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The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Theology within an Asian Context

The past few decades have witnessed the global expansion of Christianity, particularly within the “Global South”—the areas of the world in the southern hemisphere made up primarily of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹ Today there are more Christians in these regions of the world compared to areas where Christianity has been dominant (i.e., North America and Europe). Mark A. Noll observes that as a consequence there are more Christians who worship in China each week than who worship throughout so-called Christian Europe (2009). More Adventists worship in Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than in Canada and the United States combined. World Christianity has shifted to the “Global South.”

Lamin Sanneh argues that what makes Christianity unique in comparison to other world religions is its translatability (1996:22, 23). Andrew F. Walls picks up on this theme by arguing that Christianity is infinitely translatable (1996:22, 23). As Christianity spreads, each new point of contact becomes a new center for Christianity that makes the survival of Christianity possible. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart note that translation in itself is a form of interpretation and that nearly all Christians translate the biblical text into new settings (2003:19, 33, 80). Thus, scholars such as Alister E. McGrath observe that this global phenomenon results in “local theologies” as traditional “Eurocentric” theology is deconstructed by native writers (2013:183). A significant aspect of this means that the translation process is not merely spatial, but incorporates time as well. Thus, translation results in periodic shifts.

This most recent shift of Christianity to the “Global South” means that Christianity in general, and Seventh-day Adventism in particular, must be translated in new ways. Theology, therefore, is about choices that help to clarify new questions raised from a new cultural frame of reference. Although the process of translation is inherently loaded, it is imperative that such interactions be rooted and grounded in the biblical material. Walls

notes that this “cross-cultural diffusion . . . invariably makes creative theological activity a necessity” (2002:79). Thus, one can and should expect creative interactions within Seventh-day Adventist theology as Seventh-day Adventism spreads throughout Asia and the “Global South.” The most profound expressions of this theology are therefore often local and vernacular (80).

Such local and vernacular translations of Seventh-day Adventist theology should result in new emphases including creative new ways of looking at the same traditional Adventist beliefs. In fact, such translation does “not negate” tradition, but rather enhances it. Of course it is possible for misunderstandings to occur when the cross-cultural process is not rooted either within Scripture, or in other instances, when other cultural norms are imposed without translation. Thus Seventh-day Adventist theology has much to benefit as it faces new values that naturally in turn enriches Adventist theology. All such explorations must be rooted and grounded firmly in the Scriptures.

Beyond Seventh-day Adventist theology, it appears that Christian theologians appear to be yearning for creative new expressions within theology. The long and winding saga within Western thought about modernism has left many theologians longing for something more. As Roger E. Olson, in his *tour de force*, *The Journey of Modern Theology* (2013) observes in reflecting upon the future of theology, states:

All I can say is, whatever the future brings, it is likely to be interesting. I look toward the Global South and its young churches to breathe new breath into Christianity and possibly into theology as well. It seems we in the modern West have followed every path to the journey’s end. Now we are going around in circles. Perhaps an African or Asian voice will speak into our postmodern milieu and point the way forward. (2013:713)

Thus, it is imperative for Christian theology in general, and for Seventh-day Adventist theology in particular, to explore new theological pathways. This article examines two primary questions: What is Asian theology? and second, What are some of the areas that should be characterized in an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theology? The fact that Seventh-day Adventism has existed for over a century in Asia means that such connections have likely been happening for quite some time, and as Adventism has become increasingly indigenous across Asia, points of contact between Adventism within an Asian context will happen quite naturally. These points of contact will likely come with natural affinities as well as potential pitfalls. Altogether such explorations should ultimately result in a clearer understanding of Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs. As this cross-cultural process occurs it

will continue to raise new questions that need to be resolved. In order to begin this process one must start by discussing Christianity as an Asian religion. Points of contact should be creative, fresh, and thus, illuminating.

Christianity as an Asian Religion

Christianity began as an Asian religion. The earliest phase of Christianity was one in which Christianity moved away from one centered upon a Judaic understanding to Hellenization. Andrew Walls argues that Christianity can be characterized into six major phases. The first major transition was the change from the Jewish to the Hellenistic/Roman phase (for an overview of these six phases, see Walls 1996:16–23). Such a radical shift was one of the most dramatic to ever take place. This cross-cultural process brought new questions about the very nature of who God is: for the earliest Christians Jesus was the Messiah, but this term was replaced by a curious new title, *Kyrios* (Lord). In the second phase of Christian history Gentile Christians tried to express their faith in new ways, which brought about theological innovations such as the Trinity and the atonement. What is clear is that within the first century, as Christianity changed from a religion that was primarily rooted in Judaism, it quickly became Hellenized and thus moved away from its Asian origins.

