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## Toward Third World Theologies

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## Review Article

### Toward Third World Theologies

C. G. ARÉVALO

ASIAN VOICES IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY. Edited by Gerald H. Anderson. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976. 320 pages. Cloth \$15.00/Paper \$7.95.

MISSION TRENDS NO. 3: THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIES. Edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. New York/Grand Rapids: Paulist Press/Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1976. 354 pages. Paper \$3.45.

First, to get the technical details out of the way: *Asian Voices* has nine fairly lengthy theological papers by Asian theologians from as many countries, a preface by Dr. Anderson, and two appendices: one which puts together Selected Creeds, Confessions and Theological Statements of Churches in Asia (pp. 211-60) and Appendix 2, an extensive and valuable bibliography, country by country (pp. 261-321), compiled by Anderson, Mariano Apilado, and Douglas Elwood.

*Mission Trends No. 3* has 28 articles, mostly shorter ones from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and a selected bibliography of Third World theology books in English.

Most of the names which appear in these two volumes are well-known to those who have been following "Third World" theological writing in the last ten years; some names are new. A brief comment: both books will serve to introduce Third World theologians and theological concerns to those who are relative strangers in these areas. Both books are "musts" for even smaller theological libraries in the Philippines. *Mission Trends No. 3*, because of its format and price, should prove an excellent source book for a seminar or course on Third World theologies. We hope a local publishing house will do itself the favor of getting the necessary permits to publish a cheaper Philippine edition, and we trust that at least theological seminaries will order a good number of copies.

These two books deal with "Third World theologies": one spans three continents; the other concentrates on Asia. But we may be allowed to review both books together; there is a considerable measure of convergence. Christian theologians, writing from various "formerly colonial contexts," are increasingly addressing themselves to the same issues and voicing similar aspirations and concerns. The 1976 Dar-es-Salaam meeting, with its concluding statement, tells us something of the near unanimity arrived at (or so it seems) on the crucial problems which the poor peoples of the earth today confront, and what Christians are called to do about them.

We might do well to begin with some sentences from the text which Dr. Anderson uses as prelude to *Asian Voices*. It will give readers, especially non-theologians, an idea of what we are concerned with, when we speak of "Third World theologies" or "Asian theologies." It comes from a statement issued by a consultation of the East Asian Christian Conference, Kandy, Sri Lanka, December 1965:

It is out of the contemporary necessity to confess the Faith that there arises the task of theology for the churches in Asia . . . a living theology must speak to the actual questions people in Asia are asking in the midst of their dilemmas; their hopes, aspirations, and achievements; their doubts, despair, and suffering . . . Christian theology will fulfill its task in Asia only as the Asian churches, as servants of God's Word and revelation in Jesus Christ, speak to the Asian situation and from involvement in it. Dogmatic theological statements from a church that stands on the sidelines as spectator or even interpreter of what God is doing in Asia can carry no conviction . . . The Asian churches so far, and in large measure, have not taken their theological task seriously enough, for they have been largely content to accept the ready-made answers of Western theology or confessions. We believe, however, that today we can look for the development of authentic living theology in Asia.

To give some kind of "sampler" of what will be found in these two books, I would like to take up successively, Dr. Emerito Nacpil's essay in *Asian Voices*, Dr. Choan-Seng Song's "From Israel to Asia" in *Mission Trends*, and Father Gustavo Gutiérrez's contribution in the latter book, then to conclude with a few brief observations of my own.

#### NACPIL: THEOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

First, Dr. Nacpil's paper — Nacpil (not perhaps as well-known in Catholic circles as he should be and as in fact he is in churches connected with the World Council of Churches) is executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia, and a distinguished theologian whose work is of consistent quality and articulateness — "A Gospel for the New Filipino" (written before the imposition of Martial Law in the Philippines)

asks what the task of theology in the Philippines today is. The answer is, it must interpret the Gospel to the renewed Christian self-understanding and new Filipino in such a way that it frees him for creative participation and responsibility in the upbuilding of a more fully human and more fraternal social order in his country.

