

The Task of Malaysian Theology

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As the eyes of eastern Asia and the world begin to focus more clearly on the situation in Malaysia, voices from the world of the established religions are beginning to be heard in ever greater numbers. Canon Batumalai offers an overview of the situation from a Protestant perspective and outlines the consequences for doing theology in Malaysia today. The style of the piece, wide-reaching and frequently drawing on press reports (about half of the references were omitted for reasons of space), reflects the tenseness of the situation and the eagerness of pastors and theologians to find a way to engage themselves.

INTRODUCTION

“To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia.” This was the theme of a recent conference of the Pacific-Asia Tourist Association. It could as well serve as a motto for the goal of a proper Christian understanding of one’s people. According to Bishop R. Hollay, this is part of the “search for wisdom.” He goes on:

The gift of understanding, of a true appreciation of the situation and all its circumstances, is a rare and precious gift, worth struggling to attain. At the beginning of the search for understanding must come self-knowledge.¹

To know Malaysia is to know its people, not simply to know the successes and glories of the country’s past, but the full complexion of its people in all its diversity and ethnic composition.

This is an essential part of the theological task. It is what we might call theology’s “neighborological concern.” As K. Koyama says, “theology is talk that takes one’s neighbor seriously.”² Asian theology takes its neighborhood seriously. Asian Theology is a *theologia in loco*. This is what the Christian Conference of Asia refers to as “living theology,” that is

the manner in which a church confesses its faith and establishes its historical existence in dialogue with its own environment, faithful to the test and relevant to the context.

One of Asia’s foremost lay theologians, M. M. Thomas, of India, put it this way:

Asian theology is a response to the challenge to make faith relevant to life in the midst of the Asian social revolution. It is a small matter whether it gets systematized or remains unsystematic. The important thing is that it should emerge.³

Christians from a non-Asian context who have served Asians are also in a position to discern the Asians’ theological task. John England remarks:

All theology is a discerning of the divine in the human being — the signs of God-in-Jesus Christ in the world and is a reflection upon and a response to that. So its source is found in every place, time and level of human life, where the spirit of God is: in all lives, all peoples

and in all our histories. The signs are always personal, particular, historical, creational, incarnational, liberating.⁴

From this perspective of theology and neighborology, let us look at the living reality of Malaysia.

The Context

Malaysia is a multicultural country where Christians, who form a minority and represent the country's only multiracial religion, are called on to play the role of catalyst. Malaysia is made up Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs, followers of Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions, and believers aligned with various folk religions. It is on the one hand a veritable melting pot, and on the other a collage of water-tight compartment.

Islam is the official religion and much effort is being taken by the Muslim community of Malaysia to make Malaysia an Islamic State, a goal which may be difficult to attain, given our heterogeneous composition and political climate. Even Muslims are agreed on this point. According to the 1980 Malaysian census, Malaysia's 13 million people are comprised of 59% Bumiputras, that is, Malay and other indigenous communities, 32% Chinese, and 9% Indians and other smaller ethnic groups. Each religion is dominated by one ethnic group:

Islam is 99% ethnically Malay and other Bumiputras, Buddhism is 98% ethnically Chinese, Chinese traditional religions are 99% ethnically Chinese, and finally Hinduism is 99% ethnically Indian. Muslims comprise 53% of the total population, Buddhists 17%, traditional Chinese religions 12%, Hindus 7%, and Christians only 6.5%. To repeat, ethnic exclusivity is one of the outstanding characteristics of Malaysia's religions and this is where it may be hoped that Christianity can offer a sign of hope.

Politically, Malaysia is a stable country, though new political currents are coming to maturity. This was seen in the 38th General Assembly of the United Malay National Organization in which the traditional leadership of the Prime Minister as the Head of the UMNO was challenged and the electorates were divided for suitable leadership, the incumbent winning by a margin of only 43 votes. This is one sign of crisis in Malaysia. In the words of the Prime Minister, "the Malays have so far been successful in politics. But in religion, (society), and economy, our achievements are unsatisfactory."⁵

Strong emphasis is placed on (Malay) security, and the dignity of the Malay race. This has motivated the non-Malays to search for their own identity, and to fight for their communal needs.

Religion is a divisive force in Malaysian life. Islamic brotherhood is a recurring theme; Islamic pundits are of the opinion that this force could be creatively used to unite the nation. Achieving national unity has been the engrossing national aim throughout the three decades of Malaysia's independence, posing a constant challenge to all the religions of Malaysia. Efforts are being made to unite the people of Malaysia as one people, to be reconciled with one another, in the midst of various divisions and gaps and strive for ethnic identity. It is in this context that the Christian presence, with its multiracial character, can be a creative force for nation building and national unity.

National unity is being threatened by various forces. "Unity is strength" is part of our national logo, but our multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-linguistic situation has brought much tension and challenged all Malaysians to seek a workable solution. Conflicting aspirations of various ethnic groups threaten natural unity.