The deep roots of Christianity within Asia becomes more obvious as Christian missionaries re-entered parts of Asia. The cross-cultural process resulted in creative interactions that often resulted in indigenous expressions. What surprised early missionaries in Vietnam, for example, was such new expressions of Christianity were not only indigenous, but “may have been closer to biblical norms than the . . . understanding held by European missionaries” (Stanley 2003:326).

What Is Asian Theology?

Samuel Hugh Moffett in his two-volume magnum opus on the history of Christianity in Asia highlights that in many ways historians today know more about ancient Asia than ancient Asians did. The historian Strabo in CE 20 presented the best picture of the planet that people up to that time had ever before possessed. He knew that the world was *not* flat, but was instead a globe. He was also the first person to mention the Seres or Chinese, and knew that the Ganges was the mightiest river on earth. Such knowledge by Strabo would have been unfamiliar to many of the loose conglomerate of tribes across Asia at that time. “There was no consciousness of Asia as a whole, nor did any one part as a rule know much more than the borders of the next part” (1992:1:5, 6). Instead it would be only as trade, communication, and governments were formed that such self-knowledge gradually formed.

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What is clear is that Christianity largely disappeared across Asia. This in spite of early attempts by Nestorian Christians to gain a foothold in China in the sixth-century. However, they were later eradicated. Still pockets of Christians could be found such as the Thomist Christians in India, but these were rare exceptions. What is clear is that many other world religions filled this void: most notably Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism with many other variations and local indigenous religious forms. While it is difficult within the confines of this article to highlight all of these social, economic, and religious forces, what is clear is that these world religions generally placed a high value on the world of the supernatural. Some of these world religions place a high value on living an ethical life (e.g., Confucius and Buddha). The family structure became the basic building block of life, and ancestor worship was a way of honoring departed family members. Spirits and spirit-worship was a part of everyday life for most Asians, with the exception of Islam. The need to appease such spirits was a powerful force of everyday life. Powerful dynasties and kingdoms arose as Asia became increasingly complex and multifaceted.

Simon Chan argues that the best way to understand an Asian theology of Christianity is at the grassroots level (2014). One of the key issues for Asian Christianity concerns how to relate to these other world religions (see Chan 2014, especially chap. 6). He furthermore argues that many traditional Asian theologians have failed to truly grasp what Asian theology is because they have been primarily influenced by Western Enlightenment. Thus they have failed to grasp creative cross-cultural interactions and points of contact as Christianity has spread through Asia.

A central point of contact is what missiologists describe as the “middle zone” that concerns questions of ultimate meaning with questions of the observable. This “middle zone” is “the realm of spirits, demons, and witch doctors” and shares “deep affinities between the biblical worldview and primal religions” (31). Many of these forms of “folk Christian” are “often prematurely judged as syncretistic” and therefore superstitious. Instead, a “failure to take folk Christianity seriously, as we have seen in mainline Protestant Christianity, has resulted in either a fossilized tradition (mostly among the more conservative) or one that is subject to the whims of cultural change (mostly among the liberal)” (32). Christianity in this way adapts to both the unique characteristics of preserving tradition while still adapting to changes. Some, such as Daniel Goh, describe this process with the term “transfiguration” and “hybridization” (cited in Chan 2014:32, 33). Some theologians find Stanley Hauerwas’s theory of social engagement helpful as it “seeks to create a community of transformed persons . . . who in turn leaven the surrounding culture” (40). This is why, according to Chan, liberation theology (which heavily emphasizes immediate change) has not been extremely successful in Asia.

Saphir Athyal proposed that Asian theology be systematized around contextual issues. The organizing principle, he argues, should be the God who acts redemptively and controls history (cited in Chan 2014:42). Such a narrative approach connects well, especially within an Asian mindset (and even Africa) because of “body thinking.” This is an imaginative process that includes not only stories, but also painting and poetry. This is also why some of the most influential preachers in Asia are in fact great storytellers (Chan 2014:42). Thus, Chan takes Athyal one step further by arguing that “a person’s foremost identity” is really “his or her family.” Thus, “the concept of God as the Trinitarian family should serve as [Asian] theology’s organizing principle” (42, 43).

This is a very significant shift that has profound implications for a Seventh-day Adventist Asian theology. Theologians and missionaries working within an Asian context should take note because one of the neglected aspects, according to Chan, is that a greater emphasis needs to be given to the priestly ministry of Christ. The Western emphasis on the equality of the Trinity belies egalitarian assumptions instead of as the *family* of God. Human beings are a part of this family even if sin has disrupted this familial relationship by bringing shame. Yet God has a rescue plan to restore peace and harmony within this family once again. Thus, Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology should and must take on new meaning within this framework (45).

