Landas 25 (2011) 37–55

SOME PRE-NOTES TO DOING THEOLOGY ON MAN, SOCIETY AND HISTORY IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT*

Catalino G. Arévalo, S.J.

By way of a rather personal contribution to your deliberations, I would like simply to make a few seemingly disparate points which, though they take some tentative positions, have no pretensions to being anything but points of departure for discussion. "Seemingly disparate:" I believe that when seen together they do converge and have a certain coherence.

First, some remarks along methodological lines:

1. In a note, well-known to many of you, which he wrote "On 'Asian Theological Reflection'," contemplating "the task of constructing an Asian theology," Father Antonio Lambino begins with the point that "it will not be achieved … through the direct formulation of theological principles 'in the Asian way'."[1] Applying the current

*This article is constituted of excerpts from a paper given at the consultation on Theological Education for Christian Ministry in Asia, Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia, Manila, March 13–21, 1977, published later under the title, "Some Prenotes to 'Doing Theology' on Man, Society and History in the Asian Context," in *Loyola Papers* 9 (1977): 123–139.

[1]Antonio B. Lambino, "On 'Asian Theological Reflection'," in *Approaches to Christian Decision, Loyola Papers* 4 (Quezon City, Metro Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1976), 71–75, especially 72.

https://publications.lst.edu/

distinction between theological principles and theological imperatives, he proposes that what the "urgency" of the present moment in Asian theological reflection calls for is the formulation of imperatives rather than principles. "An imperative," he writes,

> is born of the interaction between principle and the actual human situation. The imperative is characterized by a greater "contingency" of "modifiability" because of its closer dependence on the sociological, economic, political, etc. factors of the concrete historical situation. When these contingent factors change, the imperative also changes with them.

Though the language of "principles" and "imperatives" seems to be especially related to the field of Christian ethics, the point is applicable on a broader scale. The question it raises, I think, is whether we embark on too ambitious (too imperial?) a project when we try to bring into being a full-grown Asian theology (or Asian theologies) with some large framework or scheme of reflection as the principal objective of the construct, or work instead "from the ground up" by formulating imperatives, one by one, in the face of the concrete demands of a situation.

This would seem to be especially relevant in reflecting theologically on the themes which emerge under the general rubric, *Man in Society and History*. I believe there are major frameworks already drawn up (political theologies, the theology of hope, the various development and/or liberation theologies and the like) from other—even First World—contexts. It is not necessarily being too dependent on "foreign constructs" to accept such previous frameworks, *by way of working hypothesis*, and by asking very concrete questions raised from within real situations Asian Christians and Christian communities face, in order to allow our own larger themes (and our own major framework) to emerge little by little.

Edicio de la Torre, S.V.D., who gave what was considered the main paper in the *Theology in Action Workshop*[2] here in Manila some years

[2]"The Christian Participation in the Struggle for Liberation," in Jae Shik & John England, eds., *Theology in Action*, A Workshop Report, Manila, September 1–12, 1972 (Tokyo: EACC, 1972), 33–39.

https://publications.ist.edu/

ago, used to speak of "guerrilla-style" theology, one which does not immediately look for a larger and "finished" theological construct, but is willing to take a piece-meal (even a "hit and run") approach, thus building more realistically, less academically but ultimately more solidly, in trying to create an Asian theology.

2. The second point I raise grows out from the first. I cannot be rid of the feeling (if that is all it is) that the main focus of Asian theological reflection in our present age—for most of post-colonial Asia, at any rate—will be found in the general area of the theologies of development and (especially) "liberation." Certainly the joint Dar-es-Salaam statement of Third World theologians is a piece of liberation theology, even if liberation theology "with a vengeance," spanning now three entire continents. A cursory reading of theological journals from Latin America, Africa and various sections of Asia will suffice to show the predominance of this theme.[3]