Communalism is another serious concern. Racial polarization is worsening. Amidst the divisions of race, religion, and language, Bumiputrais and Malayism represent a search for Malay survival, unity, identity, protection, and domination. This spirit in turn has inspired other racial groups to fight for their own ethnic needs. Meantime, the Malay political dominance is being used to safeguard the interests of the Malays. The implementation of Bumiputrais has affected human rights of other Malaysians. The Malaysian Internal Security Act and the Official Secrets Act are typical of the highly sensitive issues that beset us now.

Although we enjoy a "limited freedom," there is much restriction for religious practice in Malaysia. According to our Constitution, Malays are also Muslims and they should not be converted to any other religion. In spite of this, non-Malays have been converted to Islam by the Malays with governmental assistance. The growth of non-Muslims religions is hindered by all sorts of pressures. Islamization, a phenomenon which expresses Islamic life and ministry, is also one of the important concerns of non-Muslims. This had affected interreligious climate and imperiled the religious tolerance we enjoyed for a long time. This common factor led to the formation of the Malayan Consultative Council of Buddhist, Christian, Hindus, and Sikhs (MC C BHS).

The socio-economic sector is another major concern. Financial scandals like the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance affair, corruption in co-operatives, bribery, and other social evils are a cancer spreading in the country

Who is writing Asian theology?

Local theologies are not the monopoly of privileged professional theologians or Churchmen, as may be the case in Western society. Asian theology is not always printed in the form of books or articulated in famous public lectures. Asian theology is going on (often indirectly, due to fear of the consequences); at times it is spoken, at times written, articulated, and illustrated by our local artists, poets, journalists, housewives, people imprisoned for their public ministry, and students. From them we hear the cry of God's people from various perspectives.

Perhaps we can best begin with a distinction between theology and Christian theology. If theology is a people's understanding of people in the light of their understanding of God, whatever their religious persuasions, then it is clear that theology is being done from the Islamic point of view as well as from other religious and ideological perspectives. (It can also be articulated for economic gain. Although tourism in itself is not evil, it has exploited the Asian culture and people to satisfy rich Japanese and Western tourists. Such things often underlie the slogan of the tourist agents that "Our greatest assets are the people.")

To identify Malaysians reflecting theologically takes us across Christian and non-Christian, lay and professional barriers. As we look at some examples, however, it

should be remembered that Malaysia is a democratic country, a constitutional monarchy based on the principle, of “government by the people and for the people.” In the words of former Prime Minister, “It is ultimately for the people themselves to shape their own destiny.” Despite government restrictions, to some extent justified, there is also concern for human rights and their violation.⁶ And despite harsh laws, there is some, degree of freedom of the press.

MASS MEDIA: A VOICE FOR THE PEOPLE?

Newspapers exist in Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language), English, Chinese, and Tamil. The question is: Whose voices are being heard most frequently and powerfully? The *New Straits Times* is one of the oldest newspapers in Malaysia, but has now come to be referred to as “the government paper.” It has become the voice of the government — the ruling elite — which is not to say that it has no constructive role at all to play.⁷

Utusan Malaysia, the Malay daily which calls itself the “People’s Voice,” is the organ of the Malay who are running the country. Even though it expresses its concern in an intercessory manner, *Utusan Malaysia* cannot restrict its interests to the lives of the Malays.

The Star, another daily newspaper, seems to be the favorite newspaper in the country. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the former Prime Minister, Dr. Tan Sri Tan Chee Khoon, a Methodist, and a former member of the opposition party, contribute weekly columns to it. These two personalities, due to their credibility and influence, are in a position to exert influence for the needy.

Both the Chinese and Tamil papers, like the Malay papers, are organs of communal interest. But there are also other “voices” which unite the Malaysia people. One of these is *Suara SAM*, Malaysia’s leading environmental newspaper in which ecological concerns cut across lines that otherwise divide.

POLITICIANS

If government is “by the people and for the people,” politicians are the chief servants of the *rakyat* (ordinary people). Though government leaders are expected to serve the people, members of the opposition parties have also shown much interest in the lives of the people. Dr. V. David, an Anglican M. P., and Mr. Lim Kit Siang, are just a few of the prominent leaders whose concerns have been widely publicized.⁸

Former prime ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Hussein Onn continue to be active. The Tunku—as he is popularly known — was not only a freedom fighter and the one who attempted to unite the entire people of the country, but also championed the needs of non-Muslims and defended the position of the Malays. “My business is to safeguard the interest of the country,” he wrote in a recent book. “While there is life there is hope, and I would like to go on writing.” The Tunku is helping to build a genuine Malaysian community.⁹ Tan Sri Lee advised the Malaysian public to listen to the Tunku: “When the Tunku speaks, we should, as the Chinese proverb says, wash our ears and listen respectfully.” The Tunku offers encouragement, speaks on behalf of the people, and when necessary, passes judgment.

We may also make brief mention of the names of some important journalists, novelists, academics, and poets.

