

Ecumenical Theological Developments in Asia and the Pacific

An Outline of Themes and Convergences 1987–1992

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Although the writing and publication of contextual or indigenous theology has a long and extensive history in the region—dating from at least as early as the 8th century¹—the last half-century has seen both a great proliferation of Asia-Pacific theologies and many significant developments in focus, resources and methods.² In the last decade there has also emerged a creative convergence in the theological and socio-cultural concerns of our colleagues in Asian and Pacific countries as these have been articulated in the programmes and publications of both regional and national churches, centres and movements. These offer a range of theological reflection which has arisen from Christian responses to human suffering, to cultural and religious resurgence and to social struggles and aspirations.

The following summary attempts to outline these theological themes and publications only as they have become focussed in the work of regional ecumenical agencies and networks in the last few years.

I. ASIA (EAST, SOUTHWEST, SOUTH)

A. The Christian Conference of Asia (Regional Council of Churches, with headquarters at 2 Jordan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong)³

Although occasional articles of theological significance appear in the monthly CCA News, specifically theological writing is published in:

i) CTC BULLETIN (three times a year, Hong Kong) of the Commission for Theological Concerns which since 1977 has promoted a range of national and regional programmes.

In the years 1987–91 prominent themes addressed in both programmes and publications appear in the following issues of CTC BULLETIN:

—Special issue on *Christology* edited by Rienzi Perera (VII.3, December 1987). Focuses upon the question “How does Jesus become Christ for the peoples of Asia?”

—*The Search for a Relevant Ecclesiology*. Papers from the consultation of February 1989 (VIII.1–2 April–May 1989). Salvador Martinez edited this

and the following issues. Identifies some “vital alternatives” for the churches’ life and witness in the Asian context.⁴

—*Dialogue and Mission in Context*. Reports and Biblical Studies (VIII.3, December 1989). Affirms that “dialogue and mission are not conflictual but convergent realities” in a wider, active ecumenism.

—*Creation and the Suffering People of Asia*. Papers from a joint consultation with URM and Women’s Concerns of CCA (IX.1, April 1990). Links the suffering creation with suffering and struggling people, as the context for all commitment to the mission of God.

—*Asian Theology in the 90’s* (IX.2–3, May–December 1990). Papers from a September 1990 consultation which characterize coming theologies as being comprehensive regarding context, decolonizing, universal in recognizing all suffering peoples, non-sexist and wholistic regarding personal and global salvation.

—*Theology and Spirituality of Struggle* (X.1 April 1991). Studies from a national consultation in the Philippines, October 1990 which built on continuing reflection and involvement there.⁵

—*Religion, Power and Politics* (X.2,3, December 1991). Papers and Bible Studies from the workshop held in Thailand in November 1991 presenting religion, power and politics in the history of the church, in Korean and Malaysian contexts, and in theological perspective.

ii) The *Urban Rural Mission* unit of the CCA produces many regular publications, including committee reports, consultation papers, manuals and documentation for organizers/missioners, and also studies of particular issues or situations for urban rural mission.⁶

Integral to almost all other books published by URM are Biblical Studies and Theological Reflections upon the theme of particular issues and programmes.⁷

Biblical and theological reflections in *The Peoples’ Struggle Continues*, the Report of the URM National Co-ordinators’ Meeting, March 1991 (Hong Kong, CCA URM 1991) provide a good example of theological approaches and insights which in many parts of the region arise from and also support urban rural mission engagement. Here, they are presented by Poulouse Mar Poulouse and Kim Yong Bok.

