

Ecumenical and Inter-religious Contributions to Asian Liberation Theologies

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Abstract

This essay surveys the varieties of liberation theologies that have emerged in different religious communities across Asia. It explores how Asian liberation theologians from across the major religious traditions of Asia have sought answers from within their own religious traditions and social locations to the endemic persistence of mass poverty, exploitative socio-economic structures, and oppressive political systems that often deny basic human and democratic rights to the poor and marginalized masses in Asia. The article's basic premise is that liberation and social justice are not monopolies of Christianity, but are found across the great religious traditions of Asia, and it highlights examples such as Mahatma Gandhi in Indian Hinduism, B. R. Ambedkar in Indian Buddhism, and Buddhadasa Bbikkhu in Thai Buddhism. Christian examples include Aloysius Pieris (Sri Lanka), Dalit and indigenous tribal theologies from India, and Minjung theology from Korea.

Liberation theologies emerging from Asia may not be as well known globally as their Latin American counterparts, but they are no less crucial to understanding the development of both Asian theologies and liberation theologies. While many people are familiar with Latin American liberation theology, few know about the indigenous Asian liberation theologies that have emerged in different parts of Asia in response to specific social locations and cultural/religious contexts. The need for liberation theologies in Asia arises from the fact that Asia, like Latin America, is a continent of socio-economic extremes. More specifically, we see, as in Latin America, that Asia also has extremes of economic disparities, with the richest nations in West Asia benefitting from an oil

boom and cheap migrant labour, while in countries at the bottom of the economic ladder, such as Timor-Leste, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Cambodia, people struggle to eke out a daily living. At the same time, although both Asian and Latin American liberation theology speak to the common struggles against social injustice, oppression, and marginalization, the social-cultural contexts and resources for the task of engaging in Asian liberation theologies are different from those of Latin American liberation theologies.

First, liberation theologies in Latin America emerged out of, and in response to, an overwhelmingly Christian socio-cultural and political milieu: one that was shaped by Christian worldviews and perspectives as a result of Spanish and Portuguese conquests and colonization. In Asia, however, Christians continue to comprise only a small percentage of the total population, notwithstanding that Jesus was born in West Asia and that Asia had a Christian presence long before Europe – for over two millennia.¹ According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's 2011 report, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, Christians account for 7 percent of the total population of the Asia-Pacific region, which translates to 13.1 percent of the total world Christian population.² *Global Christianity* further identifies the top three Asian countries having a significant Christian percentage of their total population as the Philippines (93.1%), Timor-Leste (99.6%), and South Korea (29.3%), and notes that Christians continue to comprise a small proportion of the residents of China (5%) and India (2.6%), who collectively comprise about one third of the world's population.³

Second, this small percentage of Christians in contemporary Asia, which holds around two thirds of the world's population, reveals the complex diversity and plurality across Asia that often defies attempts at easy classification. While the label "Latin American" may be broken down to regions socially and culturally dominated by Spanish or Portuguese colonialism and the legacy of colonial Catholicism, this is not the case with the

¹ Indeed, the Christian movement originally emerged in Asia and also moved eastward, propagated by Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured across the vast expanses of Central Asia along the Silk Road to India and China in the first Christian millennium. On the presence of Christian minorities across different parts of Asia since the first century BCE, see Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (London: Routledge, 1999); Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia. Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, 2nd revised and corrected edition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement. Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001); Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003); and Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and How It Died* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2011), 75.

³ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

term “Asian.” Indeed, Asia is a continent of extremes marked by diversity and plurality. Although “Asian” is often used as a convenient label for a diverse range of peoples from different regions across Asia, in reality it hides a significant diversity and plurality in terms of language, ethnicity, culture, social practice, and spiritual tradition across the six geographical regions that make up the continent.

North Asia consists of the sparsely populated Siberian region of the Russian Federation, which is more closely aligned politically, socially, and culturally with the European region of the Russian Federation, especially since the resettlement of ethnic Russians in this region in the 20th century. West Asia – the cradle of the Abrahamic monotheism that birthed Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is predominantly Muslim with significant pockets of Jewish and Christian presence. At the same time, Asia is also torn by violence along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines. Central Asia, which used to have thriving Buddhist, Assyrian Christian, and Zoroastrian communities, is now home to large communities of Muslims living in the various republics that broke away from the former Soviet Union. South Asia is predominantly Hindu in India, Buddhist in Sri Lanka, and Muslim in Pakistan and Bangladesh, with significant Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Jain minorities. Southeast Asia is a world of contrasts, with the predominantly Muslim Malay and Indonesian Archipelago on the one hand, and the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, Thailand, and Indochina on the other. This region is marked by significant diversity along ethnic, cultural, and religious lines. East Asia, encompassing China, Japan, and Korea, is heavily influenced by Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions, with significant Muslim minority presence in the western region of China that overlaps into Central Asia. Asia has the world’s oldest extant civilizations of China and India on the one hand, and newer nations such as Timor-Leste, which became an independent nation-state only in 2002, on the other. The top three most populous nations in the world – namely China, India, and Indonesia – are not only part of Asia, but are each so diverse that they are, in reality, miniature continents with hundreds of languages and dialects, ethnic cultures, and socio-cultural traditions.