It will cause no surprise when we note that liberation theologians especially in Argentina[3] have developed, over some five or six years, an approach to the theology of liberation through the theme of *el pueblo*, the people, which bears remarkable similarities to the Asian approaches of both Dr. C. S. Song and Dr. D. Preman Niles.[4] This in no way reflects on the originality of the suggestions put forward by the Asian theologians just cited; in fact, for me anyway, it is a remarkable point of convergence—which is a source rather of rejoicing, for obvious reasons. After all, the Christian heart of an Asian and a Latin American will, despite large dissimilarities, when placed in similar human predicaments, register basic "coincidences," be moved by similar reactions, seek somewhat similar responses, articulate similar

[3]José Miguez Bonino, "The Theology of Liberation," in *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 65–69 (chap. 4). "The Church does not offer a model which it has itself invented; it does not impose a system from above, but it accompanies the people, communicating the liberating contents derived from the kerygma" (68).

[4]D. Preman Niles, "Toward a Framework for Doing Theology in Asia," Background Paper I, CTECMA, March 1977. See also Choan-seng Song, "The New China and Salvation History: A Methodological Inquiry," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* XV/2 (1974): 55ff.

https://publications.let.edu/

aspirations and yearnings. They will recognize these in some major symbols and themes in the Bible and the Christian theological tradition, because these furnish us with our common Christian horizon.

But what then shall be *Asian* in this theology? One might sound facetious by saying simply: "its rootedness in the concrete Asian situations." That nevertheless would in fact be the true answer. It would seem to me that the questions should be articulated precisely as they arise (with the language and image and all the emotional overtones) out of the Asian experience, and that the imperatives which are discerned should be expressed as people who are the subjects of this experience in fact believe their Christian faith should be expressed in deed and life: as their Christian faith commits them to respond to this experience and the reflection and discernment which follow from the experience. To me the operative words here are "just as they arise out of their experience" and "as they in fact believe their Christian faith commits them."

You will see that I am not asking anything very different from what the Theology in Action Workshops asked, from what Ian Fraser asks in his (to me quite stimulating) book, *The Fire Runs*,[5] which is something of a *summula* on this "close to the ground" approach. I would only ask insistently that Asian Christians be allowed to experience and to respond to the realities they encounter without being decisively programmed to a response already worked out for them by some ideological or theological construct coming from Euro-American, Latin-American or African contexts, but as much as possible, the response should arise from their own struggling with the Scriptures and their reflections on pertinent data from Christian history and experience (Tradition).[6]

---

[5]Ian M. Fraser, *The Fire Runs: God's People Participating in Change* (London: SCM Press, 1975).

[6]This *freedom*, on the part of "indigenous theological projects, to pick and to choose" seems to me an essential element in the whole matter of creating indigenous theologies. One cannot eliminate existing horizons of Christian theology in other parts of the world, in other areas of the Church's existence and life. But one may not allow them to dictate one's own concerns, approaches,

https://publications.let.edu/

A large order, and some might think a naïve and impossible one. For want it or not, the "programming apparatus" (mainly ideological and theological constructs) is already very much in operation, no matter which way we turn. Yet must not the effort be made? Would any genuinely Asian theology (of liberation or any other concern) be possible without such an effort? Here I think we possibly have one cardinal and highly neuralgic point for discussion, which it might be quite profitable to take.

3. Experience is indispensable in the effort to construct a genuinely Asian theology of liberation. We cannot insist on this sufficiently. This is the first condition for "contextualization," and perhaps many among us have failed to get onto the first solid step of a genuinely contextualized theology precisely because we have not been able to allow this experience to enter significantly into our lives. A merely token experience ("two weeks in the squatter areas") will not do; what is called for is something that *internalizes* the lot of people caught in situations of poverty and hopelessness, growing in the consciousness of the total reality in which their life-situation is inserted, and facing it (both the darker and lighter sides of it), trying to cope with it in some measure, trying to do something about changing it, "struggling for liberation."

