

Claiming the Hyphens and Slashes

—Arun W. Jones

Asking a historian to speak authoritatively about any kind of future is a potential recipe for disaster, at least as far as the audience is concerned. For the historian however, the occasion may actually be welcome: I can speak my mind without having to bear the burden of being academically responsible for the substance of my remarks. Perhaps the one obvious point about the future that the historian can make with some degree of confidence is that the future rarely turns out the way we imagine it. Just one century ago, the Christian civilization of Europe, which had been touted by western missionaries for almost a century as God's greatest blessing to humankind, burst into an unimaginable and horrific fratricidal conflict, a war that was so devastating that when it was over the common consensus was that it was the war to end all wars. Neither World War I, nor its aftermath, were predicted by the seers of the age. So what I offer this evening is less a prediction of the future than my hope of how *some* theological educators of Asian heritage will develop their vocation in the next quarter century or so, assuming that life on our planet does not devolve into total chaos—which I grant is a very real possibility.

In thinking about the future of theological education, I am going to make two fundamental assumptions. The first is that scholarship is done generationally. A generation can last for any number of decades, and then usually there is a significant paradigm shift, a phrase made popular by Thomas Kuhn.¹ The shift may be more revolutionary, as happened in biblical studies at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, or it may be more evolutionary, as in the move from modernity to postmodernity in more recent years.² Sometimes cataclysmic events, like wars or collapse of cultures, mark the ends and beginnings of scholarly approaches. New scholarship affected by World War II, for example, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

As far as scholarship of previous generations is concerned, one of the favorite sports in North American academic circles is “Blame That Generation.” Scholars at all levels—and I include myself—somehow feel the need to delegitimize the work of our forebears in order to trumpet our own accomplishments and insights. It increasingly seems to me that this attitude is not simply short-sighted and self-serving, but allows us to pretend with a good dose of hubris that we *finally* have gotten it right—whatever the “it” may be in our work. This proclivity of academic work in North America is in direct contrast to the Indian philosophic tradition, where brilliant new ideas were introduced through appreciative and profound commentaries on the work of previous generations.

A second assumption I am going to make about the foreseeable future is that the twin forces of globalization and localization are going to continue to manifest themselves in various ways. In the 1970s, when the nation

1 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2 Kuhn thought of paradigm shifts as revolutionary changes in thinking. For a theological use of the concept of paradigm shifts, see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 183-89.



states of Asia were still emerging, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted that in response to nationalism there was an intensification of local identity and rootedness.³ Back then, one of the ways that peoples in Asia were reacting to the growing claims and power of the relatively new nation states was to identify more strongly with their linguistic, ethnic, regional, religious and kinship groups. The same dynamic is happening around the world today: as nationalism has expanded to become internationalism, one of the reactions has been the strengthening of local and national allegiances. Even the pragmatic Scots were seriously considering reestablishing their own country in the face of incredible obstacles, and it seems that one reason they chose to stay in the union was that the union promised to give them more national autonomy. Globalization and localization are both intensifying.

Now for some thoughts on the future of Asian/North American theological education. First of all, obviously, a new generation will have to carry this on. It seems to me that the previous generations have bequeathed us four movements in Asian and Asian-American theological work. The first movement is the rooting and rethinking of the Christian gospel in Asian thought worlds and experiences. Kosuke Koyama's collection in *Water Buffalo Theology* is a good example.⁴ In those essays Koyama listens to the Thai peasant trying to make sense of the gospel, both intellectually and experientially, in the Thai context. The second movement is bringing western theological systems and categories to bear upon the Asian Christian experience. This would include Asian liberation and feminist theologies, such as Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro's *The Jesus of Asian Women*, and sociological studies such as those included in the volume *Korean Americans and Their Religions*.⁵ A third movement has been for Asians to bring Asian worldviews and experiences to bear upon western scholarship. I am thinking of works like R. S. Sugirtharajah's *Voices from the Margin*, or Peter C. Phan's *Mission and Catechesis*.⁶ Finally, some Asian and Asian-American scholars bracket their Asian experience completely, and enter into western theological discourse completely on its own terms. A good example would be Choon Leong Seow's *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*.⁷

I wish to make clear that I am not suggesting that these different ways of approaching theological work are in any way sequential in the history of Asian and Asian-American Christianity. Nor do I want to suggest that any one approach will define a particular theological educator: many of us mix and match. I might very well be teaching a traditional North American seminary course on the history of Christianity in Europe and North America, and an elective on the history of Christianity in South Asia. Finally, I do not want to deem one approach to the broad theological task as any better than the others. There has been excellent work done by those of us here and by many of our Asian and Asian-American colleagues and teachers with these approaches. And the future will no doubt yield more excellent work in these veins.

What more can we ask of the future? It seems to me that the intensification of globalization calls for a further development in theological education, a development which Asian and Asian American theological scholars and teachers are well poised to engage. Globalization has meant that on the one hand, conventional distinctions (which we always recognized are not overly neat) such as Asian/western, missionary/indigenous, liberal/conservative, Christian/non-Christian, traditional/modern are being increasingly blurred and confound-

3 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 255-310.

4 Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

5 Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner, *Korean Americans and their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

6 R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes & Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

7 Choon Leong Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).



ed.⁸ On the other hand, tensions and cleavages between Asia and the west, between Christians and followers of other religious traditions, between conservatives and progressives are intensifying. So in the secular world, we have the election by overwhelming margins of a Hindu nationalist party in an increasingly westernizing (at least by some measures) Indian nation. And in the religious domain, the most rapidly growing form of Christianity is Pentecostalism, which is often both markedly Americanized and also highly indigenous. Such contradictory and paradoxical phenomena, as I mentioned earlier, are the result of growing globalization which of necessity calls forth its “other,” localization. And I don’t think it does us any good to try and stuff people into the ideological boxes (such as progressive/conservative) that were created for the 19th and 20th centuries, but are now bursting at the seams.

At least some Asian/North American theological educators are well poised, it seems to me, to grapple with the complexities of simultaneous and intensifying globalization and localization. The reason is that many of us have been given the gift and burden of bilocality, even polylocality (if you will excuse terms which immediately engender red squiggly lines on my Microsoft document). What I simply mean is this. Many of us have been given the gift and burden, either in reality or in potential, of being able to inhabit more than one world: the world of some part of the vast continent of Asia, and the world of some part of the vast continent of North America. This multiple habitation gives us a privileged position from which to interpret the strengthening forces of both globalization and localization of which the whole Christian *oikumené* is increasingly a part. The Church needs Asian/North Americans and Asian-Americans to reflect theologically on our unfolding, promising and threatening condition. And I am speaking not merely of first or second generation Asian Americans, or of Asians who teach in North America, but of third, fourth, fifth, tenth, fifteenth and twentieth generation theological scholars and educators of Asian origin, who carry within ourselves the marks and memories of far distant yet simultaneously ever closer origins. We look to the future to reflect theologically on what it means to be a Christian rooted in North America, and rooted in Asia, and rooted in both, and rooted in neither. Such theological reflection will certainly be necessary for a Church and a world that is increasingly rooted in many places, and increasingly rootless. Such theological work and teaching is far too complex for any one of us alone—it will need to be a collective effort of the emerging generation.



Arun W. Jones is the Dan and Lillian Hankey Associate Professor of World Evangelism at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He is the author of *Christian Missions in the American Empire: Episcopalians in Northern Luzon, the Philippines, 1902-1946* (2003), and of several articles and book chapters on Christianity in Asia. Jones’ current research includes the history of the church in North India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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