Culture, Power and Ideology in Third World Theologies

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This is an enormous subject. Who could do it justice? It is a bit like being invited to survey the ocean and give an account of its behavior. I say ocean rather than continent because the churches of the third world are teeming with spiritual and intellectual life that impinges on ours. They are making waves that sweep over us also, yet there are no obvious mountain peaks of theology by which the whole scene is dominated. No great councils yet have given definitive form to the landscape. The best we can do is swim in this ocean a bit, to say something about how one swims in *this* ocean, and describe our experiences.

This is a more modest enterprise but a necessary one. The fact that we pose the issue this way gives evidence that we, mostly "westerners" from old Christendom, have a sense of promise about this mixture of culture, ideology and theology, and at the same time a sense of danger. How does the Word of God interact with human ways of life and of thought? This is a question we are asking of third world theologies. It is also a question to us and our way of being Christian. How faithfully do they relate ideology and culture to the revelation in which we all live, we are right to ask. How is our faithfulness reformed and renewed by their witness? That is the counter-question which makes our enterprise a spiritual, an ecumenical, adventure. I propose to keep these questions in mind in dialogue, not with the whole range of theology in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but with a few fellow Christians, mostly from Asia, about the subject itself, as it concerns us all.

The Meaning of Culture

First, a few thoughts about the terms we are using: culture, power and ideology.

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What is "culture"? The reality is very old; the concept is relatively new. "The way of life of a society," the Columbia Encyclopedia defines it succinctly. The term gained its modern meaning from the discipline of cultural anthropology. It shares the precision and the limits of that discipline. It assumes a self-contained organic wholeness of religion, custom, art, personal and family relations, ways of production and exchange, and political order, all regulated by certain values, explicit or assumed. Anthropologists love to find such societies and study them as interacting systems, unspoiled by the powers and conflicts of world history, and the attractions of world civilization. Historians seek them out, conscious that in various corners of the earth they grew and died, but delighting in the integration of their substance in their time: ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, imperial China, the Incas, the Mayas, the Khmer.

But this is not only an academic enterprise. Peoples tend to define themselves by their concept of a culture that unites them, and the more threatened they are, the more passionately they do it. We see this in our own society when we cling to symbols like the flag, the public ceremonies of civil religion, or the ideal of small-town America in fear of what technological upheaval and cultural pluralism are doing to us. We have seen it in the explosion of nationalism in Europe during the past two centuries. How much more then in the efforts of Asian and African peoples to define and defend themselves in the face of the overwhelming attack and temptation of Euro-American wealth, power and influence.

Here lies the problem. Cultures are realities that give human life within them a moral and a spiritual structure. They define human relations and give them meaning. They bring judgment on disruptive actions that would threaten the harmony of the whole. They give context to the creative imagination and redirect destructive impulses. But cultures are also ideals. They reflect our self-image, as much as the way we really are. They tend to be assertions of our collective selves against the forces and the temptations that would pull us apart, subjugate us to another way of life, and throw us into community with others who are different from us. In short the culture we affirm may be our dream world, our desperate attempt to imagine, or cling to, or to create a world different from the one in which we daily live. Cultures unify societies; they also divide societies. For no society in this world is informed by only one culture.

Theologically the problem goes still deeper. Cultures are efforts to embody ultimate truths and ultimate values in ways of life of particular peoples, or, to reverse the direction, they are efforts to see particular ways of life as reflections of the ultimate in particular human communities. In the words of Paul Tillich: Culture is the form of religion; religion is the substance of culture (Tillich 1959:42). These ultimates may be expressed religiously, or in some humanist substitute for religion, in forms that are Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, free enterprise Capitalist, Marx-Leninist or Sikh. Yet cultures are at the same time expressions of the social being of a particular nation, language

group, race, religion or class. They express a real experience of transcendent reality. They capture that reality in the life-experience of one human group over against others. They show forth the glory of God in their context. They use their god as an instrument of self-assertion to oppress other groups when they can, even while claiming to save or liberate them.

The task of theology then is to understand human cultures, our own and those of others, in both of these dimensions. Our mission is to discern and witness to the way in which cultures — both Christian and non-Christian — are being judged and transformed through their encounter with one another and with the Gospel. Our service is to reform and recreate culture as we seek new ways of faithful penultimate living with our neighbors.