In our Christian communities in the Philippines at this moment, there exists among a not insignificant segment of "church people" an effort, which we cannot sufficiently praise and encourage, to enter truly into this world of the poor, the suffering, the deprived. The 1974 FABC statement speaks of those "who have a special call from God to identify with the poor" and to share in their struggle for a new and more human society.[7] Surely the summons of the Spirit of God lies behind these efforts at solidarity with the poor and inspires these

---

bases of perception, sensibility, imagery, etc. John Mbiti says pretty much the same thing in several essays, e.g., in the paper which I quoted at length in my foreword to Leonardo Mercado's book, *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word University, 1975), xii–xiv.

[7]Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, Statements of the First Plenary Assembly, Taipei, 1974 (Office of the Secretary-General, FABC, P. O. Box 1160, Manila, Philippines).

https://publications.let.edu/

vocations in the Church. For who of us will doubt that this effort at solidarity and even identification with the poor is *one very genuine expression* of living out the Gospel for our time and our place?

Granting all this, we must say however that sheer experience is not enough, certainly not enough for the theological enterprise and those whose task is to engage in it. There has to be a moment which follows after this, at least in the "theological community." Not simply the moment of understanding or even conceptualization, but the moment of discernment and of judgment which precedes responsible decision and commitment.[8]

Is there too much (at present anyway) of unexamined acceptance and support of ideological perspectives out of either a sense of "being established" or, on the other hand, out of a sense of moral outrage, but not enough of the really difficult effort of hard-nosed multidisciplinary research, analysis, step-by-step planning, as well as the exercise of "utopian imagination" in all this? Can we learn from the (admittedly rather paralyzing) investigation done by, as well as the lines of further study proposed by, the sociologist Peter Berger in his book, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*?[9]

The examination of ideological analyses and constructs (mostly of Marxist provenance) which we so readily assume into contemporary theologies of liberation has to be undertaken with all possible seriousness, and it has to be not only a mesmerized study of the concepts there given, but a study too of their verification or non-verification in our concrete situations.

---

[8]Cf. the remarks of Father Lambino, "Doing Theology in the Philippine Context," *Loyola Papers* 9 (Quezon City, Metro Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1977).

[9]Peter Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1974). Cf. Horacio de la Costa, Antonio B. Lambino & Catalino G. Arévalo, *Faith, Ideologies and Christian Options*, *Loyola Papers* 7/8 (Quezon City, Metro Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1976), 16–17, 88–90.

https://publications.let.edu/

Moreover, we have to have the sufficient sense of theological responsibility to see what is biblical language and Christian "consequence-drawing" from Christian teaching, and what is ideological language and concept—and the possibly over-facile transition from one to the other, the possibly uncritical assumption that one set of words means the same realities, equivalently, as the *other* set of words. That, for instance, the Gospel theme of God being on the side of the poor, the widow and the orphan means the same thing as "God being in favor of the class struggle."[10]

May I suggest that this is perhaps the most demanding and most crucial area for the theological reflection on "man, history and society" in Asia today? I might point out in passing that, at least among the more "left-ward activist" but also in many ways the more genuinely committed segments of Christian communities in our country, this suggestion of a more sustained and empirically hard-nosed probing is taken as a sign of non-involvement, of bourgeois vacillation, of ivory-tower academicism, and even a heartless betrayal of the cries and anguish of our people? Yet, unless we wish to yield to irresponsibility, must this kind of reflection not be done as our grave responsibility, as theologians and as ministers to our Christian people, lest we be as blind men passionately leading the blind?

But note that this effort of study and reflection cuts both ways. We have to apply critically the questions raised by people like Juan Luis Segundo in his *Liberation of Theology*[11] to our reigning and operative theological constructions also. As Segundo does, we must project the questions Marxism asks, and we must take these questions with utter seriousness. We must undertake the equally hard-nosed effort to make our reading of the Scriptures and Christianity, to see the

[10]A question: is there at least a semi-conscious "glissement of vocabularies" operative in the dialogue between Marxism-Maoism and Christian liberation theology? Or is this "glissement" really logical and justifiable, as Juan Luis Segundo's work argues?

