Landas 24:1 (2010) 19–30

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE

A Contextual Theology for Asia

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Asian Gifts

A gift is—like a charism—always also a source of commitments. The Asian Church has many gifts to give—and, accordingly, many commitments to honour. I will focus on two such gifts mentioned by the postsynodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* proclaimed by Pope John Paul II:

(i) The Saviour was born in Asia.[1]

(ii) Asian traditions have developed a rich spiritual and religious life.[2]

Asia is, so to speak, the first born of the children of the continents, born into the good news, and full of spiritual values that can teach so much to ideologies of materialism. A contextual theology for Asia for the 21st century will have to consider the gifts the Asian Church can bring to the World Church; any gift is always embedded in a framework

[1] *Ecclesia in Asia* 5, hereafter referred to as EA.

[2] EA 4, 6.

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of interactions and mutual obligations and expectations (an insight from Marcel Mauss' famous work *Le don*[3]). A contextual theology for Asia can fruitfully work with these two fundamental gifts—the gift of welcoming the Saviour and the gift of immaterial values.

The Nature of Contextual Theologies

Contextual theologies are based on identity issues. They respect the local identity of human beings who are, at the same time, part of a bigger context that is identity giving. Basically, this means that contextual theologies require a sense of "Self" both on a local and on a translocal level. The theological work of a contextual theologian is "identity labour," which is the effort of working with local sources of human identity against the background of more universal sources of identity. Human identity is shaped by "commitments"—commitments that people enter and commitments that people experience. These commitments offered by identity-giving groups have a cognitive, an affective, and a conative dimension—they are accompanied by beliefs and convictions, by emotions and feelings, and by a moment of striving and moving, a sense of direction and development. Contextual theologies honour the local construction of identities—they touch upon a sense of "Self" (self-esteem, self-appreciation, self-knowledge, self-understanding) and thus contribute to local identity labour (the labour necessary to cultivate, maintain, stabilize and defend local identities).

In order to develop a contextual theology of Asia I will briefly mention the idea of contextual theology. What theologians have come to realize especially in the decades since the opening of the Second Vatican Council is the large extent to which theology has been shaped by the times and the cultures in which it has been articulated. Theology was formerly understood as the reflection in faith of two theological "sources" or "*loci theologici*": Scripture and Tradition. Today, theology also considers *present human experience* as a theological source or "*locus theologicus*." And the present human experience is always a local one.

[3]Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: WW Norton, 1990).

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This is why we can define "contextual theology" as a way of doing theology that takes into account two things:

(i) It takes into account the *experience of the past*, that is, the experience of our ancestors in the faith recorded in Scripture and the doctrinal tradition both as a source and as a parameter of our Christian life and Christian theologizing.

(ii) It takes into account the *experience of the present*, or in other words, the (specifically) local *context* in which Christians of a concrete time and place find themselves. This context might be a particular experience that a person or group of persons is having at the present time (e.g., a village in Indonesia struggling to recover from a natural disaster), the culture—that network of meanings, values and behaviors which gives shape to a people's world—in which an individual or a community lives, or the social location (e.g., a poor Black community in Jamaica) out of which an individual or a community theologizes, or the world changed by the forces of globalization, migration or secularization that pushes Christians to reevaluate their faith.

What is new, therefore, about contextual theology is that theology is conceived as a dialogue—or as American theologian David Tracy would put it, a *mutually critical* dialogue between the experiences of the past and the experience of the present. Both kinds of experiences are normative, and theology is done by allowing our experience today to be measured, judged, interpreted and critiqued by the wisdom found in the classical sources, the "classics" of the Christian tradition, and by allowing those "classics" to be measured, judged, interpreted and critiqued by the happenstances in our lives, by our cultural values, by our struggles and by the epochal changes that are shaping our world.[4]

[4]David Tracy, *The Analagical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (NY: Crossroads, 1981).

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A contextual theology for Asia will enter into this mutually critical dialogue in three steps:

(i) by trying to understand the dialogue partner, i.e., the translocal sources of Christian faith;

(ii) by identifying the local sources of human identity;

(iii) by mutually challenging and shaping the translocal through the local and the local through the translocal.