Dr. Tan Chee Khoo is one of the leading voices in the country. His regular column in the *Star*, "Without Fear or Favor" has contributed much. Though he was a member of the opposition party, the government honored him with one of its highest titles, Tan Sri. He is thought highly of as a writer, both in Church and society. He has written much and continues to awaken the conscience of the government and the people at large. He pleads on behalf of the needy and has spoken on behalf of a liberal government policy toward freedom of the press.¹⁰

Chandra Muzaffar is the president of "Aliran," a social reform movement. Though the movement has only about 100 members, it has emerged as one of the most powerful voices in the country, both prophetic and conciliatory. The movement is interested in the life of all Malaysians and as such is non-communal, unlike many political parties in the country. Chandra uses his *Aliran Monthly* and other publications to bring about social and religious transformation.¹¹

Aliran and C. Muzaffar are trying to be heal ethnic tension and at the same time to save the Muslim Umma from extremism. They agitate for a more open society and seek to help the poor and powerless through the process of democracy.

OTHER VOICES

Human Rights in Malaysia, a collection of the writings of politicians, social reformers, and church workers, has been called "an eye opener on the state of human rights" in Malaysia.¹² Its concern is that the voice of the people should be heard loud and clear to ensure that citizens are accorded their rights in substance and spirit. Writers include Lim Kit Siang, Karpal Singh (members of the opposition party), Chandra Muzaffar, and Rev. Paul Tan, a senior member of the Jesuit Order in Malaysia.

Corruption, as we noted, is gradually worsening in Malaysia. Prof. S. Hussein Al-Atas has written *The Problem of Corruption*¹³ to address the question. Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin, former Auditor General of Malaysia, has earned the respect of the people at large for carrying out an impartial inquiry into the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance scandal, the worst in Malaysian history.

Malaysian journalist, novelist and poets have also done their share. A Samad Ismail, a leading Malay journalist who works in the political sphere, considers language a means to national unity in Malaysia.¹⁴ Ahmad Said, one of our best novelists, heads the literary unit of *Berita Harian*. He was awarded the Anugerah Sastera Negara in 1985 for his novel, *Salina*, which is considered a "minor epic."

Among leading Christian voices we may mention the Malaysian poet, Cecil Rajendran. A Penang lawyer, he was one of the two poets chosen to represent Asia in an international poetry festival in London in 1985.¹⁵ In works like *Song for the Unsung*, *Post-script*, and *Other Voices, Other Places*, he expresses his concerns for the poor, the needy, and the silenced.¹⁶

Theology in Malaysia: The Roman Catholic Church

In recent years leadership in the Catholic Church has become acutely aware of the importance of contextualization and developing a corresponding incarnational theology. The spirit of Vatican II which sees the Church clearly as 'a sign and agent

of God's Love" is expressed by the work of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, the clergy, and the faithful. Here I would like to focus on one member of the clergy and one from among the faithful.

Rev. Paul Tan, S. J., is an ecumenical leader who offers leadership through theological vision. His contributions include research, lecturing, and writing, the editing of the *Catholic Asia News*, and serving as Secretary and Assistant Secretary for the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBHS) and the Christian Federation of Malaysia respectively.

Among his publications (aside from those appearing in *Catholic Asia News*), is a 1986 book entitled *Straight To Catholics*. There he tackles the main areas of interreligious dispute, offering an explanation through allusions to the scriptures and the Fathers, and through philosophical and theological arguments. His aim is to help Catholics understand their own faith better so that they will neither fear attack by others nor feel compelled to counter-attack. In his introduction to *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religions*, Tan discusses the Christian response to Islamization. As secretary of MCCBHS, he is promoting the need to take seriously the constitutional freedom and rights and privileges of the minority people and religious groups in Malaysia. In an article entitled "Human Rights: Freedom of Expression and Belief," which appeared in the work referred to earlier, *Human Rights in Malaysia*, he remarks:

I believe that the religious rights of non-Muslims have been gradually and subtly whittled down through the years. I reiterate, the blame is not solely on the Government and the government officials, but especially on the non-Muslims themselves.

In this regard we may note a booklet he issued in 1987 under the title *Islamization of Malaysian Law*, in which he states on the opening page that "the sole voice of protest against the move to Islamize Malaysian laws came from the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhs."

Catholic Asia News has come to be regarded as one of the few Malaysian publications that is critical of the Malaysian context and attempts to offer some Christian responses. It gives Paul Tan and others the opportunity to discuss the signs of the times in Malaysia, particularly as they affect the Christian community. Among its concerns are:

- a concerted effort to understand Malaysian society in order to serve Malaysia (August 1985).
- vital issues such as freedom, poverty, peace, justice, nation building, human rights, equality, and so forth (December 1986, January and May 1987).
- racial and religious polarization, corruption at various levels of government (February 1987), injustice in Malaysia, scandal (April 1986), and minority needs.

The editor not only reminds the Catholics of the present living realities, but also encourages people to respond. One of the concerns is "to create understanding between people of different races as a foundation for national unity" (January 1986). While the Muslim population constitutes about 52%, there is very little dialogue between them and other religious groups in Malaysia.

Mr. Chooi Mun Soo, former Malaysian auditor General, Ahmad Noordin Zakaria, and an accountant Ramli Ibrahim were appointed in 1984 by the Malaysian Prime Minister to investigate losses in Bumiputra Malaysia Finance. As a lay Chris-

tian in public life, Chooi knows well what it is to be caught between the demands of one's professional life and one's spiritual life.