[11]Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976).

https://publications.let.edu/

(liberalist) "ideological infiltrations" it has suffered and to see how our conscious or unconscious ideological stances and commitments have influenced (even vitiated) our own understanding of and living out of the Christian faith.[12]

The missionary enterprise in Asia, carried out by churches linked with the colonizing powers, the Church structures and theologies brought into our countries by that enterprise, the continuing influence (someone spoke of domination) of the church communities of the First World in our local milieux—their language, their mind set and concerns, even their life styles—all of this needs deeper probing and questioning, more courageous evaluation by the kind of theological reflection which few have pursued with the seriousness and courage demanded by the task.

4. The question of the necessity of involvement and praxis (even, say the liberation theologians, the *inevitably conflictive praxis* that "being on the side of the poor" thrusts one into) for the very possibility of "doing theology" must be considered also. The Dar-es-Salaam statement "rejects as irrelevant an academic type of theology which is divorced from action." It summons us to "a theology which engages in critical reflection on praxis in the reality of the Third World." Here we touch *the new epistemology of praxis* (which the liberation theologians "prolong" from Marxist Maoist thought) and the question of commitment to the struggle of the poor and oppressed which (so the liberation theologians argue with great power—take Segundo as an example) is and must be genetically *prior* to the task of doing theology itself.

This is perhaps the strongest challenge which theological education among us must meet and answer one way or the other: that theology must be functional to orthopraxis. This is the theological transposition of the Marxist norm that primacy must be given to the transformation of society and history over theoretical constructions: one is not there to contemplate reality, one seeks rather to change it. The theological norm would then be: the primacy goes to *the praxis of evangelical love*

[12]Alfred T. Hennelly, "The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo," *Theological Studies* 28 (1977): 125–135.

https://publications.jet.edu/

within history over the merely correct *affirmations of faith* and the constructions of theology; *orthopraxis over orthodoxy*. Theology and doctrine are functional to the praxis of effective love, and this praxis (for instance in our concrete Philippine situation) is involvement in the social and political, on the side of the majority, who are poor and oppressed, as they strive to bring into being (as the very meaning of history) a more human world.

It is a challenge that has been thrown increasingly at theologians of seminary and university in this country. It is a challenge not to the theologian in "Teutonic captivity" only; it poses rather a crisis of identity for the entire Church, her pastoral activity, her structures, her presence in the world.

We are all familiar with the almost complete inversion of perspectives that is demanded. On the premise that the modern world sees knowledge as functional to the control and transformation of natural and social processes, on the Marxist premise that social practice primes theoretical knowledge, these affirmations are made:[13]

I. God reveals himself to us and through his Word. But his Word is not first of all "words" (Scripture) but an historical praxis—his action which liberates man and through man all of creation. The real locus of divine revelation is God's liberating *action* in history.

II. This self-revelation of God in act summons from man the response of faith which is not a notional understanding of the nature of God and his relationship with the world, but rather a response that is a praxis (of social and political liberation in history) which seconds God's own *doing* in the world.

III. When men engage themselves in this liberating action they realize God's own doing in history. For the liberation which God works consists above all in enabling men to

[13]Luis Alberto Restrepo, "Teologia y practica politica," in *Fe y Justicia*, Theologica Xavieriana 4 (Bogota: 1976), 453–469, especially 463–469 ("Algunas Tesis").

https://publications.let.edu/

make themselves free. Thus this historico-social praxis is both the doing of God and the doing of man.

IV. Faith, when it is taken to be intellectual knowledge—vehicled by words (the Scriptures, the texts of tradition, the writings of theology)—is and must be subordinate to praxis. It takes its origin from the *doing* of God in the world and must terminate in the *doing* of men transforming humanity, freeing themselves within history.

V. The liberating praxis of God, mediated in history in and through the liberative praxis of men, is solidarity with the poor and the oppressed in any given society. Hence the praxis of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed is the privileged "space" where the summons of God and his revelation of himself can be met today. The historical praxis of social and political liberation is the privileged encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A good number of consequences flow from these theses. Those who espouse them hold that the entire theological enterprise must have concrete praxis not only as the privileged locus for its verification but as the only guarantee of its authenticity. Faith and its concepts are evangelically authentic, and Christian theology is similarly authentic, only when they begin with commitment to and struggle for the poor and oppressed and only when they flow back into it.

