

Contextual Theology in Asia

Editor's Introduction

This special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra* contains the papers and conclusions of the *International Colloquium on Contextual Theology* held in Manila on June 20-23, 1978. It deals mainly with Contextual Theology in South East Asia. The International Colloquium on Contextual Theology was funded by the *Institute of Missiology*, Aachen, West Germany. The holding and the success of the Colloquium were made possible through the generous contribution of the *Institute of Missiology*. Through these pages we extend our warmest congratulations to them and to the people behind the organization of the International Colloquium on Contextual Theology. We hope that the *Institute of Missiology* will never give up this service it is rendering to local churches all over the world.

The intent of the Colloquium was to bring together scholars and theologians from Asia to discuss in a four-day conference the problems Christianity faces in the *Context* of Asia.

Asians are now 54% of the world's population and the proportion will probably rise to 60% by the year 2000. A church *catholic*, which recognizes her mission to be universal, "to the ends of the earth", cannot reconcile herself to be absent from that immense population.

On the other hand, Asia is the most religious of all the continents. All the great religions have their cradle here. But at

the same time, Asia is the least Christian of all the continents. There are just over 50 million Catholics. They form a small percentage of 2.3% of the total population of Asia. To this Catholic population we have to add 11 million Protestants and 3 million Orthodox Christians. If we discount the 35 million Filipino Catholics, the percentage falls to a mere 0.95%. After so many centuries the missions have barely started, so it seems, the task of evangelization.

There is a strong conviction among the missionaries that this is largely traceable to the nature and extent of the cultural diversity within Asia. People seem to think that Christianity is European and for Europeans. The title of Hilaire Belloc's book, *Europe and the Faith* comes to our mind. "Europe is the Church and the Church is Europe". And yet the Philippines, the only Christian nation in Asia, is an existential proof that Christianity is not alien in any way to Asia.

How can Christianity become part of Asia? This was the main idea and moving force behind the organizers of the International Colloquium on Contextual Theology. Since this was the first time theologians from Asian theological institutions gathered together, the Colloquium tried to limit itself to a sort of situational analysis of the problem as it is experienced in the Asian countries. A questionnaire was elaborated and passed before the Colloquium to serve as a basis for preparing written papers from the different Asian countries.

These were some of the questions posed to authors of working papers: What are the principal characteristics of the socio-cultural and political milieu of your country? What challenges and questions do they pose to your theological institutions? How are you meeting the challenges posed to your theological institutions? What new theological and pastoral problems and questions are coming up to the fore? What priorities do you propose to meet these problems?

Some of these questions are answered in the working papers we present now in this special issue of *Philippiniana Sacra*. They are only part of what transpired during the four-day Colloquium. In the workshops, in the open forums and in the general assemblies many more points were dealt with and discussed which do not

appear in this official edition of the Proceedings of the Colloquium. All through the four-day conference there was a lively exchange of ideas and thoughts, a sincere sharing of life experiences. These ideas and life experiences cannot be translated into concrete propositions. The synthesis papers may be a reflection of what was discussed and approved during the Colloquium.

There were thirty two *official* representatives to the Colloquium. However, a much larger number took part in the general meetings and in the open forums, as there was a very positive answer to the open invitation for professors and committed Christians to attend the Colloquium as listeners.

Theologians of the past, in their efforts to create an incarnational theology, were wont to use words like "indigenization", "inculturation" and the like. Recent theologians of the Third World prefer to use the word *Contextualization*, for in their opinion the theological meaning of contextualization is deeper and wider. According to them it embraces the process of secularization, poverty, ecology, technology and the struggle for justice and liberation. In the context of South East Asia, this seems to be necessary for we are confronted here with rich cultures and philosophies. The nations of South East Asia, most of them belonging to the Third World, are faced with problems never faced by nations of the West. There is an urgent need to contextualize theology without having recourse to Western theological patterns. Christ has to be incarnated in the philosophy, culture and lives of the people, in their concrete historical context. And this context is very different in Asia from the context of Europe or America. Asian theologians seem to be convinced that western theology is a serious hindrance to indigenous or contextual theology in Asia. The dependency on Western Theologians has to be cut off once and for all, if Christianity is going to become contextualized in Asiatic societies.