Social Power

So much for the term "culture". Before turning to ideology, however, there is another reality we must name which stands between and qualifies them both. Let me call it "social power." Not all that goes on in society, despite the cultural anthropologists, can be called culture. There is another angle from which society must be seen: not from its values and its pretensions to harmony, but from its striving for wealth, its mastery of physical nature, and from the struggle to dominate and control which perpetually goes on among human beings. "I put for a generall inclination of all mankind," wrote Thomas Hobbes more than three centuries ago, "a perpetuall and restlesse desire of power after power, that ceaseth onely in death" (Leviathan Ch. XI). The insight was biblical. Society is the scene of power conflicts. It is the area where people compete to master one another and the environment around them to produce more power and wealth for themselves — and where the poor and the weak struggle to survive and propagate on whatever terms they can. Structures of public life grow out of this conflict, sometimes by agreement, more often imposed by the strong on the weak: structures of production and exchange and the exploitation of labor, structures of government expressed in laws and the powers of enforcement.

This world of social power has its own relation to God and his purposes. Culture may contain it somewhat, but never wholly. Ideologies may rationalize it but never without distortion. It has its own dynamic, rooted in God-given human capacities to bring forth the fruits of the earth for the common good, and in human misuse of those capacities to dominate others and despoil the earth. The test of any theology, on whatever continent, is its insight into the working of this human power in relation to the divine power revealed in the work of Christ — through and behind all the cultural and ideological masks with which we hide it.

Ideology

Given this, we can turn to ideology. Here again, the term is new, the reality is old. The term has entered modern vocabulary by way of the Marxist movement. Here, in his own words, is Marx's point:

In the social production of their subsistence men enter into determined and necessary relations with each other which are independent of their wills — production relations which correspond to a definite state of development of their material productive forces. The sum of these production-relations forms the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which a juridical and political superstructure arises and to which definite social forms of consciousness correspond. . . . It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence, but on the contrary it is their social existence which determines their consciousness. . . . With the change in the economic foundation the whole immense superstructure is slowly or rapidly transformed. In studying such a transformation one must always distinguish between the material transformation in the economic conditions essential to production — which can be established with the exactitude of a natural science — and the juridical, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic, in short ideological forms, in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out (From: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:* Preface).

Leaving aside the strange claim for economics as an exact science — an illusion shared even today by capitalist and communist alike — the basic argument here continues to probe us. Human religion, philosophy, art, and even law and government — in short, all human ideas and decisions — are rooted not in objective reason, not in universal principles or standards, but in the struggle and the self-assertion of the particular social groups that hold them. They are rationalizations and instruments of the interests of those groups. There is no truth or morality — no knowledge — which can set terms for the social struggle. Every claim to universality is in fact an effort of one group to impose its morality, its religion, or its government supporting its dominance over others.

Thus the negative side of the argument; but there is a positive one as well. Since no form of consciousness is beyond ideology, the critical question becomes: With which social group does one enter into solidarity? Whose social struggle does one make one's own? Whose ideology does one adopt and whose interests, welfare and goals does one serve? The Marxist answer is clear: it claims to be the ideology of the poor, the exploited, the oppressed who have been utterly and in principle deprived of any share in the fruits of their labor, who are therefore completely without a stake in the present system. Marxism claims to be the strategy and tactic of the liberation of these poor, of their revolutionary struggle to overthrow the existing centers of power and establish a new classless, equal human community. This, they say, despite betrayals by powers that call themselves Marxist, is the way of hope and the direction of history.

In all of this there is also hidden a biblical insight, one which has led Jose Miguez-Bonino to speak of "the unsubstitutible relevance of Marxism" for Christian obedience in Latin America (Miguez-Bonino 1976:19). It can be expressed, I believe, in three points:

1. For biblical understanding, long before Marx came on the scene, human reason and morality was understood to operate in the context of a commitment in a social relation. This is the meaning of covenant as the basis of the peace of Israel and the context of the law. It is why the mission of the

people of God to the nations began with the offering of a covenant and the preaching of the Gospel. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31). Marx was rediscovering for our time an insight that had been obscured by Thomas Aquinas, rediscovered by the Reformers, and obscured again by the Nineteenth Century theology he knew: that human reason and conscience are as corrupt as human lust and pride, and that redemption comes through personal calling into community.

2. For biblical understanding too, reflection and obedience are part of the same reality. As one follows, one knows. In the venture of action to prepare the way for the coming of Christ one learns from the forgiving grace of God.