A responsible theology, Nacpil begins, is attained mainly when the Christian faith is interpreted in conscious relationship to the fundamental problems of human life as they appear in specific forms and in particular environments, and when it is in dialogue with other faiths, religious or otherwise. His paper offers a contribution "toward carrying out in fragmentary fashion this particular understanding of theological responsibility as far as the Protestant situation in the Philippines is concerned" (p. 117).

His thesis: "the theological task in the Philippines lies in the direction of *interpreting the human meaning and social content of the Christian faith*" (emphasis reviewer's).

Nacpil sums up the "theological situation" in the Philippines as far as Protestant Christians and churches are concerned this way: Most Protestant churches in the Philippines bear the characteristic features of the traditions and cultures of the mother (American) churches which produced them. The concerns of these churches, up to now, have been mainly those of evangelism, pastoral work, church extension. Their "spirituality" (though he doesn't use the word) emphasizes the *personal reality* of salvation, and tends to bypass concern for the problems of society and its right ordering and transformation.

The [Filipino] Protestant is essentially a convert; his life is structured negatively by his separation from the world and positively by the ethical resources of his newly-found faith. His face is turned toward God and his back toward the world. The measure of his unworldliness is the measure of his godliness . . . His is an ethic of personal purity, not involved in the struggles of overcoming evil in the world . . . To be a good Christian [layman] one must be active in the internal affairs of the church . . . as a religious fellowship and not as a member of the people of God who must live out the Gospel in the world. (p. 119)

It is not true nonetheless that the Protestant churches have been positively without social influences upon Filipino society, both institutionally and in the quality of leadership exercised by many of their lay members in the professions and in public service. But the fact remains that the churches train their laity mainly for participation in the activities of the church.

There are, however, social changes taking place in contemporary Filipino society, triggered especially by the "developmental revolution which is radicalizing and accelerating the transition to a modern society" (p. 122), which is challenging the churches away from the relative isolation in which (up till the immediate past) they were able to pay more or less exclusive attention to their internal life — these changes affect personality structure, social

relations and institutions, and cultural values and outlook. They are pushing the Filipino toward a far-reaching search for a new self-understanding, a new social order, and a new cultural synthesis; toward the emergence of a new Filipino and a new society.

The Filipino's value-orientations are thus subjected to a thoroughgoing ferment: witness the increasingly evident value-conflicts in personal and social life, the present coexistence of pluralism in world-views and ideologies, the social pluralism in other dimensions of life, the widespread violence, moral chaos, intellectual and ideological confusion, and social disorder. What is called for is the resolution of these conflicts, this confusion, in the direction of a new sociocultural synthesis. And the direction and promise of the future point to the renewal of (and efforts to realize) the ideals of the Philippine revolution, the aspirations for human freedom and dignity, for a just and peaceful social order, for modernization and development.

There is then this emerging vision of a new Filipino in a new society. It includes the creation of the objective conditions necessary for the coming-to-be of a new social order — economic, political, educational. But it also aims beyond them, at the fuller humanization and the transformation of "the traditional Filipino" into a new Filipino with a new self-understanding, functioning responsibly in a new nation and living meaningfully in a new society.

It is this vision which provides the agenda for the task of theology and the mission of the Church in the Philippines today. The new Filipino is looking for a new cosmology, a new anthropology, a new eschatology. For the Christian this means *the search for a new theology* — a theology which will be the systematic and adequate exposition of the human meaning and social content of the Christian faith for the new Filipino in the new society which he must construct in freedom, creativity, and responsibility.

This in turn means the presentation of especially three aspects of the Gospel: *the Gospel as liberation* (from the cyclic view of time and the Filipino's sacral view of his natural surroundings and of the customs of society, from stifling kinship structures of social relations); *the Gospel as summons to responsibility* (to the responsibility, i.e., of developing and caring for the earth, or nature, and to the responsibility of transforming and humanizing society); *the Gospel as the horizon of hope* (hope that in God's word, in the resurrection of Christ and the promise of the kingdom, God gives the power to heal human lives and to renew society and redirect world history toward the attainment of mankind's liberty and maturity).