Public funds to the amount of US \$1 million were "lost" in what was the greatest scandal in the history of Malaysia. A team of three investigators issued a report revealing "massive fraud, cheating, theft, and official cover-up." The government, which initially sponsored the investigation was reluctant to publish it. When the Chairman and Chooi Mun Soo challenged them on the point, the government was obliged to concede, as a result of which the chairman and Chooi came under attack from various quarters. Chooi has stated that he was supported by his family and the Christian community for this prophetic task of standing against corruption and cover up. For all the personal crisis and suffering, this experience has helped many Malaysians in general and Christians in particular.

Chooi has made known that Christian discipleship involves all spheres of life, as he said, "There can be no dichotomy between my faith and my life."¹⁷

His actions have given others the courage to stand up for justice. As Chooi said, "I have heard of instances where some Christians in my country, who are generally regarded as rather timid, are speaking against corruption and injustice in their various areas of work." What is more, this cause has helped bring together the Muslim, Ahmad Noordin Zakaria, and Chooi, a Christian, in the trials they shared together.

CATHOLIC PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The laity are now being understood in the Catholic community as a new way of being the Church. This shows up in the interest in forming basic ecclesial communities, in furthering a spirituality to equip the laity to live their faith in daily life, and in encouraging them to commit themselves to the people of Malaysia as a whole.

By learning to see God as Father of All, faith is not just a call to personal conversion within one's own community, but a demand to engagement in social transformation. There can be no social transformation without tackling the root cause of injustice. The new ecclesia attempts to meet some of the needs.

In this regard, the Church is being called to make a basic option for solidarity with the poor— at the lever of praxis. This takes the shape of assistance to squatters, factory workers, and so forth. The commitment to peace and justice is one which a small minority of the Protestant Churches have also made in their own way.

THEOLOGY IN MALAYSIA: THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES

To look at the range of theological concern among the Protestant Churches we may consider briefly the work of the evangelicals and the main-line churches represented in the Council of Churches of Malaysia. (Together with the Catholics, the three have formed the Christian Federation of Malaysia.)

Traditionally the evangelicals have been preoccupied with preaching the Gospel in order to bring non-Christians to Christ. In the last five years or so, attempts have been made to educate the laity for their mission. Their concerns are both spiritual and social.¹⁸ Apart from articles on personal conversion or testimonies, interest has grown in social problems of every sort. Malaysian CARE (Malaysian Christian Association for Relief, *Persatuan Pembantuan Kristian Malaysia*), which was originally

started by the evangelicals, is now one of the leading Christian agencies in Malaysia for social ministry.

The Evangelicals in Malaysia publish a bi-monthly newsletter of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia, *Berita NEC*. In it one can see theological reflection about current national trends and popular concerns.¹⁹

The leadership of the Council of Churches of Malaysia seems to be sympathetic towards government leadership. Generally, they have voiced the need of Christians, although occasionally they have spoken for the broader needs of the public, as in the case of the “boat people” from Vietnam or the need for national unity. *CCM News*, their official organ, has been helpful, allowing each denomination to voice its own views. The *Anglican Messenger* of the Diocese of West Malaysia, the *Berita TRAC*, and other denominational newspapers also show a vision committed to responding to problems of national unity as a united Christian front. Christian leaders and heads of Churches are also voicing their concern for people at large. Among the Protestant Churches, Bishop Tan Sri J. G. Savarimuthu, Bishop of the Diocese of West Malaysia may be mentioned.²⁰

In general, there is a need to mobilize Protestant leadership, both bishops and clergy, and theologically trained laity, in order to pave the way for more theological writing. At the Third National Christian Conference, held in February of 1987, the following working papers were presented, representative of the direction being taken:

- “Christian Mission in a Plural Society”
- “Christians and the State”
- “Christian Compassion in a Suffering Society”
- “Christians Youth in a Rapidly Changing Society”

ACADEMIC TRAINING IN THEOLOGY

Theology aims at praising God and serving our neighbors. In order to bring others to the saving knowledge of Christ, we need to equip ourselves first by knowing our faith. As we in Malaysia find ourselves in a non-Christian context, it is natural that an understanding of the Bible and a pastoral approach for evangelism are given strong emphasis. Apart from the biblical, theological, practical, and liturgical areas of studies, Islamic studies are introduced in a one-year program. India and Chinese religions, along with their cultures, are also taught. Malaysian society, also a one-year program, further helps us to know the living realities of our people. Theological education is thus designed with our neighbors of other faiths in mind.

Only 8% (or 800,000) of Malaysians are Christians. Our biggest challenge is to be effective witnesses to the 82% of the non-Christian population. As we are placed in a missionary situation, the stress is placed on knowing our “Christian God” from the biblical heritage, just as the Muslims emphasize Allah, or God, from the Quranic perspective. Biblical languages, both Greek and Hebrew, play an important part in the studies of students aiming at higher degrees.

