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The Jesus of Asian Women

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Chapter 1

Looking at Jesus through Asian Eyes

Why should not Asians draw on their own hermeneutical reservoir to fashion Jesus for their own time and place?

—R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH, *ASIAN FACES OF JESUS*

ASIA—LAND OF THE SPIRITS, GODS, AND GODDESSES

The largest of the earth's seven continents, Asia is home to 58 percent of the world's population.¹ It is diverse in culture, language, race, and political governance. Asia has seven major linguistic groups and hundreds of dialects within each group.² It gave birth to some of the oldest civilizations in the world. Asia has a colorful mosaic of rich cultures, traditions, and religions; it is the birthplace and “cradle of all the spiritual religions of the world.”³

Religion is a system of symbols that rouses strong emotions and motives in humans as they create concepts to explain the existence of things and beings. Thus, religion has powerful effects on one's behavior and relationships with the world. This is true of Asian religions. Except for the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Asian religions are cosmic in that they revere gods and goddesses, nature spirits, cosmic deities that dwell in the universe, and the spirits of the ancestors. Nature is commonly regarded as a living entity that has a spirit, and disruptions of nature's cycle and rhythm affect people's lives—both their production and their reproductive capacities.⁴

Other religions are metacosmic in the sense that they assume and worship the reality of the divinity as an immeasurable presence of the

mystery believed to be “salvifically encountered by humans, through liberating knowledge and redemptive love.”⁵ Metacosmic religions such as Buddhism that migrated to other parts of Asia found ways of merging with the indigenous cosmic religions, those that Christians pejoratively call animism.⁶ Indigenous religions, and to some degree Shintoism and Shamanism, regard nature as a living entity that has a spirit. Disorder in nature’s cycle and rhythm affects all dimensions of people’s lives.⁷ This view of the universe shapes the Asian ecological anthropology interwoven into the indigenous cosmic religions.

Most host communities received these new religions as they were. Some appropriated and transformed these religions into ones more suited to the natives’ existing religious views.⁸ Thus, we find metacosmic Hinduism and Buddhism in some parts of Southeast Asia in their original forms. Yet, strands of popular Buddhism are also found in South China. In some cases the gods metamorphosed. For instance, when Hinduism and Buddhism reached China, the Hindu god Avalokitesvara crossed over and became the Buddhist goddess Kuan-yin. Another Hindu god, Maitreya, transformed into the Buddhist goddess Mi-lo.⁹ Confucianism was able to weave itself into religions like Taoism, which found a home in China and its ancient tributary, Korea.¹⁰ Metacosmic in character, Christianity seemed to have trouble connecting with native and cosmic religions of Asia. Its core teachings, particularly Christology, hindered it from harmonizing with the indigenous religions, whereas other Asian metacosmic religions were able to insert into them and create an even “higher level of intellectual sophistication.”¹¹ The concern for salvation and liberation is central to most Asian religions, but their enslaving dimensions tarnish them.¹² Christianity is not an exception. These religions’ concerns for salvation and liberation, as well as their weaknesses, have affected cultures in many ways.

THE COLONIAL JESUS: A STRANGER TO ASIAN CULTURE

Jesus was born in Asia. The memory of his ministry and his teachings became the impetus that gave birth to the Christian faith that believers take on their life journeys. Christianity as a religion left Asia in its youth. It reached the continent of Europe, where it flourished, but Christians began to use it to gain power for their interests and colonial ventures.¹³ It came back to Asia fifteen centuries later as a

Western religion and as a partner of the Western colonialist enterprise. It attempted many times to overthrow the religions of Asia. Yet, despite its feverish missionary campaigns to convert the “pagan” Asians, Christianity today can claim less than 4 percent of the Asian population.¹⁴ Except in the Philippines, Christianity did not attract as many followers.