This proclamation of the Gospel to the new Filipino is the task of the theology which the Filipino theologian must work out, and the task of the church in the Philippines as well.

It can be asserted that to the extent that the *telos* of social change in the Philippines is the formation of the new Filipino in the image of freedom,

justice, and maturity, and the creation of a new order in society that reflects this image, it should be taken up in faith into the whole movement of world history toward its future in the kingdom of God. (p. 144)

### SONG: DEWESTERNIZING THEOLOGY

We have developed Dr. Nacpil's thesis rather fully, intending it as a sample of the "first moment" in this presentation of "Third World theologies." Dr. Choan-Seng Song takes the argument somewhat further in his essay in *Mission Trends*, "From Israel to Asia – A Theological Leap." (Dr. Song, formerly professor of theology and principal of Tainan Theological College in Taiwan, is now associate director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC, Geneva. Orbis Books is publishing his theological essays in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: an Asian Attempt*.)

Song believes that western theologians generally have distorted the message of the Bible in what we might call its "western domestication." The history of Israel, and the history of the western Church have been made *the single line* of redemption/salvation history – the salvation which God offers to mankind has been appropriated by the Christian Church in the West as its own possession – henceforth all salvation must pass through its historical channel, the channel of the "Tradition" of the western Church.

The question Song asks is this, then: Does God, can God, deal *directly* with "the nations" – other peoples of mankind – or "is his redemptive activity mediated *only* through the Church?" He complains that western theologians "obstinately persist in reflecting on Asian or African cultures and histories from the vantage-point of that messianic hope which is believed to be lodged in the history of the Christian Church . . . and redemption loses its intrinsic meaning for cultures and histories outside the history of Christianity" (p. 215). In other terms, salvation for a people must be in continuity with the Christian Church concretely as it has developed in the West. There is no other "possibility"; God does not deal *directly* with other peoples. One might half-facetiously say, "Extra ecclesiam occidentalem nulla salus."

Song argues that "the Old Testament 'prophetic tradition consists in a refusal to recognize the history of Israel as identifiable with the totality of God's acts in the redemption of his creation.' Israel was *not* to be 'the nation through which God's redeeming love would be mediated, but to be a symbol of how God would also deal redemptively with other nations'" (p. 211).

This habit of doing theology always through the history of the western Christian Church must be called into question. It must be possible above all now, for Asian Christians to engage in theological reflection on the direct relationship of Asia to God's redemption . . . In the light of the experience unique to Israel, other nations should learn how their histories can be interpreted redemptively. An Asian nation would have its own

experiences of exodus, captivity, rebellion against Heaven, the golden calf. It would have its own long trek in the desert of poverty or dehumanization. What a nation goes through begins to take on redemptive meaning against the background of the history of Israel, symbolically transported out of its original context to a foreign one. An Asian nation will thus be enabled to find its place side by side with Israel in God's salvation. The Old Testament has shown how the history of a nation can be experienced and interpreted redemptively. If this is so, the theology which regards Israel and the Christian Church as the only bearers and dispensers of God's saving love must be called into question . . . It is of paramount importance [then] to know how other people can see and experience redemption and hope in the sufferings which descend on them with cruel consistency. They want to know how the chains of sufferings can be broken, and to experience salvation in the present and the future. It is to these people that Asian Christians must address themselves, sharing their longing for liberation. Surely there must be a direct relation between their sufferings and God's saving love manifested in the people of Israel and in Jesus Christ. (p. 216-17) In the light [of this], present-day Asia poses a momentous challenge to Christian theology. (p. 219)

Song enumerates several factors which enter into this challenge: secularization in the West has greatly weakened the spiritual influence of the churches in western society (in Asia and Africa as well); there are attempts from the West to look to Asian religions and spiritual traditions to help fill the spiritual vacuum created by secularization and "the consumer society"; the overwhelming significance of the rejection by mainland China (more than one-fourth of all mankind) of Christianity and the western church ("a Christian theology which goes about its business as if the ideological challenge of China makes little difference is defective and useless [for Asia]" pp. 219-20); the multireligious context and the increasing influence of Maoism throughout Asia oblige Christian theology in this part of the world to rethink from the roots "the concepts and standards which have a time-honored place in the traditions of western theology." "One thing is certain," he affirms. "The historical continuity of God's salvation which the churches in the West and their offshoots have sought to represent is interrupted and broken in Asia" (p. 220).

