

# Why Should Asian Theologians Read Texts of the Early Teachers of Faith?

*J. Jayakiran Sebastian*<sup>1</sup>

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.

- Umberto Eco, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose*

## Introduction: Contemporary constraints and revisiting the past

Revisiting the past does not seem to be the “in thing” in Asian theological circles now-a-days. After all, the argument goes, in a context of pluralism and poverty, in an age of materialism, individualism and consumerism, where globalism tends to submerge the local, where violence and the quest for identity overwhelm whole sections of Asian society, where there is hardly any time to devote to the bewildering array of information filling and spilling out of cyberspace, where one seems to be perpetually out of breath in an effort to keep up with the transient present, any attempt to go back to revisit the past seems to be almost an irrelevance.

In our church circles, many of us are caught up in the effort to keep things going in a context where there is the militant reassertiveness of ancient religions. Right now India is in the news for all the wrong reasons. The world has witnessed with horror another outbreak of violence and brutality between members belonging to different religious communities in the state of Gujarat, the same state from which the apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, came. Neighbours have turned into fanatics; the home has turned from a place of refuge to a killing field; carefully fostered relationships and shared joys and sorrows have evaporated in a frenzy of bloodshed and hatred. The pent-up hatred has burst from behind the façade of civility, revealing the frightening face behind the mask. The iron under the velvet has been exposed.<sup>2</sup>

This reality is all the more disturbing and troubling because India has been a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious land for more than three millennia. Indeed India has been described as a “laboratory of dialogue,” where

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<sup>1</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian is H. George Anderson Professor of Mission and Cultures and Director of Multicultural Mission Resource Center at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, USA. The article first appeared in Samson Prabhakar, ed., *Inter-Cultural Asian Theological Methodologies: An Exploration* (Bangalore: SATHRI, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Among other writings see *India Today*, Vol. XXVII, No. 14 (April 8, 2002) – Cover Story entitled: “Is Secularism Dead?” and *Time*, Vol. 159, No. 9 (March 11, 2002) – Cover Story entitled: “Bloody India”.

people belonging to different religious persuasions and faiths have lived and worked side by side for generations. This is not to deny the reality that there have been clashes and violence down the ages – there have been very violent episodes not only in the past but also in recent history – the Partition of the country about fifty years ago leading to one of the great human tragedies after the end of the second world war.

What sears the imagination are the pictures of burnt-out shops and homes, bodies lying twisted grotesquely, hands reaching out for help from relief camps, and the shallow proclamations of those in power, cynically playing about with human lives, indifferent to the cost of human tragedy.

The churches in India, which include the ancient Orthodox churches, the Catholic church, various Protestant denominations and a wide range of Pentecostal churches are left bewildered and forlorn, wondering about how best to carry out their calling to be active and committed peace-makers in the present context. What does the proclamation of the gospel of reconciliation and peace mean in such a context? How can the churches co-operate in helping in relief and rebuilding measures? How can the churches display charity while speaking the truth in love to power?

It is in such a context that the question comes to us again – is it not too much to be hoping for some kind of insight to emerge from revisiting the past? Can the dead speak to us? Can what the dead have said be of any consequence to us here and now in the midst of Asian intercultural realities?<sup>3</sup> Listen to the admonition of one commentator:

Classical theological texts are becoming more scorned than read. I have sought to read the tradition sympathetically because a community that rejects its past is doomed. The shapers of the Christian tradition were trying to do something. When they did it well and when poorly, and when they succeeded and when they failed, are questions that require thoughtful discernment. Yet we cannot make those judgments if we fail to sympathize with these ancient writers. ... The goal is to let the dead speak to us.<sup>4</sup>

This quotation speaks about the importance of revisiting our Christian past. If this line of thought is found to be one worth pursuing, an immediate objection can be made – talking about the past is all very well; but why should the past that is sought to be revisited be the Christian past? Who are the dead