Bp. Poulouse Mar Poulouse (Nestorian, South India) interprets “Discipleship as Identification with the Sufferings of, and presence in the struggles of the People” and then explores the “Significance of the Lord’s Supper for the Peoples’ Movements”. This raises new issues for the fellowship and unity of “the People of God in mission”.⁸ Kim Yong Bok, whose writings have appeared in many CCA publications, discusses here “Peoples’ Participation”, as an Upsurge of Democratic Participation, and

as the Churches Serving the People. The People of Asia are seen by Kim as being both the subject and the context, in both history and mission.⁹

Also published by Urban Rural Mission is a collection of speeches, articles and letters, by Kwok Nai Wang, from the years 1984–1991, *Hong Kong 1997: A Christian Perspective*, 1991, articulates the sentiments of Hong Kong people regarding the future of Hong Kong, with critical appraisals of government, people and Church.

iii) CCA assembly and conference themes have stimulated a range of studies and lecture series which make accessible the work of many contemporary movements in Asian theologies.¹⁰

The Mission of God in the Context of the Suffering and Struggling Peoples of Asia edited by Salvador T. Martinez (Chiang Mai 1988) is a collection of twelve Bible Studies published in preparation for the Asia Mission Conference 1989. A diversity of Biblical approaches explore the themes of Jesus' Nazareth sermon (Luke 4) and the larger themes of jubilee, homeland, and "Christ Among People".

Papers, studies and reports from the Asia Mission Conference itself appear in *Peoples of Asia, People of God* (Osaka, 1990).

The Niles Memorial Lectures from the 9th Assembly in Manila 1990, have been published under the title *Building a Just and Convivial World* (Hong Kong 1991). Toshiki Mogami interprets the concept of conviviality as expressing the image of God in and between persons, and therefore emancipating. Ranjini Rebera presents the obstacles and resources for building "a community of equals", and Levi Oracion contrasts "the emancipation of Christ's liberating power" in solidarity with "the actual poor", with the life-destroying power of present market systems.

B. The Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (Hong Kong)

The conference programmes and publishing which developed into this regional centre, began with the publication of the serial *In God's Image* (quarterly, Hong Kong) in 1982. Since then many occasional publications have also been issued.¹¹ The Centre moved to Seoul, Korea, in 1991.

*We Dare to Dream*¹² is a Collection of 14 articles from Protestant and Catholic women from six Asian countries. The chapters are grouped in three sections. Reworking Theological Themes—Christology, the Church, the Holy Spirit; Reflecting on Asian Realities—Peace and Unification, Human Sexuality, Feminist Consciousness, and Religious Commitment; and Doing Theology as Asian Women—Feminist Theology in India, Korea and the Region.

Associations of theologically trained women have also been formed in countries of northeast, southeast and south Asia, and these have also issued significant publications.¹³ For a most useful overview of these developments and the emerging Women's theology and spirituality, in the region see Chung Hyun Kyung *Struggle to be the Sun Again—Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1990)

Issues of *In God's Image* during the years 1987–1992 have continued the analysis and reflection for women's concerns of earlier years, with a somewhat sharper focus upon life concerns and women stories:

Migrant women; the sex industry and exploitation; bride–burning and dowry issues; living with and as the poor; rape and genital mutilation; women's activism; the sexist Church; militarization; and women's stories. Prominent authors here are e.g. Mi Kung Lee, Matsuri Yayori, J. Tellis Nayak, and Tako Tomiyama.

Articles from the same years which give specifically theological reflection focus on these life concerns, and on:

Women's liturgies; woman–church; women's spirituality; “Feminist theology” in Korea, China, India, the Philippines; reinterpreting bible and doctrine; Goddess traditions as a resource; Women in Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation; and the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Theologians here include e.g., Park Sun Ai, Aruna Gnanadason, Stella Faria, M.J. Mananzan, Elizabeth Tapia, Ahn Sang Nim, Jane Cheui, Kwok Pui Lan, Dulcie Abraham, Aileen Khoo, Prakai Nontawasee, and Yamagouchi Satoko).

C. Programmes for Theology and Cultures in Asia

Since 1923, this Programme has conducted Asia–wide courses each year which give priority to the reclaiming and use of Asian resources in theological education reflection and writing. Younger staff–members of theological schools, seminaries and study centres work in their own locales and in residential seminar–workshops to articulate the (Christian) theological dimensions of their own histories, cultures and socio/religious movements.

Particular emphasis is placed (in publication, library development and teaching) on the collection, exchange and communication of materials from the regions extensive Christian histories and writings, and from Christian participation in contemporary social, religious and political movements.