Third, in contrast to Latin America, where the Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors subdued and massacred the indigenous populations, systematically destroying their cultural and religious systems, the European powers have not fully subjugated and colonized Asia to the same extent. This means in practice that the historical and cultural legacy of Asia, as a continent with ancient civilizations and religious traditions, still endures. Asia gave birth to several of the world’s ancient civilizations, including the Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, and Dholavira in the Indus valley (c. 3000 BCE); the Yangshao in the Yellow River basin (c. 5000 BCE); and the Liangzhu in the Yangtze River valley (c. 3300 BCE). Asia is also the native soil from which the ancient great religions of the world sprang up. This includes the religious traditions of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and Jainism in South Asia; Confucianism and Daoism in East Asia; Zoroastrianism in Central Asia; and the three monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in West Asia.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, independence and post-colonial consciousness led to a discovery of national pride, and with it, a massive revival and growth of traditional Asian religions throughout Asia. India has experienced a Hindu renaissance; and Islam is on the upsurge, making it one of the fast-growing religions in the world. In East and Southeast Asia, Buddhism has gained a new vitality as Buddhist movements that emerged in the early 20th century blossomed in the decades after the Second World War. These influential religious traditions are very much alive throughout Asia, nourishing the present spiritual needs of billions of Asians, and they are intertwined within the socio-political and cultural fabric of diverse communities across Asia.

Fourth, because of the legacy of Spanish and Portuguese dominance over Latin America, the marginalized subaltern masses that Latin American liberation theologians seek to address are Christians, at least nominally. Hence, it is not surprising that Latin American liberation theologians are thoroughly rooted in, and take for granted, a fully Christian biblical, theological, and pastoral framework when they articulate principles of social justice and liberation. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the marginalized subaltern masses across Asia are adherents of the great religions of Asia. This means that liberation theologies in Asia cannot presume a normative Christian framework. In practice, Asian liberation theologians have sought to work from within the various religious frameworks of the subaltern masses from across Asia. In other words, for liberation and social justice to be efficacious in Asia, Asian liberation theologians must transcend an uncritical Christian exceptionalism and triumphalism to engage with, and include, the great religions of Asia. This should come as no surprise, as many poor and marginalized people in Asia are followers of the great religions of Asia, practising a variety of popular religious traditions related to the great religious traditions that have shaped the dominant Asian cultures.

This essay seeks to survey the varieties of liberation theology that have emerged in different religious communities across Asia. It explores how Asian liberation theologians from across the major religious traditions of Asia have sought solutions from within their own religious traditions and social locations to address the endemic mass poverty, exploitative socio-economic structures, and oppressive political systems that often deny basic human and democratic rights to the poor and marginalized masses in Asia. The basic premise here is that liberation and social justice are not the monopolies of Christianity, but are found across the great religious traditions of Asia. This is an important socio-religious factor as Christianity, with the exception of pockets of majority

presence in the Philippines and East Timor, continues to have a minority presence across Asia. I will highlight, for example, the call to social justice and liberation of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian Hinduism, B. R. Ambedkar in Indian Buddhism, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in Thai Buddhism. From the Christian perspective, shaped by the socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious challenges of diverse Asian contexts, a variety of Asian Christian liberation theologies have emerged. In this context, this essay shall explore the insights of Aloysius Pieris (Sri Lanka), Dalit and indigenous tribal theologies from India, and *Minjung* theology from Korea.

Liberation Theologies from Asian Religious Traditions

Mahatma Gandhi

An early advocate of liberation theologies from an Asian religious context is Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869–1948),⁴ who is remembered for his campaign to liberate India from British colonial rule and for social equality and justice for all Indians in the context of his Hindu faith through non-violent means. Indeed, Gandhi's vision of non-violence was greatly influential in Martin Luther King Jr's approach of non-violence in his civil rights campaign against segregation. The seeds for Gandhi's non-violent, liberative approach were sowed in his participation in the South African civil rights movement. There, as a young lawyer defending Indian citizens from racist South African segregation laws, he discovered the liberative power of non-violent resistance. His first-hand experience of social injustice through his grievous mistreatment due to his racial status would shape his activism for liberative action.