3. In the Bible, too, the thrust of Divine action is to reach out for the poor and the oppressed, to hear their cry, to share their suffering on the cross, and to bring them into the community of the justified, where a new relationship reigns.

With this, however, the problem is immediately apparent. The biblical message is not another ideology. The "social existence" that determines Christian consciousness is communion with Christ in the serving and witnessing church, not the solidarity of a class or the discipline of a party. The praxis of the Christian is exploration of relationships with one's neighbors in Christ, not the strategy and tactic of the conquest of power for one's own class. To share the cause of the poor is to seek both their justice and their justification at the hands of a gracious God, not to sanctify their enmity, their struggle, their ambitions or their hope of victory. How then can we bear this witness without ourselves turning the Gospel into ideology that excuses our relative satisfaction with the status quo? How can we, caught in the ideological predicament as we analyze our world and determine the form of our obedience, still bear witness to the One who breaks into our ideologies with his reality and corrects our praxis by his real presence with our neighbor? Ideology is sin. Yet who can avoid it in an honest attempt to understand one's world and guide one's actions in faith? To know this risk and yet to take it, open to correction by God through those of other social places than we, is what we have to learn. To paraphrase Luther: *Ideologe fortiter, sed fortius crede et gaude in Christo.* Ideologize boldly, but more boldly believe and rejoice in Christ.

The terms with which we are concerned, then, are three: culture, ideology and social power. Each of these is a vital expression of human life in response to God's gift and guidance in creation and history. Each is an instrument of human self-assertion against God and the neighbor. How do they operate in the theologies with which we are concerned — our own and that of our third world colleagues — as they face the Bible and the world? Let me offer a response in two parts.

A. The Role of the Old Testament Story and the History of Israel

The problem here is in one sense an old one. Why is participation in the

history and promise of Israel basic to knowing God in Jesus Christ? Why is the culture of this single alien people the context of divine revelation? In recent years, however, the problem has been restated and made more acute by Old Testament scholarship wrestling with the roots of anti-Semitism in Western society, for a profounder understanding of the Hebrew witness to God. With relation to our subject this wrestling gave rise to three realizations.

First, the peoplehood of Israel had a basis that set them fundamentally apart from the cultures round about them. It was undergirded by no cosmology like that of the Egyptians or Babylonians, but in a calling to Abraham and his seed to go out from land and home and kindred to pursue a promise. It had no religious mythological foundation in the structures and harmonies of Being reaching down into the orders of society, but rather its God was a leader who could not be described or named, whose authority was in the leading and whose holiness was revealed in the power of events. Israel was totally dependent on a covenant relation with this God, guided by a living experience of His judgment and mercy, knowing His righteousness through a living law that grew and changed in response to His acts. Israel was not a people defined by a culture. It was in fact rather poor in culture, and its efforts to embody it in fixed institutions came constantly under the judgment of the prophets. The heart of Israel's existence was a relationship rooted in a calling and fulfilled in an historical promise. In this context, and not in any religio-cultural milieu, God revealed himself for all peoples and all times.

Second, God was known, and through him human justice and love for all peoples everywhere, not by the extension of any human perceptions of order and goodness in the world, but in the covenant relation and the obedience it brought forth. God was sovereign in that relation. The only test of truth was the experience of life within it. The only appeal was to a deeper understanding of the character of God himself and of the covenant He has established. It must have seemed, to an Egyptian, thoroughly ideological.

Third, Israel was called to servanthood and witness to the power of God. There was an absolute discontinuity between divine and human power. The people were indeed promised, and given, victory in war and prosperity in their land, but this was in consequence of their obedience and in no way an appropriation of divine power for themselves. Israel was a witness, in weakness and in strength, to the judgment of God and to his undeserved mercy. As such it offered "a covenant to the nations."

This interpretation poses problems for Asian theology in three aspects: it secularizes culture and seems to deprive human cultural experience of a redemptive promising character; it historicizes God's revelation to the point that it seems to sanctify human technology at the cost of harmony with nature; and it stresses the witness of the servant to the point of seeming to undermine the struggle of the poor for their own liberation.