Learning theology in a Malaysian context is both challenging and exacting. We live in a religious country. Western theology, written from a secular and philosophical context, is being read in a critical manner. Students of theology are also expected to know the theologies of non-Christian faiths (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam). Bible Colleges (Evangelical schools) do not teach non-Christian religions. Aloysius Pieris

highlights the importance of knowing non-Christian soteriology, in which religion and philosophy are inseparable, and he goes on to say:

It [Christianity] must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian religiosity and bold enough to be baptized on the cross of Asian poverty.²¹

Theology is being taught within a context of theological pluralism. For example, we attempt to wrestle to communicate the Trinitarian doctrine with the help of *Sal Chit Anananda*, from a Hindu context. Our challenge is to examine with the Quranic teaching the concept: “Your God and our God are one.” Theology of the Christian Allah is vital for Malaysian Christians. Even though Christians and others are discouraged by Muslims from using the words *Allah* (the only one God), *Alkitab* (Holy Book), and so on, the importance of studying non-Christian religions is continually stressed from the Christian side:

Fundamental to the teaching of theology in Asia and Asian theology itself is an Asian reading of the scriptures. This can be done reading the scriptures in the company of neighbors of other faiths, by reading the scriptures along with parallels in their scriptures, or oral traditions, socio-economic and religious realities of Asia. The enrichment of the Asian reading of scriptures is a first step to-wards doing Asian theology. . . . The Church has always had a missiological but not a theological understanding of people of other faiths.²²

Apart from teaching theology, serious attention is also given to pastoral theology. As Christians in Malaysia, due to our population ratio and our family ties with members of other living faiths, we are inextricably involved in a multi-religious situation. As such, students are expected to know non-Christian religions, customs, traditions, and history.

During their period of stay in the seminary, students are given an opportunity to learn from their non-Christian neighbors by visiting their homes and temples, and by observing them on festive occasions and in their educational environment. We also invite their religious leaders to our seminary to address us. Visits to mosques—not as tourists but as pilgrims—is one form of dialogue. Students are also expected to initiate dialogue at a deeper level with neighbors of other living faiths. This is a necessity both for sharing the gospel and for greater involvement in the life of our society for the good of all. This exercise takes place during their long-term placements, during their weekly practical work, and in concrete projects. To sum up, our curriculum is designed to enable students to *do theology in context*.

Student response falls into two classes. Those who are “new converts coming from traditional or conservative backgrounds are wary of our concern that they familiarize themselves with the non-Christian faiths and scriptures. When I first began to introduce the study of the Quran in 1984, most of the students in that year told me that they did not mind photocopying certain parts of the Quran but would not themselves care to purchase a copy of the Quran for study. In later years this reservation disappeared. A small percentage of students are also unhappy with being introduced to Christian theology from the perspective of Asian culture, religion, and philosophies. They tend to think it is safer to study theology from the Western perspective.

At the same time, there are also some enlightened students who are prepared to take risks in a religiously plural context. They are willing to explore non-Christian treasures and seek ways and means to contextualize theology with “treasures” from the non-Christian religions. This has encouraged us to identify Asian history, culture, customs, (*adat*), stories, and other vehicles to incarnate the gospel and to present the challenge of Christianity to others.

Non-Christian resources for a Malaysian theology

In December of 1986, the World Council of Churches organized a Christian-Muslim Colloquium in Bali entitled “Advancing Together into the Next Century: Our Common Responsibility in Preparing our Peoples for the Industrial Age.”²³ The Colloquium recognized, among other things, that it would be theologically impossible to unify all the religions, but arrived at the conclusion that both Islam and Christianity can join hands to play an important role in the state in terms of stewardship in our national economy and family life that are coming into the industrial age. The Malaysian national ideology, *Rukun Negara*, motivates Malaysians of different religious persuasions to contribute towards a strong moral, ethical and spiritual foundation.

In Malaysia, a religiously plural society, we have yet to take advantage of the richness of other religions for Malaysian theology. However, we have attempted, on a modest scale, to take what is best from each religion and put it in the service of a united Malaysia. In a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-racial nation such as Malaysia, nation building is a difficult process. Prejudice, ignorance, and frustration await all true nationalists who understand the principle that unity does not necessarily mean uniformity of belief and custom. Leading churchmen and members of the public from our heterogeneous society, have attempted to encourage interreligious dialogue in order to establish common religious values for nation building.²⁴ The Quranic guidance for such dialogue is instructive:

Say: O people of the book, come to a term common between us and you, that we shall not worship anyone but Allah... (Al-Quran 3:64)

This attempt is not new in our Malaysian context. In the 1970s the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organization—forerunner of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs — attempted to go beyond a *tolerance* of the religious beliefs of others to seek an appreciation of what others held and believed.²⁵ This is indicative of the way in which Malaysians are striving for religious harmony and are attempting to appropriate the spiritual values of other religions.

Seminar Theoloji Malaysia, an ecumenical seminary which is supported by the Anglicans, Methodists, and Evangelical Lutherans and came into being only in 1979, attempts to address these questions in its program of studies. Every two years we go through a curriculum revision. In the past, “Asian Theology” was taught for only one semester. Recently this has been altered to bring both Asian and Malaysian theology into the picture. The former is taught during the first semester, giving a survey of Asian theological insights as a basis; Malaysian theology proper is introduced in the

second semester. There we make an attempt to explore some of the non-Christian spiritual classics.

