

Book Review

***Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, eds. Timotheo De. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue. Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019**

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Asian Christian Theology (ACT) seeks to “approach Christian theology that is biblically rooted, historically aware, contextually engaged, and broadly evangelical” (2) and reassesses “traditional areas of Christian teaching in light of the Asian church’s distinctive needs and resources, and [then] revis[es] the very areas of focus themselves” (5).

The book has two sections – doctrinal themes and contemporary concerns – where essays do the following: (i) survey the classical/historical development of each systematic doctrine; (ii) describe the Asian socio-cultural and religious contexts in which Christianity interacts; (iii) explicate a unique Asian Christian theology.

ACT begins with Gener’s excellent chapter on divine revelation. It states that studying theology must be missional and contextual; it emphasizes Christology, the “centrality of biblical revelation in Christian faith” (15), and how it relates to the practices of Asian theology, mission, and discipleship. Gener believes that the “experiential dimension of doing Asian Christian theology” is to see “the living faith of the people of God... as the locus of primary theology” (30) by “listening carefully to what the Spirit of truth who indwells the church is saying through the people of God” (31, citing Chan). In this way, listening to the Spirit opens “Asia’s ‘gifts’ of spirituality, meditative prayer, the religions, and a strong family orientation as resources that could enrich the universal body of Christ, when appropriated discerningly” (32). The rest of the book closely follows Gener’s themes.

Chapter 2 develops a doctrine of the Bible in dialogue with Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim scriptures to uncover how God reveals himself in various modes. A rich insight that emerges is how “the nature of the revelation indicates the nature of the deity involved, with the manner of self-disclosure being an indicator of this nature” (46). Chapter 3 surveys the Trinity, one of the most challenging concepts

to explain in Asian Christianity. A unique contribution is the author's development of a contextual Asian Trinitarianism, taking the traditional Filipino nuclear family as an analogy for the divine family (76-77). Contextual Christology follows (ch 4) to critique the "radically creative turn of Asian Christology" (91-95) where Jesus is "a caricature of the person who is proclaimed by the testimony of the New Testament writers" or "a God-man no different from what Krishna is to Hinduism, or a mere teacher of wisdom as Gautama the Buddha is to Buddhism" (92). Rather than communicating Christology in Western abstractions, we must "search for presentations of Jesus that resonate with Asian categories of thought and address the most immediate challenges to witness and mission" (95). Christology is also discussed in a theology of creation (ch 5). Here, Christ's "all-inclusive reconciling ministry of bringing together everything under God's control" means that Christians are "formed into a new people [who] will be reconciled with the earth, with the world of nature by being given a land in which to dwell" (110). Creation is "reconciled to God (not worshipped), cared for" (116).

These chapters present a beautiful vision of the world – both creation and Asian culture – infused with the Spirit's presence. Ch. 6 cautions readers not to over-exclude or over-include the Spirit in non-Christian religions (121-123). Indeed, the church in Asia is now on something of a "quest to find paths forward in pneumatology that are (1) faithful to the Scriptures, (2) informed by Christian tradition ... and, (3) capable of speaking to key cultural-religious as well as social realities in Asia" (126). Such improvements are also needed in Asian evangelical ecclesiology (ch 7) because of its weak historical character, theological fluidity, fragmentation, and "ritual impoverishment" (140-141, 152).

On a separate topic, good eschatological hope exists for Asians (ch 8) to deal with terrorism and peace and with poverty and Asia's widening wealth gap. Because of God's revelation for the world in Christ, Christian hope "is not just about a future reality" but also about pursuing divine justice, peace, and life now, in tension with present disappointments and tribulations (172).

The remaining essays reflect contemporary Asian concerns: suffering and mission (ch 9); cultural identity and theology (ch 10); contextualization of Christ for Hindus (ch 11); Christian witness as public theology in the Philippines (ch 12); diaspora identity, belonging, and mission (ch 13); a typology of theology for religious encounters (ch 14); theology in context of radical Chinese cultural shifts (ch 15); and reconciliation in the Middle East (ch 15). They all exemplify how context-specific approaches towards religious Others can happen through dialogue, deep friendship, and incarnational and peaceable witness.

What benefits does the book offer for theological education?

ACT offers theological educators in Asia an understanding of Christian identity and life that is faithful to Christ yet also richly contextualized. From insights in *ACT*, educators can discover pedagogical places, people, and processes to fertilize their

own approaches to teaching (e.g. using dialogical approaches to interreligious encounters, employing missiological or ethnographic research methods to study culture and people in conversation with theology, etc). Humility that incorporates listening and learning from Asian sources as educational resources is implicit throughout.

By including contributions from many denominations (e.g. Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostals) and institutions (e.g. seminaries, mission boards, research institutes), *ACT* showcases how theological training now occurs in rapidly expanding modes across Asia. Churches and seminaries need not be the only options for theological educators for ministry in Asia. Traditional Asian theological education must now consider how to relate to these diversities. Ignoring them may serve a denomination or doctrinal purpose in the short-term, but failing to consider serious intra-denominational dialogue or partnership may lead to limited institutional resources and parochial theological perspectives in the long run.

While inter-organisational, inter-denominational cooperation is important, Asian evangelical Christians are united on a strong commitment to the Bible. Unfortunately, historically, this posture has marginalized missiology's and sociology's contributions to theology. However, by including essays by Juliet Lee Uytanlet, Lalsangkima Pachuau, and Tan Kang San, *ACT* implicitly calls Majority World seminaries to add anthropologists and missiologists to their faculties. Doing so will better equip students for biblical socio-cultural engagement and will integrate anthropology and missiology as valid disciplines of Christian study.

If *ACT* calls for better anthropological and missiological engagements in theological education, it opens another question: Can Asian seminaries invite religious Others into their classrooms as instructors? Most Asian Christians (especially first-generation converts) are not even interested in visiting non-Christian religious sites; they do not see religious Others as sources of learning. This reluctance finds its way into many classrooms. To be sure, many valid reasons exist for this (e.g. security concerns, discrimination, or restrictions, etc). Yet Christians (in Asia and elsewhere) should reconsider this attitude. If learning can be enhanced by interdisciplinary approaches, we should also recognize the enrichments offered by religious Others. We should not limit learning to texts and doctrines "out there" but should include non-Christians in our classrooms so that we can learn from them.

On a very specific note, Gener's chapter asks: If theology is to be contextual and missional, to what extent should Asian evangelicals hew to the traditional structure of systematic theology, when that structure emerged from a Western framework? For example, why should eschatology be separate from other doctrines if the underlying reason for such separation is a Western definition of time as linear? Could eschatology not be integrated throughout theology? Gener also questions the limits of systematic theology: How might an Asian contextual

version account for narrative drama rather than offer a “set of timeless propositions” (26; 66)?

Overall, *ACT*'s essays model theologizing in interfaith/intercultural dialogues appropriate for Asia's diverse socio-religious contexts. Even though the book is not squarely aimed at theological educators, it is a resource for analytical frameworks and will stimulate contextualized theological training. It will motivate readers to adapt their approaches to engage with Asia's pluralisms. *ACT* is an important milestone and should be required reading for all Christian theological educators and students in Asia. It sets the stage for future writing on Asian missional theology that would complement the fine essays offered here.



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