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<sup>3</sup> For a response from another context, see Kathleen E. McVey, “Christianity and Culture, Dead White European Males, and the Study of Patristics,” in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XV, No. 2, New Series (1994), pp. 103 – 130.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. viii.

whose voices are worth listening to? Is not the revisiting of the *Asian* past far more important for us today? Fair enough, but in a context of postcoloniality, for Asian Christians, the attempt to disentangle the two is not something that is worth pursuing, nor is it possible. Our Asian past and our Christian past have become inextricably interlinked and we need to recognize this for what it is.<sup>5</sup> Our identities have been both constructed and politicised. In an earlier article on the understanding of identity across the hyphen that binds Indian to Christian, that is Indian-Christians, I wrote: “This recognition of the politicised nature of identity will be of assistance in the attempt to understand the characteristic of the hyphen as something which is not isolated but as an entity which has the power to draw together elements which come from the living past, while being informed about the machinations of the present, and anticipating an uncertain future.”<sup>6</sup>

While paying tribute to the work of many people who have helped us recover and rediscover, who have indicated and reappropriated the legacy of our Asian seers and teachers, both from the dominant and marginalized strands of society, and both from written and oral sources,<sup>7</sup> it is incumbent on us, along with the appropriation and critique of the rich and varied Asian sources of theologising, to allow the legacy of our Christian past to speak to the present. It may be objected that the Christian past that I am thinking about is not “our” past in that sense. Can the struggles of a bishop in Northern Africa in the middle of the third century on a vexed problem of baptism and unity have anything to say to us twenty-first century Asian Christians?<sup>8</sup> There must have been some reason as to why such episodes have not been taken seriously by Asian Christians. Did the ancient writers address issues and themes that have been judged to be irrelevant and unrelated to Asian Christianity? At this point, the forecast of one of the most productive Asian Christian scholars has to be taken into account:

When a narrative fails to answer the needs of the present, and if it cannot be retold to meet new demands, it will be relegated and pushed out of the interpretative frame. The unappropriated texts do not wither

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the Asian present and the Christian present, see Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope – At the Dawn of the Millennium* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “Pressure on the Hyphen: Aspects of the Search for Identity Today in Indian-Christian Theology,” in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (December 1997), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Two examples from India spanning the gamut of possibilities will suffice: Raimundo Panikkar, ed. and trans., *The Vedic Experience – Mantramañjarī: An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration* (Pondicherry: All India Books, 1983 [1977]), and Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> My struggle with this question can be found in my doctoral work, which has been published: J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “... baptisma unum in sancta ecclesia...”: A Theological Appraisal of the Baptismal Controversy in the Work and Writings of Cyprian of Carthage (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997).

away but recede into the background, yielding their place to the newly chosen texts which are accorded the status of the living Word of God. Nonetheless, texts left out remain true and valid, awaiting their turn to be resurrected. No one narrative remains static or eternally valid.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, these words refer primarily to the writings contained in the Bible, but using the insights contained in this analysis, one can extend the argument and say that it is now time that we, as Asian theologians, recognize that we have been deprived of a part of our heritage by our unwillingness, deliberate or otherwise, of taking seriously the texts, life and witness of the early teachers of faith. In our pilgrimage in theology encompassing both Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai,<sup>10</sup> we need to recognize that there are other mountains and plains, valleys and ravines, very often outside the tried and trodden beaten path, that we can traverse, being open to the possibility of enrichment and interrogation.

### **Some examples of intercultural learning possibilities**

Following this rather long introduction, it is now time to briefly demonstrate some of the ways Asian theology could be enriched in its encounter with the life and witness, struggles and solutions, frustrations and misunderstandings of the real women and men who form part of the cloud of witnesses from the time of the early church. The examples that follow are a cross-section of the variety and range of the rich and varied legacy of the early teachers of faith. Questions regarding the “representative” character of the examples chosen can be raised. While such questions are valid and open to discussion, in what follows, I hope that a glimpse and a taste of the legacy can be sampled and that our appetite for further exploration can be whetted.