Points of Contact

If the identity of God’s family (i.e., the Trinity) is the organizing principle of Asian theology then this has far-reaching implications for further developing a Seventh-day Adventist Asian theology. This paper now explores specific points of contact that should be major points of emphasis in order to more fully identify and develop an Asian theology of Seventh-day Adventism.

Within an Asian context the reality of the supernatural is of utmost importance. Asians are rarely troubled by the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a prophet because visionaries, witch doctors, and other seers are common throughout Asia. Instead, one of the greatest challenges facing Christianity in Asia is that of ancestor worship (Chan 2014:188). Chan argues that Asian theology must explain the human condition and sin. The major challenge Christianity faces is a Platonic view of an “immediate resurrection” at death that fails to adequately deal with the “biblical idea of a final resurrection.” Seventh-day Adventists, who believe in the non-immortality of the soul, will find this as a useful (and perhaps neglected) avenue for reaching Asian minds unencumbered by Western notions of Platonism. A failure to address folk religious ideas, especially

the “living dead” in Africa or ancestral worship in Asia “has been a major hindrance to the acceptance of Christianity in Asia” (Chan 2014:72).

Another significant point of contact, as already alluded to, is the Great Controversy theme. If the primary locus of authority in Asian society is the home, then Adventists must place a heavy emphasis in telling the story of a cosmic conflict from the perspective of God’s home. “Sin is equated with oppression, unjust distribution of wealth” (81). Thus, sin is a relational problem that brings pollution. The concept of shame versus honor is similarly a biblical theme. The term “guilt” is mentioned 155 times in the Bible whereas “shame” is mentioned 345 times. Asians at the most basic level are conditioned to appreciate the Great Controversy theme with its plan of restoring harmony to God’s family. Thus, it is the desire of Jesus Christ to give each person a new status and honor that can be found only in God.

Not all points of contact are necessarily positive. In some instances the cross-cultural implications have not always been understood and a failure to understand them has weakened Adventist theology. One of these areas is the concept of conversion, which is ultimately a change in orientation rather than simply baptism. Part of the problem is that within an Asian context it is generally seen as acceptable, sometimes even encouraged especially in polytheistic contexts, to try out the beliefs (or spirits) of other peoples, especially those of rich Western foreigners. Thus, many Asians experiment with Christianity, and Adventism, by being baptized but find themselves afterward disappointed. From their perspective they are leaving the safety net of one family for another, but some Western missionaries failed to realize the full implications of this and to create a new sense of family for the recently baptized convert. When new Christians do not experience either a change in status or discover a new sense of community (or both) then this person continues their religious journey. Many people are baptized but do not see this as a significant change in orientation, at least not to the degree that some missionaries have in the past perceived as “conversion.” Thus, it is not very helpful, and sometimes even downright destructive, to quickly enter into areas with whirlwind evangelistic efforts without a significant investment in discipleship.

Christ and Culture

The significance of identifying and understanding an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theology extends into the realm of praxis (lifestyle). One of the most helpful constructs for understanding this is H. Reinhold Niebuhr’s depiction of “Christ and culture.” Change can either come from above or below, or, for Niebuhr, Christ can work from within culture. Some specialists argue that what makes Seventh-day Adventist theology

unique is its ability to transform culture from above. In praxis Adventism resists contextualization by its very nature and claims of truth.

Owen McIntyre in his comparison of Adventism in Papua New Guinea versus Samoa suggests that Adventism has thrived in spite of its lack of cultural accommodation (1999). He furthermore finds those who criticize Adventism on the basis that it plays on people's fears because of its claims to exclusiveness as inadequate. Instead, Barry Oliver finds that a primary point of contact is a "wholistic" approach to mission that embraces the spiritual, mental, social and physical development.

It would seem that even though Adventists have expected a break with practices of the past, they have tapped into a biblical dynamic which communal cultures of PNG can accept. As village life, belief and practice, encompassed every aspect of life, so does the Adventist alternative. Perhaps the gospel has become contextualized at a level deeper than that of mere outward observance. Whereas Adventists have not even been paying lip-service to cultural preservation, some other Christian groups have undoubtedly imported a Greek style separation of body and soul and given little attention to the wholistic realities of the gospel. (McIntyre 1999:129–130)

The challenge, at least according to McIntyre, about the Adventist denomination in Samoa is that it is not enough to merely set cultural norms. The Seventh-day Adventist approach in Samoa has been weak because leaders have "simplistically" decided whether an issue is right or wrong with minimal consultation of Scripture. Many aspects of Samoan culture are obvious borrowings from Western missionaries. Thus, contextualization should not be simply avoided by replacing old norms for new ones borrowed from foreign missionaries.