C.S. Song takes up all these points, and places them within his own interpretation of the significance of the Old Testament for non-Christian cultures. "The People of Israel were singled out," he writes, "not to present

themselves to the rest of the world as the nation through which God's redeeming love would be mediated, but to be a symbol of how God would also deal redemptively with other nations" (Anderson and Stransky 1976:216). In his latest book he calls this transpositional, as distinct from centrist theology. History is important, as the scene of God's creating and redeeming work. The biblical history has a special place as a paradigm — my word, not his — or that work, in the light of which we can understand how it also happens in the histories of other peoples. Song's books, especially his latest one, *The Compassionate God,* are filled with this use of the Old Testament story.

Three points are important about this perspective it seems to me. First, Song does not deny, but establishes the critical revelatory importance of the history of God with the people of Israel. Thence we learn the way of God's dealing which we can then discern in the histories of other peoples. D. Preman Niles takes issue with him at this point, and suggests a starting point in the story of creation and in Deutero-Isaiah's testimony to God's freedom to do a new thing in history, thus giving theological meaning to much of the histories of other cultures which is not brought to light by the transposition of Israel's experience (Nacpil and Elwood 1978:275ff). But Niles is only broadening the perspective here. He is still within general framework of creation-history, hence of the particular witness of the biblical story as determinative for the meaning of other cultures and history.

Second, Song reinterprets the history of Asian peoples — first of all his own Chinese history — in the light of the history of Israel shed upon it. He does so, to be sure, with an emphasis on creation in contrast to "straight line history" that moves toward Niles' point of view. "The straight-line God of *Heilsgeschichte* is a hard, stern God — a monotonous and unamusing God" (Song 1982:26). He would like to bring other — also biblical — themes into play, from the Wisdom literature for example, that open history to a variety of directions and possibilities. In his first book he calls — appropriately I think! — on Karl Barth as witness to this freedom, and suggests that "culture as a whole is none other than the manifestation of God's creative power translated into actual forms and events." But in all this Song is nonetheless looking at cultural history in ways that break up that culture's self-understanding. He shows a discontinuity with the prevailing ideology which cannot but be as revolutionary (or as revisionist) as the impact of Western Christian missions themselves on that culture. It is an enterprise parallel to what the Chinese Communists are doing from their perspective to traditional Chinese self-understanding.

Third, Song emphasizes, especially in *The Compassionate God,* the theme of disruption in Israel's history and uses it to bring out the discontinuities also in the histories of other peoples. Not the self-understanding of the covenant people, but God's new judgment on them at each stage of their history, is important. Not the continuity of their history but God's acts upon them, ultimately in Christ, are the message.

Is this a new way? For some it does not seem to go far enough. There is here

not much basis for accommodation to Buddhist or Hindu concepts of origins, events or cosmos. For others it runs the risk of romanticism about cultural histories, for the theme of disruption is not applied clearly enough to the analysis of them. For still others the question remains open whether something has happened in the past century to override the integrity of all cultures, Christian and non-Christian, with the power of a world-wide civilization. Certainly the testimony of two recent Asian conferences is ambiguous at this point. With one voice they speak of seeking "the Asian voice of Christ," and of theologizing out of the experience of people at the local level, including their religious and cultural roots. With another they interpret the people in terms of social oppression and the conflict of powers which are universal in the modern world.[1] Song would move the Old Testament in the direction of the former. Others would emphasize the universal Exodus theme in the direction of the latter.

B. The Ecumenical Servanthood of the Risen Christ

I emphasize all three terms deliberately. What does it mean for third world theologians that Christ is ecumenical, that he is a servant and that he is risen?

1. Ecumenical

The ecumenicity of Christ raises, for Asian theologians, the question of the relation between cultures and peoples in this world and the church. Criticism of the church abounds in the literature from Managua to Manila, from Santiago to Seoul, for its distance from the people. Sometimes it is a general plea for theological relevance to local culture and social change (John Mbiti in Anderson and Stransky 1976:6-18). Sometimes it complains that the church has been made an ultimate value at the cost of living a life of love and service (Tissa Balasuriya in Fabella 1980:21), that the church's "major concern is how to cater to the spiritual needs of individual Christians" instead of proclaiming Christ's lordship over the world" (Song 1975:122), or that the church has become (in Latin America where it has been dominant) an expression of the ruling, oppressive class (Boff in Torres 1981:126). Behind this criticism lie two common themes and one vast range of difference. All the critics assume the existence of the church they criticize and in a sense affirm it by their critique. They have their membership in some branch of the church. Some are ordained by it. Most draw their support from it, and all appeal to its conscience, its teaching and its awareness of the gospel of Christ, in addressing their critique to it. Second, all the critics seek some new form of the church, closer to the culture, the experience, the needs and the goals of the people as they understand them. The movement of their thinking posits the ecumenical pole and seeks to anchor the local one. Sometimes the locality is all of Asia or Africa or Latin America. Sometimes it is the particular language, national or religious group of the writer. In any case, there is a dissatisfaction with forms of the church and the problems of ecclesiology bequeathed by

Europe or North America, or, in the case of Latin America, by the traditional society.

