

THE PROPHETIC CALL OF NARRATIVE FORMS OF THEOLOGY: NARRATIVE THEOLOGY, ASIAN TENDENCIES, AND ROMAN EMPHASES*

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ABSTRACT

Julius-Kei Kato challenges the reader to reflect on and uncover the gems of one's culture (here, specifically Asian) as a source of theology. Asian theologians' type of narrative theology (the narrating and re-telling of Asians' experience of faith grounded in their cultures) contributes significantly to the ongoing theological enterprise of the whole Church.

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Introduction

Prophetic activity is often triggered by a crisis. For our purposes here, I would like to identify – what I perceive as – an increasingly serious crisis in our present globalized context. I refer to a crisis rooted in the experiences of groups of people who have been “hybridized” in their consciousness. On the one hand, they feel that they simultaneously belong in significant ways to multiple worlds. On the other hand, they also experience that they *do not fully belong* to any of these multiple worlds with which they can claim some affiliation.

If we apply this hybridization of consciousness to the issue of religious belonging, it could very well be claimed as a common phenomenon especially among certain Asian Christians whether in Asia itself or in the diaspora. In short, there are many Asian Christians who experience this typically hybrid conundrum with regard to their Christianity vis-à-vis their particular Asian cultures in which Christianity is considered something of a “foreign matter.” The crisis I refer to is that for such hybridized Christians, Catholic teaching, especially in its dogmatic forms, can sometimes seem like an object that is unintelligible, foreign, and, consequently, one that they have great difficulty making fully their own.

This hybridization of religious consciousness is not confined to Asia. In a world that is truly becoming a global village due to the wonders of technology, many Christians experience a similar conundrum – they feel that, yes, Christianity is one world that makes up their identities but, at the same time, they are becoming aware that other religious sensibilities – some very different from Christianity – have actually also become part of themselves. This is clearly illustrated, for example, in theologian Paul Knitter’s recent book, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*.¹

This paper will ask how theology can play a prophetic role in order to make Catholic Christianity more intelligible and relevant for such hybridized people. It will suggest a way forward by remembering directions pointed out by two veteran theologians in their various works – Choan-Seng Song and Hans Küng. The common thread that can be identified in these two is that, in some of their most important works, they both propose prioritizing a narrative style of theology over a dogmatic and propositional one in order to make the Christian message more relevant, we can say, for Asia and the contemporary world in general.

1. Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (New York: OneWorld Publications, 2009).

I will argue that the endeavors of theologians such as Küng and Song to make theology a more narrative enterprise with the aim of making Catholicism and/or Christianity more universally accessible and relevant, particularly to non-Western people, are a prophetic call in present-day Catholicism where, under the long combined pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, there has been a strong movement supported by the hierarchy to re-emphasize more traditional, dogmatic, and propositional forms of appropriating the faith. I believe that such an emphasis contributes more and more to Catholicism's being reduced to a curious ghetto that is "smaller and purer" (a phrase that has been associated – perhaps incorrectly – with Joseph Ratzinger) but devoid of relevance and thus of true catholicity for many.²

“The Rule of Benedict”

One can describe the recently ended tenure of Benedict XVI (sometimes styled “the Rule of Benedict”)³ in different ways. For our purposes, I would like to identify what I believe are some defining characteristics.

In what turned out to be a programmatic homily before being elected to the papacy in April 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger thundered against a “dictatorship of relativism,” saying,

... whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,” seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.⁴

The solution he offered then simply put was “having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church.”⁵ On subsequent occasions, Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, would spell out even more clearly his

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2. See the discussion initiated by Joseph Komonchak, “A Smaller but Purer Church?” *Commonweal Blog*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/smaller-purer-church>, accessed October 1, 2013.
 3. See David Gibson, *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).
 4. Joseph Ratzinger, *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, The Vatican, April 18, 2005; available at http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html, accessed May 31, 2010.
 5. *Ibid.*

proposed solution to the acute crisis of relativism. One occasion was his so-called “Regensburg Speech” in September 2006.

It is unfortunate that other more weighty points Benedict made in that talk have been drowned out by the outcry that his reference to the Prophet Muhammad elicited especially among Muslims. A more careful analysis of this talk, however, shows that he was continuing his reflection on what he thinks should be foundational to the Christian faith (ultimately, in order to combat relativism). He utilizes what he perceives as a dangerous tendency in some Muslim circles to accept a “sheer, impenetrable voluntarism,”⁶ that is, a notion which prioritizes “the will of God” no matter if that will does not conform to “reason” or, in the pope’s preferred term, *logos*. On the contrary, quoting Byzantine emperor Manuel II, “. . . not acting reasonably (*sun lógo*) is contrary to God’s nature.”⁷ From this principle, the pope develops his argument that “the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith. . . .”⁸ In short, the “encounter between the biblical message and Greek thought” is providential so much so that the Greek philosophical influences that have become part and parcel of Christianity since this encounter are a *sine qua non* (essential element) to the Christian faith.