Upon returning to India, Gandhi used his new insight on non-violent resistance to fight for the liberation of India from British rule. Inspired by the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount, Gandhi articulated his paradigm of *Satyagraha*, which literally means “clinging to the truth” and is commonly translated as “soul force” or “truth force.” For Gandhi, non-violence is more than practical strategy and pragmatic action. Gandhi understood it to be a foundational human attribute empowering human beings with the courage, perseverance, and discipline to work for liberation of the oppressed and exploited. More importantly, Gandhi perceived *Satyagraha* as the pursuit of one's *dharma* (or call to action) to work for solidarity, progress, and the empowerment of all without distinction, differentiation, or discrimination. In his writings, Gandhi insisted that the key element of *Satyagraha* is the overarching power of *ahimsa* (non-violence),

⁴ For a concise summary of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of liberation, non-violence, and social justice, see Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997). What follows in this section on Gandhi is a precis from *Life in Freedom*, 58–64.

not as a selective political strategy, but rather as an uncompromising theological worldview to render unjust laws powerless through civil disobedience. Within the context of *Satyagraha*, the path of *ahimsa* becomes the nonviolent path of the righteous that is practised even if one is justified to retaliate for unjust actions, because it is a way of life that accepts suffering as a means of purification and character-building that is done freely and without coercion. The efficacy of Gandhi's vision was demonstrated in the nonviolent mass civil disobedience movement of the 1930 Salt March, which overwhelmed the British colonial administration and gained crucial international recognition and support for Gandhi's campaign, setting in motion the negotiations for India's independence.

B. R. Ambedkar

Popularly acclaimed as the "Father of the Indian Constitution" for his active involvement in its drafting, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's (1891–1956) life-long fight to liberate the Dalits from caste oppression was motivated by his own personal experience growing up as Dalit.⁵ Ambedkar thus experienced marginalization as an untouchable in a society that was strictly delineated according to caste norms. At school he was often taunted and bullied for his outcaste status. His high-caste teachers refused to touch his work and he was isolated from other higher-caste students out of fear that his untouchable stigma would pollute them. Ambedkar struggled against all odds, excelling in school and winning scholarships to pursue doctoral studies at Columbia University and the London School of Economics. Notwithstanding his two doctoral degrees in economics and his status as a lawyer admitted to the Bar in London's Gray's Inn, Ambedkar continued to experience caste discrimination and harassment as a Dalit, especially when high-caste Indians took exception to his advocacy for caste reform and rights for Dalits.⁶

Eventually, Ambedkar became disillusioned with Hinduism, convinced that caste reform within Hinduism was futile. He turned to Buddhism as an alternate path for liberating the Dalits from oppression and marginalization. In his seminal work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published posthumously,⁷ Ambedkar emphasized the relevance of

⁵ For a more in-depth discussion beyond this short survey, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), on which this section is based. For further reading, see D. C. Ahir, *The Legacy of Dr. Ambedkar* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1990) and W. N. Kuber, *Dr. Ambedkar: A Critical Study* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973).

⁶ For Ambedkar's vision of caste reform that met with fierce resistance from his high-caste compatriots, see the latest critical edition of his classic work *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 3rd ed. (Bombay: Siddharth Publications, 1984).

Buddhist teachings to usher in much-needed social and political changes to reform the systematic injustices and inequities in the caste system, thereby liberating the Dalits from the vicious cycle of poverty, oppression, exploitation, and violence by the high castes. Ambedkar and his wife converted to Buddhism in a public ceremony on 14 October 1956. Despite his death six weeks later, Ambedkar's embrace of Buddhism paved the way for Dalits to choose the liberative path of Buddhism to escape the caste strictures.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

The Thai Buddhist monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) was a well-known social reformer and a critic of capitalism and the impact of its social ills in Thailand.⁸ Growing up in the countryside in southern Thailand, he entered the Buddhist monastic life at the age of ten and came to the capital city of Bangkok for monastic training. There, he was disillusioned by his many encounters with city-dwelling monks who pursued power and prestige instead of critically reflecting on the contemporary relevance of the Buddhist dharma to address the social ills of his day. He returned to his home province and established a hermitage for meditation and contemplation. His ability to explain deep insights in simple terms drew many to his hermitage. His prophetic critique of capitalism and the modern social and economic structures that were deeply dividing Thai society in the 20th century was rooted in his insight that personal and social transformation must go hand in hand. In particular, Buddhadasa insisted that personal egoism and selfishness trap individuals in dissatisfaction and frustration (*dukkha*). These traits are inextricably linked to the self-centredness and selfishness that give rise to social, economic, and political inequities that entrap society and marginalize segments of community in dissatisfaction and frustration.