Let me start with a negative example: Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the champions of Nicene orthodoxy, preached the following about the way theology had to be done in the year 380, in Constantinople, in the first of his five “theological” orations:

Discussion of theology is not for everyone. I tell you, not for everyone – it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor, I would add, is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry. It must be reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences, and certain limits must be observed. It is not for all ..., but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s

<sup>9</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 277

<sup>10</sup> See Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1984).

brightness.

What is the right time? Whenever we are free from the mire and noise without, and our commanding faculty is not confused by illusory, wandering images, leading us, as it were, to mix fine script with ugly scrawling, or sweet-smelling scent with slime. We need actually 'to be still' in order to know God ... .

Who should listen to discussions of theology? Those for whom it is a serious undertaking, not just another subject like any other for entertaining small-talk, after the races, the theatre, songs, food, and sex: for there are people who count chatter on theology and clever deployment of arguments as one of their amusements.

What aspects of theology should be investigated, and to what limit? Only aspects within our grasp, and only to the limit of the experience and capacity of our audience. ...<sup>11</sup>

Most professional theologians, will, I suspect, be in sneaking agreement with some of the sentiments expressed here, but is the writer not going a bit too far in drastically limiting the scope and ambience of theologising? In his desire to be pragmatic and reasonable, is Gregory looking for an ideal audience, an ideal situation, an ideal topic and an ideal theologian. What about doing theology in the context of ongoing life and real struggles? What about the theologising of ordinary people, who cannot "be still" or achieve a state of detached equanimity or calm, undisturbed leisure, but have to carry out reflection within the hermeneutical circle of action-reflection-action? Indeed, even the task of reflection could be an unattainable prospect for some of those forced to be part of the spiral of violent exploitation. Theology as amusement – don't make me laugh!

Nevertheless, let us read on as to what Gregory says, as if anticipating our objections:

Yet I am not maintaining that we ought not to be mindful of God at all times – my adversaries, ever ready and quick to attack, need not pounce on me again. It is more important that we should remember God than that we should breathe: indeed, if one may say so, we should do nothing else besides. ... So it is not continual remembrance of God I seek to discourage, but continual discussion of theology. I am not opposed

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 27: Against the Eunomians (27.3), trans. Lionel Wickham and Fredrick Williams, in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen*, intro. and commentary, Fredrick W. Norris (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), p. 218 – 219. Original Greek text (with French translation) in Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours 27 – 31 (Discours Théologiques)*, intro., texte critique, trans. and notes, Paul Gallay, *Sources Chrétiennes*, No. 250 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1978).

either to theology, as if it were a breach of piety, but only to its untimely practice, or to instruction in it, except when this goes to excess. Fullness and surfeit even of honey, for all its goodness, produces vomiting ...<sup>12</sup>

Again what is left to be said? An admonition from the turbulent fourth century reaches us, Asian theologians of the twenty-first century, asking us to re-examine our priorities, our commitments, our loyalties and our praxis. These words come to us from an interesting, perplexing and challenging context – a time when Nicene orthodoxy was under threat from various sources including scheming bishops, easily-swayed crowds, political compulsions, the challenges of alternate forms of belief systems within the church, the desire for power and prestige by hoping that one’s theological orientation would prove to be that which received imperial favour and patronage, with all the attendant benefits.<sup>13</sup> Of course the whole issue of what is “orthodox” and who or what defines “orthodoxy” is also to be addressed,<sup>14</sup> and the issue regarding those judged to be “heretics”,<sup>15</sup> and whose teachings were deemed “heretical” remains a pressing ecumenical issue.<sup>16</sup> But what is to be noted here is that the thinking indicated in the short excerpts do not come from an “ivory-tower” situation, but is “hands-on” “feet-on-the-ground” theology of the most pragmatic and pastoral kind. Today, it is incumbent on us to take seriously the point

that orthodoxy in the fourth century was reached by a process of trial and error in which the error was not all on the side of the ‘heretics,’