Why did Christianity fail to attract followers? Some observers say Christianity, being the religion of the colonizers and empire builders, had a negative impact on Asians, even though Asians were eager to gain knowledge from Western education that they could appropriate into their contexts.¹⁵ Moreover, Aloysius Pieris, Jesuit theologian and scholar of Buddhism from Sri Lanka, theorizes that religions that hold on to the reality of an immanent but transcendent power such as Christianity had difficulty becoming established in regions already occupied by another metacosmic religion such as Hinduism or Buddhism. While metacosmic religions found cosmic indigenous religions to be natural landing pads, the “first come, first served” basis of accommodation¹⁶ deterred Christianity from advantageous positioning. Thus, Pieris predicts that Asia “will remain a non-Christian continent.”¹⁷

The Western strand of Christianity that came back to Asia constructed its central figure, Jesus the Christ, in the image of the male, white Western European conqueror. This Jesus had a superiority complex and became a stumbling block to the kinship of Asian religions. This Jesus came back to Asia not as a *balikbayan*, who comes home to reclaim Asian roots.¹⁸ Rather, this Western Jesus was a total stranger to Asia who despised the spirits, gods, and goddesses of Asia. This Jesus was the colonial Christ who judges the adherents and practitioners of Asia’s cosmic indigenous religions and its great living religions as sinners and idolaters who must be saved from the darkness of evil.¹⁹ Redemption is possible only if Asia’s heathen souls adopt Western culture and abandon Asian religions and ways of life. This kind of Christology has blurred the visions of many Christians in Asia and continues to do so. Most Asians, however, closed their doors and refused to let the colonial Christ come into their homes.

Adaptation—Early Attempts to Make Christianity at Home in Asia

Adaptation, a low-level interaction between religions and cultures, is generally associated with the manipulation of culture.²⁰ The relation has usually been understood as external in that there was no mutual

assimilation of culture and religion. It is about the adjustment that theology had to make in order to fit into a new situation and survive and multiply there. In the context of liturgical discussion in the Roman Catholic Church, *adaptation* was understood as synonymous with *accommodation*, meaning “temporary change or modification of the rite made by the minister to accommodate the special interest or needs of various groups.”²¹ In the spirit of Vatican II some liturgical writers refer to adaptation as “incarnation,” based on the understanding that Christ incarnated and lived among people. Indeed, the term is culturally neutral. However, theologians were uneasy with it because cultural adaptation has been linked with the “colonizers’ manipulation of culture in the past.”²²

Some missionaries recognized that Asians have grasped the light of God through their cultures and have “put to shame many Christians for their upright life.”²³ Some were creative in their desire to communicate and spread Christianity. Among the better-known cases is that of the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries, namely, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), who went to China and South India, respectively.

The Italian Matteo Ricci originally went to India as a volunteer, but his superiors assigned him to China in 1583. There he learned and Romanized Chinese, translated the works of Chinese scholars of his day, and published books for catechumens. He became a scholar of Confucianism and of the Mandarin language. Aside from his acceptance of ancestor veneration, Ricci presented Jesus as a wise man, similar to Confucius, and “the Christian’s God as the Lord of Heaven.”²⁴ This position led to the Rites Controversy, which was settled only in 1742, but it also gained him favor among the Chinese elite, including the emperor.²⁵

Born to a well-off family in Rome, Roberto de Nobili went to India in 1605. He found that Indians thought becoming Christian meant abandoning their culture and traditions. De Nobili thought one could be a Christian *and* remain Indian. To prove his position, he decided to become not just an Indian but to wear saffron robes and become a Brahmin *sannyasi*, an ascetic who is in the fourth and final stage of a Brahmin’s life.²⁶ He learned several Indian languages, studied the Hindu scriptures, and accepted the Hindu culture, including its rigid caste system.²⁷ De Nobili’s “policy of accommodation” drew converts from different Indian castes but also dragged him into the Malabar Rites Controversy, which was stirred by those who accused him of syncretism.²⁸

In effect, Ricci and De Nobili metaphorically dressed Jesus in Asian garb and gave him an Asian tongue. They attracted converts to Christ, particularly from high-caste Hindus and elite Chinese audiences. Although their Christologies may be considered exclusivist and true to orthodox Catholicism, their method of adaptation helped these missionaries gain converts to Christianity. Nevertheless, one may say that their Christ, although accommodated to a particular setting, retained the bias of the colonial Christ who looked down on Asian religions, though secretly. Their use of some aspects of Asian cultures may be considered mere ploys to hide their Western Christ behind Asian robes in order to attract converts. A Buddhist compared this approach to a chameleon waiting to gobble its deceived prey.²⁹ One cannot, however, discount the invaluable contributions of Ricci and De Nobili to Christian missionary work in Asia.