Thus the effort to elaborate intellectual constructions and theological systems, spelling out in academic discourse one's understanding of God and his relationship with the world is contrary to that evangelical authenticity toward which theology itself must strive. Theological faculties and schools cannot exist for this kind of work. If they do, they run counter to what the Gospel asks of them. The truth of God's word is found only when the believer submits to it in its project and movement in history. The Minister of the

https://publications.jet.edu/

> Gospel is not authentic because he can speak learnedly of the Scriptures, but because he can show in his life and in his sharing in the struggle for liberation that his love for his brother is effective and obedient to God's word.[14]

This position which I have just enlarged on is not mine. But it has been raised most insistently before people like ourselves (if perhaps not with all this explicitness of expression) again of late. It poses the most serious questions to our entire theological education if it seeks in fact to be an education in involvement and for involvement in the creation of a new world of justice among men. We are told that it is only when this perspective is adopted that theology can be really liberated so that men can liberate themselves.

The points I have made so far are primarily methodological. You might regard them as outside the scope of the theme assigned to me. But I believe these issues must be faced, in the effort to create an Asian theology.

5. A last point, which might be called methodological also. In a recent talk to the 1977 National Convention of Students of Roman Catholic Seminaries,[15] Father Lambino summed up the task of theological formation for the Church in the Philippines today as striving for a) a theology *na marunong lumakad* (knows how to walk): a theology whose first component is experience, a true sharing of the experience of our people, especially the masses of the poor, of their suffering, their joys as well as their aspirations and struggle for a more human life; b) a theology *na marunong umupo* (knows how to sit), which does not shirk the agony of prolonged and disciplined study, multi-disciplinary research, sustained reflection and responsible judgment of issues—an ability "to sit down" which is of such crucial importance

[14]These theses are drawn, for the most part, from Restrepo, "Teologia y practica politica." See also Jose I. Gonzales Faus, *La Teologia de Cada Dia* (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1976), 283–292.

[15]Unpublished talk to the 1977 National Convention, Inter-Seminary Forum of the Philippines, February 29, 1977.

https://publications.let.edu/

since theology is not a search for knowledge only, but at base a search also for the Kingdom of God; lastly, c) a theology *na marunong lumuhod* (knows how to kneel) (Hans Urs von Balthasar's *betende Theologie*), a theology which is finally born in the fire of prayer, enlightened and purified by prayer, by living contact with the Word of God and the presence of God in our lives.

Father Lambino insisted that there is finally no theological integration without worship, prayer and obedience to the will of God discerned in prayerful reflection and in the stillness of adoration which is the noblest act of our human freedom.

This point terminates in another demand: that our theological education for participation in the transformation of society be, in a way, a *formation in a spirituality for the ministry* of our time—a formation of the kind of men and women who can participate in responsibility for the world *as Christians*, who are able to integrate presence-and-action in the secular and often conflictive areas of social and political action with their vision of faith, their grasp of the presence of God in the love of persons as its privileged context.

This may sound like a cop-out on the task assigned to me, but if what we need first of all at the present time in Asia are not so much theoretical systems but efforts in the line of authentic spiritualities of participation in responsibility for our brothers, should not theological education for this participation be geared explicitly to foster *an authentic spirituality for ministry*?