Many people are asking themselves this question: Are we Christianizing the people of Asia or are we Asianizing Christianity? Are both things necessary? Are they possible? Is Christianity going to redeem Asia or is it going to become a folklore?

History tells us that the early Christians were faced with the tremendous task of contextualizing theology. Paul the Apostle, a

representative of the three great cultures prevalent in the world in which Christianity was born, to wit, Judaism, Romanism, and Hellenism tried to become a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greeks. His life is a clear example of the tragic sufferings that contextualization implies. The rest of the Apostles, Peter included, in spite of their close association with the Lord Jesus, did not seem to fully understand the need to contextualize theology. The bitter struggle between Paul and the Judaizers is a proof of the risks contextualization implies. Paul rebuked Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21) for his weak stand in regard to the Christians coming from paganism. How much of the Old Law had to be kept? How much had to be rejected? Let all old things pass away? Let all things be new? Paul had to contextualize theology for the Greco-Romans. His main task was to uproot Christianity from Palestine and transplant it to the more fertile soil of the Greco-Roman world. He struggled to free Christianity from the Synagogue and make it really contextual to the Hellenistic world. Christians after him followed his footsteps. Some, like the Gnostics, made Christianity a mere philosophy, emptying Christianity of its redemptive and salvific message. *Pistis*-Faith counted for nothing. Others, without going that far, like the Apologists, still gave too much to *pagan* Hellenistic philosophy. Perhaps a study of the school of Alexandria, of men like Clement and Origen, might help us. Incarnation is a two-way traffic. Thus in primitive Christianity we find a Christianization of Hellenism and a Hellenization of Christianity. The problem lies in the fact that the message, salvific and redemptive, is given (Tradition) to us. Are we going to change it? We have to keep intact the salvific message and, at the same, we have to incarnate this message into the culture and language of each nation. The risks involved are not small and yet the task of inculturation/contextualization has to be done if the Christian Faith is to be meaningful and redemptive to each culture of the world. The present history of the Church demands a multiplicity of new inculturations which have as yet to assume more explicit forms, hopes and reality. Theologians are convinced that the rich cultures and religions of Asia can serve as *pedagogues* to Christ. Are they not a gift for Christianity, as Hellenistic philosophy was in Ancient Christianity? Justin the Apologist, with his theory of the *Logos*

Spermatikós, would feel at ease in Asia. Can we not find seeds of the LOGOS, of the total truth, in Asian religions?

In an introductory article to the Symposium — Colloquium on Contextual theology, entitled *Prenotes to the Contextualization of Theology*, Catalino Arevalo sees the contextualization of theology as a task at the service of a more authentic and more effective evangelization. In his own words “we are not involved here primarily in the study and discussion of an academic activity or an academic undertaking, but at an effort to make evangelization and Christian life and praxis more authentic, more interiorized — more true to the Gospel, more true to its task in history and beyond history, as well as more truly ours”.

Arevalo starts from the fact, for him a very clear one, that the task of inculturation/contextualization of theology is one that must be done in the local churches. This task of contextualization needs no justification.

Contextualization goes beyond what the term “indigenization” means. Contextualization, Arevalo points out, has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World Contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterizes the historical moment of nations in the Third World.

Arevalo sets down some “ground rules” for contextualization. One important rule, in his opinion, is the need for “local theologians” to have largeness and boldness of vision. They must have the courage to walk along a path that may offer some risks.

He asks foreign born theologians teaching in “local” seminaries to take even more seriously than the locally born theologians the task of contextualization. He writes: “I might suggest that at this hour of the local church, *this constitutes the specifically missionary contribution that they are asked to make as theologians-in-mission to our Asian Christian communities*” (underlining given).

