

ASIAN FACES OF CHRIST

Office of Theological Concerns
Theological Colloquium
of the
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

held at
Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre
(Baan Phu Wan), Sampran
Thailand
May 11-152004

Papers Edited By
Edited by
Vimal Tirimanna C. Ss. R.

Published by
Asian Trading Corporation
P O Box 8444
Bangalore
India

JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE: TOWARDS A CONFUCIAN CHRISTOLOGY

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This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to his followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mt. 16:15), as it is directed to the peoples from the Confucian world of East Asia, viz., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. More precisely, it seeks to explore possibilities for articulating a christology which will be meaningful to peoples from the Confucian tradition. Although J.V. Taylor, a missionary to Africa made the following comment in the African context, it is just as pertinent, if not more, to the peoples of East Asia:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic

Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) are taken from *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales & C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*) and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, eds. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*).

Abbreviations used: BIRA = FABC Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs

FABC = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

FAPA = *For All The Peoples of Asia*, Vol. I (1970-1991), Vol. II (1992-1996)

Note on Transcription: The pinyin transliteration system is used throughout this essay, except the names of Chinese authors who publish in Western languages and have chosen to transliterate their names in a specific way, and those Chinese terms which have been transliterated using the Wade-Giles system: in quoted texts and titles of works.

Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?

Paraphrasing Taylor, one could also ask: if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions which the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese peoples have been asking, what would he look like? Undoubtedly, East Asian Christians are able to repeat what European missionaries have told them who Jesus was and is. Now, the time has come for them to say for themselves who Jesus is and what is his significance in their lives today. It is clear from Mt. 16:13-15 that Jesus is not so much interested in the abstract and impersonal "who do people say I am,"² as he is in the question, "who do you [viz., a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Vietnamese] say I am?"

On this basis, this paper seeks to investigate the prospects for articulating a distinctive *Confucian christology* which would uncover the *significance* of Jesus for Confucian East Asians, as well as engage in a *dialogue* with their philosophical-religious traditions, socio-cultural institutions, existential concerns and life experiences.³ First, it surveys the historical developments of christology in the European world, exploring the transition from classicist-universalist European christologies to contextual Asian christologies, as well as the implications of this transition. Second, it surveys the context of the Confucian world of East Asia, presenting an overview of its historical developments, philosophical-religious worldview and ethical ethos. Third, it presents a critical evaluation of the possibilities of using the powerful and evocative image of the *sage* (sheng 聖) as a christological image for East Asian Christians, with an emphasis on articulating the

1 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 16.

2 Or, to paraphrase the question in the East Asian context: "Who do Europeans say I am? Who do the Christians of European Line Antiquity say I am?"

3 In this regard, it has been argued that "if christology is never final, but always in dialogue with the early church, with the religious and mythical presuppositions and commitments of the Jewish and Hellenistic world, and perhaps most important, with the worldviews of our own age and time." See Robert Berkeley and Sarah A. Edwards, *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993) 24.

foundational principles which would undergird this Confucian christology, its principal elements, resources and interpretive matrix.⁴ Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implications which the image of Jesus as the "crucified and risen sage" would have for East Asian Christians.

I. FROM CLASSICIST-UNIVERSALIST EUROPEAN CHRISTOLOGIES TO CONTEXTUAL ASIAN CHRISTOLOGIES

If there is one thing which Christian theologians and believers of all stripes and colours could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus the Christ stands at the centre of the Christian faith. Christology, or the "theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, clarifying systematically who and what he is in himself for those who believe in him,"⁵ is one perennial topic of theological inquiry which began when the crowds around Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth wondered who he was, and which has continued unabated ever since. To the age-old question "Who do you say I am?" the answers in different historical epochs are diverse and varied, as Jaroslav Pelikan stresses in his landmark survey *Jesus Through the Centuries*.⁶

Christianity's chequered history offers us a good glimpse of the diversity of responses to the question of Christ's identity by different

4 This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavours at exploring the possibilities for articulating a Confucian christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavours include Kim Heup Young, "Jen and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," *Asian Journal of Theology* 8 (1994): 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing a Confucian christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (ren 仁); and Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," *Studia Missionaria* 45 (1996): 25-55, which seeks to construct a Confucian christology by "situating Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships, especially on the role of the eldest son, and the Asian practice of veneration of ancestors" (p. 27).

5 Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000) 42.

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Pelikan's underlying thesis is that Jesus cannot be understood outside of human cultures, and that it is human cultures that shape the diverse images and understandings of Jesus in human history.

communities of followers. Clearly, Christians of all ages and places have been confronted with a diversity of images of Jesus in the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the pronouncements of ecumenical councils. Indeed, there is no unanimity in the understanding of Jesus' identity even in the primitive church, a point which manifests itself if one contrasts the so-called "low" christology of the Gospel of Mark with the so-called "high" christology of the Gospel of John. What is clear is the fact that the various portraits of Jesus in the New Testament are not so much a reflection of the historical Jesus, as these churches' understanding of Jesus and his significance for their faith life. Hence, one sees a diversity and plurality of images of Jesus, e.g., as "Son of Man," "Son of God," "Teacher," Messiah (*Christos*), Word (*Logos*), Lord (*Kyrios*), and Saviour (*Soter*) in the New Testament. These images reveal what the apostolic Christians perceived the significance of Jesus was for them in messianic, soteriological terms.⁷ In this vein, J.B. Chethimattam suggests that "the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles clearly show, like divinity of Christ was not the focus of the early Christian understanding of the salvation wrought by Jesus," but rather, it "was principally the work of the Father, the one God of the Bible, who in fulfillment of his promise of salvation to humanity sent Jesus as a new Moses, a new David and a new Solomon to lead humanity in the faithful carrying out of the Covenant with Yahweh."⁸