Along with the regular PTCA *Bulletin* (biannual, Christchurch) annual collections of selected papers (from the seminar–workshops) have been issued on major themes in Asian resources. Recent volumes include:

i) *Doing Theology with Cultures of Asia* (Kyoto 1987) ATESEA Occasional Papers No. 6, edited by Yeow Choo Lak, Singapore, 1988. Includes: “asking fellow Asians for water (of culture) to drink”; history and culture through the eyes of women; culture, technology and power; the long and diverse history of Christian rooting in Asian culture.

ii) *Doing Theology With People’s Symbols and Images* (Yogyakarta 1988) ATESEA Occasional Papers No. 8, edited by Yeow Choo Lak and John C. England, Singapore, 1989. This features symbolisms of land, peace and struggle: of “leisure–sitting”, dance, women in culture and art; of family, death, the Goddess; of Biblical stories of creation and of Asia’s long Christian history.

iii) *Doing Theology with God’s Purpose in Asia* (Hong Kong 1989) ATESEA Occasional Papers No.10, edited by Yeow Choo Lak and John C. England, Singapore 1990. Sub-titled “Towards a New Missiology”, explores theology and God’s purpose for Koreans, Dalit Indians, Filipinos and Taiwanese; for missiology and struggle, mass–media, Christian art, human ecology, and in Asian theologies.

iv) *Doing Theology with the Spirit’s Movement in Asia* (Kosari, Korea 1990), ATESEA Occasional Papers No.11, edited by John C. England and Alan J. Torrance, Singapore, 1991. Theology and church history from the “underside”, in today’s stories, Biblical narratives, early Asian Church history; in Noh drama, peoples’ struggles, primal religion; in women’s stories and suffering, folk–song and rebel movements.

v) The Seminar–Workshop papers for 1991 and 1992 are now about to appear, on the themes of *Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways*—diverse methods being used in constructing Asian theologies, and *Doing Theology with Religious Customs and Festivals in Asia*—discerning theological significance in these for reflection–in–life and for theological education.

II. THE PACIFIC

A. Pacific Conference of Churches Headquarters at Suva, Fiji (P.O. Box 208)

From its formation, the PCC has been a vehicle by which Pacific Churches have sought to express their own identity, autonomy and cooperation, in christian education, theological education, justice and development, communications, mission and unity concerns.¹⁴

Major concerns, both in mission and in theological reflection, have in this period been:

—justice, peace and development programmes, nuclear issues, transnational corporations continuing colonialism, land tenure, and exploitation of the poor. (See e.g. *Pacific Journal of Theology* II. 3, 1990, II. 8, 1992.)

—women and ministry: women’s experiences, sources of patriarchy in Pacific societies, more inclusive curricula, new methods. (see *PJT* II. 3 1990 for reports of special consultations in 1989 and 1990; also II. 4, 1990; II. 7, 1992.)

—spiritual formation in ministry: a priority for most of the eleven member schools of the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, and of member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, (See *PJT* II. 5 1991).

—doing local and contextual theology in the Pacific, (See *PJT* II. 4, 1990; II. 5, 1991).

Following the earlier stances taken by the PCC on tourism (since 1961), on a Nuclear Free Pacific (since 1972), on aid and development (since 1973), on national independence (1976), and on trans-national corporations (1980 on), the 6th Assembly of the PCC in August 1991 brought together commitments on militarization, nuclear testing and dumping and decolonization in a wholistic understanding of salvation and liberation. This included a turning from dependence and passivity, to the nurture of Pacific Islanders own faith and hope and a stress on the strength of “smallness” (in both the Bible and in Pacific experience) when this is in solidarity and unity for a common mission.¹⁵

B. Fuller theological studies on such issues have been published in e.g.

—G. Trompf (ed.) *The Gospel is Not Western* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, Books 1987). These papers contrast the earlier impositions of foreign cultures with the present importance of local beliefs and practices and provide many examples of liberation theologies (untouched by South American writings).

—J.R. Chandran (ed.) *The Cross and the Tanoa—Gospel and Culture in the Pacific* (Suva, Lotu Pacifica, 1988) In this collection the Gospel is shown to affirm, enrich, challenge and transform all aspects of Pacific cultures, in a continuing dialectic. The presence of Christ in the Pacific brings a wholistic experience of sky, sea and land and the justice of God’s Kingdom.