Beyond this the similarity ceases. To the question of the character of the church in and for the third world, a range of answers is given. For Yong Bock Kim, an inspirer and editor of *minjung* theology, the role of the church in Korea has been to provide the Korean people with a new historical messianic language. In his words,

> The language was utopian and at the same time transformative. But most important, the messianic language in Korea was concerned with historical transformation. The application of the messianic language to the historical experiences of the Korean people was bound to historicalize and secularize the Christian language and thus move it beyond the boundaries of the Chinese church (Kim 1981:115).

C. S. Song seems, in some of his writing, to have the same message. "Into this movement of the people's history," he writes at the conclusion of his poignant allegory, *The Tears of Lady Meng*, "we as Christians in Asia have been incorporated. We are not writing a Christian history of Asia. As long as we are intent on such a history, it becomes a missionary history, a history of confessions and denominations. But as we begin to write history with our fellow Asians, it turns out, to our surprise, to be a history of the cross and the resurrection in Asia" (Song 1981:65). But Song does have a doctrine of the transcendent word, something that Kim has not articulated. "The chief task of Christian mission," he writes, "is to let the faith in Jesus Christ become the germinal element which enables civilizations to be renewed as witnesses to the glory of God's creation and manifestation of the presence of God as savior in the world" (Song 1975:57). The church, he follows Hoekendijk, is in the event where this renewal takes place. It is the sacrament of the word of God in action, mission centered not institutional, with the world, not itself, as object. All cultures and histories are both judged and redeemed by this word.

Both of these perspectives attempt to combine the concept of people as an oppressed class with people as a traditional culture with a distinctive language and tradition. In this, and in their vagueness about the form of the Christian community, they differ with the basic ecclesial community movement in Latin America. There also, a new concept of church is emerging, identified with a people. But the people have lived in Christendom for centuries. There is no question here of a non-Christian religious or cultural background. There is, furthermore, linguistic and cultural homogeneity in the Iberian tradition. Not national and cultural identity but class defines the people, in an adaptation of the Marxist point of view. It is natural, in such a society, for a form of the church to be the bearer of this sense of peoplehood. "The people's church," writes Sergio Torres, "is the vocation of the entire church, which is called to be constantly reborn from within the poor, who are the privileged of the kingdom. Thus we are not speaking of a church that is parallel to the institutional church, but rather one that responds to the most basic gospel demands. Like Jesus Christ, who became poor (Phil. 2:5-11), the entire

community of the saved should be naturally rooted in the people" (Torres 1981:6). Statements like this can be found almost on every page of Latin American liberation theology. Jesus Christ became poor, identified himself with the lowly, brought the gospel to the poor; therefore the church must choose for the poor, be the church of the poor, share the suffering and the struggles of this class. Jon Sobrino puts it sharply. Jesus "concretizes his morality by immersing himself in the situation on the basis of a class outlook" (Sobrino 1978:123). Jose Miguez-Bonino takes issue with the idea of a tension between the identity of the church as the body of Christ and its identification with the poor: "The greater the church's identification with Jesus Christ, the more the church will be driven to an identification with the common people; the more the church is identified with the people, the more it will be in a position to reflect the identity of its Lord" (Torres 1981:148).