At present, we are facing a religious revival in Malaysia. Islamization to an extent is responsible for this turn of events. As such, each religion seems to be introverted and is very much interested in its own welfare and evangelism. The challenge is how we can be genuinely concerned for the people without forfeiting our evangelism.

In the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia, we have initiated a program of "Theological Education by Extension" for the laity, one of the important aspects of which is understanding our neighbors of other living faiths. People have shown keen interest in these studies. This program, I am convinced, could be used creatively to highlight some of the values in other faiths. We are also pleased that MCCBHS is also striving to relate to people of other religions in Malaysia — with the exception to date of the Muslims—in order to bring what is best in all of us to the service of religious and national harmony.

For the mission of the Church in Malaysia, the 8% of the population that is Christians must make a creative yet critical use of our diversity as resources for doing theology. We have inherited a rich racial, linguistic, cultural, and historical heritage, reflecting a diverse history of values, human relationships, philosophies, and religions. In our seminary, we are attempting to appropriate all of this as raw material for the doing of theology. Students of Chinese, Indian, and Bumiputra origins are expected to learn from one another and make use of these materials in the study and practice of theology on the principle that "in Him all things hold together" (I Cor 1:17). In this method of doing theology, the aim is not a syncretism but a solidarity with all people. It is in this critical identification we are attempting to share the Gospel of salvation.

Obstacles to doing Asian (Malaysian) theology in Malaysia

The first of the obstacles to doing theology with Malaysian resources is that in the past there was little encouragement for doing Malaysian theology. To have any meaning it must emerge from our contemporary Malaysian experience, struggling both with the *text* (Bible and theologies) and the *context*. A creative interaction is supposed to lead to adaptation, accommodation, inculturation, indigenization, contextualization, and so forth. But it seems to me that just the opposite has happened: our colonial history has protected and isolated us from other members of Malaysian society.

The Roman Catholics have had a seminary for more than 100 years in Malaysia, but they have yet to produce a theological textbook with a Malaysian perspective for their seminarians. As for the Protestant Churches, it was only after the Second World War that we established an ecumenical Seminary (Trinity Theological College in Singapore, 1948). Our main concern was to produce pastors and priests for our Churches. Further, there was not much motivation to encourage local "theologians" or theological educators. Due to our financial difficulties and lack of clergy we were highly dependent on western personnel to do our work.

During the colonial period (1874—1957), Christianity was unofficially the “state” religion and it was partly promoted or given official recognition. This status did not help the Church become rooted in the soil of Malaysia or to produce “local” (contextual) theology. The Church remained very much a colony of the West, foreign to our neighbors of other living faiths. It was only after we secured our independence that the Church began to be identified with the people at large. At the same time, however, independence encouraged the resurgence of non-Christian religions, especially Islam.

The government’s strict immigration policy has been a blessing in disguise. The churches were motivated to “give birth” to Malaysian seminaries and “Malaysian theologians.” In my own case, this meant that I was sent to England to do post-graduate studies in order to teach at the Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (an ecumenical seminary founded in 1979). Since then, it has produced about 60 students.

Secondly, the contemporary Malaysian situation provides obstacles of its own. One may say that Malaysian Christians are “wrestling” in at least three areas: the dominance of western theology, the unpreparedness of Malaysian Christians, and the control of the Malay community over the life of the nation. The program for Theology and Cultures in Asia, in its inaugural consultation in Kyoto in July of 1987, identified certain obstacles:

But the dominant influence of western theologies has often created a blockade to indigenous theology and at times hampered creative efforts for a living theology in our own way, style and method. Theological minds in the region were not meeting other thoughts and realities within the area, but tended to look westward for growth, for appreciation and stimulation.²⁶

I am told by my Catholic friends that Asian theology is not being taught in Malaysian seminaries. This does not necessarily mean that their traditional formation leaves them entirely ill-equipped to do Asian or Malaysian theology, but only that they are not yet at that stage.

An evangelical seminary in Kuala Lumpur, the Bible College of Malaysia, offers a course in Asian theology for 12 weeks and Asian religions for another 6 weeks. On the other hand, the Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, with more than half of its lecturers expatriates, cannot give much leadership in terms of Malaysian theology. Most of our books and theological education is too much patterned on western models. The Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), on the other hand, has been actively encouraging the idea of Asian theologies.

It should also be pointed out that among the evangelicals, many have not been happy with Asian theology. According to some, it tends to encourage appropriation of spiritual insights and values of the non-Christian religions, whereas the true concern is with evangelistic work. At the same time, the evangelical concern has enabled others of the evangelicals to produce Asian theological books from their own perspectives.²⁷

In the third place, the Malaysian Church has been ill-equipped for this important task. The Roman Catholics have not produced much theological writing. Their concern was very much in the area of Church planting, pastoral work, secular education, and community life. Only recently, in the last five years or so, have they begun to write. The *Catholic Asia News* is indicative of this trend. The Roman Catholic Research

Unit is another recent development, undertaken in response to the urgent needs of the present.