The Pacific Journal of Theology (P.O. Box 2426, GB Suva, Fiji) in recent years has published a range of articles also dealing with such themes. The article “Theology for Time and the Times” by Kilion Mafaufau¹⁶ is a good example. “Pacific Time” is here presented as “the full time... time for all”, a time to slow down programmes of development and to discover the fullness of people-time.¹⁷

*C. The Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service
Goroka (P.O. Box 571) Papua New Guinea.*

Now a fully ecumenical organization for research, publication and

education. The Institute publishes the quarterly journal *Catalyst*, and the bi-annual *Point*.¹⁸

Issues of *Point* in particular have provided significant volumes of theological reflection. The major themes in recent years include: Christ in Melanesia; The Church and Adjustment Movements; Exploring Theological Issues; New Horizons for Melanesian Women; three volumes edited by Brian Schwarz in 1985, concerning ministry, cultures and religions in Melanesia; and two edited by Gernot Fugmann in 1986 concerning indigenous church, ethics and development.

Since 1987, volumes of studies have appeared on *Religion in Irian Jaya* (12, 1988); *Law and Custom in Melanesia* (13, 1989); *Human Sexuality in Melanesian Cultures* (14, 1990) and *Melanesian Models for Brotherhood* (16, 1991).

These and later issues all present the opportunities and challenges raised for theology by a serious dialogue with the traditional and modern Melanesian context. The standard collection of work by Melanesian theologians—on context, village, Christian experience and church—is still: *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader* edited by John D'Arcy May. (*Point*, Series 8, 1985).¹⁹

III. PACIFIC ECUMENICAL FORUM (PEF)

An alliance of churches in Asia, the Pacific Islands and the west of North America, was initiated by the World Council of Churches in 1981. In the emerging activities and reflection of this network, it is possible to see a creative convergence for the whole Asia–Pacific region, both in mission engagement and in theological understanding. The Christian Conference of Asia and the Pacific Council of Churches are constitutive partners in the Forum and provide minimum secretarial and publishing facilities for it. Two years preparatory work issued in the first meeting, December 1990, for which the objectives were:

- to establish and affirm common identity as people of the Pacific;
- to explore common issues of JPIC in the Pacific;
- to reflect together theologically and share hopes and vision;
- to develop concrete steps of working together in the Pacific.

Publications of the Forum have included:

i) *The Tightening Grip* edited by Clement John (CCA, Hong Kong, 1990). This introduces the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation Initiative (USA, Japan, ASEAN, Australasia, North America), as a converging US–Japanese Imperialism and documents this process fully. Here the concerns are summarized for discussion at the coming Pacific Ecumenical Forum.

ii) *The Pacific Ecumenical Forum* edited by Erich Weingartner for the CCA, PCC and NCCUSA members (Canada and Hong Kong 1991). This

presents the regional and country-specific concerns and resources which the Churches wish to stress in working together for the autonomy, self-development, and common action of Pacific peoples. Outlines of the historical contexts are provided (pp. 7–10, 12–16), along with Bible Studies (pp. 17–18, 22–24), Press Releases and Working-Group Reports (pp. 28–37).

The Report on *The Role of the Churches and Theology*²⁰ stresses the central task of discerning theologies that emerge from experiences of struggle and transformation. This means for theology not just a change of language or context, but a different process bringing together the resources of the Bible and peoples' lives within an ecumenical commitment to justice, peace and environment: a critical transformational theology—of land, ocean, struggle, solidarity—in community.

IV. THE ECUMENICAL ASSOCIATION OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS (EATWOT)

This is a larger network of which Asian and Pacific colleagues are also a part, and this should be briefly mentioned here. The Association has co-ordinators for Africa, Asia, Latin America and for U.S. minorities, holds regular regional consultations, has fostered a series of new church history projects, and publishes widely.²¹

Amongst other publications by the Association, five symposia volumes have been issued from major EATWOT Assemblies (since 1976) the most recent being *Third World Theologies—Commonalities and Divergencies* edited by K. C. Abraham (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1990).