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 27.4, *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> See Donald F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus*, Patristic Monograph Series, No. 7 (Cambridge, MA.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979); and for a compact summary, Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 148 – 160.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard Hanson, “The achievement of orthodoxy in the fourth century AD,” in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 142 – 156. For a brilliant reassessment of the life and work of Arius see, Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Arland J. Hultgren and Steven A. Haggmark, eds., *The Earliest Christian Heretics: Readings From Their Opponents* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). The editors write: “Understanding the first- and second-century debates has become increasingly important in our times. The sheer abundance of competing religious systems of the second century bears a marked resemblance to the plurality of the modern and postmodern worldviews. In many ways we have more in common with the currents of pluralism of the second century than with the theological conflicts of the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity was on the ascendancy. Insofar as that is the case, it is fruitful to analyze and understand just how second-century thinking regarding the person of Jesus related to its own complex and pluralistic environment.” (p. 8)

<sup>16</sup> See Fredrick W. Norris, “The Arian Heresy?,” in Timothy J. Wengert and Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., *Telling the Churches’ Stories: Ecumenical Perspectives on Writing Christian History* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 55 – 71, where he notes the reality as to “how slowly consensus is built, how cruelly ancient labels can be applied to contemporary Christians, and how often remarkably faithful people seem to be on the other side.” (pp. 70 – 71)

but was shared by the 'orthodox' too ... . Men learnt by experience, by controversy, by seeing their own mistakes and the mistakes of others. This is how orthodoxy was reached in the fourth century. It is probable that this is the way orthodoxy is always achieved. There must be a preliminary period of confusion, or groping, of uncertainty. Diverse and clashing views must be given expression. Conference, conversation, perhaps even confrontation, are an unavoidable part of the process. Conceivably this observation may have a bearing on our own day.<sup>17</sup>

There are several other areas which would benefit from such a conversation with long dead seekers of salvation, healing, and wholeness, not to say anything of nasty church politicians, scheming bureaucrats, those condemned as heretics by one group of people and venerated as saints by another, faithful and misunderstood disciples, seekers of varied ways of responding to the living out of the Christian faith in complex intercultural situations.<sup>18</sup>

Some of these areas are the study of our liturgical traditions,<sup>19</sup> the attitude to women in our churches,<sup>20</sup> the understanding of the history that has shaped us,<sup>21</sup> the search for new symbols and images for faith articulation,<sup>22</sup> an analysis of Christology in its encounter with cultures,<sup>23</sup> the methodology of Biblical interpretation,<sup>24</sup> the search for an authentic and meaningful spirituality,<sup>25</sup> the

<sup>17</sup> Hanson, "The achievement of orthodoxy in the fourth century AD," *op. cit.*, pp. 113 – 114.

<sup>18</sup> See Rowan Williams, "Defining Heresy," in Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 313 – 335. Williams writes: The 'heretical' impulse has done much to shape a culture, in the sense that it has obliged Western Christendom to pursue an intellectual history of intensifying disunity and scepticism. Divorced from the gospel of a 'saving' or reconciling work achieved through the ruptures of systems of meaning and location, this becomes a more and more heretic and violent pluralism. (p. 335)

<sup>19</sup> See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> See the material analysed in J. Jayakaran Sebastian, "Martyrs and Heretics: Aspects of the Contribution of Women to Early Christian Tradition," in Prasanna Kumari, ed., *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, Gurukul Summer Institute 1998 (Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1999), pp. 135 - 153.

<sup>21</sup> See Jacques Rossel, *The Roots of Western Europe: An Essay on Interpenetration of Cultures during the First Nine Centuries A. D.* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001), where this issue is specifically addressed.

<sup>22</sup> One example from the area of visual culture is Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> One period of creative synthesis has been analysed in J. Jayakaran Sebastian, "Permeating all things with divinity: Jesus in Selected Writings of the Teachers of the Early Church in the Second Century," in Gnana Robinson, ed. *Challenges and Responses: Church's Ministry in the Third Millennium - Challenges for Theological Education* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2000), pp. 294 - 314.

