

## PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS INCULTURATION IN KOREA

*The following pages have been extracted from a lengthy essay, originally prepared in French and delivered at the Institut Biblique in Jerusalem, by Paul In-Syek Sye. Earlier sections of the paper deal with the geographical situation the historical background) and the general religious context of Korea. It is offered here in the hopes of encouraging further reflection on topics for future conferences of Inter-Religio. The full text may be obtained either directly from the Institute for Theological Research in Seoul or from the editorial offices of INTER-RELIGIO.*

One should begin with the comment that to work for the inculturation of Christianity in a Korean context demands contact with the treasures accumulated through the past of its people. And this past is one richly drenched in Confucian and Buddhist thought. To be in touch with this accumulation of the past two thousand years means that one appropriate its wealth as a means for casting linguistic expression, and that despite the weight of traditional expression one strive to elucidate the essence of the Christian message in terms clear to contemporary Korea. Alas, this twofold demand is no easy feat! In fact it is the very concern of some of our Korean theologians: to make themselves able to read western theology as part of an ongoing history of salvation, they need to acquire a good awareness of the Korean classics, all written in classical Chinese, combined with an understanding of the contemporary Korea of today, in order to offer the message of Christianity in a way to make it both coherent and viable for modern Koreans. After the reunification of the three kingdoms with the Silla Dynasty, we have become a single people with a single language, even though dialects are still spoken in various regions. What is more, we possess our own system of alphabetic script since the fifteenth century. But the Chinese ideograms are still widely used today in the current language in the various communications of the mass media. This state of affairs creates a complex bilingualism that renders communication difficult. In any case, it is more than a technical linguistic problem we have on our hands. It supposes that one is able to move freely in a number of worlds at the same time. However, there are indications that a good number of young theologians and philosophers are being equipped for higher studies in order to alleviate this problem in the future.

Together with these young Christian intellectuals, we are doing our best to produce a Christian literature in Korean, modern and accessible. Today all theological options seem to be relative and arbitrary. Everything is brought into question by the diversity of theological currents, whether in western theology or in the theologies of the third world. Everything is brought up for radical criticism, and in particular everything that has to do with the colonial mentality that still survives in the 'young churches.' While in our present context here, everybody is busy arguing about ways to inculturate the Christian faith, the danger is that

in our eagerness to respect the views of others we waste our time in discussions—when there is no time to lose. We need to get to the essentials. Accordingly our primary concern for the incarnation of the Church of Jesus Christ is directed to how to present the message of the gospel to Koreans in living perspective. One supposes here that the concrete experience of the local church is taken seriously by reflecting Korean Christians. Whenever there are Korean Christians who refuse to build Christianity up from out of their own historical experience of Korean faith, the result is a lack of a Korean dimension to their faith, and a lack of biblical dimension within the Christian community shaped on such a faith.

We are certain that the Christian message has much to offer to Asians today. Very often we are accused of being mere translators of western theology. But would that theology itself ever have been possible without the previous encounter of the Greek and Latin world with Semitic religion? From the very outset, therefore, is not Christianity a religion of "books," and therefore a religion to be translated? To begin with we have a sacred scriptures that have the character of historical fact, but which at the same are to be discovered by Koreans from the point of view of their own logic, grammar, and linguistic structure before they can engage themselves in the task of interpreting the scriptures in the light of their historical experience. It is therefore a foundational task to see to a Korean translation of the word of God in order that the Christian faith be inculturated in the local church. But then, a translation of the bible supposes an entire ensemble of hermeneutic principles. For lack of a coherent hermeneutic drawn up within an oriental context, we content ourselves with a "faith-type" hermeneutic resting on familiar Christian foundations: "God wills to save humanity," "Faith alone saves, "Only Christ the Word Incarnate is mediator." It is a sort of hermeneutic of the instinctive faith of a local church which has received its faith from the missionaries. No doubt the rich experiences of this local church are indispensable conductors of an authentic and Asian interpretation of the "Word." This interpretation shows a profound confidence in the Holy Spirit and the life of prayer as a way to discern the authentic values of the gospel.

In the second place, it is indispensable for us to enter into a dialog that presupposes a genuine openness to culture and religion in our country. This is often difficult for us, so used are we to thinking out our principles within the context of a sectarian proselytizing. In a land where the sheer fact of disunity among Christians is already a scandal on its own account, it is doubly hard to take the initiative in such a dialog. And yet, if God wishes the salvation of all people, it is surely necessary that salvation be addressed to each according to its own mode of comprehension. The means of salvation cannot be caught by any single model. To think so would be to believe that God has taken sides. Those who open themselves to God in faith are responded to in terms of their own culture core, that is to say, in their particular mode of being, thinking, feeling, and acting. In this regard, we find some in Korea sensitive to new cultural and religious values coming from the Orient, but remain unsatisfied with the level of integration of the faith into life in society. The ancient values of traditional culture and religion are no longer adequate, because they confine a people to the spiritual life. There are signs of a rejuvenation of ancient religiosity, but these factors do not figure greatly as determinants, in my estimate,

even though they give us some indication of the movement of the soul of a people. In this regard we should also mention that local religions are also being used to some extent to shore up national identity and at the same time to uphold the political ideology of regimes in power. Buddhism and Nee-Confucianism are typical cases in point for Korea. Keeping these limitations in mind, it is necessary that we engage ourselves in the task of establishing a serious dialog with the Buddhists in recognition of the true quality of Buddhist mysticism. Travelers who journey to a country so profoundly stamped with the Buddhist spirit as Korea is, never fail to be struck by the external aspects of Buddhist religion. Yet it is a dialog that has hardly just begun. Again, Korea is often depicted as a country with a strong Confucian stamp. This is no doubt the case, since the thought of Confucius was probably known in the Korean peninsula prior to the dawn of the Christian era, and throughout its long history has so impregnated the Korean mentality as to serve as a cultural landscape. Christian anthropology and Confucian humanism open up a whole arena of convergences needing dialog to draw out more clearly points of similarity and difference. Jean Sangbae Li's (*Confucius et Jesus Christ* (Paris: Beauchesne Religions, 1979), which recounts the first Christian theology in Korea fashioned in the works of Yi-Piek, a Confucian scholar of the eighteenth century, offers us a good example of this.