The fourth and fifth century christological debates on the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ in the Hellenistic-Roman world of Late Antiquity introduced a paradigm shift from soteriology to ontology, viz., from his salvific significance for believers to abstract, philosophical musings on the nature and person of Christ

7 For a more in-depth analysis, see, e.g., James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); Eral Richard, *Jesus, One and Many: The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

8 J.B. Chethimattam, "Asian Jesus: The Relevance of Jesus Christ in the Asian World of Religious Pluralism," *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997): 300.

in and of himself, as well as his position as the second person of the Trinity. Thus, Nicaea I proclaimed that Jesus the Christ is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, and Chalcedon professed:

[the] one and the same Christ, Lord, Son, unique, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation - the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved, and [each] combining in one Person and *hypostasis* - not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same God and only-begotten Son, Word, Lord Jesus Christ. ...⁹

One should remember that when the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries fashioned these christological formulations, they were motivated, not by questions of Jesus' significance for human salvation, but by the highly polemical debates on this contentious issue between the Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians. Indeed, the council fathers pursued a defensive stance throughout, seeking to bolster doctrinal statements on the integrity of Jesus' divinity and his humanity against what were being perceived as heterodox statements.

Clearly, the classical christological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era focused exclusively on defining the person of Jesus Christ, the relation between his humanity and divinity, as well as his relationship to the Father, rather than his salvific work and significance for people, a fact which does not preclude new explorations of Jesus' salvific work and significance for people in later socio-cultural contexts. Hence, in the early Middle Ages of Europe, the old-Saxon epic *Heliand*¹⁰ and the Anglo-Saxon verse

9 English translation taken from: *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954): 373.

10 For English translation and commentary, see *The Saxon Gospel: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. G. Ronald Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). For a critical analysis, see: G. Ronald Murphy, *The Saxon Version: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Nine-Century Heliand* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

*The Dream of the Road*¹¹ presented Christ as an all-powerful Teutonic warrior-king within the context of a wider medieval germanisation of Christianity. According to James Russell, this development arose because:

For Christianity to be accepted by the Germanic peoples, it was necessary that it be perceived as responsive to the heroic, religio-political, and magico-religious orientation of the Germanic world-view. A religion which did not appear to be concerned with fundamental military, agricultural, and personal matters could not hope to gain acceptance among the Germanic peoples, since the Pre-Christian Germanic religiosity already provided adequate responses to these matters.¹²

Although scholars critique the image of Christ the Teutonic warrior-king as a departure from the pacifist Jesus of Nazareth, it is undeniable that this image of Christ as a powerful, majestic, and triumphant king persisted through much of the Middle Ages into modernity. This triumphalistic image of Christ the King (*Christus Rex*) was brought by European missionaries to Asia, Africa and the Americas, and used as justification for massacres, economic plunder and socio-cultural destruction. As Michael Amaladoss points out, "the preferred image of Jesus in the West, at least as presented to the East, seems to have been that of Christ the King who seeks to extend his kingdom all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process."¹³

More importantly, the classicist model of *missio ad gentes* is predicated upon a christology of a triumphant "Christ the King" leading an army of missionaries to conquer pagan lands and rescue pagan souls from ignorance. Not surprisingly, such an assertive "Christ the King" is

resented by many non-Christians.¹⁴ More significantly, while the image of "Christ the King" continues to resonate in the minds and hearts of many Christians in Europe and North America today, the very same Christians would have difficulty in understanding the abstract classical christological professions of Niceae and Chalcedon, let alone explain in plain, coherent terms what these classical christological professions really mean.

This brings us to the situation in Asia. Taking the Anselmian axiom *fides quaerens intellectum* as the starting point, then there will invariably be a continuous growth in an appreciation of Jesus Christ when he is understood and appropriated by people in new socio-cultural contexts. The Indian theologian Stanley J. Samartha explained it well when he pointed out that christology was not about "a frantic search for an alternative substance," whether home-made or imported from elsewhere, in order once again to understand Christ's nature," but an endeavour to answer the question, "what is the reality that we encounter in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord?"¹⁵ On the question of Jesus' significance for others and his salvific work, the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers and conciliar pronouncements are always the starting point and not the end, since these sources can never exhaust the range of people's experiences and questions in diverse *Sitzzeit-im-Leben*. The preaching of Jesus Christ to every age and culture necessarily results in new understandings, responses and experiences by people in new socio-cultural settings, all of which in turn lead to new insights about Jesus' meaning and significance for these people. One is reminded by Pope John XXIII, who noted in his opening *allocutio* to the Second Vatican Council, "[t]he substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."¹⁶

11 See Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross, eds., *The Dream of the Road* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966).

12 James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociological Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 4.

13 Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," *CTSA Proceedings* 56 (2001) 10.

14 See discussion in: William Burrows, *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) 242-244.

15 S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unborn Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974) 41.

16 "Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966) 715.