More importantly, Buddhadasa argued that capitalism as an economic system is based on a fundamentally flawed notion of destructive competition that reinforces individualism and egoism in search of selfish gain. It pits everyone against each other in its zero-sum thinking, thereby undermining society's network of relationality and interdependence, trapping individuals and communities in a vicious cycle of personal and social *dukkha*. By contrast, he explained, the Buddhist dharma provides the path for mutual benefit and support, promoting mindfulness and loving kindness to overcome egoism and selfishness, nurturing selfless endeavours to work for the betterment of society, alleviating the sufferings of poor and marginalized people, and empowering the

⁸ This section is a summary from Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 76–80. For a general overview of Buddhist liberation movements, see Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

fight for justice, equality, and peace in the contemporary Thai society. Buddhadasa also went a step further than his Buddhist confreres in his willingness to engage in inter-religious collaborations with non-Buddhists in Thailand to bring about social and economic transformation in society, especially for those who are poor and marginalized.

Asian Christian Liberation Theologies

The Taiwanese Christian theologian C. S. Song gives a clear and succinct definition of the distinctiveness of Asian theologies when he explains that Asian Christian theologians seek to reclaim their Asianness within their diverse Asian heritages in order to carry out their theological reflections together with their fellow Asian peoples.⁹ Historically, Asian Christian liberation theologies have been inspired by Latin American liberation theologies emerging in the 1970s that focused on Jesus Christ as liberator of the oppressed and aimed to bring justice to the poor and oppressed through socio-political transformation of sinful structures. At the same time, these Asian Christian liberation theologians, working within the contextual framework C. S. Song describes above, sought to theologize using Asian realities as resources, discerning the divine presence and action in them, and correlating them to resources in the Bible and the Christian theological tradition. For many Asian theologians, the peoples' cultures, the history of their struggles, their cultural and religious traditions, popular devotions, oral traditions, socio-economic and political events, experiences of exploitation and oppression, and their quest for justice, freedom, dignity, empathy, and solidarity became resources for theological reflection. For them, God is redemptively present in human history through the incarnation, and the Christian gospel is only liberative insofar as it is rooted in, and responding to, the totality of human life.

The contextual liberation theology of Kosuke Koyama

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama speaks of Asian theologies as having the following ten foundational characteristics.¹⁰ First, Asian theologies are *contextual*, that is, they emerge from the experiences of the local community. Second, being contextual, all Asian theologies take the Asian peoples' daily experiences and life struggles as a starting point. Third, Asian theologies seek to correlate these daily experiences and life struggles with the Christian gospel. Fourth, there is a need to use the tools of social analysis to

⁹ This forms the central thesis of C. S. Song's classic work, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986).

¹⁰ Kosuke Koyama discusses these characteristics in critical depth in his seminal theological opus, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974).

interpret the experiences of the Asian peoples. Fifth, social scientific methods on their own are insufficient and therefore, indigenous thinking and logic are needed to complement social analysis. Sixth, Asian theologies utilize Asian philosophical methods and conceptual tools to articulate insights and conclusions that would be Asian in worldview and ethos. Seventh, Asian theologies also utilize the resources and realities of the Asian cultures that shape the worldviews and life experiences of the Asian peoples. Eighth, Asian theologies have to be formulated in the languages of the Asian peoples. Ninth, Asian theologies are not abstract or theoretical, but rather facilitate liberative action and commitment to social transformation. Finally, Asian theologies share the common goal of faith, seeking the fullness of life for all Asians.

The post-colonial liberation theologies of Samuel Rayan, Kwok Pui-lan, and Wong Wai Ching Angela¹¹

One of the earliest Asian pioneers in Christian liberation theologies is the Indian Jesuit theologian Samuel Rayan, who also served as an unofficial spokesperson for Asian theologies in general and Indian theologies in particular. Rayan was professor and dean of the Jesuit-run Vidyajyoti College of Theology in Delhi, India, in 1972, a member of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission from 1968 to 1982, and principal of the Indian School of Ecumenical Theology in Bangalore from 1988 to 1990. The underlying theme of much of his theological writings in English and his native Malayalam is a post-colonial thrust that seeks to *decolonize* and *liberate* Asian theologies in general, and Indian theologies in particular, from the clutches of "colonial" Eurocentric theologies.¹² By colonial Eurocentric theologies, Rayan refers to theologies that originated in Europe and were brought to Asia by colonial-era missionaries, and which the colonial European administrations found to be convenient for keeping the locals subservient to colonial rule. He argues that these theologies stressed hierarchy, power, submission,

¹¹ For the purposes of this discussion, this essay follows the standard Hong Kong convention of surname before given Chinese name. Hence, the usage Kwok Pui-lan instead of Pui Lan Kwok and Wong Wai Ching Angela instead of Wai Ching Angela Wong.

