# SOME REFLECTIONS FROM ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

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Thoughts on mission and integrity from an Eastern perspective which give a fascinating insight into the Western church and mission.
**Category:** Observations

A few days ago, I quoted extensively from a paper by Andrew Walls from a 2005 edition of a Swedish Missiological Journal. While I was looking at the journal, my attention was caught by a paper entitled The Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel - Some reflections from Asian Christianity by Hwa Yung.

I found this paper very helpful, both for its reflection on mission and for what it had to say about Western Christianity. One of the ways in which we can understand our own situation in the West is to listen to reflective voices from other parts of the world who can say things about us that we may not have observed.

> *O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us*
> *To see oursels as ithers see us!*
>
> *Burns; To a Louse*

As I did with the Walls paper, I'll highlight some of the themes and give extensive quotes which illustrate what the author is saying.

**What draws people to Christ in the Two-Thirds Word?**

> *Philip Jenkins sums up much of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World as follows:*
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> *The churches that have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditionalist and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or Pentecostal .... Southern Christians retain a very strong supernatural orientation ... These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. They preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility.*
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> *...This is not to say, that all these Christians have been influenced by classical Pentecostalism and western charismatic Christianity, with its emphasis on glossolalia. Rather, the strong Pentecostal- charismatic orientation of non-western churches stems from worldviews that differ significantly from that of the prevailing western one. Western Christianity, at least among the more educated, in the twentieth century has been largely controlled by a*

> *naturalistic and mechanistic view of the world. Within such a worldview, the supernatural tends to be rejected, whether it is about miracles, demons or, ultimately, God. This worldview is largely rooted in the Enlightenment with its narrow empiricism and skeptical rationalism. Much of indigenous Christianity in the Two-Thirds World, even in places where modernity has descended en masse in all forms, does not necessarily share this worldview, and hence remains open to â€˜signs and wonders.â€™*
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> *...Christians from the non-western world read the Bible through their own worldview lens, and find great similarities between their worldview and that of the Bible. They find that the gospel actually addresses a fundamental felt- need of their culture, which is the ability to deal with the spiritual realm and all its imponderables.Â*
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> *...Another reason why many in the non-western world are turning to Christianity is its perceived power to change the individual and personal circumstances.Â*
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> *For instance, some years ago, a senior member of the Malaysian government came out publicly to admit that the stateâ€™s drug rehabilitation centers were simply not working. He then appealed to the public to do what they can to help deal with what is a very serious problem in the country. What he did not say publicly was something he probably knew about, which is that the one group that is producing results is the rehabilitation centers run by churches! The thirty or so such centers have a success rate higher than any other group in the country. And many of the ex-inmates are now leading productive lives as useful citizens and Christians.*

**Pluralism in Asia**

> *There is no need to rehearse here the parameters of the religious pluralism debate. Further, in the west, a public consensus, shared by some Christians, has emerged that a tolerant and inclusive world requires that we reject any exclusive claims. This, it seems, should apply to religion also. But on the ground level, in much of the Two-Thirds World, this view is not shared by the vast majority of Christians, even if many western writers would like to think differently.Â*
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> *...I am aware that some of us have genuine sympathies with the pluralist agenda, and that the academic arguments involved are complex. Nonetheless, I must confess that I believe Furuya is right. If you are to talk to evangelists, pastors and theologians from Asia, at least within Protestant and indigenous Christian circles, you will find that the vast majority of them are not pluralists, precisely because they have had long familiarity with other religions!*

**The Western Guilt Complex**

> *Turning to the issue of the western guilt complex, I will need to be more circumspect in what I say since I am not from the west. I realize that the history of western colonialism in the modern world, together with issues like the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, slavery and the Holocaust, have created tremendous problems for the western pysche. For some Christians, this guilt complex seems to have brought them to the point where the proclamation of the gospel and the call to conversion is now seen as a form of â€˜religious imperialism.â€™*
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> *...I would like to suggest that we should look at this issue from a rather different angle. To begin with, it is clear that some of the historical accusations associated with the western guilt complex are simply false and remain unsubstantiated. At the same time, there remains much that western missionaries and, especially, colonial powers were guilty of. But the question we need to ask is, where does the guilt complex come from, and what does it ultimately point to? In world history there have been many conquests and expansions of empires, many of which have been carried out in the name of religion. I am not much of a historian, and I am open to correction. But I am not aware of any society or culture in history that has self-critically developed a guilt complex as deep and extensive as that of the present western world over its past mistakes.Â*
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> *...The point I am making is. What has been almost completely overlooked is that the very fact of the western guilt complex may well be one of the supreme evidences for the enduring validity of the gospel in the post- Christian western world! For it shows that the gospel has such power to shape a culture that, even when its propositional claims have been forgotten or rejected by and large by that culture, its hold on the conscience of the culture continues to endure. Indeed this may be the ultimate â€˜witness of the Holy Spiritâ€™ â€“ his lingering, yet unquenchable, presence in a society and culture that once worshipped him, but is now rather embarrassed to take him seriously any more!*
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> *...What then do we conclude from all these? The right conclusion is that the western guilt complex is a call to repentance from all forms of mission that are presumptuous, insensitive, ethnocentric, militaristic, and triumphalistic. Mission in such modes will always lack integrity in light of the gospel. The wrong conclusion, however, is to suggest that we must deny Christian mission on the assumption that mission per se lacks integrity.*