<sup>24</sup> See Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: A Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> See K. M. George, *The Silent Roots: Orthodox Perspectives on Christian Spirituality* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994). An important point made is that "Eastern Christian spirituality is nourished by the stories of saintly men and women and their experience of God and compassion for the

understanding of poverty and prosperity,<sup>26</sup> the changing patterns of family life,<sup>27</sup> and the quest for ecumenical inter-relationships across doctrinal divisions.<sup>28</sup>

A few examples will suffice:

### 1. Ritual

Listen to pragmatic words from the *Didache*, a document that probably predates many writings in the New Testament:

Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: After you have reviewed all these things, baptize 'in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Spirit' in running water. But if you have no running water, baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times 'in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.' And before the baptism let the one baptizing and the one who is to be baptized fast, as well as any others who are able. Also you must instruct the one who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.<sup>29</sup>

Whether or not fasting is a pre-requisite today, the pragmatism of the passage is what strikes us – hot water, cold water, standing water, running water, immersion, sprinkling – what is important are not some of these external factors, but the reality of water baptism in the name of the Triune God. In a context in which much competition between the churches takes place not on

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world. An age that narrowly concentrates on ethical and social activism tends to underestimate the invisible roots of cosmic compassion gleaming through such traditional and apparently pious hagiographies. It is, however, a welcome sign that in the new search for spiritual and cultural roots in various contextual theologies, story telling as revelatory human experience is again assuming a prominent role.

Stories of saintly persons living in peaceful harmony with nature, even with wild animals, are not mere fiction, but indicate the deepest human aspiration for holistic existence, rooted in the real experience of individual human beings." (p. 66)

<sup>26</sup> I have explored some aspects of this in J. Jayakiran Sebastian, "Poverty and Prosperity: Learning from the Early Church," in National Council of Churches Review, Vol. CXXI, No. 9 (October 2001), pp. 749 – 761.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Clark, "Constraining the Body, Expanding the Text: The Exegesis of Divorce in the Later Latin Fathers, in William E. Klingshirm and Mark Vessey, eds., *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Marcus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 153 – 171. Clark notes: "Once a biblical text was deemed authoritative sacred literature, it could not be rejected, only interpreted through hermeneutical strategies that accommodated the text to the worldviews and agendas of later readers. (p. 153)

<sup>28</sup> For one example, see, J. Jayakiran Sebastian, "Infant versus Believers' Baptism: Search for Ecumenical Understanding," in Vinod Victor, Leslie Nathaniel and P. Surya Prakash, eds., *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges – Festschrift to the Rev. G. Dyvasirvadam* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), pp. 124 – 141.

<sup>29</sup> The *Didache*, 7, trans. in Michael W. Holmes, ed. and rev. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1999), p. 259 (Greek Text on p. 258).

substantive doctrinal issues as such, but on perceived or imagined external realities, this is one piece of advice worth returning to.

## 2. Ethical

Ethical dilemmas still confront us at various levels and call for sensitive responses. Whether we can really learn from the past or whether only a situational response is possible is still an issue that is debated and will continue to be debated. It would be too simplistic to try to imagine that a return to the situations that were faced by the early teachers of faith in their attempt to relate perceptions of scriptural admonition to the new movement that was fast becoming an institution would be of direct help or use to us today. In an age where Jackie Chan is glorified not only in Asia, but also in the West, listen to what one bishop in the middle of the third century had to say regarding a newly baptized Christian who was an actor, and continued to remain one after his conversion. Calling acting a “disgraceful profession,” Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, writing to his fellow-bishop who had raised this issue, rules:

... you should do your utmost to call him away from this depraved and shameful profession to the way of innocence and to the hope of his true life; let him be satisfied with the nourishment provided by the Church, more sparing to be sure but salutary. But if your church is unable to meet the cost of maintaining those in need, he can transfer himself to us and receive here what is necessary for him in the way of food and clothing. Instead of teaching others outside the Church lessons that lead to death, he can learn himself within the Church lessons that lead to salvation.<sup>30</sup>

What is striking for us today is not just the ethical issue, perhaps understandable in the context of the emergence of the Christian religion as offering a different set of values to the surrounding society, but what the Church is seen as being capable of. This is a question that we ought to address as theologians today. How is the church seen in terms of its activities beyond the immediacy of worship? How do we understand the church as a sociological phenomenon in terms of intercultural values?