A good example of this I discovered through my personal experience when I visited Mizoram in northeastern India. At the time I was a pastor of a fairly traditional congregation in the United States. Drums were considered anathema so I was surprised to find very large drums in the churches of Mizoram. Conversely, I was aware that many of my church members quietly drank caffeinated beverages. When I consulted the mission president he shared with me that he wished that Adventists would be more grace-oriented about drinking tea—India is one of the largest per capita tea-growing areas in the world. The problem was that when a church member was caught drinking tea the church would call an emergency business session to discuss discipline. I found it ironic that when I walked over to the mission store to purchase a few things I discovered an entire row of Coca-Cola on the shelf. The problem was that no one had ever translated the original Western cultural norm as to *why* tea was harmful so that new practices (drinking caffeinated soda) replaced what was forbidden.

Seventh-day Adventists in Asia have a rich theological foundation, but the need for contextualization, especially when it comes to lifestyle issues, needs to be closely scrutinized. Seventh-day Adventists in Asia do not need to be concerned about “lowering the standards” because Adventism, as exemplified in Papua New Guinea, does not appear to lose anything by being distinctive. Seventh-day Adventists should continue Niebuhr’s paradigm of Christ transforming culture from above, but merely adopting Western lifestyle standards, whatever they may be, with adequately considering the contextualization of theology in an Asian context will necessarily ring hollow and miss the mark.

Observations

Andrew F. Walls notes that there are two twin perils that come with the translation principle: either defensive retreat or postmodernist relativism. Neither one is suitable within an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theological context. Seventh-day Adventist thinkers in Asia have nothing to lose by deep and meaningful reflection concerning Asian cultural values. In fact, such perspective will deepen and creatively expand Seventh-day Adventist theology in new directions. At the same time Adventists should avoid postmodernist relativism because Seventh-day Adventist theology makes an inherent claim to truth as found in Scripture.

New expressions of Christianity in Asia, especially within a Seventh-day Adventist context, means that the Seventh-day Adventist message must be “translated” into an Asian context. New theological priorities raise and clarify theological points of reference. For Asian theology this central frame of reference is found in the family. Thus, the heavenly Trinity best expresses the family of God, and becomes the starting point for the Great Controversy theme, which should be considered as the organizing principle for an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theology.

Such localized theologies are also indicative of creative new directions. Such cross-cultural diffusion is not just a possibility but a necessity. I believe the Seventh-day Adventist Church so far has only begun to touch the surface of this creative potential in Asia, and that students and faculty of AIIAS are in a unique position to build upon this for the future of Christian theology that Roger Olson yearns for and that will enrich the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Such creativity should “not negate” established tradition (i.e., the 28 Fundamental Beliefs), but rather, it should instead enhance it as anchored within a biblical foundation.

What are some of these creative theological expressions? While it is difficult to say for certain what all of these creative aspects may be, here are some suggestions based upon my study so far.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to better understand the nature and role of the Holy Spirit. The rapid expansion of Pentecostalism in Asia, considered to possibly be the best example of indigenous cross-cultural adaptation, raises the issue of the “middle zone.” Jon Dybdahl observes that Seventh-day Adventists have historically been very weak in discussing the nature and role of the Holy Spirit, possibly because within a Western context Adventists have been afraid that such discussions could lead to a Pentecostal form of Adventism (2014). The nature of the “middle zone” will challenge Adventists to think more candidly about the nature of the heavenly family, especially the Holy Spirit.

A closely related second aspect is the nature of the supernatural realm. While the most recent 28th Fundamental Belief on “Growing in Christ” (belief #11) was created to help deal with confusion in parts of Africa and Asia about this very topic, but Dybdahl questions whether this new belief actually has accomplished its intended goal. It appears that Adventists need to more fully explore the domain of the supernatural, especially demon possession, which tends to be a very real problem across much of Asia.

A third major area, especially in light of recent discussions about women’s ordination, is that an Asian perspective should be a helpful critique about the role of women in the church. The idea of an ordered family structure, so essential within Asian thinking, could be helpful in critiquing Western egalitarian notions of equality. To be candid I am quite surprised that there has been so very little creative activity from Adventist theologians in this part of the world.

Finally, Seventh-day Adventists in Asia are in a unique position to understand and explain the significance of the gift of prophecy within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This prophetic reality, after a century, should and needs to be explored in much greater detail. It is also important to explore how Ellen G. White’s writings have been translated into various Asian languages. In what ways have her writings been adapted or changed? How has this reflected either localized situations or theological agendas by Western missionaries? And how have such translations either benefited or detracted from the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Asia? In addition to translation, further exploration needs to be done on the nature of prophecy from an Asian context.

These are just some of the fruitful areas that I believe need to be explored that will enrich an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theology and benefit the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many of the points of contact have already been established at the grassroots level. At the same time, in order to carefully construct an Asian Seventh-day Adventist theology much more reflection needs to be done about cross-cultural translation as anchored in Scripture.

Notes

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