This essential task of theological contextualization must be done in genuinely valid relationship with the Church *catholic* —

both *diachronically*, i.e., with all of Revelation and Tradition, and *synchronically*, i.e., with all the other churches in the Christian/Catholic communion, with the Magisterium, and with the Roman Pontiff *qui universo caritatis coetui praesidet*. For it is the Church catholic which is the one, unique, and adequate believing subject of the Christian faith. Each local church is part — *and only part* — of that communion of local churches which is the *katholike ekklesia*.

Mercado, in his paper *Contextual Theology in the Philippines*, offers us some thought provoking questions. In analysing the Philippine situation he disagrees with liberation theologians of Europe and South America. In his opinion, the Philippine situation is different from any other in the world. Latin American theology of liberation has certain limitations when applied to the Philippine context. Liberation theology, he objects, with its grim picture of injustice has no place for the theology of joy. Why take away the little joys the poor have and make them more gloomy through liberation theology categories?

Furthermore, according to Mercado, the Asian concept of justice is different from the liberationists concept. The Asian concept is communitarian and accepts inequality. If liberation theology is to be Philippinized or Asianized it has to take the Asian concept of justice into consideration. Liberation theology has denied the unity of culture and society in Asiatic nations. In the concrete case of the Philippines, liberation theology finds echo only among westernized Filipinos, but it has not found a positive response in the *barrio* (rural) people.

Is there a Filipino Theology? This important question is asked and answered by E. Rivera in his paper *Towards a Filipino Theology*. The contents of Filipino Theology, Rivera affirms, are the contents of the Christian faith professed by the Catholic Church. However we must seek an understanding of our faith using our Filipino patterns of thoughts forged by age-old traditions and enriched by modern contacts. We have to draw from our own insights provoked by events of our past and present history touching the very core of our lives.

When Filipino theologians try to give answers raised by their life-situation as Filipinos they are building up Filipino Theology.

Filipino Theology is simply Christian faith seeking to find expression in Filipino culture or absorbing from this culture age-old elements of natural revelation and religion, purifying them if necessary from deviations and misuse that paganism and popular superstitions may have fostered, but also being open to an enrichment that it may not have obtained from any other culture past or present. Filipino Theology is Christian faith seeking greater understanding and maturity by becoming aware of the contemporary Philippine context and trying to answer the questions being raised by the Philippine situation.

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world. Indonesia's population in 1977 reached the figure of 137 million. By the year 2000 the population will reach the high mark of 237 million. What are the prospects of Christianity in this complex and dynamic state? Indonesia is not a 'religious' state. All religions enjoy equal rights. However, the largest religion by far is Islam. Due to this fact some strong Islamic movements are advocating the creation of an Islamic Republic. Will they succeed, especially today when we are witnessing an Islamic Renaissance in the world? Indonesia is a *Pancasila* State, as Fr. Hardowiryo tells us in his long paper, *Contextual Theology in Indonesia: A Pastoral Point of View*.

What are the major challenges and questions posed to the Church and to theology by the Indonesian context? If the Church wants to fulfill her mission she has to concentrate on defending man's dignity here on earth and lead him to his everlasting salvation in union with God. The Church has to strive for man's development which implies eternal salvation. What are the problems faced by Christianity in Indonesia? The problems are many and complex. One of the serious problems is *inculturation*. But how can Christianity become *incarnate* in so many faiths and cultures as are to be found in Indonesia? How can the Church in Indonesia help people become aware of their *rights and responsibilities*? Serious attention has to be given to reach the mighty and powerful who are greatly responsible for the present state of affairs. The most valuable contribution the Church can make is to conscientize people. Conscientization of the poor, conscientization of those in power, and conscientization of peoples at all levels.

How will Christianity finally enter the life of China? This is the question posed by Prof. Chang in his paper *Theological Institutions and Cultural Diversity in the Republic of China*. Christianity in China is still seen as a foreign import even by some of its firm believers because of its incomplete assimilation of Chinese cultural patterns. The Christian theologian is faced with the challenge to present God's revelation in its totality. He has to show that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is intimately connected with the life of the Chinese people. How? Are there points of contact between Christianity and Chinese philosophy and culture? Prof. Chang finds many points of contact which could bridge the gap between Chinese culture and Christianity. His paper attempts to study these points of contact.