The principal journal of the Association is *Voices from the Third World* (biannual, Colombo) edited by Tissa Balasuriya. Recent issues have included articles by Asian theologians Sun Ai Lee Park, Aruna Gnanadason, Carlos Abesamis, Lee Chung Hee, Aloysius Pieris, and M. Amaladoss.

It is possible to see in this selection of materials from regional ecumenical agencies and programmes many of the creative theological initiatives which are now shaping Christian presence and understanding in Asia and the Pacific. Aotearoa New Zealand Christians have long been actively involved in these, but the present challenge and opportunity is for a much fuller partnership with colleagues in the Asia Pacific region because we now share common social struggles and are engaged in a similar reconstruction of cultural identities and of contextual theologies.

NOTES

1. See J.C. England "The Earliest Christian Writings in Asian Countries" *PTCA Bulletin* 4.1 April 1991.
2. J.C. England "The Range and Intentions on Asian Theologies" *Inter-Religio* 14, 1988.

3. For recent history see Clement John *Seoul to Manila: The CCA 1985-1990*, Hong Kong 1990.
4. See also *Tradition and Innovation—A Search for a Relevant Ecclesiology in Asia* from CTC-CCA, Singapore 1983.
5. See e.g. *Theology, Politics and Struggle* edited by F.V. Carino, *Tugon* Special Issue VI.3, 1986.
6. Particular theological concerns have issued in volumes (all published in Hong Kong) such as: *Theology and Ideology in Asian Peoples' Struggle* edited by G. Ninan 1985. *Theology and Struggle* beginning a series in 1988.
7. See e.g. *Set Free to Struggle for Freedom* edited by Barbara Weatherspoon, Hong Kong 1985 pp. 16-51.
8. *The Peoples' Struggle Continues*, pp. 38-48.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 69-88.
10. See e.g. *A Call to Vulnerable Discipleship: Niles Memorial Lectures, Bible Studies and Testimonies* for the 7th CCA Assembly, Bangalore 1981. Singapore 1982. *To Set at Liberty Those Who are Oppressed: Niles Memorial Lectures, Bible Studies and Testimonies* from the 8th CCA Assembly, Seoul 1985. Singapore 1987.
11. The first major volume was *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from the Singapore Conference*, November 1987. AWRCCCT, Hong Kong 1989.
12. *We Dare to Dream—Doing Theology as Asian Women* edited by Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park. AWRCCCT and EATWOT, Hong Kong 1989.
13. See e.g. *For the Establishment of Feminist Theology in Asia* Seoul, Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT) (Seoul 1984); *Theology of Humanhood—Women's Perspectives* edited by Aruna Gnanadason (Delhi, ISPCK 1986); *Women and Religion: A Collection of Essays, Personal Histories and Contextualized Liturgies* edited by Mary John Mananzan (Manila, St. Scholastica's College 1988).
14. For history of the Conference see:
Charles W. Forman *The Voice of Many Waters—The Story of the Life and Ministry of the Pacific Conference of Churches in the last 25 years*. Suva, Lotu Pasifica, 1986. Charles W. Forman "The Pacific Ecumenical Scene" *Pacific Journal of Theology* (Quarterly, Suva) II.4 1990 pp. 51-68.
15. *PJT* II.6 1991 pp.91-96.
16. *PJT* II.6 1991 pp.22-29.
17. c.f. A Havea on "coconut time/coconut theology" where resources are able to grow to "fullness for everybody" *ibid.* p. 28.
18. See Darrell L. Whiteman "The Melanesian Institute—A Venture in Interdisciplinary and Ecumenical Cooperation" in *Religious Cooperation in the Pacific Islands* edited by Kerry James and Akuila Yabaki. Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific 198N.
19. May has now published his study of Pacific Christology, eschatology and pneumatology in *Christus Initiator: Theologie im Pazifik* (Theologie InterKulturell 4, Dusseldorf, Patmos Verlag 1990).
20. *Pacific Ecumenical Forum* 1991, pp. 36-37.
21. For history and documents for EATWOT's first decade, see *From Dar Ee Salaam to Mexico—Third World Theologians in Dialogue*. Special Issue of *Voices from the Third World* XI.9 1988.