For their part the Protestant Churches, which suffered from a lack of clergy and trained laity, did not do much writing or publication either. My own doctoral thesis, *Prophetic Christology for Neighborology*, modest achievement though it is, may be the first theological book published in Malaysia. No doubt the best is yet to come if the present climate is any indication.

Theological writing is not yet part of our agenda. We do not have a Christian publishing house and our concerns are directed toward the government's policy of Islamization. The disunited Christian community has been in part united through an external force, Islamization, which brought into being the Christian Federation of Malaysia in 1985. But the lack of a creative theological community will only be more keenly felt as the years go on.

As Dr. Yeow Choo Lak, Executive Director of ATESEA, has remarked, "The talent pool in our churches is very limited compared to the talent pool in the churches in the West."²⁸ Both Dr. Yeow and his colleagues in ATESEA were successful in identifying some of the talented young theologians in our regions and have given the necessary opportunities to write Asian theologies.

(In 1984 ATESEA held a Theological Seminar Workshop which dealt with doing theology with popular folk literature in Asia. In 1985, the theme of the Theological Seminar Workshop was on "Doing Theology and People's Movements in Asia." In 1986, the Theological Seminar Workshop was on "Doing Theology with Asian Religions".)

One of our serious drawbacks is that we do not have Malaysian Christian theologians who are well-versed in Malaysian religions — Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism — in order to contextualize our theology and initiate serious interreligious dialogue. However, as noted above, this handicap has not hindered us altogether from making a small contribution.

In the fourth and final place, the dominance of the Malays is both an obstacle and a challenge to Malaysian Christians. Malay control on the political, economic, cultural, and religious plane seems to have hindered the Christian community in their mission in general, and Christian communication in particular. Though there is also a positive side to these hindrances, let us first identify how the government's restrictions have hindered our doing of theology.

Islam is a national affair of state and comes under the Sultan (Ruler) of each state in the Federation of Malaysia. The Malays are protected from being converted into any other religions and onto other Islamic sects by strict government's surveillance. Constitutionally, the conversion of a Malay is permitted; in practice, it is impossible. The government has prohibited non-Muslims from using the words *Allah*, *Alkitab*, *Baitullah*, and so forth. Islamic architects are not allowed to work for the non-Muslims. The insecurity of the Malays prevents us from getting close to them. As such, Christians are sensitized to these religious restrictions and are discouraged by our Church leaders from contextualizing theology both in preaching and in writing, lest it create

problems. A certain group of Christians is of the opinion that it is unconstitutional for any group of citizens to prevent us from employing Bahasa Malaysian, or Arabic words. Although it looks as if non-Malays are powerless, we are not without our prophetic utterances. Thought I hesitate to include it in this category, I was reluctant to publish my own thesis because of its discussion of Islam and Muslims neighbors.

Positively speaking, Malay dominance should encourage Malaysian Christians to make known their concern both as Malaysian citizens and as Christians. But we are slow in establishing a Malaysian Christian solidarity which could empower us to voice our concerns without fear and favor. Meantime, Islamization has brought about a resurgence of religions in Malaysia (for example, the birth of Hindu Sangam which is quote vociferous). Hindus are selling *Yesus Kaviyam* (a life of Christ) by Kannadasan Tamilnadus, a leading Tamil poet, written from a Hindu perspective.~ The book itself was the fruit of a Roman Catholic and Kannadasan collaboration, and thus could serve as a fulcrum for dialogue. For all the major obstacles, then, there are still signs of hope.

“*Pucuk harapan*”

A Filipino Roman Catholic theologian, Carlos Abesamis, has said, “The conscientized grass-root poor can produce a relevant theology for Asia.” I have tried to show, from a different perspective, how the agenda for doing theology in the religiously pluralistic society of Malaysia, where nation-building is the concern of all citizens, must appropriate precious insights and values from our neighbors of other living faiths and ideologies at a level no less radical and grass-roots. Despite the obstacles that have hamstrung us in the past, new challenges from the *rakyat* (people) are being seen as new signs of God, as *pucuk harapan* (a ray of hope) in the “valley of dry bones.”

Traditionally the English language, together with Mandarin and Tamil, have played an important part in our Christian communication. Since independence, Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language), has come into prominence. In order for us to make an impact and shape the lives of the people, we must employ the new national language in which the youth of the country are now fully conversant. Another vehicle of expression is traditional drama, dance, and song. In fact, the Seminari Theoloji Malaysia has published a book entitled *Pucuk Harapan* dealing with the use of drama in expression the Christian message, the first of its kind in the Malaysian Church.

Traditionally, Christian theology has been the monopoly of Christians, especially professional theologians. In the Bible, traditional prophets of God had to give heed to God’s special, unknown “saviors” (like Cyrus, “the Lord’s anointed”). Today, too, new voices of God are speaking through the *rakyat*, but it will take special insight, training, and skill to appropriate these gifts into the heritage of the community. Who are the modern prophets of God? Cartoonists, novelists, trade unionists, intellectuals, nationalists, freedom fighters, journalists—all these and more are the modern voices of God.