Song gives some indications of the shape and texture of the Asian theologies which must be created. They cannot be in the western style of conceptual and propositional theology; such a theology "can barely touch the heart of Asian humanity." Note, moreover, that "local theologies" should not pretend to be "universal"; as for European and North American theologies, so for the Asian ones. Asian theologians must situate their theology in the concrete human, sociopolitical situations in which their peoples live and suffer and must be led to hope. They cannot afford not to address

themselves to the “aggressive Communist ideology, desperate poverty, suffering, and the continuous religious search of the resurgent religions of Asia” (pp. 221–22).

Freedom from external theological interference, the conscious effort to become true to a particular situation, and liberation from the claim to universal validity – these make theology become alive, useful, dynamic and, above all, authentic (p. 222).

All of this is rooted, finally, in the reality and genuineness of the Incarnation. What indigenous theologies constitute, at basis, is the realization of the Incarnation in the consciousness of other peoples, of other cultural contexts, of other historical situations. Song ends his essay thus:

In the final analysis, the Word has to assume Asian flesh and plunge into the agony and conflict of the mission of salvation in Asia. This flesh will be broken as it was broken on the cross. But when this Asian flesh assumed by the Word is broken, the saving and healing power of God will be released into the struggle of men and women for meaning, hope and life. And Christians outside Asia – especially those under the long history of the church in the West – will be enriched by it. This is the mystery of God’s salvation which works both ways between Israel and the nations. (p. 222) (An eloquent statement, but then Dr. Song is a theologian of uncommon eloquence!)

#### GUTIERREZ: GOSPEL AS PRAXIS

Moving to Gustavo Gutierrez’s “The Hope of Liberation” (*Mission Trends*, No. 3) is a step further, into the “new theologies,” this time into the context, thrust, and language of Latin American liberation theology. This is a reflection on the discussion re: his *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

Gutierrez is at pains to emphasize that liberation theology is a radically new way of doing theology. He insists that it is to be sharply distinguished from the theologies of development, of revolution, of violence, “to which it is at times connected and even erroneously reduced.”

The point of departure of liberation theology is “the faith of Christians engaged in concrete historical praxis, from within the place where people struggle to be able to live like human beings” (p. 64). It presupposes and mandatorily builds on “active commitment to the process of liberation.” When Christians enter upon such social and political praxis, they are forced to make “a qualitative leap – the radical challenging of a social order and of its ideology and the breaking with old ways of knowing” (The “epistemological break” liberation theologians make very much of; read especially Juan Luis Segundo’s *The Liberation of Theology* [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977]). It is “for this reason that theological reflections carried

out in another cultural context say very little to [such committed Christians].”

Operative commitment and praxis on the side of the poor and oppressed forces on the Christian a re-reading of the Gospel and a rediscovery that the *Gospel truth* is not so much “truth contemplated” as “*truth done*.”

The Gospel truth is done! We must work the truth, John tells us, and that truth is love. To live love is to affirm God. To believe in God is not to limit ourselves to affirming his existence; to believe in God is to commit our lives to Him and to all people. To have faith is to go out of ourselves to God and to others. Faith works through charity, as St. Paul makes clear. Faith thus appears to us ever more as a liberating praxis. (pp. 65–66)

But faith working through praxis must operate in the real world, and must enter into its concrete sociopolitical realities, and thus grapple with concrete sociopolitical analysis. True, the Christian is concerned, finally, with sin. But “only by participating militantly and effectively in the historical process will it be possible for us to discern the fundamental alienation present in every partial situation” (p. 66).

Within this context, theology must be understood as critical reflection within and on historical praxis in confrontation with the word of the Lord and accepted in faith. It will be reflection in faith, and on faith, as liberating praxis.