A colleague of mine likes to say that the Marxist-Maoist challenge is first of all not on the level of theory (although surely it is that too) but on the level of commitment and deeds, hence in that area of lived theology which Christian tradition calls spirituality. I have read recently of not a few seminaries in Europe and the United States wherein what is called spiritual formation has come to know a significant revival. May I be bold enough to suggest that this area deserves a certain priority under the rubric not of personal formation only, but precisely in the area of social and political action.

https://publications.let.edu/

For this part of this paper I would like to indicate some themes which I believe our theological work must touch or investigate in the effort to apply "the critical Asian principle" to the theology of man in history and society.[16]

1. It is a commonplace now to remark (I believe) that there is the need of a phenomenology of the religious consciousness of Asians as they are caught up in the transition from the traditional to the modern in the shapes and textures of Asian societies. May I hazard the impression that our social scientists, philosophers and historians of culture have not done us the needed service of giving us this kind of phenomenological description because their work remains excessively specialized (So much of the lack of dialogue between social scientist and philosopher or theologian stems from the different "sizes" of field of interest; apparently there are no Max Webers writing in Asia today)? I speak, admittedly, from the necessarily limited viewpoint of the Filipino Roman Catholic community, where I believe thinking and writing in this area have not yet developed a solid body of research and reflection. There have been conferences and workshops which have revolved around this theme, but at least in the Roman Catholic community no comprehensive synthetic effort has yet been made to see the entire process in such a perspective and with sufficient courage to draw the "large picture" that theology might fruitfully mesh with it. This is, of course, as much the fault of theologians as the social scientists, because the kind of dialogue that might motivate social scientists to do this kind of work has not been significant so far.

Latin American liberation theology, for instance, has created a typology of Christians and Christian groups face to face with movements of social change and/or social revolution which is quite revealing and which poses challenging questions for theological reflection—attitudes of the "official Church," a "class-list typology" of religious stances,

[16]On the "critical Asian principle," cf. Dr. Gerald Anderson's introduction to *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. G. H. A. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 3–9.

https://publications.let.edu/

varieties of responses, and the like.[17] In the Philippines we have not even done the spadework for such a typological picture.

2. There is an area of our "social and political theology" which cannot, however, await the frequently retrospective scholarship of social science. I refer to the area of *the defense of human dignity and human rights* in our countries today. In situations where what has been called the "ideology of national security"[18] so readily sacrifices human rights and human dignity, and so readily labels as subversive even the defense of the most basic rights of men and women, the Church must seek to form Christians—and above all, it would seem, Christian ministers—truly sensitive to human rights and their violation, and ready to take stands in these matters, in the witness of Christian hope and love.

We do not speak of adolescent postures and sensation-seeking stances. We do not even rule out the acceptance of what has been called "developmental evil" and "*de facto* evil" in limited measure,[19] at a period such as the present, when it seems that national development can only take place under strong and decisive governments which cannot assume the "free and open" features of relatively affluent western democracies. But we must surely be awake, within our theological enclaves, to the reality of the ideology of "national security" constructed with equal passion by rightist and leftist authoritarian states today. We must be aware of how

[17]For instance, cf. Cesar Aguiar, "Currents and Tendencies in Contemporary Latin American Catholicism," CICOP Position Paper, V/pe/70; Emmanuel de Kadt, "Church and Society in Latin America," *Clergy Review* (October 1971): 755–771, and *Clergy Review* (November 1971): 843–866. Also Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 183–189 (bibliography of considerable interest). Dussel has an even more recent volume, *Historia de la Iglesia en America Latina, 1492–1973* (Barcelona: Nova Terra, 1974).

[18]On "National Security Doctrine," I-DOC *Monthly Bulletin*, New Series, January–February 1977 (articles by Joseph Comblin on the ideology of national security); 17–22 (bibliography).

[19]Cf. Edmundo M. Martinez's articles in *Loyola Papers* 9 (Quezon City, Metro Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1977).

https://publications.lst.edu/

within the perimeters of the influence of this ideology, blindness can so easily afflict us in our classrooms and seminaries, the blindness born of timidity or fear. In many ways the "specifically Christian contribution" to the effort of national development or liberation, a contribution which need not await scholarly definition, is that of never allowing strong-arm governments to forget that in all the effort to construct a new society and a new humanity, the freedom and dignity of the human person is the supreme value which cannot be set aside.