What concerns us here is that part in the pope’s speech where he presents a corollary of his thesis about the “rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.” He basically argues that the different calls for dehellenization in the history of theology ultimately lead to falsehood because of what has been expressed above, namely, Greek thought *is* inseparable with Christianity. Benedict cites as the third and most recent call for dehellenization the notion that “the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures.”⁹

How does one evaluate this stance? In the second volume of his memoirs, Küng critically evaluates Benedict’s theology in this way:

For Ratzinger Christianity only begins rightly when the biblical message meets up with Greek philosophy. . . . It is not the church of the New Testament that

6. Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memoirs and Reflections,” September 6, 2006; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html, accessed October 1, 2013.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

primarily interests Joseph Ratzinger but always the “church of the fathers”. . . . As is abundantly clear in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, his theological concern is not concentrated on the Jesus of history, in the light of whom the later dogmas of the church are to be interpreted for our time, but on the Christ of the Hellenistic councils, whom he reads everywhere into the New Testament writings.¹⁰

As another characteristic feature of Benedict’s tenure, one can add a profound respect for the Roman or Latin heritage of Christianity which, in the Regensburg Speech, Benedict explicitly links to the foundation of a Christian Europe. This esteem for the Latin heritage has been clearly seen recently in the – shall we say – imposition of the new English translations of the liturgy that was implemented throughout the English-speaking Catholic world in 2011, translations which conform in a more rigorous way with the original Latin. This could well be called Benedict’s *Veritas Latina*.

The above description of Benedict’s just ended tenure (that “tenure” is actually longer if one includes the period in which he directly influenced the whole church as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) as one characterized by an effort to reclaim a robust sense of traditional Catholic identity should be nuanced further. When that emphasis was directed at Asia – whether in Asia itself or in the Asian diaspora, whether implicitly or explicitly – it tended to take the form of sternly warning Catholics to be wary of losing a sense of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church’s preeminent position among the plethora of religions (many of them more ancient than Christianity) that are deeply rooted in the Asian continent.

What follows can be considered as merely one Asian reaction to the characteristics with which contemporary official Catholicism has come to be stamped under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It remains to be seen how things might change under the present pope, Francis.

An Asian Reaction

To put the matter starkly and even simplistically, not everyone in Asia is happy with this type of Catholicism, certainly not just at the level of likes or dislikes, but because of solid theological reasons. Let me quickly document

10. Hans Küng, *Disputed Truth: Memoirs II* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 15.

this Asian resistance to recent overarching tendencies in official Catholicism by briefly citing three indicators.¹¹

First Indicator: Dominus Iesus

This document insists that the Catholic Church should reaffirm today vis-à-vis other confessional communities and religions that the fullness of salvation is found *only* in Jesus Christ¹² and in the Catholic Church, and that followers of other religions, albeit also able to receive divine grace, are “*objectively speaking* . . . in a gravely deficient situation”¹³ with regard to salvation.

The declaration immediately caused something of an uproar of protest from many within and without the Catholic Church.¹⁴ It seemed that the declaration simply set aside the many efforts and successes at ecumenism and interreligious dialogue that have been achieved especially since the Second Vatican Council. Of course, particularly hit hard by the document were the local Catholic churches in Asia where there is a dynamic dialogue with other religions constantly taking place. In fact, the FABC expert Edmund Chia’s initial reaction was to mentally “distance the Church in Asia from the document.”¹⁵ Its tone and agenda seemed to be diametrically opposed to what had been so far the agenda of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) in order to make the Church in Asia more genuinely Asian.

Second Indicator: The Asian Synod and Ecclesia in Asia

Dominus Iesus was arguably a strong reaction on the part of Rome to what it perceived as disturbing Asian tendencies towards religious pluralism and relativism. If one wants to find out more concretely what Rome was really reacting to, then it is necessary to be familiar with the general trends emerging

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11. For a more extended discussion of the dynamics between Rome and Asian Catholicism, see Julius-Kei Kato, *How Immigrant Christians Living in Mixed Cultures Interpret Their Religion: Asian American Diasporic Hybridity and Its Implications for Hermeneutics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), chapter eight, part 2.
 12. Joseph Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus* [On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church], The Vatican, August 6, 2000; available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, accessed October 3, 2013.
 13. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
 14. For a succinct summary of various reactions to the document, see Edmund Chia, *Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx’s Method as Bridge between Vatican’s Dominus Iesus and Asia’s FABC Theology* (Bangkok: Edmund Chia, 2003), 21–29.
 15. *Ibid.*, 11.

in Asian Catholicism by examining, first, the whole process of the Asian Synod held in 1998 and, second, doing a survey and analysis of the rich collection of documents stemming from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences or FABC.

The Asian Synod was held in Rome in 1998. It was preceded by a preparatory phase and followed by a set of assessments that led to the post-synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* (The Church in Asia), promulgated in November 1999.¹⁶ In the different phases of the synod, there were pertinent events that showed marked differences between how the Asian bishops thought about and viewed the issues surrounding the Church in Asia, and how the Roman center saw them.

