

# ASIAN FACES OF CHRIST

Office of Theological Concerns  
Theological Colloquium  
of the  
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

held at  
Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre  
(Baan Phu Wan), Sampran  
Thailand  
May 11-152004

Papers Edited By  
Edited by  
Vimal Tirimanna C. Ss. R.

Published by  
Asian Trading Corporation  
P O Box 8444  
Bangalore  
India

# JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE: TOWARDS A CONFUCIAN CHRISTOLOGY

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This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to his followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mt. 16:15), as it is directed to the peoples from the Confucian world of East Asia, viz., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. More precisely, it seeks to explore possibilities for articulating a christology which will be meaningful to peoples from the Confucian tradition. Although J.V. Taylor, a missionary to Africa made the following comment in the African context, it is just as pertinent, if not more, to the peoples of East Asia:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic

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Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) are taken from *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales & C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*) and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, eds. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*).

Abbreviations used: BIRA = FABC Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs

FABC = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

FAPA = *For All The Peoples of Asia*, Vol. I (1970-1991), Vol. II (1992-1996)

**Note on Transcription:** The pinyin transliteration system is used throughout this essay, except the names of Chinese authors who publish in Western languages and have chosen to transliterate their names in a specific way, and those Chinese terms which have been transliterated using the Wade-Giles system: in quoted texts and titles of works.

Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?

Paraphrasing Taylor, one could also ask: if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions which the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese peoples have been asking, what would he look like? Undoubtedly, East Asian Christians are able to repeat what European missionaries have told them who Jesus was and is. Now, the time has come for them to say for themselves who Jesus is and what is his significance in their lives today. It is clear from Mt. 16:13-15 that Jesus is not so much interested in the abstract and impersonal "who do people say I am,"<sup>2</sup> as he is in the question, "who do you [viz., a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Vietnamese] say I am?"

On this basis, this paper seeks to investigate the prospects for articulating a distinctive *Confucian christology* which would uncover the *significance* of Jesus for Confucian East Asians, as well as engage in a *dialogue* with their philosophical-religious traditions, socio-cultural institutions, existential concerns and life experiences.<sup>3</sup> First, it surveys the historical developments of christology in the European world, exploring the transition from classicist-universalist European christologies to contextual Asian christologies, as well as the implications of this transition. Second, it surveys the context of the Confucian world of East Asia, presenting an overview of its historical developments, philosophical-religious worldview and ethical ethos. Third, it presents a critical evaluation of the possibilities of using the powerful and evocative image of the *sage* (sheng 聖) as a christological image for East Asian Christians, with an emphasis on articulating the

1 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 16.

2 Or, to paraphrase the question in the East Asian context: "Who do Europeans say I am? Who do the Christians of European Line Antiquity say I am?"

3 In this regard, it has been argued that "if christology is never final, but always in dialogue with the early church, with the religious and mythical presuppositions and commitments of the Jewish and Hellenistic world, and perhaps most important, with the worldviews of our own age and time." See Robert Berkeley and Sarah A. Edwards, *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993) 24.

foundational principles which would undergird this Confucian christology, its principal elements, resources and interpretive matrix.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implications which the image of Jesus as the "crucified and risen sage" would have for East Asian Christians.

## I. FROM CLASSICIST-UNIVERSALIST EUROPEAN CHRISTOLOGIES TO CONTEXTUAL ASIAN CHRISTOLOGIES

If there is one thing which Christian theologians and believers of all stripes and colours could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus the Christ stands at the centre of the Christian faith. Christology, or the "theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, clarifying systematically who and what he is in himself for those who believe in him,"<sup>5</sup> is one perennial topic of theological inquiry which began when the crowds around Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth wondered who he was, and which has continued unabated ever since. To the age-old question "Who do you say I am?" the answers in different historical epochs are diverse and varied, as Jaroslav Pelikan stresses in his landmark survey *Jesus Through the Centuries*.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity's chequered history offers us a good glimpse of the diversity of responses to the question of Christ's identity by different

4 This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavours at exploring the possibilities for articulating a Confucian christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavours include Kim Heup Young, "Jen and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," *Asian Journal of Theology* 8 (1994): 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing a Confucian christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (ren 仁); and Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," *Studia Missionaria* 45 (1996): 25-55, which seeks to construct a Confucian christology by "situating Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships, especially on the role of the eldest son, and the Asian practice of veneration of ancestors" (p. 27).

5 Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J. *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000) 42.

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Pelikan's underlying thesis is that Jesus cannot be understood outside of human cultures, and that it is human cultures that shape the diverse images and understandings of Jesus in human history.