Fr. J. Sasaki, in his paper *Some Pastoral Considerations Regarding Contextual Theology in Japan*, gives an analysis of the Japanese situation today. Contextualization of theology is one of the main issues. Why not discover the seeds of the Word of God within the Japanese culture and society? According to him Japanese Christians are not familiar with Japanese national and religious values. Thus he advocates the creation of a Japanese theology of spirituality and liturgy based on Japanese culture and traditions. A *theology of nature* is essential for the Japanese people, as they believe nature is a mystery of harmonious existence, something they cannot separate from their daily life. God, the Creator, can thus easily be found.

The Japanese people regard aesthetic and religious values as closely related. In the Japanese cultural tradition religious and aesthetic values are viewed as ultimately one reality. Thus there is a need in Japan, in this search to contextualize theology, to create a *theology of beauty*.

Sasaki tells us of the wrong conception prevalent among the large majority of the Japanese people, of considering Christianity as a foreign import, alien to the way of life of Japanese people. And this in spite of the fact that many Japanese consider the teachings of Christ as admirable and excellent. In order to break this prejudice some Japanese Christians are trying to adapt Christianity to the context of Japanese spirituality. Some of them

use Zen spirituality as an instrument to integrate it with Christianity.

Sazaki concludes by saying that the creation of a contextual theology in Japan will depend on the actualization and the depth of the incarnation of the Word of God in the hearts and lives of the people as well as the living traditions and culture of the Japanese people.

Piryns' paper does not intend to give an abstract view on contextual theology. Rather it refers to what is happening concretely in Japan. It reflects on the self-realization of Japan's local church, on the experiments that could grow simultaneously or through the initiatives of Christians, and on obstacles to this self-realization. Piryns, based on the message of Christ, makes an effort to evaluate what concretely takes place when this message encounters the Japanese context.

What does theology think about non-traditional ways of becoming a Japanese Church, of social problems, and of new ministries? What does the realization of the Kingdom-of-God-for-man mean within the community around Christ and outside this community? What ways of being Church can be recommended for the future?

Japan is, or seems to be, a model country for the rest of Asia. What about the Japanese Church? These and many other questions are asked by Piryns in his paper *Contextual Theology: The Japanese Case*.

In the Japanese case the Christian message has a catalyzing function within the context. It brings about a catalyzing process. Is it not true that the message frees us from the situation in order to make us free for it? It ennobles us to participate in God's saving work, in taking up from the situation what is God-willed and correcting or eliminating what is the result of sin.

In Piryns' opinion contextual theology must stress the fundamental intuition of harmony with nature in Japanese culture and life. Nature, man and things have to be looked upon as good and are to be appreciated. What about the opinion of some scholars who say that Japan knows only a shame culture and not a guilt and sin culture? What can the Christian message heal in this

case? Piryns strongly objects to this wrong opinion. Though shame is a real factor in Japanese life, yet a relationship between shame, sin, and guilt really exists. The Christian message can heal and cure indeed!

The socio-cultural context of Papua New Guinea is, from many points of view, quite unique. Although Papua New Guinea is geographically speaking a close neighbor to South East Asian countries, from the cultural point of view it is quite different from them. The manifold cultures of the island have developed quite apart from the cultures of South East Asia.

Before the impact of European colonization Papua New Guinean peoples were composed of numerous small-scale, relatively self-enclosed, tribal societies whose livelihood depended upon subsistence agriculture. Out of a population of 2½ million people, more than 700 distinct language groups have been identified.

Sister Wendy Flannery, in her paper, *Theology in Context. Papua New Guinea*, gives us a masterful exposition of the traditional Melanesian life context. She poses a few questions to theology. The challenges and questions facing theological institutions in Papua New Guinea are serious and grave. She suggests the need to restructure theological education in seminary institutions so that these institutions will open themselves to the creative challenges of the contextualization of gospel, church and theology. She also warns against the dangers of religious syncretism, although syncretism could also be studied from a positive angle. Syncretism could be seen, we are told, as the ground from which a genuine indigenous theology could grow.

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