¹² What follows is a discussion of Samuel Rayan's seminal essay, "Decolonization of Theology," *Jnanadeepa* 1 (1998), 140–55. For further reading, see the following key essays that he authored: "Theological Priorities in India Today," in *Irruption of the Third World*, ed. Virginia Fabella et al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 30–41; "Reconceiving Theology in the Asian Context," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, ed. V. Fabella and S. Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 124–42; "Asia and Justice," in *Liberation in Asia: Theological Perspectives*, ed. S. Arokiasamy and G. Gispert-Sauch (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987), 3–15; "People's Theology," *Jeevadbara* 22 (1992), 175–202; "The Challenge of the Dalit Issue: Some Theological Perspectives," in *Dalits & Women: Quest for Humanity*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Chennai: Gurukul, 1992), 117–40; "Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insult," in *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Trichy: Carmel Publications, 1996), 125–45; and "Inculturation and Peoples' Struggles," *Indian Missiological Review* 19 (1997), 35–45.

resignation, and otherworldly salvation rather than community, friendship, obedience to truth, pursuit of justice, and ushering in of the reign of God in contemporary human societies. He further argues that indigenous post-colonial Asian theologies that focus on the concerns, needs, and hopes of the poor and oppressed masses of Asia have to emerge in order to liberate them from the unjust social, economic, and political structures that remain in Asia notwithstanding the waves of decolonization.

Complementing Samuel Rayan in East Asia is the Hong Kong theologian Kwok Pui-lan, who has done significant work in post-colonial Asian liberation theology, and feminist theology in particular. Kwok seeks to build upon the political independence from colonial rule to construct autonomous indigenous Asian theologies that are relevant to, address the challenges faced by, and respond to the hopes of the Asian peoples who are confronted with significant economic and political challenges in their daily lives. By insisting on the need for Asian theology to be post-colonial, Kwok urges Asian liberation theologians to confront the evils of colonialism and utilize the implications of decolonization to empower Asian Christians to rethink how they read the Bible and construct indigenous Asian liberation theologies.¹³

Following in Kwok's footsteps, fellow Hong Kong theologian Wong Wai Ching Angela states that Asian theologies have to take on the anti-imperialistic task of challenging the hegemony of the Western Christian theological heritage. In turn, Wong explains, we need to construct post-colonial Asian theologies in reference to the social location and identities of the Asian peoples, and to decolonize the economic and power structures left behind by the colonial elite that favoured a small minority at the expense of the majority. For Wong, being liberative is synonymous with being anti-imperialistic and post-colonial in orientation.¹⁴

The inter-religious liberation theology of Aloysius Pieris

Among the many Asian theologians who have contributed significantly to the development of Asian Christian liberation theology that engages with inter-religious realities is

¹³ Kwok Pui-lan unpacks these ideas in her *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005). See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995); *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000); and "Postcolonial Asian Feminist Theologies," in *Asian Theologies on the Way: Christianity, Culture and Context*, ed. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar (London: SPCK, 2012).

¹⁴ For a more in-depth discussion, see Wong's essays: "Women Doing Theology with the Asian Ecumenical Movement," in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 36–50; "Postcolonialism and Hong Kong Christianity," in *Asian Theologies on the Way*, 56–64; and "Negotiating Gender Identity: Postcolonialism and Christianity in Hong Kong," in *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization: Postcolonialism and Christian Patriarchy*, ed. Eliza Lee (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 151–76.

the Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris, who was the first Sri Lankan Catholic to earn a doctorate in Buddhism at the University of Sri Lanka. Pieris insists that Asian liberation theology cannot merely duplicate Latin American liberation theology. In his seminal work, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988),¹⁵ Pieris argues that all efforts at Asian liberation theologizing have to take seriously both the “Thirdworldliness” of the Asian context and its distinctive “Asian” character. He seeks to make the case that an authentic Asian liberation theology has to be rooted in the two defining dimensions of the daily lived realities of Asia, which are the immense poverty and multifaceted religiousness that characterize much of Asia. For him, these realities of poverty and religiousness are inseparable and must engage deeply with each other for any theology to be both Asian and liberative.¹⁶

First, Pieris highlights the reality that in Asia, poverty is not just forced, as often is the case across Latin America thanks to untrammelled capitalism, but also voluntary, as in poverty that is voluntarily assumed by the holy women and men across Asia. Hence, Pieris makes a contrast between the “imposed” or “forced” poverty that arises from injustice, marginalization, and exploitation on the one hand, and the “voluntary” poverty freely assumed by many Asians within the context of traditional Asian religious practices as a way of life in empathy and solidarity with the masses of the poor and marginalized in Asia, on the other. He observes that “imposed” or “forced” poverty in Asia arises from structural imbalances brought about historically by colonialism and is perpetuated by neo-colonial practices and economic exploitation by transnational corporations, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, the abuse and trafficking of women and children, the implications of dictatorship, and ongoing violence arising from civil strife. For Pieris, involuntary or forced poverty is enslaving and oppressive, while voluntary poverty is liberating and life giving.¹⁷