The Impact of Jesus on Asians of Other Faiths

In India the figure of Jesus stirred the nationalist Hindus to think of national and religious reforms as early as the nineteenth century. In doing so, Hindu thinkers also inspired Christian theologians to reimagine Jesus in light of religious diversity.³⁰ Stanley Samartha (1920–2001) of the Church of South India and an advocate of interreligious dialogue was correct when he wrote that Christ cannot be imprisoned in one tradition.³¹

The “unbound Christ,” to use Samartha’s term, has drawn different responses from people. One response was a nationalist movement called Arya Samaj (*samaj* means “community”), which sought to reform the local religious tradition to keep Christianity at bay. Arya Samaj was centered on the Vedas, sacred Hindu texts, and “sought militant revival of Hinduism in its Vedic purity in defense against Christianity.”³² Founded by Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–83) of Gujarat, Arya Samaj affirmed Sarasvati’s criticism of some idolatrous elements of Hinduism. The movement encouraged people to serve human beings in society in order to live a full life.³³

Another type of response to the “unbound Christ” was the founding of Brahma Samaj in 1815 by Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). Roy was considered a prophet of Indian nationalism and a pioneer of liberal Hindu reforms.³⁴ In *The Precepts of Jesus* he portrayed Jesus as a compassionate human being, a *guru* whose ethical teachings could help reform Hinduism.³⁵ Unlike Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj adopted

Christian principles and values to change Hinduism. Following the steps of Roy and a member of Brahma Samaj, conservative Hindu Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–84) behaved and thought like a Christian but was never one. He understood Jesus in light of the parallel he drew between the Brahman as Satchitananda (*sat*, “being, true”; *chit*, “intelligence, awareness”; *ananda*, “bliss, joy”) and the Christian notion of the Trinity. Sen understood Jesus as the Mediator and the Logos who was, and is, involved in the process of creation and the perfection of the world. The universal Jesus the Christ is the devout yogi and loving *bhakta* (person of devotion), the norm for Hindu pantheism.³⁶

Individual Hindu thinkers responded to the “unbound Christ” in their writings. Prominent were Swami Vivekananda (1862–1902), known as the symbol of religious awakening of India, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), a philosopher and former president of India. They reaffirmed *advaita*, the Hindu philosophy and belief based on the principle of “not-twoism or non-duality.”³⁷ *Advaita* is a kind of Hindu theism that believes in the inseparable nature of God and the created world. This notion provided Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan the lens to see Jesus as the Master Yogi,³⁸ one who is in eternal union with God. Jesus is one incarnation of God among others, just like Buddha and Krishna. They also considered Jesus as one manifestation of the eternal principle of Vedanta, the Hindu scriptures. At the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda reinterpreted the Vedanta as a universal religion, integrating into it the Christian idea of social service. Moreover, Vivekananda interpreted Jesus in light of the Vedantic impersonal principles, such as Christ and Buddha, and not on the basis of the historicity of a person, as in Jesus and Gautama.³⁹ For Radhakrishnan, Jesus is the “mystic Christ who believes in the inner light” and who rejects ritual and legalistic piety.⁴⁰

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, more commonly known as Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), was fascinated with the Beatitudes. He held that God is the *satya* (truth), and when one seeks truth, beauty and goodness follow. To Gandhi, this is what Christ and Jesus was—a “supreme artist because he saw and expressed Truth.”⁴¹ Jesus embodied his teachings through his ethic of love, which Gandhi appropriated as *ahimsa* or nonviolence. Thus, Gandhi saw Jesus as the Supreme *Satyagrahi*,⁴² one who holds on to truth and practices nonviolent resistance to evil.⁴³

THE OPPRESSIVE ELEMENTS OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

Culture and religion have enslaving aspects. In India the two are intertwined in the caste system, which assigns people to a particular level of a ladder that transcends social and economic class. Those who are outside the caste are regarded as non-persons, as pollutants, as outcastes. In the same way the *burakumins* in Japan are discriminated against and deprived of social services and employment. This discrimination is rooted in the Shinto and Buddhist notion that those who slaughter animals and those who dispose of human and animal corpses are polluted. As such, they are not allowed to take part in religious rites. They are considered as “filth (*eta*) and as non-people (*hinin*) and settled in ghettos (*buraku*).”⁴⁴