Doing Contextual Theology for Asia

I would like to develop the two main points concerning the unique contribution of the Asian context to the world community—the fact that the Saviour entered the world through Asia and that Asia can rely on a vast treasure of immaterial values.

The Saviour entered the world through Asia

A contextual theology for Asia will work with the blessing and burden of "the primacy of the welcome." Asia welcomed Jesus, the Christ, first, and he spent his whole life in Asia. This is truly an identity-giving statement which says something about the value of *hospitality* in the Asian context. Asia has provided the human context for the incarnation. A contextual theology for Asia then will have to develop a special "ethics of memory," not forgetting the Asian roots of Christianity. An ethics of memory is a code of remembering—what must be remembered, what must not be forgotten.

A contextual theology for Asia could see itself invited to consider the story of Esau (Gen. 27–33) in the light of the "primacy of the welcome." Asia welcomed the Savour first, but then it seems that the gospel has been translated into theology based on European philosophical backgrounds. And now Asia that provided the earthly home for the Saviour needs to reappropriate the good news. Esau lost the blessing as the first born because he did not recognize its value (Gen. 25:31ff) and Jacob was blessed as the first born (Gen. 27:23–30).

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There are moments of greed and power in this story, moments only too well known in the framework of contextual theologies. There arose a need for reconciliation and dialogue—and this reconciliation (Gen. 33:4) was only possible because of Jacob's wrestling with an angel (Gen. 32:21–33). Jacob was the one who did not honour the local context by buying the rights of the first born from his brother who (in his way by selling his identity) did not honour his local roots. Jacob was afraid of his brother. And it was in this situation of fear and alienation and a recognition for reconciliation that Jacob wrestled with the angel. The situation of this fight is rich—it could be used as a special way of looking at a contextual theology for Asia, a theology that recognizes the need to enter a dialogue between the local and the translocal. It is this fight that prepared the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau: Jacob was transformed by the fight and Jacob recognized the identity of his brother (Gen. 33:3).

Let us read this fight as an introduction into "doing contextual theology" as a mutually transformative dialogue between the local and the translocal. Looking at this fight we should note the following points that are relevant for contextual theologies:

a) Jacob wrestles alone. Contextual theologies have to fight their own fights and not "by substitution."

b) Jacob wrestles throughout night to the dawn. Remember the night is an image of the transformation and disruption in mystical theology. A "night of wrestling" resembles the experience of exile, the experience of estrangement, of an intermediate stage between a "no longer" (the old orientation being suspended) and a "not yet" (the new orientation not yet having gained a foothold). Contextual theologies are transformative and also open to transformation. As liminal experiences, they balance their fragile equilibrium between the local and the translocal, an equilibrium that needs to be constantly renegotiated.

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c) Jacob's left hip is injured and he limps after the fight. The mutually critical and transformative dialogue between the local and the translocal exposes one's vulnerability and wounds. A wounded person can become a wounded healer. Contextual theologies are, in this sense, not "triumphant" and "powerful," they are "wounded theologies," wounded by this sense of broken identities that are constantly being transformed.

d) Jacob holds tightly on to his opponent until he can wrest something from him. Contextual theologies must be stubborn in holding on to the dialogue even in times of difficulty. They are about focus and pertinacity, about endurance and a clear insight into the issues at stake, both local and translocal. As the document *Ecclesia in Asia* had put it: "Attention to local needs is legitimate and indispensable, but communion requires that the particular Churches remain open to one another and collaborate with one another, so that in their diversity they may preserve and clearly manifest the bond of communion with the universal Church."[5]

e) Jacob forces his opponent to bless him ("bene-dicere") and thus the opponent ceases to be an opponent and is transformed into friendship and hospitality. This seems to be a crucial point for contextual theologies, especially in the context of "lost firstbornship." There is a need to overcome opposition, enmity and even a sense of competition.

f) After the wrestling match Jacob gets a new name from his opponent turned friend. Theologizing changes us. Do not allow yourself to remain unchanged by important theological issues you wrestle with. Theologizing is self-mutation, working hard on oneself.

[5]EA 26.

