

# philippine studies

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## **A “Grass-Roots” View of Asian Christianity: Christianity in the Asian Revolution**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 16, no. 1 (1968): 206–209

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Finally, in the light of Vatican II, all religious, Benedictines not excepted, are invited to reflect anew on their traditional attitude towards the world. Rather than flight from a world considered as evil—a manichean legacy to very early eastern monachism—contemporary monks and nuns should not so much think in terms of flight 'from', but rather as flight towards God from that which is evil in the world, to choose God absolutely. "The Benedictine monk chooses the life of utter dedication to God which will include seclusion". To this necessary and essential segregation belong at least living quarters away from the world and silence to enable the monk to be recollected. With these essential safeguards, the Benedictine religious can engage in an appropriate amount of work that is suited to his type of life.

The fundamental preoccupation of monasticism, at the root of all ascetic practices and spiritual orientation, is the actuation of man's radical tendency towards God: To seek God first of all and to consider everything else under the aspect of this primary aim. This book is a vigorous affirmation of the old and ever-new goal. What contemporary insights have added is a more conscious awareness that the realization of the ideal is not achieved in a vacuum, neither is the monk's ideal that of disembodied spirit: Man does not go to God directly nor alone, but with the help and in company of his fellow human beings; he is responsible to the People of God and he is under the guidance of the Church; he sustains the impact of the historical situation. His love of God is authentic only if he truly loves his neighbor. These truths obviously are not new in their objective and propositional content; what is new, however, is the light shed upon them through insights gained from different angles of human self-realization.—As over against the new and exciting spiritual landscape, monasticism may seem unattractive and even archaic to the outsider. Yet the well-trodden paths of its expanses eventually may lead towards unexpected horizons and into luminous clearing, provided that monasticism assimilates into the innermost recesses of its system those insights which are apt to re-create the monk's identity as that of a man in whom his fellowman can decipher the clear contours of the Incarnate Son of God. Dom Columba's book is an unequivocal pointer in this direction.

SISTER MARIA BRUNO, O.S.B.

## A "GRASS-ROOTS" VIEW OF ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

CHRISTIANITY IN THE ASIAN REVOLUTION, by Harry Haas.  
Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, Inc., 1966. 116 pp.

The aim of this little book, according to its author, is "to try and evaluate the role of Christianity in the social upheavals taking place in Asia today, and the particular ways in which Asian Christians

are meeting the challenge of the modern world." The author, a Catholic priest, bases his evaluation on personal experiences gathered over 15 years of work as chaplain to Asian students in The Netherlands and Germany, and as secretary to the Bishop of Chilaw, Ceylon, for five years where his work took him largely to the countryside while keeping in touch with the urban centres. In the foreword, Fr. Haas states that this study is designed to give a "grass-roots" view of Christianity in Asia as contrasted with the view from the top, i.e., that taken mainly from contact with Christian institutions, and leaders both clergy and lay.

With these impressive credentials, the author does come up with a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of Christianity in Asia today. However, there is little that is new in what he says for the reflective Christian who has been attentive to the events going on in Asia and the rest of the world (who, unfortunately, are not to be found in great numbers). In the penultimate chapter, entitled "Towards an Asian Christianity," the author writes, "What we have said so far by no means constitutes an ordered plan of action; it has simply tried to describe the state of affairs which Asian Christians will, sooner or later, have to tackle." The real task then, having described the situation, is how do we go about making Christianity truly Asian, that is, *incarnated* into Asia?

Christianity in itself is not intrinsic to any culture. However, historically, Christianity flourished in the West and became so integrated with European culture that it could be said by Hilaire Belloc, "Europe is the Faith, and the Faith Europe." Thus when it came to Asia and Africa, Christianity was presented in its Western dress. For many Asians, to accept Christianity meant a profound break with their culture, their way of life. This fact hindered conversions. Today, the advent of industrialization and the growth of mass communications have introduced the scientific outlook and have advanced secularization. These have weakened traditional religious and familial ties. They do not, however, make it any easier for conversions to Christianity. The relatively easy spread of Christianity in the Philippines is probably an indication of the absence of a well-developed national culture at the time Spain started to colonize us.