What does this really mean? There are passages enough in this literature which suggest that it is not the poor, as such, with which the church must be identified, but the poor who have been or will be "conscientized" by teachers from various classes to a certain understanding of their condition and its causes, and, therefore, to a certain involvement in struggle with enemies defined by this understanding. Juan Luis Segundo calls it by its name — ideology, a necessary choice of a framework of thought interacting with and clarifying conditions of existence and praxis (Segundo 1976: Ch. 4). On the other hand there is also much evidence that identification with one class in a class struggle is not a simple immersion of the church in that class, but a locus where the church will still bear witness to the judgment and saving grace of God toward all classes, which a Christian struggle for justice requires. Miguez-Bonino ten years ago recognized that ecclesiology in this sense is a problem for liberation theology (Miguez Bonino 1975: Ch. 8), and drew a distinction which he later repeated between the specificity of the church and the social milieu in which it is formed. "The church is not simply supposed to lose itself or dissolve in the people, — it serves the people truly only when it respects its own identity" (Torres 1981:147). Sobrino is more concrete: "The church must humanize structures in the direction of the kingdom of God. It must try to ensure that they foster the satisfaction of primary needs, the basic equality of human beings, interhuman solidarity and a fair sharing of power. It must also humanize human beings themselves in the direction of the new human being." This means for him that the church in the midst of class conflict should encourage solidarity and generosity in commitment and at the same time discourage "disunity, excessive protagonism, vengeful tendencies, and the abuse of power" (Torres 1981:182-184). It should even apply just-war criteria to popular insurrections and try to humanize the conflict itself. There are many other examples. The question of the relation of the church to "the people" as poor and oppressed, even given its identification with them, is still at issue.

There is also a third approach to our question, to which M. M. Thomas gives the provocative title of "Christ-centered syncretism" (Nacpil and

Elwood 1978:335). Lakshman Wickremesinghe describes it as "essential evangelism in the context of dialogue with persons in their situations" (Fabella 1980:33). The context of this approach is the increasing secularization of state and society, accepted by Christian and non-Christian alike as the basis for pursuing and discerning what is truly just and human. But secularization does not abolish religion; on the contrary "all the religious traditions in the world are in various stages of renaissance and reformation, through which they are seeking to redefine themselves under the impact of the spiritual self-understanding of the modern man, and under the urge to provide the spiritual foundation for the struggle for human community. It is within this framework that Christ, and the church as the fellowship in Christ, must take shape, calling for the transformation of all religions and the conversion of man in integral relation with their religions to Jesus as the Christ of God" (Thomas in Nacpil and Elwood 1978:330-331). Christ indeed takes form in different cultures and transforms them from within. Why not within other religions, judging and transforming them as he does our Christian religiousness?

This approach, needless to say, is controversial, but from two sides. It takes the ecumenicity of Jesus Christ with final seriousness as the Lord and meaning of all religious striving and insight whatever its form. It understands him not only as the completion of other religions, as earlier syncretic thinkers had argued, but as their transformation, in the spirit of Hendrik Kraemer. Is the moment of judgment in this transformation clearly enough seen? Is the mixture of religio-cultural pretension with social injustice well enough analyzed? Is there still a place for conversion, from the sin of one's personal or one's social idolatry? Once again, the future is open.

2. Servanthood

I return to my second term. What is meant in these theologies by the servanthood of Christ? In other words, how do they cope with the problem of power? In certain circles power is the issue and servanthood is hardly mentioned. The final statement of the Sri Lanka Asian Theological Conference spoke of theology rooted in the struggle of the poor and oppressed for full humanity (Fabella 1980:156-157). *Urban and Rural Mission* speaks of "building the people's power" (England 1982:134). But in most other sources the theme of struggle and liberation is woven together with suffering, sacrifice and servanthood. "In the situation of Asian suffering and hope," writes Preman Niles, "we are called upon to see our participation as no less an undertaking than to share in God's suffering love for his creation. Only in this way can we, on the one hand, avoid a triumphalistic stance which draws attention to ourselves and, on the other, persist in our task as witnesses to what God in Jesus Christ is doing in Asia today" (Nacpil and Elwood 1978:228).

This sets the theme that is taken up in various ways. Jon Sobrino leads liberation theology straight into participation in the cross that changes the terms of political action and hope. "Jesus was condemned as a political

agitator. Jesus' journey to the cross is a process that raises questions about the kind of power that truly mediates God" (Sobrino 1978:209). The dialectic of suffering love leading to transforming love has thoroughly secularized the concept of power in the coercive political sense of the term. Power conquest is not the decisive movement of history. On the contrary, on the cross "the Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history. In his ultimate solidarity with humanity he reveals himself as the God of love, who opens up a hope and a future through the most negative side of history. Thus Christian existence is nothing else but participating in this same process whereby God loves the world and hence in the very life of God" (Sobrino 1978:209). In the resurrection of Christ lies hope for a new, transformed future, not simply the achievement of temporal justice by political struggle but a new relationship of love. To follow Jesus along the way of the cross is Christian discipleship.