Arguably, the most famous instance of the dissonance between Rome and the Asian bishops was when the Japanese bishops reacted strongly to the *Lineamenta* (the preparatory document to be used as a springboard for discussion before the synod), pointing out that it did not reflect the real concerns of the Asian Churches in different areas, particularly, in Christology and Ecclesiology. While the *Lineamenta* stressed Jesus Christ as the one and only savior, the Japanese bishops argued for a different emphasis, that of Jesus's self-emptying or *kenosis*.¹⁷

The Japanese bishops also pointed out that the *Lineamenta* put undue emphasis on "proclamation of Christ" and not enough attention to the necessity of dialogue and compassion with those who suffer.¹⁸ They also suggested that the Asian characteristic of creative harmony be better employed.¹⁹

The aftermath of the synod even more clearly showed the dissonance between Roman voices and Asian voices. Evaluating the pope's postsynodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, John Prior and Edmund Chia point out in their very insightful assessments of the document that a lot of what was eventually expressed in it was more the pope's (and the Roman center's) voice, rather than that of the Asian bishops. They strongly felt that many things that were voiced out, discussed, and suggested by the Asian bishops during the synod were not sufficiently expressed by the pope in his exhortation.²⁰

16. See Peter Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 286–332.

17. See *ibid.*, 62–64.

18. See *ibid.*, 62.

19. See *ibid.*, 63.

20. See John Prior, "Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*," in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, edited by Peter Phan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis

Third Indicator: L'affaire Peter Phan (*The Peter Phan Affair*)

By “*l'affaire Peter Phan*,” I refer here to his 2004 book, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, and the reaction that the work elicited from the hierarchy in 2007 in which it warned that Phan’s cutting-edge theological reflection – which is representative of general trends in Asian and Asian-North American theological efforts – “could easily confuse or mislead the faithful.”²¹

Let us briefly review the situation. A prominent Asian-American theologian publishes a book that is very much a fruit of his identity and experiences as an Asian-North American. The book deals with many issues concerning the relation of Christianity with other religions. To express the book’s thesis simplistically, it is nothing more than what is hinted at in the title: In this globalized and postmodern era, the religiosity of Catholics should be interreligious in nature.

The book proposes some factors which can be thought of as pushing the envelope or stretching the limits, particularly in the realms of Christology and Ecclesiology, because of their extraordinary openness to and valorization of other religions. Meanwhile, as stated above, institutional Roman Catholicism, especially in its official upper echelons, has been engaged for some time during the last two papacies in trying to reaffirm and reclaim a robust sense of “traditional” Catholic identity and the guardians of orthodoxy have been quite explicit as seen in *Dominus Iesus* and in other events that Catholics should be clear about Christ’s and the Church’s superiority over other religions.

It was no surprise then that Phan’s *Being Religious Interreligiously* appeared on the radar screens of the doctrinal guardians shortly after its publication. Investigations both at the local (US) level and Roman level were started. The preliminary result of the investigations was that Phan’s book was faulted as having come short of the required mark on several key areas in – what official Catholicism understands as – God’s scheme of things, hence, it could easily confuse or mislead the faithful.²²

Books, 2002), 236–48; Edmund Chia, “Of Fork and Spoon or Fingers and Chopsticks: Interreligious Dialogue in Ecclesia in Asia,” in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, edited by Peter Phan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 273–83.

21. Committee on Doctrine United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Clarifications Required by the Book, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*,” by Peter Phan; available at <http://old.usccb.org/doctrine/StatementonBeingReligiousInterreligiously.pdf>, accessed October 3, 2013.
22. See *ibid.*

Given all these indicators of a dissonance between institutional Catholicism represented by Rome and sectors of Asian/Asian-North American Catholicism, we can now ask: What is it in the Asian or Asian-North American soul that creates such a dissonance? For our purposes here, I would like to retreat to the safer haven of fiction in order to describe possible factors why many Asians are not comfortable taking Rome's very confident and even triumphalistic approach to Catholicism, by mentioning vignettes from a novel of one of Japan's great novelists of the 20th century – Endo Shusaku.

Endo Shusaku's *Deep River*

Being a Catholic from his youth, Endo had always felt that he was different from the mainstream of Japanese society for whom Christianity is by and large considered a foreign religion. He constantly felt that he was some kind of oxymoron because Christianity as it was present in Japan was, in a way, a Western construct, incompatible in many respects with Japanese culture. That, for him, was why Christianity had never taken firm root in Japan. This realization prompted him to make, as his lifelong project, the effort to “cloth Christ in a kimono,” that is to say, to japanize him.

The last and arguably most mature work of Endo before he died in 1996 is the novel *Deep River*.²³ The novel tells the story of a Japanese tourist group that goes to India on a tour of the Buddhist holy sites and concludes the tour by converging on the city of Varanasi by the sacred river Ganges.

The tour is made up of different characters who go to India for different reasons, each of them, however, on a search for meaning. One of the participants of the tour is a woman called Mitsuko who joins the tour with hopes of meeting an acquaintance, a Catholic priest named Otsu.

I would like to put into sharp relief the Christian Asian's brand of Christianity in the novel (as represented by Otsu's faith). A second element to pay attention to are the dynamics of the troubled relationship between Otsu and his superiors with regard to Otsu's religious views.

In several parts of the novel, we see Otsu attempting to describe how he regards Christianity. Writing to Mitsuko as a seminarian in Lyon, Otsu confesses,

23. See Shusaku Endo, *Deep River* (New York: New Directions, 1994).

I don't believe in European Christianity. I've been here three years. For three years I've lived here, and I've tired of the way people here think. The ways of thinking that they've kneaded with their own hands and fashioned to meet the workings of their hearts . . . they're ponderous to an Asian like me. I can't blend in with them. And so . . . every day is hell for me. When I try to tell some of my French classmates or teachers how I feel, they admonish me and say that the truth knows no distinction between Europe and Asia. They say it's all because of my neurosis or my complex or whatever.²⁴

Otsu then goes on to speak about friction between his ideas and Western ideas as regards "distinctions." Western minds make clear distinctions between good and evil but for his Asian mind, the distinction is not that clear. He thinks that "evil lurks within good, and that good things can lie hidden within evil as well."²⁵ This thinking is sharply rejected by Otsu's superiors.