All these the author mentions in the early part of his book. It is in the last two chapters that he presents, as he says, "an ordered plan of action." It is understandable that only the last two chapters should be devoted to this task, which is an all-important one, because the solution is spelled out in the concrete rather than worked out on paper. At any rate, an ordered reflection on the existing state of affairs already suggests some solutions. Aside from this, the book is interesting because one can find numerous parallels in the Philippine scene to the pictures painted by Fr. Haas.

What is the author's evaluation of the role of Christianity in Asia? The answer is one which is to be expected: Christianity has contributed substantially to the material and spiritual uplift of Asians, but it has not gone far enough, and sometimes even, retards the development of Asian peoples. The evaluation is elaborated into an examination of the different sectors of the Asian Christian community.

The chief contribution of Christianity—including Protestant denominations—lies in education and in the establishment of welfare institutions. Through its schools, which are the best in Asia, Christianity produced the leaders of national independence and reform movements. Thus Christianity in Asia, has largely been spared the effects of nationalist sentiments which have naturally been anti-Western. Through its charitable institutions, and through its teaching of discipline and moral duty, Christianity introduced the element of organization into Asian cultures, which has contributed no mean part to nation-building, although the element of organization might be better attributed to the industrialized society that grew up in the West than to Christianity.

The debit side of the ledger is more fully written up. Although the Christian educational system has produced dynamic national leaders, the majority of Christians—and here I think the author refers largely to Catholics—are conservative, "paternalistic towards their employees, servants, and the so-called 'masses,' and cherishing the ideal of a leisured class which they inherited from their former colonial rulers." He attributes this to the fact that the missionaries who came over, came from those countries which were in the tail-end of the feudal system and who brought feudal ideals into the system of education they set up in Asia.

The feudal notion of an "elite" passed into the system. Thus the schools tried their best to produce a "set of literate, responsible people who would take their place in society as perfect examples of the benefit of a Christian education. In practice, however, this elite was rarely dynamic." One can discern the similarity with the Philippine scene.

In the field of labor, Christians in general are unaware of the discontent among the working classes. Christian leaders frown upon members of their group who join socialist political parties or trade unions. Among the educated laity, there is a lack of willingness to take on extra burdens, to take the initiative in reform movements. "Their confidence in institutions and bureaucracy is such that they feel excused from any personal commitment to the task of making sure that this 'education', in which they put such faith, is something more than a piece of paper saying that so-and-so is 'qualified.'"

With regard to the poor, the author notes that because of the institutional approach to the underprivileged, i.e., through charitable organizations, most of the influential Christians are isolated from the underprivileged and never, share their lives in any way. The educated "elite" have not understood the Christian message. The poor are not there as an outlet for the "charity" of the "elite," but as their brothers in the faith. The schools have failed to impart a firm sense of social justice, and thus cannot be said to have given a truly Christian education.

The author also notes that the Catholic clergy are in a privileged position and that many Asians speak of the Church as rich. This is reflected in the complaint of poor and lower-middle class Catholics that Catholic schools admit only the children of rich, Catholic and non-Catholics alike. This complaint, and the image of the Church as rich, have a familiar ring to them.

Although the debit side apparently outweighs the credit side, the tone of the book is not pessimistic. In the last two chapters, the author turns to the question of making Christianity more effective in Asia. He suggests two approaches. First, it is necessary to salvage from the Christianity inherited from the West ("Gothic Christianity") what is practicable in the circumstances. What is desired is to make Christianity more elastic, capable of withstanding the shocks of changing Asian society, and to make it more in harmony with the culture of Asia.

Secondly, it is necessary to discover the character of each Asian country in order to see which features can be safely incorporated into Christianity. A relevant feature of Asian religions which can easily be incorporated into Christianity (and some aspects of which have already been incorporated), is their penchant for contemplation, which has its counterpart in Western monasticism.

In any case, whatever elements are chosen, whether from the East or from the West, two conditions have to be observed: they should be in harmony with the local situation, and they should be in agreement with the spirit of the Gospel. Furthermore, lines of communication between Christian leaders, i.e. religious superiors, and their men in the field, and especially with the people themselves, should always be kept open. Lastly, a spirit of ecumenism, which includes not only members of different Christian denominations but also non-Christians as well, is necessary.

With the advent of Vatican II, the possibility of a truly Asian Christianity has come much closer to realization.

JOSE MARIA FRANCIA, S.J.