In India, the dalits are treated the same way the *burakumins* are treated in Japan. While the missionaries’ strategy of accommodation attracted converts to Christianity, Ricci and De Nobili ignored the oppressive elements of culture and religion. This was acutely felt among the outcastes, whom Indian society traditionally called untouchables. The outcastes called themselves dalits. The term comes from the word *dal*, which means “crushed” or “broken.”⁴⁵ Statistically, the dalits compose the majority, but sociologically, they are a minority. Most of them are economically impoverished and deprived of the right to participate fully in the sociopolitical aspects of society.⁴⁶ The caste system has imposed on the dalit psyche a sense of low self-esteem within a culture of fear, despair, and hopelessness. The dalits insist that the Indian Christologies speak only to Brahmins and upper-caste intellectuals, not to them. They need a Jesus who not only speaks to them about their economic oppression, but one who addresses the core of their “dalitness.” Thus, dalit theology emerged in 1981 to identify Jesus as one among them: a dalit. Arvind P. Nirmal, a Protestant, first articulated dalit theology and asserted that dalitness makes dalit theology a Christian theology.⁴⁷ Nirmal is a professor of systematic theology at Gurukul Theological College and Research Institute in Madras, and heads the department of dalit theology. He insists that dalit theology must assume a kind of exclusivism to guard itself from incursions by dominant traditions.⁴⁸ The cross was the fullest manifestation of the dalitness of Jesus. There, Jesus went through the experience of abandonment, of being God-forsaken. That experience is at

the core of dalit experience and consciousness.⁴⁹ This pathos makes dalits especially sensitive in grasping the humanity and divinity of the dalit person of Jesus.⁵⁰ Nirmal contends that even if the struggle is not yet over, dalit theology is “doxological in character,” because such struggle is strengthened by dalit experiences of exodus and hope for liberation.⁵¹

Dalit theologians affirm dalit theology as one that is truly Indian and liberationist,⁵² because it expresses dalit pathos, hopes, and visions. Like other peoples’ theologies, dalit theology takes history seriously.⁵³ In the New Testament, Jesus is very much a dalit, one who did not even have a place to lay his head (Mt 8:20). Indeed, he is the prototype of all dalits, one who declared the manifesto for dalits:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to
the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind.
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Lk 4:18–19)

Jesus went through all the dalit experiences of rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, torture, and death under the dominant political and religious powers.⁵⁴

Nirmal was worried about foreign concepts filtering into dalit theological articulations. Yet, traces of Euro-American patriarchal notions certainly converge with Asian cultures’ own brand of patriarchy. This is evident in some dalit theological constructions and sacralizes the sufferings of the dalits, especially the women.⁵⁵ Dalit women have complained that male dalit theologians seldom address the issues affecting the women. They think the dalit Christology of the suffering servant is not liberating to dalit women. If dalit theology’s task is to humanize dalits, then it must stop being anthropocentric, patriarchal, and androcentric. It must take seriously women’s bodily experience of oppression.⁵⁶ Some dalit theologians contest the highlighting of obedience as a virtue in christological formulations. In the context of dalits, the concept of disobedience to an oppressive religio-cultural tradition is liberating.⁵⁷ This idea is novel in Christology, but it is not new in the praxis of resistance movements. On the one hand, as a theological theme, the liberating element of disobedience is worth exploring in

order to depart from the universalizing view that disobedience is sin. On the other hand, disobedience viewed as freedom from the “bonds of nature” must be clarified and explored critically so that it will not lead us back into the notions that endorse the exploitation of the earth and vulnerable beings.