Who would act the role of the Dewa, the know-alls—the journalist or the politician? Can the journalist rightly claim that he is the Dewa and his voice is sanctified by his espousal of

the people's cause, when society has become increasingly complex, given the plurality of our society?³⁰

The above quotation is taken from the speech delivered by Haji A Samad Ismail upon recently being conferred a Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by the Kebangsaan University. Journalists are acknowledged as being one of the most forceful voices in society today in Malaysia. There is a call to upgrade journalism in Malaysia to enable them to be mirrors of society with a perception so keen that perceive the problems. There is an urgent need for a Christian voice in the field of journalism and also in the poetic world, as highlighted by Cecil Rajendra.³¹

Just as the prophet Elisha learned painfully that he was not the sole voice in the prophetic ministry but had 7,000 others (1 Kings 19:9—18), so Malaysian Christianity with its mere 800,000 voices must find ways and means to join hands with other members of the 15 million strong Malaysian community. This collaboration must include members of Aliran, journalists, members of consumer associations, and politicians if we are to express our solidarity and carry out the Christian mission of incarnation. It is by being a part of the living people of God through critical involvement that we can continue in our Christian mission and our doing of theology for Malaysians and for Asian.

NOTES

1. *Church Times*, 28 November 1987, p. 8..
2. Kosuke Koyama, *Pilgrim or Tourist*, p.24..
3. SEAJT (*Southeast Asian Journal of Theology*) 16/2 (1975): 8.
4. SEAJT, (1985): 258.
5. Prime Minister's speech at the recent UMNO General Assembly.
6. For example, "Justice & Charity for Home & Abroad." *Aliran*, 7/5 (1987).
7. "Government Was Urged to Uphold Art. 8," *New Straits Times*, 13 July 1987.
8. See "Contemporary Issues in Malaysia Religion," *New Straits Times*, 13-15 July 1987.
9. His publications include the following: *View Points*, (Kuala Lumpur, 1978); *As a Matter of Interest* (Kuala Lumpur, 1981); *The Challenging Times* (Pelanduk); *Pout zeal Awakening* (Pelanduk, 1986).
10. "Citizenship: Open the Door a Bit," *Star*, 24 June 1987.
11. His publications include: *Protector* (Penang, 1979); *Aliran Speaks* (Penang, 1981); *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, (Penang, 1986); *Freedom in Fetters* (Penang, 1986).
12. "Eye-opener on State of Human Rights," *New Straits Times*, 30 March 3 1986.
13. *The Problem of Corruption* (Singapore, 1987).
14. See, "A Longer Book, a Stronger Book," *New Straits Times* 27 March 1987; Patah Sayap Terbang Jua, 1986.
15. *Star*, 3 February 1985.
16. His first work, *Embiyo*, was published in 1965. Since then he has also come out with *Eros and Ashes* (1975), *Bones and Feathers* (1978), *Refugees and Other Despairs* (1980), and *Hours of Assassins* (1983). He contributed regularly to the *Star* and his poems have been translated into a number of languages.
17. *Catholic Asia News*, January 1987, p. 20.

18. See *Asia Beacon*, published by a group of evangelicals since 1986; for an indication of social concerns, see 16/7; 17/3:5—7; 17/4—5; 18/1—2,6:2—4;
19. See also the series, *Christian in Malaysia*, published by the Graduates' Christian Fellowship, Malaysia. The first in the series was entitled *The Christian and Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur, 1986), followed by *Freedom of Religion in Malaysia: The Legal Dimension*, by Pahlip Koh Fong Ngee (1987).
20. See his *The Man of Vision* (Kuala Lumpur, 1986).
21. *Asians' Struggle for Full Humanity*, edited by Virginia Fabella (New York, 1980), pp. 93—94.
22. Sam Amirtham, S. W. Ariarajah, *Ministerial Formation in a Multifaith Milieu* (Geneva, 1986), p. 9.
23. See World Council of Churches, *Dialogue with People of Living Faiths*. Report of the Christian-Muslim Colloquium held at Dhyana Pura, Kuta, Bali, Indonesia, 6—11 December 1986.
24. See *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religion* (Kuala Lumpur, 1984).
25. See *Suara MIRO* 1/1, 1970.
26. See the "Report on Inaugural Consultation, Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia," dated 11 July 1987.
27. See A. A. Abdul Hagg, *Sharing your Faith with a Muslim*, (Bethany Fellowship, Minnesota, 1980); V. Samuel and C. Sugden, *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World: Partnership in Mission in Asia*, (Bangalore, 1983).
28. See ATESEA Occasional papers No.3, *Doing Theology and Peoples' Movements in Asia*, (Singapore, 1986).
29. Kannadasan, *Yesu Kaviam*, (Kalaikkayin, Thirchira Pāli, 1981).
30. A. Samad Ismail, "Journalism Then and Now," *New Sunday Times*, 2 August 1987.
31. *Dove on Fire*, (Geneva, 1987).