Second, and more importantly, Pieris argues that unless Asian Christian inter-religious liberation theology enters into dialogue with Asian religions and integrates the introspective dimensions of Asian religiosity into its heart, it will remain foreign and non-liberative for the Asian peoples. For Pieris, the struggle with poverty and inter-religious engagement are two sides of the same coin. In his essay “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions

¹⁵ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

¹⁶ Pieris discusses these two foundational realities of “Thirdworldliness” and “Asian” in Asian inter-religious liberation theologies in his essays “Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation,” in *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 69–86, and “The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology,” in *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 87–110.

¹⁷ This is a summary of Pieris’ celebrated essay, “Asia’s Non-Semitic Religions and the Mission of the Local Churches,” in *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 35–50.

and the Mission of the Local Churches,” he introduces the notion of the double baptism of Asian Christian inter-religious liberation theology. As he explains, for any Asian theology to be liberative for the masses of Asians experiencing crushing poverty and dehumanizing conditions in their daily lives, it must embrace its inter-religious identity by being baptized in the “Jordan of Asian religion” and the “Calvary of Asian poverty.”¹⁸ In this regard, Pieris is adamant that inter-religious engagements with other Asian religions is necessary for Asian Christian theology to be truly liberative for the masses of Asian peoples, the majority of whom are not Christian but devout practitioners of various Asian religions. In other words, the innate religiousness of the Asian masses and their experiences of material poverty must undergird any Asian Christian liberation theology. To put it another way, the struggle for justice would be doomed to failure if Asian Christians ignore the great religions of Asia.

The feminist liberation theology of Hope Antone and Gemma Tulud Cruz

Feminist Filipino theologian Hope S. Antone, who is also active within the Christian Conference of Asia, has articulated an Asian feminist theology that draws upon the Filipino experiences of women and children. Her theology comprises the following five elements: (1) naming the oppression, (2) identifying the agents and causes that reinforce the oppression, (3) identifying the dominant theology that justifies and perpetuates the oppression, (4) carrying out a feminist critique on the oppression, agents, and underlying theology, and (5) committing to action to work toward change.¹⁹

Building on the experiences of the huge contingent of Filipino migrants working abroad to support their families back home, Filipino theologian Gemma Tulud Cruz has constructed a contextual Asian liberation theology for migrants that focuses on the powerlessness of the migrants in the face of economic exploitation and various forms of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse.²⁰ She highlights the breakdown in family ties when one or more parents is forced to go abroad as breadwinners for their families. Drawing attention to the “irruption of the poor,” she argues that the resistance of poor and oppressed people is the power of the powerless, challenging not just the power of the powerful, but also the way theology is typically done by, and for, the benefit of the powerful.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45–50.

¹⁹ Hope S. Antone, “Mainstreaming Asian Feminism in Theological Education,” *CTC Bulletin* 19:3 (2003), 87–91, <http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc03-03/ctc03-03j.htm>.

²⁰ See Gemma Tulud Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness* (Leiden: Brill 2010) and *Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Korean *Minjung* theology

Emerging in the 1970s in the context of the Korean peoples' protest movement against the military dictatorship of General Park Chung Hee, *Minjung* theology is a Korean liberation theology that challenged the Korean military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s and sought redress for the oppression and marginalization of ordinary Koreans. The term *Minjung*, which literally means "the common peoples" or "masses of peoples," captures the struggles and hopes of the powerless subaltern masses of Korea who are marginalized and exploited by the economic and political elites of Korea. According to Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, *Minjung* may be translated as the popular masses from the underside of history who are oppressed, exploited, dominated, alienated, and discriminated against, especially poor people, women, ethnic minorities, workers and farmers, as well as intellectuals who are persecuted and harassed for rousing the conscience of the nation. For Chung, Korean women are doubly marginalized by society as sources of cheap labour in factories and by men in the patriarchal familial structures. She explains the roots of this double marginalization in the twin contexts of the pervasive endurance of patriarchy and political oppression and economic marginalization, first by Chinese and Japanese colonialism, followed by military dictatorship and subsequent transnational neo-liberalism that has emerged as the result of globalization.²¹

