



Synopsis: Thinking Theologically in Context

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Asian Christianity Hobbled by Cultural Blinders

Christians throughout the world celebrate Christmas with Advent wreaths and Christmas trees in December and often accompany Easter celebrations with eggs and bunnies in the spring. What many do not realize is that these holy days were adapted from European pagan festivals.

When one understands the history of today's Christian traditions and practices, Majority World Christians are left wondering why they do not have the same freedom to adapt Christianity through the lens of their own cultural worldview, practices, and festivals as their Western counterparts. Majority World Christians are often cautioned to legalistically hold onto the standards and theologies provided by missionaries, rejecting any form of contextualization as syncretistic – even as they fail to recognize that the forms they consider “standard” are often culturally derived.

Sadly, this is one of the primary reasons Christianity is seen as a foreign or Western religion. How then can Christianity be allowed to adapt and take root in Asian soil as it has in the West?

God and Asian Churches “On the Move”

At the beginning of the 21st century, as Christianity is now polycentric and with two-thirds of the world's Christians living in the Global South, there is a pressing need to rethink theologically in context so that Christianity can take firm root in the recent cultures it has entered. How then can Asian churches enable and empower Christians to think theologically in context? This session suggests a three-pronged process to learn, unlearn and relearn one's schema/worldview to enable fresh theological thinking in the Asian context.

The first prong requires one to first understand the ontology (origins) of theology and practice to differentiate unchanging biblical foundations from cultural shells. The second prong requires one to epistemologically (process of knowing) evaluate indigenous cultural forms, traditions and practices to determine what can or cannot be used to locally express Christianity. A third prong would be to draw from acceptable Asian philosophical characteristics and traditions to develop an indigenous process of self-theologizing.

In Western terms, a contextualized Asian theology may not be a systematic theology, which is inherently reductionist, but approach theologizing narratively and ethnohermeneutically. It may not be an isolated, reflective endeavor of one theologian, but may be a communal dialogue. In other words, Asia may not produce a Calvin or Barth, but Asian theology may be defined by a “school” or a “community.”

Christianity is constantly “on the move” geographically and across generations. And all theology is inherently contextual. As such, as transplants must draw from their strengths to adapt to their new environment, Asian Christians must be bold and courageous to harness the inherent characteristics and nature of the biblical faith that will enable Christianity to thrive in Asian soil.