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Jacob is given a new name and identity by his opponent who has power over him. There is this sense of humility attached to contextual theologies—humility understood as "having the feet on the 'humus', the ground." Now it is only natural that we do not want to give power over us to the translocal context (or to the local context, depending on the perspective)—but this is the message.

g) Jacob does not find out the name of his adversary who remains an enigma. This is sometimes taken to mean God or the angel. A curious asymmetry—Jacob receives a new name but does not get to know the name of the adversary turned ally. This can mean that no local context can be fully understood ("individuum est ineffabile!"), and it can also mean "The gospel can never be fully understood on a local level." There is a moment of openness and ineffability, a moment of mystery which seems to be of special importance for contextual theologies. In contextual theologies, there is a need to recognise openness and non-closure.

The story of Esau seems to be pertinent for the Asian context. Jacob was transformed by the fight and Jacob recognized the identity of his brother—this is what contexual theology is about: transformation and recognition of identity. A contexual theology for Asia will have to enter a mutually critical dialogue, a "fight" in order to seek reconciliation after having lost the "primacy of the first welcome." This wrestling would mean to look for possible ways of communicating Jesus to the Asian world, as Teacher of Wisdom, Healer, Liberator, Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One.[6] The great question now facing the Church in Asia is *how* to share with our Asian brothers and sisters what we treasure as the gift containing all gifts,

[6]EA 20.

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namely, the Good News of Jesus Christ[7]—and this sharing involves a moment of wrestling as described.

Asia can rely on a vast treasure of immaterial values

A second key element of a contextual theology for Asia is the fact that Asia has so much to offer in terms of a rich spiritual tradition, a treasure of immaterial values. An important contribution to the construction of "Self" in the Western world brought about by Christianity was the discovery of "interiority" as a major source of identity. Now, the interesting point is that Asia can provide sources of understanding interiority independent from Graeco-Roman philosophies. The Asian spiritual traditions—with their insights into silence, into inwardness, into meditation, into moulding the soul, into a "sacramental world view" where the visible is a symbol for something invisible—have so much to offer to make sense of human interiority. A contextual theology for Asia can contribute to "an inner reading of the world," to an immaterial interpretation of the material and hence can deepen the sense of human interiority. On the other hand, the Christian idea of interiority can find a well prepared soil in Asia.

I have mentioned Margalit's idea of identity-giving groups. A contextual theology for Asia will have to honour the Asian profile of such identity-giving groups. It will also have to protect that. This is not a given. Maybe we have entered a third stage in the construction of contextual theologies. In a first stage, the beginnings of an understanding of a truly global Church, people recognized the importance of the local context as an element in the construction of theologies. In the second stage, the heights of postcolonial discourse and its hermeneutics of suspicion, people tended to develop (maybe in the enthusiasm of discovering the possibilities of local theologies) a sense of the primacy of the local context over the translocal challenges.

[7]EA 19.

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In the third stage, in an age of globalization, people need to be reminded of the wealth and value of their local traditions and identity sources. A contextual theology for Asia must recognize the importance of non-American, non-European, truly Asian sources of identity. Contextual theologies can only develop against the background of "self-confidence," "self-knowledge," "self-appreciation," and "self-esteem." And this concept of Self is nourished by an understanding of commitments and a specific set of "beings" and "doings"—nourished also by the above mentioned ethics of memory.

Spiritual Resilience

A contextual theology for Asia could be characterized by the challenge to maintain spiritual resilience. In times of global materialism, in times of a danger to underestimate the local context, in times of spiritual forgetfulness and religious illiteracy, I would encourage thinking about spiritual resilience as a special responsibility for a contextual theology for Asia, honouring the rich spiritual resources that can be found in the Asian traditions.

The capacity to deal with strokes of fate in times of crisis is called "resilience." In light of the situation of contextual theologies as "wrestling," of the threatening of local identities through forces of globalization, the art of showing resilience to the materialism of the times seems especially important. Asian spiritual treasures can serve as basis for spiritual resilience.

