korea great again; Make Japan great again.” We have often heard these words. These are the stories told by national leaders.

President Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow speak the language of Russian nationalism, “Russkiy Mir” (Russian world). “Russkiy Mir” is a worldview that considers the Russian-speaking, Russian Orthodox congregations’ residential areas as their own world. They justify Russia’s territorial expansion into areas that were part of former Soviet territory with the spiritual solidarity of “Russkiy Mir.” For President Putin, “Russkiy Mir” is Russia’s legitimate sphere of influence, which is based on a Slavic ethnic narrative dating from the Grand Duchy of Kiev (Kievan Rus’) (c. 882 - 1240). And the Russian Orthodox Church supports it. Vladimir I of the Grand Duchy of Kiev (r. 978-1015) made Eastern Orthodoxy the state religion in 988. The Russian military invasion of Ukraine occurred and was justified in this narrative.

Another story the Kremlin tells is that it is the Soviet Union that liberated the world from the Nazis in World War II. The current military invasion is told in Russia overlaid with the story of that “liberator USSR.” Independent media that speak critically from other perspectives are erased from existence

and the Kremlin controls the information (narrative). Also, in the occupied Ukrainian territories, Russia forbids the teaching of Ukrainian history, teaches Russian history, and makes people sing the Russian anthem. They are trying to incorporate the next generation of Ukrainian children into the Russian narrative.

However, the Church is called to go beyond these narratives and live God's story.

IV. Christianity in Japan

Most likely there were waves of Jewish migration and an influx of Nestorian Christianity into Japan from early times. Jewish figures *haniwa* (clay figurines) from the *Kofun* period (the 3rd-7th centuries) were excavated, and there is a Shinto shrine with a trinitarian gate in Kyoto established before the 8th century. Perhaps their influence has been integrated into Japanese culture to a certain degree though we are not sure.⁸

A. The 1st Encounter of Japan and Christianity

After this, Japan encountered Christianity on three major occasions. The first encounter was the Catholic mission by the Jesuits in the 16th century (1549). In the 17th century, Japan banned Christianity (1612) and closed its borders (1639) to protect the country from the colonial policies of Spain and Portugal. The ban lasted until 1873.

During the Christian persecution that lasted for more than 260 years, without a single priest or missionary, tens of thousands of Catholics carried on the faith for more than seven generations underground, with martyrs, in

8 Cf. Masayoshi Jokura ed., *Tonozuka, Himezuka Kofun no Kenkyu*, (Tokyo: Rokuichi Shobo, 2017).

difficult circumstances. There was no room for the “prosperity gospel” we sometimes see in modern Protestantism. They lived as believers, remembering the suffering of Christ and of missionaries. On the other hand, the long-lasting anti-Christian edicts in Japan created a tendency to view Christianity in a negative light.

B. The 2nd Encounter of Japan and Christianity

The second encounter began in the 19th century. At the end of the period of national isolation, whilst Christianity was still forbidden, missionaries entered Japan in 1859 to minister to westerners. Both Protestants and Catholics sent missionaries that year, and the Russian Orthodox Church sent their first missionary two years later, in 1861. The Christian ban continued until 1873. Thanks to the Methodist mission, Aoyama Gakuin began the following year in 1874.

Much of the Protestant Christianity brought to Japan was evangelical Christianity with a British and American background. The Protestant evangelical Christianity was developed in Britain and North America in the mid-18th century. Its characteristic elements were biblical faith, continental European pietism, and revivalism. Evangelical Protestantism, following the Protestant tradition, places great emphasis on the Bible (*Sola scriptura*). It also emphasises the experience of personal faith (*Sola fide*) and conversion (born again) before God, a personal relationship with God, and a devout life. It also emphasises “evangelism/mission,” the sharing of the Gospel with people, and “revival,” in which the hearts of the faithful are stirred up and many experience conversion.

John Wesley, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards were leaders of the Anglo-American revival movement. It was not mere religious fervour, but a movement based on academic research and piety. Some scholars describe

Evangelicalism as Puritanism that experienced revivals.

In the first two encounters, Japan reacted against Western colonisation. In the 17th century it closed the country. In the 19th century it accepted the opening of the country as Westernisation was inevitable. However, under the motto “Japanese spirit, Western technology,” Japan kept its traditional spirit whilst accepting Western science and political systems.

Many churches and Christian schools were started under the influence of Western, particularly Anglo-American, Christianity. Japan has only 1% of the Christian population, but Christian universities account for 10% of all private universities. Christianity in Japan reached the middle and upper classes. It has a certain influence and respect in society, but it did not fully reach the working class.

The theology of early Anglo-American missionaries to Japan appeared to be simple and elementary to some seminarians and Christian leaders. They tried to develop theology by studying more academic German theology on their own. Although this was good in terms of sharpening academic skills, it tended to become a tool to be linked to Japanese nationalism against Anglo-American Christianity. A large number of church leaders of this period were patriots who came from the samurai warrior class and had a strong independent spirit against the West. This might be described as a priestly tendency. However, there were also prophetic patriots such as Kanzo Uchimura, who started *Mukyokai* (Non-Churchism) against institutionalised Western Christianity and missionaries. Christianity in this period was engaged in social issues as well as evangelism.

C. The 3rd encounter of Japan and Christianity

The third encounter of Japan and Christianity was started at the end of World War II (1945). This period continues to the present day. The Church

regretted its cooperation with the war effort. Post-war Japan has clearly turned towards pacifism. The Church took an even more pacifist direction. The Japanese Church tends to be critical of the Japanese tradition because of the persecution periods in the 17-19th centuries and the 20th century. As a result, there is a tendency to associate itself with left-wing forces that are also critical of Japanese tradition (and Western capitalism). The enemy of your enemy is your friend. In a sense this tendency of the church might be described as partially prophetic, but anti-Japanese Christianity without priestly spirit is not a healthy church at all.

The post-war Protestant Church in Japan was strongly influenced by the theology of Karl Barth. Japanese Barthians concentrated on the proclamation of the Word and avoided involvement in social issues, although Barth did not distance himself from social matters. The Japanese churches, both Protestant and Catholic, are very sensitive to Japan's exclusive nationalism. Perhaps, this is what we can contribute to the churches in Korea and China. The Japanese churches value their relationships with churches in Korea, China and other countries.

Conclusions

It is natural for Asians to react to the Christianity brought to them by Western colonisers. It is also natural for Asians to worship in such ways that fits their cultural tradition and to produce theologies that reflect their own experiences. However, it is most important to live as authentic Christians in Asia, instead of trying to make theology Asian. I discussed the prophetic tradition and the priestly tradition of the Church. They are necessary elements for the forming of an authentic Asian Christianity. *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) in 1930s and 1940s Germany and the current Russian Orthodox Church serve us as examples to avoid. Theologies "birthed

from Asia for Asia” should contribute to peace in Asia, reflecting the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven (Shalom) in the context of Asia.

To love God, to love our neighbours, to create God’s peace, and to live here on earth towards heaven. That is what we need for an authentic Asian Christianity.