## 3. Historic

Another area of interest lies in our attempts to understand ourselves as inheritors of a complex history, a history that encompasses intercultural realities. How have we understood the encounter between Christianity and the existing religious and social realities in our lands? Though the methodical and extreme cruelties of Roman emperors like Nero have been documented by

<sup>30</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, Letter 2 (2.2.3), trans. in G. W. Clarke, trans and annotated, *The Letters of Cyprian of Carthage, Volume I* – Letters 1 – 27, *Ancient Christian Writers*, No. 43 (New York: Newman Press, 1984), p. 54.

a variety of writers,<sup>31</sup> the church historian, Eusebius, calling him “the monster of depravity,” adds that in addition to all his other crimes, “he was the first of the emperors to be the declared enemy of the worship of Almighty God.”<sup>32</sup> We need to reflect on how we as Asian Christians have attempted to formulate our histories and our understanding of the historical processes within the certainties of our theological convictions. Recognizing that we are not only actors in the drama of history, but have also been acted upon in various ways by historical currents that flowed over us from various directions, how have we situated ourselves as historical subjects in our intercultural existence and how have we articulated this?

#### 4. Linguistic

Let us turn now to listen to the impassioned outpourings of one of the most prolific of the early teachers of faith – Augustine:

Before I existed you were, and I had no being to which you could grant existence. Nevertheless here I am as a result of your goodness, which goes before all that you made me to be and all out of which you made me. You had no need of me. I do not possess such goodness so as to give you help, my Lord and my God. It is not as if I could so serve you as to prevent you from becoming weary in your work or that your power is diminished if it lacks my homage. Nor do I cultivate you like land, in the sense that you would have no one to worship you if I were not doing so. But I serve and worship you so that from you good may come to me. To you I owe my being and the goodness of my being.<sup>33</sup>

Where do we search for the language to articulate the depth of our relationship to our God? What are the philosophies from which we draw and on what parched ground does our sweat and tears fall? To what extent have we comprehended the possibility of the politics of identification? With whom do we wrestle and whom do we imitate?

#### 5. Poetic

Although examples can be multiplied, let us attend to the poetic utterances of one characterized as the “harp of the Holy Spirit,” the fourth century poet-theologian Saint Ephrem. In his hymn on the Eucharist he writes:

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Seutonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, rev. Michael Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1989), Nero: pp. 213 – 246.

<sup>32</sup> See Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.25. English translation in G. A. Williamson, trans., Andrew Louth, rev., ed., and intro., *Eusebius, The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XIII, i (I), trans., intro., and notes, Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 273.

Your garment, Lord, is a fountain of medicines:  
 In your visible clothing there dwells your hidden power  
 Again a little spittle from your mouth became  
 A great miracle of light, for light was in the clay it made.  
 In your Bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,  
 In your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk:  
 The Spirit is in your Bread, the Fire in your Wine –  
 A manifest wonder, that our lips have received.  
 When the Lord came down to earth to mortal beings  
 He created them again, in a new creation, like the angels,  
 Mingling within them fire and spirit,  
 So that in a hidden manner they might be of fire and spirit.<sup>34</sup>

Through such exquisite and evocative poetry, the image of the human as a being related to God is indicated.<sup>35</sup> Ephrem creatively explored the depths of symbols and metaphors, including applying feminine metaphors to describe the reality of God.<sup>36</sup>