To use a well-known example: resilience is necessary in times of change, such as the Babylonian exile of the people of Israel. Chapter 29, verses 4–23 of the Book of Jeremiah ("Letter to the Exiles") asks the exiles to build houses and to live in them, to cultivate gardens and to eat the fruit these bring forth (v. 5). They are requested to make the best of the situation they find themselves in, not to look at their exile as a transitional state but as a place to live in, where they will find new roots and provide for a future home. Growth and development should therefore be possible and are certainly desirable even in a state of crisis and transition. Only then are the people promised hope and

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salvation, a change and return. The ability to perceive a situation not as a provisional one, which one should escape, but as a condition which might become permanent and enable one to grow, is closely connected with the ability to recover.

Contemporary studies on resilience mention three main factors that enhance robustness after the experience of loss and deprivation and are key to the construction of spiritually resilient contextual theologies in Asia:

(i) internal factors of resilience: factors that are known to enhance resilience include, for instance, an attitude towards life that minimises the "fear of change," that helps individuals to look after themselves and to plan their lives aiming towards the future.

(ii) external factors strengthening resilience that are dependent on social structures and exterior circumstance: nobody is likely to deny that a functioning system of social security and a functioning health system strengthen resilience; it also seems obvious that a company is capable of developing a culture that is beneficial for resilience. The importance of these factors for contextual theologies must not be underestimated. Human development has to be seen as a moral and social question[8] and at the same time the immaterial commitments can be tested by their "cash value" for the poorest of the poor, by a preferential love of the poor.[9] Spiritual resilience is strengthened if there was really the realization of an option for the poor. Social resilience is dependent on institutions (these may foster an atmosphere of creativity and pluralism and strengthen the ability to cooperate);

[8]EA 32.

[9]EA 34.

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> it has to be translated into political structures (these may encourage individual initiative and provide social systems that minimise risks) and fostered in a culture (by educating humans for "agency").

Unlike external factors strengthening resilience, internal factors are dependent on the individuals themselves. These factors include the above mentioned sense of control and self-control, a sense of direction and aim. Internal factors concern spiritual attitudes, mental capacities and preconditions. I would therefore like to propose the term "spiritual resilience" to refer to robustness that is dependent on the inner attitudes, the non-material sources of identity of people. Spiritual resilience therefore relates to factors within humans themselves and depends on attitudes, convictions, an individual's views and styles of cognition. These factors are also important in the outline of the resilient personality. A resilient person is characterized by a number of specific character traits, including creativity, the capacity for suffering, self-knowledge, self-confidence, the capacity to learn, the ability to make friends and the ability to find his way in life. These traits are also constitutive for the capacity to do contextual theology. Spiritual resilience leads to a richer interior life, an interior life that is capable of suggesting alternatives to the status quo, and can therefore be shown to strengthen resilience. Resilience can be strengthened by building up a rich internal life and thus "inner riches," which allow for a certain independence from the external world. A rich internal life is thus created that enables humans to cope with difficult situations, as many intellectuals have noticed in difficult circumstances.

Spiritual resilience aims at increasing our inner strength. This means strengthening those inner resources that are largely independent of external circumstances, as Viktor Frankl has pointed out in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, a key text for the study of resilience.[10] This is where I see a major contribution of Asian contextual theologies—paying attention to the factors that strengthen spiritual resilience. The

[10]Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2006).

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growth and formation of the soul is a question of controlling it. It is important to possess regularity and a sense of moderation, a sense of strictness with oneself and the willingness to make sacrifices in order to become less dependent on external circumstances. The growth of the soul will then lead to the strength of the soul.

By strengthening the sense of the spiritual, contextual theologies from Asia can be both authentic and relevant—they can contribute to the signs of the times, and they can offer remedies for the crisis that we face. And by being authentic and relevant, contextual theologies live up to the ethical standards of our time and avoid a trap into which contextual theologies sometimes fall—the trap of not being understood beyond the local context. The mutually critical dialogue exemplified in Jacob's wrestling ensures the standards of relevance and comprehensibility. Contextual theologies are ultimately not about power, but about trust. In the words of *Ecclesia in Asia*: "The words of Jesus reassure the Church in Asia: 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom' (Lk. 12:32). Those who believe in Christ are still a small minority in this vast and most populous continent. Yet far from being a timid minority, they are lively in faith, [and] full of the hope and vitality which only love can bring."[11]

[11]EA 50.

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