Further on in the novel when the group has at last reached the city by the Ganges, Mitsuko rereads Otsu's letters to her through the years and in these letters we find a treasure trove of material in which Endo expounds his view on the friction between European religious sensibilities and Japanese religious sensibilities.

On the Western penchant for logical clarity, Otsu says,

The brotherhood in Lyon concluded that I was not yet qualified to become a priest, and they delayed holding my ordination ceremony. There's something heretical in my nature; . . . After nearly five years of living in a foreign country, I can't help but be struck by the clarity and logic of the way Europeans think, but it seems to me as an Asian that there's something they have lost sight of with their excessive clarity and their overabundance of logic, and I just can't go along with it. Their lucid logic and their way of explaining everything in such clear-cut terms sometimes even causes me pain.²⁶

In another part, he says:

. . . it's because my Japanese sensibilities have made me feel out of harmony with European Christianity. In the final analysis, the faith of the Europeans

24. Ibid., 165.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 117.

is conscious and rational, and these people reject anything they cannot slice into categories with their rationality and their conscious minds.²⁷

It is clear then that in *Deep River*, the character of Otsu is sandwiched between, on the one hand, his fellow Japanese Mitsuko, who eyes Otsu as an oddity because of his Christianity, and, on the other hand, Otsu's religious superiors who consider him "heretical" because, for them, the Asian Otsu is not logical and discriminating enough in the realm of religion; he is too accepting of the intrinsic goodness of other religious faiths, thus jeopardizing Christianity's exclusive claims.

Monocultural Lens to View a Hybrid Entity

In *Deep River*, both Mitsuko and Otsu's religious superiors fail to understand most of what Otsu is telling them about his religious convictions. Why? I am convinced that the reason lies in Otsu's being a hybrid, a "betwixt-and-between" person; he is situated at the interstices of two conflicting worlds. Instead, Mitsuko and the religious superiors in Lyon are situated squarely in their own particular worlds and cultures. They are monocultural in the strict sense.

This "two world" experience of Otsu, I am sure, resonates with the experiences of many Asian Christians. Like Otsu, they find themselves in a liminal space between two well-defined cultures – their own particular Asian cultures and the particular Western culture which brought Christianity to their country.²⁸

Mōrosophia

What I have presented so far just makes it clear that there is a disjointed dimension in the dynamics between Rome and Asia when they envision how to understand Catholicism in the contemporary world. The question now is: How to get over this impasse?

In an insightful chapter in his *Being Religious Interreligiously*, Phan suggests that the "wisdom of holy fools" may be a way forward in our

27. Ibid., 117–18.

28. See Kato, *How Immigrant Christians Living in Mixed Cultures Interpret Their Religion*, chapter eight, part 2.

postmodern age. To elaborate, Phan traces the journey that has taken many cultures from the imaginative way to wisdom through *mythos* (myth) to a more abstract and speculative treatment of truth that can be expressed through the term *logos*. However, with the dawn of the postmodern era, more and more people have found not only *mythos* but even *logos* wanting in many crucial respects. Phan therefore shifts the spotlight as it were to a rarely considered alternative way to wisdom which nevertheless had such eminent practitioners even in Western Catholicism such as Thomas á Kempis, Nicholas of Cusa, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. This wisdom, he christens *mōrosophia*, the path of foolish wisdom. Drawing on different sources, *mōrosophia* can be described through notions which include: apophatic or negative theology which emphasizes the human radical inability to truly know God, *docta ignorantia* (“learned ignorance”) which emphasizes that since Truth is one, absolute, and infinitely simple, it is unknowable to humans, *coincidentia oppositorum* (the unification of all contradictions) which stresses that the Truth (to be equated with God) is big enough to encompass opposites, in short, Truth should ultimately transcend human reason and the principle of noncontradiction.²⁹

A Post-Critical Return to *Mythos*

Phan’s suggestion is fascinating. If I understand him correctly, the way to Truth he terms *mōrosophia* is more or less a third, distinct stage in the truth-seeking journey of humankind, a stage he thinks is very congenial to our postmodern world. Here, I would like to nuance that proposal somewhat by suggesting a slightly different image which, I think, is applicable particularly to the Asian or Asian-North American soul. According to this image, when one has trodden through the truth-seeking path and therefore gone through the stages first of *mythos* and then of *logos*, one reaches a stage akin to what Thomas Aquinas experienced shortly before his death in which after a mystical encounter with the divine, he felt as if everything he had written up to that point was like straw. Thus, he could not continue to work as before and even left the *Summa Theologiae* unfinished.³⁰

29. See Peter Phan, “The Wisdom of Holy Fools,” in Being *Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), chapter 1.

30. See Daniel Kennedy (1912), “St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company); available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>, accessed October 3, 2013.