In a similar but less systematic way the *minjung* theologians of Korea sound the same note, especially in their wrestling with the elusive term, so real to them as a force: *han*. "Han is an underlying feeling of the Korean people. On the one hand it is a feeling of defeat, resignation and nothingness. On the other it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings" (Suh Nam-Dong in Kim 1981:54). It is much broader and deeper than a class concept, and more subtle than the experience of alienation in Hegelian-Marxist thought. It expresses offended humanity both in its helpless cry and in its hope against hope. At the same time it is destructive. It can kill, hate, seek revenge indefinitely unless it is appeased and directed toward a redeeming and liberating end. "We Christians," writes Chung-Choon Kim, "should be the shamans of Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, to carry out the ministry of *han*, identifying ourselves with suffering humanity and appeasing the *han* of the people. But it should be remembered that the ministry of *han* must not only build an ideal society in the political, historical and sociological sense, but also hasten the Kingdom of God, promised by the suffering God to a suffering humanity — the criminal on the cross" (England 1982:20). This ministry moves by way of identification with the *han* of the people through the abandoned depth of Christ on the cross. Its gospel, however, transcends *han* and turns it into love and hope that transform human goals and human struggles.

All of this is given poignant expression in S. C. Song's *Third Eye Theology* of which the heartache, the hope-bringing suffering love, of God is the basic theme. Song picks up the themes of suffering both in Asian life and in Asian spirituality, and relates them to Christian theology in a powerful historicising of both. The ultimate issue, for him, is the power of God on the cross. "The cross was antihuman, anti-Christ and anti-God. In the cross was concentrated the cosmic power of negation. But by rendering God powerless the cross itself became transformed. For on the cross what was exposed was not the powerlessness of God but the powerlessness of the power of negation. What was revealed was the power of the powerlessness of God. The power of hate

was consumed in its own hate. The power of death was dissolved in its own death. In contrast, the powerlessness of God came from his inability to hate, to destroy and to kill. That is why he was the most powerful God. He was the God who loves, who lets live and who gives hope. The cross was, therefore, the victory of the powerlessness of God over the power of hate, destruction and death. It was the triumph of love over hate, heaven over hell and life over death. The world was saved by the powerlessness of God" (Song 1979:167).

The politics of God, therefore, is historical and concrete for Song, but it is also transforming. It demands radical change in present structures of unjust power. Revolution may be a Christian obligation to bring this about but revolution is not the whole description of Christian hope. "God's truth continues to seek the transposition of power, even within a revolution initiated in the name of justice and freedom" (Song 1979:241). It seeks the democratization of power, the repentance of the oppressor, the establishment of a new humanity whose quality has been shown in the crucified and risen Christ.

Much more thought needs to be given, in all of these theologies, to the problem of Christian involvement in coercive power, including just revolution, to the old question of the character of a relatively just social order which Christians might support while seeking to reform it, and to the dilemma of violent versus nonviolent, resistance to powerful evil, or the witness of action versus the witness of prophetic word. But it should be clearly recognized that we are here in the presence of Christians struggling for a faithful witness to the saving power of God in the cross of Christ, in the midst of power conflicts and human suffering that most of us in stable societies can only imagine from afar. The gospel is at work; we need first to learn from it.

3. The Risen Christ

The third term in this inquiry is the risen Christ. How do these third world theologies deal with the basic discontinuity between human effort and divine action which the resurrection expresses? How is ideology related to faith as a guide to action and a source of hope? An ironic illustration will pose the problem. Koson Srisang, of Thailand and the World Council of Churches staff, asks in an essay about the pain of Asia. "I am prepared to say," he writes, "that this pain is rooted in Asian spiritual alienation itself. Therefore in order to deal with it adequately we must 'enter the struggle at the level of spirituality' as M. M. Thomas has pointed out. By spirituality he means 'the structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness within which man lives and enters into a relationship with nature and with fellow men in politics, economics, society and culture.' In a similar vein C. S. Song perceives spirituality in terms of the 'totality of being that expresses itself in ways of life, modes of thinking, patterns of behavior and conduct, and attitudes toward the mystery that surrounds our immediate world and that beckons us on to the height beyond the heights, to the depth below the depths, and to light beyond lights'."