Finally there is a peculiarly Korean popular religion. This is the primitive religion that came from the north with the people who spread southwards into the peninsula. Later it became a sort of national religion at the time that the primitive tribes formed themselves into kingdoms. This religion displays sentiments of obligation and fear vis-a-vis the Gods, which were manifested by numbers of ritual ceremonies and built up into an intricate and complicated system of belief. This religious tradition is called "popular" not only in the sense that it is participated in by the majority of the population, but more often because for the last 550 years or so it has officially become the object of a tacit scorn, if not outright persecution, on the part of the country's intellectuals and leaders. While differing somewhat from Siberian shamanism, this religious tradition has to it a whole side of ecstatic propheticism to its initiation process. There we see certain elements it shares with the Baal rites of the Canaanites, against which the prophet Elias struggled at Mount Camel (1 Kings 18). In this religion, perhaps, there is to be found the *anima religiosa* of the Korean. Still, it is barely a dozen years since Korean scholars have given themselves to a study of this question, which explains the rarity of attempts for synthetic presentations of this tradition of belief. For all that, popular religion remains properly Korean, since it existed before Buddhism or Taoism or Confucianism or Christianity found their way here, and it continues to make itself actively felt in the interior of religions imported from abroad. Koreans who search for a response to the demands of their own human condition in a land where elements of foreign religions and cultures predominate, will probably end up in this popular religion. It is so much under the skin of the Korean that this shamanistic religion has for all proposes become the dynamic force behind the expansion of Korean Protestantism which has found a way to compromise with it. In any case, an anthropological approach to these religions seems a primary requisite for an inculturation of the Christian faith in Korea.

In the milieu of this pluralism of religions and culture, what is

there to say of Christianity, imported from China through Confucian scholars? The Christians are a weak minority within the totality of the population. But are we not capable of transforming the culture of this land, the triumphalists would ask, convinced of the superiority of our religion? It is our persuasion, however, that the Christian faith as a way of salvation engages us in an inculturation of Christian theology in our country. And this is our reaction to the demand that comes to us from without: Grid for the preparation of a personal report on the process of inculturation in your own area.

Convinced that the Christian message has much to offer to Asians today, we have put our shoulder to the wheel to translate the "Christian sources in such a way as to make them accessible in a language reflective of the cultural legacy of Koreans past and present. We find ourselves here faced again with the scandal of disunity among the churches weighted clown with the problem of their relationship to actual human conditions. The way that Christian faith comprehends and speaks of the paradox of human contingency appears self-contradictory, but it is precisely such an approach to the complexity of the problems that seems most appropriate. And the Christian message truly has something marvellous to offer to the contemporary situation. if only we can find a way to bring it into closer rapport with the way this difficult situation is actually experienced by the Korean. At the same time that one finds improvements in lifestyle for a minority, one finds a poverty that cries out to heaven. Will the church find the right words with which to announce the Good News as a possibility for all persons and for the whole person? The solutions here are net only economic in nature, but have to do with our idea of justice. Equality and justice need in effect to be essential ingredients in development. But development, even in the broadest sense of the term, is by no means the only concern of the gospel. Wherever peoples and governments seek to compete with the advanced nations of the west, the validity of that single preoccupation is brought into question by the broader outlook of the biblical message. Here of necessity theological reflection from the standpoint of the concrete situation comes into the picture. But it should be a reflection that would he at the service of the faith and promotion of justice for the church of the poor who are beset by questions like the following:

- \* *How do we understand the Far East—where China, Korea, and Japan alone represent one quarter of all of humanity—in all its complexity within these particular lands?*
- \* *Which churches in this region are in difficulties, and what difficulties are they in?*
- \* *What are the churches to do in the concrete context of Asia*

To respond to these fundamental questions the theologians of our country have set themselves to working for an authentically Christian and Asian theology that takes as far as possible the following form:

- \* *Critical presentation of the Christian message in contemporary Korea and of the "Christian sources. The translation into Korean of the bible and the church fathers are in process in several centers of theological research.*

- \* *Discernment in the light of the gospel of those values that would serve in the promotion of the whole person and all persons.*
- \* *Models for living Christian values concretely in one's context. Here an oriental metaphysic able to sustain the spiritual life of a people would seem to be an essential requirement.*
- \* *Models for the education of our youth in the faith.*
- \* *Inculturation of the liturgical life by means of new symbols, ritual language, rites, music, and artistic imagery aimed at the modern Korean.*
- \* *Discernment of those major problems of the church in need of profound theological reflection. Here one thinks, for example, of human rights, the tragic gap between the haves and the have-nots, the exploitation of women and laborers in the Third World through the current system of production, and a re-evaluation of collective morality and alliance within a Christian perspective.*

This is by no means everything that occupies the reflection of persons presently engaged in research centers in Korea, and does not pretend to be an exhaustive or complete agenda. The most important factor in a mission is time—a time that reaches across generations.

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