Going back to my proposed image, many an Asian soul (I use this expression because I do not like to limit the category “Asian” to ethnicity but expand it to include anyone who resembles what I refer to as “Asian”) who has passed the stages of *mythos* and *logos*, comes to realize like Otsu in *Deep River* that his or her Asian sensibilities have made her “out of harmony” so to speak with the different categories traditionally found in Western Christianity, particularly the elements that fall into the *logos* category. That includes many categories that Benedict in his Regensburg address has actually posited as foundational to Christianity. The Asian soul then feels the need to revert back to *mythos* and by *mythos*, I mean a less abstruse, less abstract, less propositional and more narrative, more intuitive, more imaginative, maybe even more “foolish” way of understanding Christianity.

This reminds us of course of T. S. Eliot’s famous lines with one significant difference:

We shall not cease from our exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.³¹

The return to *mythos*, or to more narrative forms of theology is *not* “knowing the place for the first time.” It is *not* merely going back to a former stage that one has already passed before. The return to *mythos* or to a more narrative kind of theology I envision here is more like a Ricoeurian “second naivete”³² (also expressed sometimes as “post-critical” naïveté). It is a return to *mythos*, careful not to repeat the same journey already done but to dwell anew upon *mythos* and recognize that it is in fact the more open-ended and inclusive way to truth. This return to *mythos* is a more mature homecoming and it should include the elements that Phan describes as characteristic of *mōrosophia*.

Directions Suggested by Two Theological Sempai

Concretely, what does the return to narrative or *mythos* consist of? Here, it would be good to go back to directions pointed out by some eminent theological *sempai*. *Sempai* (先輩) is a Japanese word that can be understood as “one who has been there before us.” The term is frequently used therefore in

31. T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”; available at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>, accessed October 3, 2013.

32. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 349.

the school to refer to upperclassmen or in the work place to refer to colleagues with longer experience. It is used to address people with the nuance of the speaker having respect for one's *sempai*. The theological *sempai* I refer to in this study are Choan-Seng Song and Hans Küng.

As mentioned previously, the common thread that we can identify in these two theologians is that, in some of their most important works, they both propose prioritizing a narrative style of theology over a dogmatic and propositional one in order to make the Christian message more relevant, we can add, for Asia and the contemporary world in general.

Choan-Seng Song

C. S. Song is well known for his emphasis on narrative theology. It suffices to highlight important points about Song that help the argument here. Throughout his long and fruitful career, Song has consistently proposed a “story theology” from an Asian perspective. In an important and rare 1999 essay on methodology,³³ he seems to suggest that one rationale for this narrative method is in order to resist the West’s linear logic and Western theology’s hegemony of theologizing in a dogmatic and propositional way. Needless to say, Song is convinced that story theology will make Christianity more intelligible and relevant to Asians.

This methodological piece from Song is particularly relevant because Song is not one who frequently ponders extensively about methodology *per se*. In commenting on Song’s methodology, Peter Phan writes

A reader trained in Western theology and its linear logic will no doubt find not only Song’s theology but also his exposition rather disconcerting. This is so not only because almost all of his books . . . lack a clear thematic unity, being collections of previously published and generally unrelated essays, but also because Song intentionally adopts a mode of discourse and a style of theologizing that he calls “perceptual and intuitive.”³⁴

33. See C. S. Song, “Five Stages toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World,” in *Journeys at the Margin*, edited by Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

34. Peter Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 164. See chapter 7 of this book entitled, “Jesus with a Chinese Face: Choan-Seng Song’s Jesus-Oriented Christology” for a good analysis of C. S. Song’s theology, in particular his christology.

Phan's remark is intended to shed light on Song's strategy of deliberately avoiding "Western" linear logic in his work as a form of resistance. In fact, Song himself states in the same essay that he has always considered theological method to be something of an "afterthought"; it is "a pause you take after you have done the work(!)." ³⁵ The reason for that surprising comment is that, for Song, "the method of story-telling is in the telling of stories" itself. ³⁶ In that he deliberately wants to disconcert anyone hoping to find in his works a bowing down to the gods of western linear logic. Here we find an important characteristic of Asian and, by extension, also Asian American theology – the disrupting of linear logic so valued in the West.

Song explains that much of the work he has done so far, reflected in his christological trilogy, is expressed by that trilogy's general title: *The Cross in the Lotus World*. The "cross" stands, of course, for Christianity; the "lotus," a characteristically Buddhist symbol, stands for the world of Asia, not influenced by Christianity (with some important exceptions such as the Philippines) but by some of the world's great religions. In the trilogy, Song endeavored to reflect on the "self-understanding of the cross in the world of the lotus." ³⁷

Five Stages toward Theology in the Multicultural World

In Song's article on methodology, entitled "Five Stages toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World," he proposes five stages that Asian theologians in particular should utilize if they are to construct an appropriate theology in Asia.

The first stage consists in becoming critical of the church-centered Christianity that is usually the norm in Western Christianity and is frequently expressed in terms of a linear "divine scheme of salvation," where the plan of God unfolds, beginning with Israel, finding its fulfillment in Jesus who entrusts the work of salvation to the Church as he ascends back to the Father. The Church in turn goes out to the whole world in order to bring all people into this realm of salvation, of which it (the Church) is the only legitimate and worthy mediator.