3. In spite of what I said earlier in the paper regarding a certain distrust of constructing too early a large framework for Asian theology, I believe that some such hypothesis as that offered by Dr. D. Preman Niles (and Dr. C. S. Song before him) would provide an admirable base for an Asian theology. The history of a people as assumed into God's plan of creation and the history (patient of the truly new) which derives from it, or as assumed into salvation history, seems to me a very fruitful "story" which can serve as a guideline for an Asian theology, or for each of our peoples. Such a structure would integrate within it the reality, the development, the significance of the religions of our peoples, and the histories and traditions which have been largely shaped by them. Such a structure would open our present moment of history to the movement of God's redeeming work in the world, point out where we believe the line of meaning ought to be leading, try to trace where the *de facto* historical line fails to coincide with the "ought line," i.e., where sin and the structures of sin are most present in our societies, as we perceive this in our reflection on the word of God and under the light of its judgment.

4. Much has been written of late on the models of the Church, on paradigms for the Christian community. Avery Dulles' well-known book[20] deals successively with the Church as institution, as mystical communion, as sacrament, as herald, as servant. For the Asian situation it has been suggested that the Church as *first-fruits* is especially meaningful (It was Dr. Masao Takenaka from whom I first heard the development of this theme). In recent years now my own search for a privileged image

[20]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974).

https://publications.let.edu/

or model of the Church for our Philippine context has focused on the Church as *Suffering Servant*. In the last few months I have felt that the two biblical names of Jesus, *Son* and *Servant*, taken as point and counterpoint, would be a particularly fruitful combination of models for the Church in the Philippines and the description of its mission.

5. The theme "Son and Servant" leads to the theme of a "Filipino Christology" underpinning our social-political theology of the Church as "Son and Servant." A Christology for liberation, but in a Philippine setting, would be a necessary prelude. This is not a minor enterprise, surely. We are not without first essays on this, first essays of interest and value (Dr. Elwood's book is an example),[21] in our various countries. But here, in the context of Asian liberation theologies, a new and creative effort must be made.

Surely one need not argue the conviction that all Christian theology returns sooner or later to Christ as to its center, its hold on reality. It is when faced with the reality of Jesus that "out of many hearts, thoughts are revealed." Our Christian presence in the social and political will be primed by our Christology and our Jesuology: who Jesus is for us, who Christ is for us, finally tells us who we are, what we are sent for, what we must do. The choice of the names of Jesus, the ascending or descending Christologies we select—these determine our ecclesiology as well as the shape and quality of our Christian life and action.

> Some Latin American theologians today opt for an historical Jesus whom one of them[22] seeks "beneath" all his biblical names and titles, an historical Jesus who can only be truly known in the praxis of following him, a Jesus who in the course of his life completely revises his understanding of God when he sees the suffering and oppression all around him, when he is rejected by the established people and powers of his time; a Jesus who begins by being wholly orthodox in his concept of God and religion, but it ends up by seeing that the only authentic response to the one true God is not the religious one, but to

[21]Douglas J. Elwood and Patricia I. Magdamo, *Christ in the Philippine Context* (Manila: New Day Publishers, CLSP, 1971).

[22]Jon Sobrino, *Cristologia desde America Latina* (Mexico: Ediciones CRT, 1976).

https://publications.let.edu/

> struggle on the side of the poor and the oppressed for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Surely here we have a Christology "from below" (with a vengeance) which is almost wholly functional to liberation theology and liberation spirituality as well.[23]

A Christology of "Son and Servant," we have said the name "Servant," linked with the notion of the Suffering Servant is especially meaningful for most Asian Christians today. The Suffering Servant limns the task of servanthood which the Christian community is called to fulfill in Asian societies today:[24] the willingness, the readiness to share in God's suffering love; the self-effacingness and seeming failure of his endeavors and the shipwreck of his mission; the total self-gift, in love and obedience, for others, in bearing witness to what God is doing for his people.