Like their Latin American counterparts, Korean *Minjung* theologians identify Jesus as being in solidarity and empathizing with the Korean *Minjung* by virtue of his solidarity and empathy for the poor and oppressed people of the New Testament. In this context, one has to appreciate the unique history of the introduction of Christianity in Korea. Unlike many parts of Asia, Korea was not colonized by European imperial powers, but rather by China and then Japan. Hence, Confucianism and Buddhism are perceived not as liberative, but rather as enabling oppression and marginalization, as these two religious traditions were co-opted by the Korean ruling class and therefore became tightly interwoven into the political landscape in Korean history. By contrast, when Christianity arrived in Korea, it was not the faith of a colonizing power, as was the case in many Asian countries, but rather a powerful liberative message for the Korean subaltern masses from Chinese and Japanese domination. More significantly, the proliferation of Korean Bibles in the vernacular *Hangul* script, rather than the classical *Hancha* script of the Korean Confucian literati, meant that the Korean *Minjung* could appropriate the liberative power of the good news of Jesus concerning the coming of God's reign. Indeed,

²¹ See the fuller in-depth discussion in Chung Hyun Kyung, "Han-pu-ri: Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology, 1989), 135–46. See also Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggling to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).

the good news of the in-breaking of God's reign serves to empower the Korean Christians to rise up and break free from the chains of domination and oppression in their quest for peoplehood and dignity.²²

Minjung theologians argue that the *Minjung* or subaltern Korean peoples are burdened by *han* that arises from their oppression, alienation, and subjugation at the hands of the strong and powerful. Literally "resentment" or "frustration," the Korean term *han* refers to the unresolved frustrations and accumulated anger that emerge from the Korean peoples' sense of helplessness in the face of oppression and marginalization by the political and military elite during the period of military dictatorship in South Korea. Properly harnessed and channelled in a responsible manner, the *han* that emerges from the grievances and anger of the *Minjung* can be a powerful source of energy to spark a peaceful revolution for change against the powerful elite.

In his essay "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," the late Korean theologian Jung Young Lee describes the process of resolving the *han* as *dan*, literally "cutting off." Lee explained that *dan* occurs at the individual and collective levels. For individuals, *dan* entails renouncing the material wealth and comforts that dull their sensitivity to human suffering and marginalization around them. For the community, *dan* involves a collective endeavour toward the transformation of community and society. As a Christian theologian, Lee asserted that *dan* comprises the following four steps: (1) realizing the presence of God in the world; (2) allowing the divine consciousness to permeate life; (3) putting into action the good news of Jesus; and (4) by doing so, overcoming injustices through radical action to transform society.²³

More importantly, Korean *Minjung* theologians speak of the Korean *Minjung* perceiving Jesus as the compassionate one who is able to empathize with the deep pathos of their suffering. For the Korean *Minjung*, Jesus is the messiah who liberates oppressed and marginalized people, who weeps with suffering people, and who bears their burdens on his cross. More importantly, Jesus is the liberator who has come to bring new life and freedom from oppression and exploitation to the *Minjung*. In this regard, the good news of Jesus empowers the *Minjung* to release the *han* from their lives. The *Minjung* are not merely the hearers of Jesus' good news. Rather, they become a part

²² For a further discussion of the unique history of Christianity in Korea, see Robert E. Buswell and Timothy S. Lee, eds., *Christianity in Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); and David Chung, *Syncretism: The Religious Context of Christian Beginnings in Korea*, ed. Kang-nam Oh (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²³ Jung Young Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," in *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 3–4.

of the *basileia* that Jesus has sought to establish with his outreach to the *anawim* of his day.²⁴

Hence, Korean *Minjung* theologians seek to address the oppression and exploitation of the *Minjung* or subaltern masses, emphasizing the triumph of God's justice in Jesus that liberates the *Minjung* from oppression and marginalization. *Minjung* theologians emphasize that God is in solidarity with the *Minjung* in their sufferings and struggles. After the collapse of military dictatorship and return to democracy in the 1990s, *Minjung* theologians broadened their horizons to explore the emerging social issues of environmental justice, eco-feminism, and rampant consumerism, as well as the struggles faced by migrant workers and foreign brides in Korea.

Indian Dalit theology

Within the Indian theological context, Dalit theology has emerged in India to highlight the social injustice and oppression that the Dalits, oppressed and marginalized as out-castes and untouchables, have experienced at the hands of the higher castes of India. Dalit theologians seek to challenge the socio-political reality of caste in India through solidarity and engagement with the Dalits, highlighting their oppression and marginalization at the hands of the upper castes. In general, Jesus is presented as liberating the Dalits from oppression and enabling them to gain regain their full humanity.