"While agreeing with the encompassing character of spirituality as defined by Thomas and Song," he continues, "I would simply specify it as the divine or sacred dimension of human life" (England 1982:128). Thus with one sentence, Srisang deflates the whole spirituality he was describing. At the same time he states with unintended clarity the issue at stake. What is the relation between the human experience of the divine, that religious vision which is the highest pinnacle of human achievement, and the action of God in human history? There is certainly a deep yearning on the part of many Asian theologians, especially in Buddhist cultures, to find ways of using non-Christian religious experiences and ideas to express the reality of God in Christ. Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Roman Catholic, suggests that the deep themes of Asian spirituality are a metacosmic soteriology and the reality of poverty which intertwine in one socio-spiritual complex. "Hence our desperate search for the Asian face of Christ can find fulfillment only if we participate in Asia's own search for it in the unfathomable abyss where religion and poverty seem to have the same common source: God, who has declared Mammon as his enemy" (Fabella 1980:94). This, however, is his most theological statement. Otherwise it is God-experience linked with human concern that lead to the praxis of "humility, immersion and participation" in the Asian, largely non-Christian experience of liberation. One assumes that in this there will be a specifically Christ-centered witness, but it will be an enlarging dimension, not confrontation, of the human spirituality around it. It is appropriate that Pieris finds Latin American liberation theology to be the one Western strand that is useful to Asians, for the same continuity is found there, this time between the human struggle for liberation and the salvation which is brought by God in Christ (Gutierrez 1973: Ch. 9).

One finds this yearning also in M. M. Thomas and in C. S. Song, but there is a decisive difference in their perception of primary reality. To put the words of Emerito Nacpil of the Philippines: "The event that begins the new creation and the new humanity in it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus constitutes a fundamental alteration in the character and movement of history; it is the beginning of the end; it is the dawn of a new age" (Nacpil and Elwood 1978:310). This being the case, all the efforts of religious cultures to come to terms with modern society, to express human values, to liberate people from oppression and to establish justice as well as to relate some experience or concept of God to this effort, are, along with Marxist and other humanist world views, secular in their reality and ideological in their form. As such they must be respected. They call for cooperation in the common struggle to define and realize what is truly just and human. But Christians in this common work are witnesses to a Lord whose saving and transforming power does not depend on human experience or work, and who constantly places this experience and work in the perspective of a new reality and a new hope. As M. M. Thomas puts it, "The primary concern of the Christian mission is also with the salvation of human

spirituality, with man's right choices in the realm of self-transcendence, and with structures of ultimate meaning and sacredness — not in any pietistic or individualistic isolation, but related to and expressed within the material, social and cultural revolutions of our time. The secular strivings for fuller human life should be placed and interpreted in their real relation to the ultimate meaning and fulfillment of human life revealed in the divine humanity of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ" (Thomas 1978:181). To which C. S. Song brings the reminder that "the resurrection faith of a Christian community becomes a historical faith when the cross of the risen Christ becomes its central concern" (Song 1979:193). Precisely so is the integrity of the Christian witness maintained. The suffering witness of the church — in Korea, in Taiwan and elsewhere — is a witness of hope and promise because it shows forth the risen Christ, as a political reality affecting the world at every point. "The power of the resurrection makes it possible to reverse and transpose the relationships of power" (Song 1979:255).

The Christian is a witness. This is perhaps the conclusion to a brief study of a vast and changing ferment of theological reflection. The integrity of that witness is the issue at every point. It underlies the poignant search for identification with the people of the world, especially the poor and oppressed, however they may be defined. It raises agonizing questions about the form of the true church among the people. It moves some to project their secular ideologies in theory and praxis and others to elaborate deep congruences between Christian faith and non-Christian spirituality. At times, in all of this, it seems as if, not otherwise than in our corner of Christendom, the longing for solidarity with a culture or a class, the desire to be effective and powerful, or the projection of human ideology onto God, will make of that witness the instrument of some human group, power or cause; and yet this does not happen. The more one reads, the more one wonders at the unforeseen ways in which Christ takes form in worlds where human religion has not domesticated his name, and at the new perspectives on human justice, love and hope which faithful witness to him there discovers.

Notes

1. The all-Asia Consultation on Theological Education for Christian Ministry, Manila 1977. Reported in *The Human and the Holy*. Asian Theological Conference, Wennapuwa, Sri Lanka, 1979. Reported in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Orbis, Maryknoll NY 1980). Cf. Comment by Dalston Forbes on the Sri Lanka conference final report, p. 164.

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