But the name "Son" should at least be equally significant for us. Sonship retains a meaning in traditional as well as present Asian society which it has lost in much of the modern world (Western and socialist). I have often wondered what a fully-developed "theology of sonship" would be, written in an Asian cultural context; so much nearer in spirit to the original biblical context, but nonetheless with its own particular ethos. "Son" would also underline the aspects in the Christian vocation which speaks of what "*is already*," not only of the "*not yet*"—the relationship with the Father, the rootedness in his acceptance and his love, the sense of being from him, sent by him, into one's mission, the confidence of being always with him, the conviction that in one's fidelity to the Father one remains in him, even now. These are aspects of biblical Christology (and Christian celebration also) which tend to receive short shrift today, when the search is for a human Jesus seen through the prism of social conflict, the human Jesus who lies even "beneath" the biblical names (or should the names

---

[23]To cite only one title, José Miguez Bonino, Leonardo Boff, et al., *Jesus: Ni Véncido Ni Monarca Celestial* (Buenos Aires: Tierra Nueva, 1977), cf. 269–272 (the bibliography). This book appeared in an English translation (by Robert R. Barr) edited by Jose Miguez Bonino under the title *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994).

[24]Niles, "Toward a Framework for Doing Theology in Asia."

https://publications.let.edu/

and titles be used, a unilateral and rather narrow choice among the senses of "servant"—servanthood in social history, in passion and struggles, in social conflict).

A Christology of "Son and Servant" would provide a thematic for Asian theology which could greatly enrich our social and political theologies.

6. The final theme I would like to bring up could have taken up this entire paper, and I apologize for the inadequate treatment here. It has been said that "the effort to re-interpret Christianity today in such a fashion that can lay claim to the ethical and moral vacuum found both in science and revolution is certainly the most momentous spiritual struggle of our time." This task is far from completed. The Synod of Bishops of 1971 affirmed that

> action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us a constitutive dimension in the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.[25]

Action on behalf of justice, the Bishops are saying, action in the transformation of society toward a more human and more just world is integral to the proclamation of God's Word.

The Christian Churches have increasingly affirmed this in the last few years. Yet if Christian theology must motivate and summon men more decisively, even more passionately to the task of doing all they can do for the poor and powerless in society and for the changing of social structures which institutionalize injustice, it must also constantly remind them that the coming of the Kingdom of God is not identical to the forward thrust of any economic, social or political movement in the world. If it will teach Christians that responsibility for history and participation in the building up of a just society are integral to the presence and action of Gospel and Church in the world, it must yet recall to them that the fulfillment and realization of the age to come

[25]Synod of Bishops, "Introduction," *Justice in the World* (Rome: 1971).

https://publications.let.edu/

belong to the freedom and power of the Lord, and will come in the time and season hidden in his counsels.

This is the burden of Pope Paul VI's most recent *summula* on evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and one senses in it the struggle to give the project of "this worldly" liberation its rightful place in the mission of the Church yet to be clear that it must open out to "something more" in the realms of the spirit, of the sacredness of each person, of eternal life if it is not to betray other basic elements in the Christian message, and the more abundant life which is the Lord's gift for us.[26]

An adequate "theology of history" or a "theology of responsibility for the world" is far from being an accomplished task in Christian theology—in Asian theology, but in western theology too for that matter. Today the efforts are many but lined up along lines of ideological polarization which seems to await upon events for its resolution. At the moment we are at one pole of the swing of the pendulum, but the last word has surely not been said yet, for we wait perhaps for a greater commitment of Christians to their work in the world before we adequately formulate its theology. Will an Asian Christian theology of liberation, drawing also the reserves of ancient Asian wisdoms, have something by way of original contribution "to what is the most momentous spiritual struggle of our time?"[27]

[26]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation (December 8, 1975). Cf. de la Costa, et al., *Faith, Ideologies and Christian Options*, 38–60; 42 (references to Philippe Delhaye's commentary).

[27]James V. Schall, "From Catholic 'Social Doctrine' to the 'Kingdom of Christ' on Earth," *Communio: International Catholic Review* III/4 (1976): 293.

https://publications.let.edu/