The late Dalit theologian Arvind P. Nirmal defined Dalit theology as one that is rooted in the struggles, sufferings, and aspirations of the Dalits themselves.²⁵ As he explained, Dalit theology is undergirded not just by the pathos of the Dalits' daily life experiences, but also their protest against the social oppression and economic injustices they encounter and their liberative dream to break free and seize control of their own destiny. Nirmal further identified three important dimensions of Dalit theology: (1) Dalit theology is *experiential* in orientation, rooted in the Dalits' experience of pathos in their lives; (2) Dalit theology *anticipates* the coming liberation for the Dalits from such pathos and oppression; and (3) Dalit theology seeks to *dismantle* the caste framework that has enslaved them in subjugation for generations.

Another Dalit theologian, Sebastian Kappen, emphasizes the implications of Jesus' good news of God's reign for the Dalits' struggle for new life and their quest for freedom to be full human beings. Specifically, Kappen has articulated a Dalit Christology

²⁴ These key ideas are explored in greater detail in the various essays in *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*.

²⁵ What follows is a summary of Arvind P. Nirmal's essays "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: GLTCRI, 1991), 139–44; and "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey (Delhi: ISPCCK, 1998), 214–30.

or theology of Jesus Christ in which Jesus' liberative actions among the marginalized people of Galilee continues with the quest for the Dalits' liberation in India. For Kappen, Jesus is a prophet who models the "praxis of subversion" that liberates the Dalits from oppression by the upper castes, as well as exploitation by global capitalism.²⁶

In a similar vein, Indian Jesuit and Dalit theologian Maria Arul Raja speaks of Dalit theology as a liberation theology arising from the context of the Dalit experiences of exploitation and oppression. He argues that Dalit liberation theology is rooted in the clear and unequivocal option for the Dalits who are relegated to the socio-economic periphery in the contemporary Indian society. Moreover, Dalit theology seeks to address the challenges that the Dalits encounter in their daily life experiences, criticizing the status quo and proposing alternatives. Post-colonial in orientation, Dalit theology also rejects attempts by outsiders, especially the higher castes, to impose top-down solutions. At the same time, Dalit theology is also eclectic in approach, integrating the divergent interdisciplinary critical methods, and engages in critical dialogue with other Asian contextual liberation theologies.²⁷

The tribal liberation theology of Wati Longchar

Indian tribal theologian Wati Longchar comes from the tribal peoples of Northeast India. His liberation theology seeks to express the tribal peoples' struggle for identity, justice, and participation, linking their precarious situation with the greedy exploitation of the land's resources. In northern India, the tribal peoples are confronting the reality that land and natural resources, which have sustained life for centuries, are now forcibly taken away from them in the name of economic development. For Longchar, the liberation of the tribal peoples from their oppression cannot be detached from the liberation of nature from human exploitation. He argues that tribal liberation theology cannot be practised apart from ecological concerns. Both humans and their environments are in a symbiotic relationship, and for theology to be liberative, both must be held together as a single whole.²⁸

²⁶ See Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977).

²⁷ See Maria Arul Raja, "Contextual Theologies: Some Salient Features," in *CTC Bulletin* 17:2 (2001), <http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc01-04/ctc0104c.htm>.

²⁸ See Wati Longchar, "An Emerging Tribal/Indigenous Theology: Prospect for Doing Asian Theology," *The Journal for Theologies and Cultures in Asia* 1 (February 2002), 3–16. Also relevant to this discussion are Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat, Assam: Eastern Theological College, 1995); and *The Tribal Worldview and Ecology*, ed. Wati Longchar (Jorhat, Assam: Eastern Theological College, 1998).

Conclusion

Contemporary Asia is a continent of contradictions and contrasts, with very wealthy and poor nations, ancient lands and newly emerged states, huge movements of peoples in search of economic livelihoods for the survival of their families, and immense religious diversity. The great religions of the world that emerged in Asia continue to nourish billions of Asians who find their spiritual needs fulfilled by these vibrant religious traditions. Compared to other regions of the world, Asian liberation theologies have emerged from the deep spiritual and religious roots of the Asian peoples, which include Christianity and the other great religions of Asia. In one sense, the preferential option of liberation theology in Asia is more than just a preferential option for poor and marginalized people. It is also a preferential option to *search for liberation in the multi-faceted religiousness that defines Asia*, and in doing so, to privilege indigenous Asian spiritual and religious traditions as important theological resources – together with the Christian biblical and theological tradition – for liberative theologizing in Asia. In other words, Asian liberation theologies are committed to serving the Asian peoples and responding to their needs and hopes in the diversity and pluralism of the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and pluri-cultural Asian world. Asian liberation theologies are also inspired by the intense religiosity of the Asian peoples and their struggles to achieve a better quality of life beyond crushing poverty, oppression, marginalization, and exploitation. Unless social justice and liberative action emerge out of, and are nourished by, Asian spiritual and religious traditions, they cannot truly liberate and, in this way, transform the daily lives of the Asian peoples.

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