**The Quest for self-identity in non-western Christianity**

> *Most churches in the non-western world were founded by western missions, at least in their initial stages. At least in the case of Asia, this often resulted in churches developing an identity, which tends to be rooted in western Christianity. Thus, in the earlier part of the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals criticized Christian missions with the comment, â€˜One more Christian, one less Chinese!â€™ Similar criticisms no doubt have been leveled at Christians in other parts of the non-western world. Unfortunately, these charges have often been true in Asian mission history. Thus the Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, has a point in describing Asian Christianity as â€˜culturally deformed.â€™*
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> *...Missiologists have noted that for a church to become truly mature it is must go beyond self-support, self-government and self-propagation to self- theologizing. That is, it must be able to define theologically its own sense of identity in Christ and understanding of the gospel, instead of finding it in some other group of Christians or alien form of Christianity. This will give its members a genuine confidence in who they are and what they have in Christ, as well as clarity of vision of what are their Christian responsibilities. At the same time, when such an identity is forged within the context of the indigenous culture, the members of the church will be able to proclaim the gospel in a way that speaks with power to their own culture and context.Â*
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> *...But one implication of the quest for identity is that western Christianity will find increasingly that non-western Christianity does not fit easily into traditional western categories!...*
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> *Increasingly non-western churches will critique openly the things in western Christianity which they see as inadequate and/ or not being consistent with the gospel.*

**Critiquing differences in worldviews**

> *The one crucial area where non-western Christianity has real difficulty with western Christianity is the latterâ€™s worldview(s). Broadly speaking, due to Greek philosophical influence, the western worldview tends to be dualistic, separating soul and body, spirit and matter.Â*
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> *...Further, much of western theology today has also been domesticated by the philosophies of the Enlightenment with its autonomous rationalism and narrow empiricism. The result was a mechanistic view of the universe in which any and everything that cannot be defined scientifically was rejected. Within such a worldview there is simply no place in which to fit the miraculous dimension, answers to prayer, the ministration of angels, the work of a personal devil and demonic powers, and related ideas, even if the belief in God is retained. Hence the modern worldview became increasingly naturalistic in that the world can be understood*

> *without recourse to religious ideas. This naturalistic and dualistic worldview contrasts sharply with the supernaturalistic and holistic worldviews that are found in most non-western cultures. Ultimately, both cannot be right â€“ unless one is post-modernist, which non-western Christianity certainly is not!*

**Contextual Theologies**

> *This brings us to the discussion on contextual theologies. As noted above, this development is necessary in order for non-western Christianity both to have a clear sense of its own identity and to more effectively communicate the gospel to the non-western world.*
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> *...There is as yet no really good work in systematic theology written from within the Asian religio-cultural context. Almost everywhere, Asian seminaries are using western texts or their translations, which are of course rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and addressing theological questions posed by western cultures. But this will not do.*
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> *For example, western missionaries often think that John 3:16 is an excellent text for the communication of the gospel. After all, who can fail to grasp the simple clarity of â€˜For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him should ...have eternal lifeâ€™? But what does this verse communicate, for example, to the Buddhist mind? The ordinary Buddhist has no proper conception of â€˜God.â€™ At best he believes in â€˜godsâ€™ and â€˜spiritsâ€™, which is nothing like the God of Johnâ€™s gospel. Similarly, the word â€˜loveâ€™ to the Buddhist means passion. But passion for the Buddhist is the very thing that one must rid oneself of in order to attain Enlightenment. And what about â€˜eternal lifeâ€™? Every Buddhist (and Hindu for that matter) desires to be liberated from the bondage of karma, which keeps him in samsara, the unending cycle of birth and rebirth. A Buddhist therefore does not want life that goes on and on forever; he wants to be liberated from it!44 Thus our theologies, mostly formulated in a western context with alien thought patterns, often communicate things which are quite different from what we intend.*

Just one thought in conclusion. I am used to reading Western Christian leaders saying that the church in other parts of the world is syncretistic. Given the degree to which we have allowed our theology and world view to accommodate to Enlightenment ideas, I think we should be careful to observe the log in our own eyes, before we accuse others of syncretism.