Using the wide variety of symbols available from Asian sources in a creative way through transposition and juxtaposition has been an important aspect of the intercultural contribution of Asian Christian theology.<sup>37</sup> The early teachers of faith had to reckon with this possibility in their efforts to create a vocabulary to encapsulate the gospel, a gospel that defied easy attempts of encapsulation, and proved to have the capacity to break the bounds of any language straitjacketing, and showed that it was in and through the evocative and creative use of cultural or intercultural metaphors that its power could be glimpsed.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Sebastian Brock, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem on the Eucharist," in *The Harp*, Vol. I, No. 1 (September 1987), pp. 61 – 68. The section quoted is from the Hymns on Faith No. 10, 7 – 9, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed study of this and other aspects of symbolism in the Syriac tradition see, Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Regarding the passage quoted, Murray writes: "This emphasis on Christ's physical body as the source of salvation, worked out through the sacramental dispensation, was evidently stimulated by the need to defend the dignity of the body and the material order against the dualistic and anti-materialistic teachings of the Gnostics, Marcion and Mani; Ephrem is preoccupied with this in his controversial writings ... ." (p. 74)

<sup>36</sup> For an analysis of this, see Kathleen E. McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors to Describe the Deity," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, Band 5, Heft 2 (2001), pp. 261 – 288.

<sup>37</sup> See Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God: An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982). In his inimitable style, Song writes: "The wonderful thing about the gospel is that it could come in any shape and in any color. Furthermore, if it feels comfortable in a western suit, it is equally comfortable in an Indian sari or a Japanese kimono." (p. 11)

<sup>38</sup> For a creative attempt from Northeast India, see Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2001). Nungshitula speaks of the reconstruction of contemporary theological anthropology that is "evolving, relating and integrating" (p. 100)

## Responding to the Challenges – Contextualizing Insights from the Early Teachers of Faith

One of the things that theologians from Asian countries have been especially proud of in terms of linkages and drawing connections has been the recognition that many of the theologies that have emerged in the last thirty years have been “liberationist” in intention, explicitly or implicitly, and that any theology that does not have this kind of orientation is suspect to say the least. However, rather than resting on ones laurels, whether earned or imagined, one would do well to take seriously the critiques that are emerging with respect to theologies that claimed to posit themselves within the liberationist framework. This is not to say that such theologies have to be abandoned or given up but rather that they can only be strengthened by an ongoing process of reflection and action in interaction, which was one of the hermeneutical principles which drove the theologies of liberation in the first place. Listen to one such voice of concerned problematizing, coming from a sensitive and sympathetic interrogation of liberation theology in Brazil:

Liberation theologies emerged in specific contexts with a specific methodology which provided a critique and a political program based on factual, positivistic social science. While anthropologists noted the dramatic fractures and existent diversity among the “poor,” liberation theologians were slow to incorporate such findings into their praxis. Democratization exposed these lacunae and liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff have modified their initial conceptions of class analysis to incorporate the critiques and emancipatory dimensions of popular religion, feminisms, race and ethnic identity struggles, and the environment. By so doing the possibility now exists of creating linkages with previously marginalized groups to overcome the aporias of both modernity and postmodernity. ... Given the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church’s increasing conformity to the neoconservative and modernist paradigm of the present papacy, it remains doubtful that their political vision, redefined in a postmodernizing context, and the linkages that such a vision would require with the wider civil society to be political active, can be accomplished within the institutional church.<sup>39</sup>

If this is the case, I believe that it is not presumptuous to predict that a return to the sources of theologising, in and through the writings of the early teachers of faith, can only help us to reconceptualize our task of giving voice to a theology that, while being in touch with the present, has not forgotten the struggles of the past, and is committed to working towards a transformed future.

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<sup>39</sup> Iain S. Maclean, “Beyond the Condition of (Post)-Modernity: Does Liberation Theology Still Have a Politics? A Brazilian Case Study,” in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Religion in a Secular City: Essays in Honor of Harvey Cox* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), pp. 243 – 244.