With that, one moves to the second stage which consists in shifting the focus from "Church" to "Jesus." By "Jesus," Song does not mean that we

35. I wonder how many professors of theology in the West would recommend this principle from Song to their students. I myself have my personal reservations, but maybe I am just under the grip of Western hegemony and still need to decolonize myself theologically as Song suggests.

36. Song, "Five Stages toward Christian Theology," 2.

37. Ibid.

should be Jesus-centered in an exclusionary way. Rather, by shifting the focus from “Church” to the Jesus who actively lived and struggled in order to usher in the reign of God in the power of the Spirit, one gets caught up in the many other stories in which God’s reign of justice and compassion becomes embodied through the concrete ministry of Jesus to the suffering people of his time. With that, one realizes that the stories of God’s reign are not the abstruse theological concepts that Western Christianity has tended to emphasize. They are rather more down-to-earth, and, more importantly, open-ended, full of potential for the “multiplication” of similar stories³⁸ even in a heavily non-Christian Asia. The second stage unveils a strategy that has been identified with the name of Song himself – story theology. It can be described as a move from propositional and doctrinal language so characteristic of Western theology to narrative language, which is more suitable to many Asian sensibilities.

In the third stage, armed with an awareness that stories of God’s reign can be endlessly multiplied outside the narrow confines of Christianity, one immerses oneself in Asia to discover that there is already a wealth of stories of God’s reign therein.

The discovery of the wealth of stories of God’s reign *extra ecclesiam* (outside the Church) brings one to the fourth stage. Here one goes back to the Christian Church, changed by the encounter with stories *extra ecclesiam*, and in possession of new eyes with which to view Christianity afresh. One now sees that in the theology centered on sin and salvation that Western Christianity has traditionally insisted upon, there are some significant discontinuities with the overriding concerns that Jesus had.

In stage five, one definitively moves away from abstract “theological ideas” which ironically can act as a hindrance to grasping the nature of God’s reign, and makes a commitment to stories, which, in stark contrast to abstract theological ideas, expand one’s imagination to see the wider and more universal presence of God’s reign, particularly in Asia.³⁹

Now, let us go to directions pointed out by our second theological *sempai* – Hans Küng.

38. I understand this term to mean “events” similar to those described in the gospels, which usher in the reign of God.

39. See *ibid.*, 18–21.

Hans Küng

In his major christological work entitled *On Being a Christian*, Hans Küng programmatically and doggedly sticks to a type of language “more in the style of the synoptic gospels and of present-day speech” in order to present the person of Jesus Christ. Such language is of course more narrative in character.⁴⁰ The flipside of this strategy is a refusal to utilize language which is dogmatic and propositional. The technique can be described as starting like the first disciples “from the real human being Jesus, his historical message and manifestation . . . (as) more of a historical Christology ‘from below’ . . . [emphases added]”⁴¹ Moreover, to be radically grounded in history – for Küng – also entails, in a sense, preferring “dynamic” categories to “static” ones.⁴²

In *On Being a Christian*, the question about Jesus’s identity is put quite late in the account, contrary to common christologies. That is deliberate because Küng wants to emphasize first “action and experience: what Jesus said and did.”⁴³ The sayings and deeds of Jesus had an effect on others which, in turn, necessitated a decision about Jesus, his person, his words and acts. Some decisions on the part of people who encountered Jesus were positive (for Jesus); some, however, were negative (against Jesus), and, therefore, a *conflict* arose around the person of Jesus. This conflict necessitated posing the question about his identity: Who really was this Jesus?⁴⁴

This strategy firmly places Küng’s Christology in the narrative category. It is definitely neither a theoretical nor a metaphysical Christology. When reading *On Being a Christian*, one can note “that the need for ontological reflection does not arise, or it is needed only as a helpful addition.”⁴⁵

For Küng, the primary norm, the so-called *norma normans* (the norm which “norms” all others and which should not be normed by other norms), is “the primitive biblical witness,”⁴⁶ and in a special way, the Jesus-event according

40. See Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 450.

41. *Ibid.*, 133.

42. More explanation on these categories will appear later. See also Hermann Häring, *Hans Küng: Breaking Through* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 142.

43. *Ibid.*, 137.

44. See *ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1988), 157.

to the testimonies in the New Testament.⁴⁷ All other “norms” (like conciliar decrees, dogmas formulated at a later age, or theological explanations) are merely *norma normata* (literally, “normed norms” not carrying the authority and definitiveness of *norma normans*).⁴⁸ It is no surprise then that Küng gives supreme importance in his Christological approach to how the gospels speak about Jesus – that is, not metaphysically, but *narratively* and *historically*.