It will be an understanding of a faith which has as its starting point a commitment to create a just and human society, a faith which should enable this commitment to become more radical and fuller. It will be an understanding of a faith which is made truth, is verified, in a real and fruitful insertion into the process of liberation . . . In the last instance our exegesis of the word, to which theology hopes to contribute, occurs in deed. (p. 67)

Gutierrez, thus states, again and again, that the theology of liberation is *the way* that theology must be done in the concrete situations of domination and oppression wherein the poor and oppressed of the world find themselves. The theology of liberation is a reflection on the commitment and praxis of men engaged in historical liberation: it arises from deeds, it returns to deeds, it always accompanies praxis. It is thus a new way of doing theology and it obliges us to rethink radically what it means to be Christian and what being Church means in the real world in which so many millions are poor, are deprived and oppressed, and where consequently to live the Gospel, whatever else it means, must involve being committed to justice among men, as an expression of Christian love.

#### THEOLOGICAL REALIGNMENT

The three papers we have presented at some length here will give readers a sampling of what they expect to find in the two books under review. There

are other themes, of course, but I think these three can be said to represent the central line in somewhat "progressive" fashion, as I believe it is fairly clear how Song's theses build on Nacpil's and how Gutierrez presupposes and carries further what the two others say. These two books carry a considerable freight of thought and (if we may use the word about theology) excitement. In any case, no teacher or student of Scripture or theology practicing in our country today can absolve himself from some understanding, hopefully in depth, of the issues which the contributors to these two volumes take up, often with admirable articulateness, sometimes with moving passion.

This is not the place to discuss even the three papers here presented; we would need a good-sized essay for that. It will suffice to say that we are at the exciting beginnings of something fresh and new in the theological scene: an effort, arising now from all the three "Third World" continents, which challenges the long-accepted belief that creative thinking in Christian theology could only emanate from the Continent (and just maybe North America too). Anderson's foreword to *Mission Trends No. 3* says that

A radical theological realignment is taking place in the Church today. The old centers of theological influence in Europe and North America are becoming the new peripheries. The new centers of vitality and importance in theological construction are in Asia, Africa and Latin America — where the majority of Christians will be living in the year 2000. (p. 1)

He goes on to cite John Mbiti as saying that "many Christian scholars in Europe and North America have more meaningful 'academic fellowship with heretics long dead than with living brethren of the Church today in the so-called Third World'" (p. 1).

Whether in fact the "radical theological realignment is *already* taking place in the Church today" or not, no one can question the imperative that Christians in Asia, Africa, Latin America must do their own theological reflection for their lives and needs, and in the coming decades they will do this with less dependence on Europe and North America, as far as both ideas and people are concerned. This is not only desirable, it is inevitable and necessary, and the more farsighted leadership in theological schools all over Asia believe their principal concern is to hasten the process.

It is Father Arrupe, the Jesuit General, who some years ago said that the irreversible movement of history is from Europe to North America, and now to the Third World. That the Christian world will be shifting weight and focus when the majority of Christians (in about the year 2000) will no longer be western or white would seem to be also inevitable and irreversible. What we see beginning in theology in these books is only the tip of the iceberg. There is more, much more, "where it comes from."

Of course, by accepted academic standards of European universities, the essays in these collections sometimes fall short of "being scholarly" *modo teutonico*. But increasingly, as especially *Mission Trends No. 3* attests, such

a comment makes hardly any impression among those seeking to work out the "new theologies." As one Asian Protestant theologian said at a recent workshop: "Three years ago I stopped looking over my shoulder and stopped asking myself what my teachers in Europe and North America would say about my work. Now the only decisive question for me is what God would say when he looks at what I'm doing when I do theology, and what my own people would say about my commitment, from where I'm at, to the Gospel and to their lives." No one, I think, could question that kind of "coming of age."

It was Leonce de Grandmaison who said (I believe) that it is the privilege of small minds to think of theology in terms first of all of details (footnotes, each individual sentence in a book, and the like), but a true theological criticism would seek the fundamental intention and the basic thrust and directions of a thinker and his work first of all, above and beyond the details. To such intelligence and large-mindedness these essays must be commended; it will find that there is much to praise and honor in these papers, and even more, to hope in, for that future of which these collections are only first fruits.