Another thing that we as Asian theologians pride ourselves is our claim that in our theologising we have recovered the role of experience in doing theology. We claim to represent the experiences of faith, hope, suffering, oppression and the reality of the Asian drama of life. The word “experience” has often been used rather loosely, with the assumption being made that everyone understands what the other is talking about when this word is prioritised and valorized. However, warnings coming from related areas of intellectual inquiry should make us cautious. From the field of women’s studies comes the timely admonition that one cannot simply allow experience

to appear as endlessly plural and unchallengeable, as if self-evident, readily available when we look ‘inside’ ourselves, and only one’s own, or only one’s group’s. Experience is a crucial *product* and *means* of women’s movement; we must struggle over the terms of its articulation. Women do not find ‘experience’ ready to hand any more than they/ we find ‘nature’ or the ‘body’ preformed, always innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture. Just as nature is one of culture’s most startling and non-innocent products, so is experience one of the least innocent, least self-evident aspects of historical, embodied movement.<sup>40</sup>

When this is so, then the variety and range of religious and social experiences, testified to, not only by the early teachers of faith, but also visible in the gospels, is something to be wrestled with, so that meanings can emerge in our committed quest to speak and act in a credible and committed manner as those called upon to do theology in an Asian context. It is good to recollect the words of Samartha, who has clearly pointed out that

Context does not produce content. Doing does not exhaust Being. Relevance does not diminish depth. No rational bridge can be built between the house of intellect and the field of action. They are related within the depths of life. To acknowledge this relationship, affirm it and articulate it in a credible way is one of the tasks of theologians in the twenty-first century. This means that both the *Mystery* of God, and its *meaning* revealed in Jesus Christ, have to be accepted in reverence and awe.<sup>41</sup>

The search for meaning goes on, but in this search we are privileged to have

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<sup>40</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “Reading Buchi Emecheta: Contests for ‘Women’s Experience’ in Women’s Studies,” in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> S. J. Samartha, “The House of Intellect in a Field of Action,” *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (June 1994), p. 9.

access to the writings of the cloud of witnesses, not only the Biblical authors and the early teachers of faith, but a vast host of those engaged in the task of creating and maintaining meaning. Losing one strand of this by ignoring the writings of the early teachers of faith can only be a deprivation in our work as Asian Christian theologians.

### **Conclusion: Reaching back in order to move forward**

The historian, Peter Brown, concludes his brilliant survey of men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity by pointing out the need and necessity of allowing the dead to speak to us anew:

Historians must bring to them their due measure of warm, red blood. By studying their precise social and religious context, the scholar can give back to these ideas a little of the human weight that they once carried in their own time. When such an offering is made, the chill shades may speak to us again, and perhaps more gently than we thought they might, in the strange tongue of a long-lost Christianity. Whether they will say anything of help or comfort for our own times the readers of this book must decide for themselves.<sup>42</sup>

You, who have had the patience to follow me through this paper, must now decide whether the case that has been sought to be made, namely, that we as Asian Christian theologians, ought to rediscover and reappropriate the writings of the early teachers of faith, and that such a task will benefit us immensely in our theological task, has been made or not. After a visit to India the Australian writer David Malouf noted: “The fear of India. It comes in many forms. Fear of dirt, fear of illness, fear of people; fear of the unavoidable presence of misery; fear of a phenomenon so dense and plural that it might, in its teeming inclusiveness, swamp the soul and destroy our certainty that the world is there to be read but is also readable.”<sup>43</sup> The writings of the early teachers of faith are there to be read, and they are also readable. This reality cannot destroy the certainty of the gospel. Let not the fear, which comes in many forms, prevent us from bringing out of *our* treasure “what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13: 52)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 447.

<sup>43</sup> “A Foot in the Stream,” in *12 Edmondstone Street* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> The original version of this paper was presented at “A Consultation for the Exploration of Inter-Cultural Asian Theological Methodologies,” Colombo, Sri Lanka, 27th April – 1st May, 2002. I wish to thank Dr. Sathianathan Clarke for perceptive and provocative comments offered on this occasion.