Küng maintains this fundamental methodological commitment of giving priority to the *norma normans* over other *norma normata* (like dogmatic language) throughout his book so much so that when he presents *his* interpretation of the creedal statement, “Jesus is truly God,” he states:

The whole point of what happened in and with Jesus depends on the fact that, for believers, God himself as man’s friend was present, at work, speaking, acting and definitively revealing himself in this Jesus who came among men as God’s advocate and deputy, representative and delegate, and was confirmed by God as the Crucified raised to life. All statements about divine sonship, pre-existence, creation mediatorship and incarnation – often clothed in the mythological or semi-mythological forms of the time – are meant in the last resort to do no more and no less than substantiate the uniqueness, underivability and unsurpassability of the call, offer and claim made known in and with Jesus, ultimately not of human but of divine origin and therefore absolutely reliable, requiring men’s unconditional involvement.⁴⁹

This non-ontological way of interpreting Jesus as Son of God stirred up a hornet’s nest. Küng was bitterly attacked by Church authorities and fellow theologians for not clearly stating Jesus’s ontological status as Son of God. Walter Kasper’s remark on Küng’s Christology is representative of the opposition to Küng’s approach: “Who is Jesus Christ? Is he a human person in whom God reveals himself in speech and action, or is he the eternal son of God who becomes man in history?”⁵⁰ But such criticisms of Küng’s Christology are, in a way, beyond the point because what Küng is trying to do in his Christological enterprise is to be faithful to the New Testament witness about Jesus which – as we saw – is definitely non-ontological.⁵¹

47. See *ibid.*, 156.

48. See *ibid.*, 157.

49. Küng, *On Being Christian*, 449.

50. Quoted in Häring, *Hans Küng*, 149.

51. See further elucidating remarks on this topic by Häring, in *ibid.*, 154–61.

In his 1998 monograph on Christianity (*Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*), Küng explains the paradigm shift⁵² that occurred in how Christianity describes Jesus Christ from Origen onwards “under the influence of Hellenism with a Neo-Platonic stamp.”⁵³ Whereas earlier Christological thinking based on the Jewish matrix treated Jesus Christ in a more dynamic and functional way, Hellenistic Christology began to concern itself more and more with static questions. Küng makes the poignant observation that “had people kept to the New Testament, they would have spared themselves the notorious difficulties which now arose over the relationship of the three persons ‘in’ God, all the speculations over the numbers one and three.”⁵⁴

The element in Küng’s approach which, I think, is most significant for the Asian context is his policy of not using Hellenistic/Western ontological categories but sticking to New Testament categories and styles in speaking about Jesus. These categories are clearly more functional and narrative. That approach is significant because, as we have seen in *Deep River*, many Asians find western ontological categories mind-boggling. Ontological categories which were so important to the Hellenistic mind are simply “foreign” to many Asian minds. When you have a Christology that intentionally seeks to avoid using Hellenistic ontological categories (like Küng’s), I feel that that would be very viable in Asia in which narrative is preferred to metaphysics!

Evaluation of Inadequacy

As we have seen, there have been many critiques of Song’s and Küng’s narrative approaches to theology. These are understandable because our two *sempai*’s approaches do not seem to valorize later dogmatic reflections that have become the hallmark of the western Christian tradition. Küng’s narrative Christology became a *cause célèbre* and further deepened Rome’s suspicions about his orthodoxy. Subsequent events ultimately led to the withdrawal of his credentials as a Catholic theologian.⁵⁵ With regards to Song’s Christology,

52. For a detailed description of the term “paradigm shift,” see Hans Küng and David Tracy, eds., *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989). In particular, Küng’s own articles therein: “Paradigm Change in Theology: A Proposal for Discussion,” 3–33; “What Does a Change of Paradigm Mean?” 212–19; and “A New Basic Model for Theology,” 439–52.

53. Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 166.

54. *Ibid.*, 173.

55. See Peter Hebblewithe, *A New Inquisition? The Case of Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980).

noteworthy is Peter Phan's terse critique dealing with its adequacy in his *Christianity with an Asian Face*.⁵⁶

These critiques are certainly understandable and necessary. If I may draw on the metaphysics of experience of the American philosopher Charles Peirce via the theologian Donald Gelpi, the human mind grasps reality both intuitively and inferentially in that order. Intuition is knowledge "mediated by perceptions and images."⁵⁷ When realities have been grasped intuitively, however, the tendency for humans is to try to "endow (this understanding) with logical precision."⁵⁸ That refers to inference.⁵⁹ Whereas intuitive thinking gives us a broad picture of reality, inferential thinking makes us see details of the broad picture with enhanced precision.⁶⁰

When we apply the distinction between intuition and inference to the history of theology, we realize that the earliest period of Christianity was marked more by an intuitive effort to grasp the person of Jesus with its preferred mode of communication – narrative. As time went by, however, a purely intuitive understanding of Jesus was felt to be wanting and various efforts were made in order to endow this intuitive perception with greater logical or inferential precision and clarity. In order to endow realities with greater precision, inference prefers to use abstract, philosophical, and dogmatic language.

Given that history, when a style of theology takes a narrative form, the tendency is to find it wanting in logical precision and rigor. Here I come back to the point made above regarding the return to narrative or *mythos* to be found in Song's and Küng's approaches. Critiquing them as lacking in logical and philosophical precision and rigor, in my opinion, misses the point.

Although not often explicitly mentioned in their works, both of them have actually reached the stage of a "return to narrative or *mythos*" after extensive theological journeys. They have been through the initial *mythos* stage, progressed onto a very rigorous grappling with the faith at the *logos* stage but at a certain point, the Hellenistic philosophical categories that Christianity has so dearly held have been found by these theologians to be, in the words of the book of Daniel, *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*, that is, weighed and found

56. See Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face*, 165–69.

57. Donald L. Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many: A Christology for Converting Christians*, vol. 3, *Doctrinal and Practical Christology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 568.

58. *Ibid.*, 284.

59. See *ibid.*, 567.

60. See *ibid.*, 284.

deficient.⁶¹ This experience of the inadequacy of doctrinal and propositional categories expressed in Hellenistic philosophical language necessitated a return to narrative or *mythos* and to know the place as if in a second naïveté.

Please allow me to suggest a description of this post-critical return to *mythos*. It is founded on an approach which even the historical Jesus considered most important as evidenced by his extensive use of open-ended parables to describe the reign of God. In the words of biblical scholar, Robert Funk, “In the beginning was the parable.”⁶² This post-critical return to *mythos* is cognizant and appreciative of the long and venerable tradition of doctrinal thinking but, like Küng, it intentionally avoids using Hellenistic categories.

It furthermore intentionally chooses narrative in order to emphasize not informative but performative dimensions of Christianity. In other words, it prefers to stress orthopraxis over orthodoxy, the ethical over the doctrinal dimension. When pressed to enter into more speculative modes of thinking, it will resist and counter with an apophatic theology insisting on the inadequacy of human categories to truly grasp the nature of the infinite; it will appropriate the Buddha’s basic stance when similarly pressed for answers to more abstract and speculative questions such as “Does the self exist or not? Do we live on after death? And the like. To such questions, the Buddha is said to have usually replied,

Your question does not fit the case. . . . What you’re asking doesn’t have anything to do with the answers I’m offering. Your questions deal with matters that are either beyond words or beyond human intelligence. . . . They’re distractions from what we can do and need to do: [which is] figure out how to deal with suffering, how to live peacefully and compassionately. Do that first, and then there might be time to entertain questions – *if* that’s needed.⁶³

That is how Knitter interprets the Buddha’s basic conviction in *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. The return to *mythos* might even claim *Veritas Hebraica* once again by insisting that Jesus’s original Jewish matrix would have been immensely concrete and praxis-oriented and would not have concerned itself so much with more abstract matters.

61. Daniel 5:25–26.

62. Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 165.

63. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 60–61.

Why Do Theology at All?

I am well aware that my suggestions here are subject to the same critiques that have followed Song's and Küng's. I am also aware that following my suggestions might leave many of us who are currently teaching theology and religious studies without jobs. Facetious considerations aside, the advocacy of a more narrative theology begs the question: So why do theology at all? Theology is, after all, a faith-seeking-understanding enterprise which involves a significant amount of *logos*-based speculation.

My answer would be: One has to walk the whole theological walk. That journey usually begins with *mythos* (the stories about Israel and Jesus that we hear as children, for example). It does involve plunging ourselves, no matter if we are Asian or not, into the waters of Hellenistic categories because Christianity as a historical entity is indeed inseparable with its Hellenistic heritage.

Commenting on the Gnostics' outlook on authority in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels explains that for many Gnostics, "the purpose for accepting authority (was) to learn to outgrow it."⁶⁴ In like manner, I would say that for many of us (especially the Asians among us), there comes a time in the midst of our grappling with the task of seeking a deeper understanding of the faith when we feel we have to transcend or outgrow *logos*. But the point is: We have to immerse ourselves first in *logos* in order to transcend it. I have expressed that state here as a post-critical return to *mythos*.

That state has been given expression in eloquent ways by some of our theological *sempai* such as Song and Küng. In an atmosphere in which there was a strong reassertion of traditional doctrinal and propositional orthodoxy in institutional Catholicism, I consider these voices advocating for a more narrative approach prophetic in the truest sense of the word for Asia in particular in order to make Christianity more truly universal or, yes, catholic.

Hope for the Future – The Francis Era

It is too early to say what the immediate future in the Pope Francis era holds for narrative styles of doing theology but a few matters are noteworthy. From the beginning of his papacy, Francis has called the whole Church

64. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 131.

repeatedly to take more seriously the call of *Gaudium et Spes* to make its own “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [*sic*] of this age”⁶⁵ and to walk with the contemporary world in its journey toward God and greater wholeness. This he has done concretely by means of repeatedly denouncing a narrow and narcissistic ecclesiastical attitude of closure upon itself (going so far as to call the narcissistic papal court the papacy’s “leprosy”)⁶⁶ and – in the words of his now famous Jesuit interview – calling for a “big heart open to God and to others”⁶⁷ that can discern the workings of God through the signs of the times. In short, there seems to be a shift of focus from a very dogmatic one during the last two pontificates to a more people-centered, context-sensitive one or – in the words of Leonardo Boff evaluating Francis’s papacy thus far – “centrality is not given to doctrine and discipline, so dominant lately, but to humans, and their searches and inquires, be they believers or not.”⁶⁸

It is obvious that such a shift of approach actually parallels some things suggested by Song mentioned above as steps to doing a theology that is more relevant in a multicultural world, particularly, in Asia. Will we see a new spring that will usher in a resurgence of narrative styles of theology? What can be said is that some Asians (in the widest possible sense) certainly hope so.

65. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

66. Eugenio Scalfari, “This Is How the Church Will Change”; available at http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/10/01/news/pope_s_conversation_with_scalfari_english-67643118/, accessed October 8, 2013.

67. Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*; available at <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>, accessed October 8, 2013.

68. Leonardo Boff, “With Pope Francis, the Third World Has Come to the Vatican”; available at <http://leonardoboff.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/with-pope-francis-the-third-world-has-come-to-the-vatican/>, accessed October 8, 2013.

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