THE LIBERATING DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

One must also recognize that religion and culture have emancipatory elements. Culture is a way of life, and religion and art are parts of it. Culture plays an important part in the formation of beliefs and in the construction of a religion’s articles of faith. In some parts of Asia, culture is an important resource in doing theology. An example of this is the mask dance of Korea. The mask dance is a social, political, and religious event. It is people’s art and therefore non-elitist. In Asia people’s art, theater especially, is a powerful tool to arouse people’s visions for struggle and protests against injustice. Historically, the oppressive governments in Korea have forbidden the performance of mask dances in the villages, because these dances inspire political resistance. The mask dance is embedded in Korean culture as one of the vehicles for expressing and releasing *han*. Taking a cue from the works of the Korean poet-activist Kim Chi-Ha, Korean *minjung* theologian Suh Nam-Dong defined *han* as the “accumulation of suppressed and condensed experiences of oppression.”⁵⁸

Korean theologian Suh David Kwang-sun, who now heads the Asian Christian Higher Education Institute based in Hong Kong, cited the Maltugi mask dance in his writings. In the Maltugi mask dance the protagonist releases his *han* at the hands of the *yangban* (ruling class) through crude language and satirical humor as an idiom of protest. As Maltugi fights to stop the cycle of oppression toward the end of the play, the audience joins the masked performers as critical, integral participants of the dance. The play ends with a dance of freedom.⁵⁹ The mask dance demonstrates that embedded in culture is its inherent revelatory and emancipating potential. Affirming the idea found in Aloysius Pieris’s work, Suh David Kwang-sun urged Asian theologians to discern God’s revelation and the presence of God in our cultures, as well as in the prophetic and revolutionary energy in them. In the mask dance Christ does not transform culture that is liberating;

rather, culture redefines Christ. Thus, Suh Kwang-sun insists, “Christ becomes Christ-of-culture.”⁶⁰ Conscious of not falling into the narrow concepts of indigenization, he calls for a “liberational indigenization” that puts the *minjung* Jesus at its center.⁶¹ As Suh David Kwang-sun points out, “Jesus Christ with our Maltugi mask liberates us and liberates the suffering *minjung* of Asia and in the world.”⁶² However, his hesitance to identify Jesus as the Christ behind the mask dance confuses his statement. His description of the mask dance’s ending is baffling. He notes that the “clear voice of Maltugi,” who had a cross on his forehead, shouts, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight” [Mt 3:3; see Is 40:3–5].” This is definitely the voice of John the Baptist calling out from behind the mask, not the voice of Jesus. Does Suh Kwang-sun equate the voice of John the Baptist with Jesus’ voice? I resonate with his “Christ-of-culture.” His understanding that Christ does not transform culture but that culture transforms Christ is thought provoking. Nevertheless, I am wary about making this understanding absolute. In the present age there are people who have actually transformed Christ into one who endorses their death-peddling and Mammon-worshipping culture. In this case there is a need for the Christ to transform such cultures into ones that are life affirming and life sustaining. I would rather say that the Christ interacts with culture as believers attempt to make sense of the Christ from their cultural location.

US-based Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song affirms the entertaining value of the mask dance, but he points out that its significance lies more in the comfort, hope, and empowerment it bestows upon people who see themselves and their struggles articulated in the dance.⁶³ Song is straightforward in his reflection that behind the mask dance, the people grasp Jesus as the Christ. The Lord of the dance, Jesus, dances the pain of the suffering people and the love of God that sustains the miracle of life in this world. To Song, Jesus is not just the mask of God; Jesus is the mask dance of God.⁶⁴ Jesus dances God’s love expressed in pain to meet people in despair. Thus, in Jesus, God and people “reach for each other to bring about a new world.”⁶⁵ This dance culminates in the cross, where Jesus and the people become one in suffering, humiliation, rejection, and death.⁶⁶ Jesus becomes the story of the people who grasp the Christ, and the Christ behind the mask dance grasps them.⁶⁷ One may only wonder what the mask dance can say about the *han* and struggle of women in the patriarchal, Confucianist society of Korea.

To sum up, the pioneers of indigenization and inculturation have done much to move away from the colonial Christ that condemned Asian religions as pagan, barbaric, and sinful. Yet, we see that the colonial Christ continues to hold many churches, pastors, and theologians captive to the metaphysical, speculative realm of Western dogma. Ironically, these Christians enjoy their captivity. Consequently, the inculturated Christ seems to remain buried “in the writings and inscriptions in the past.”⁶⁸ The Gnostic, unknown Christ of the Hindu renaissance is “entombed in the archive of historical studies and remained to be unknown to the Hindu masses.”⁶⁹ However, indigenization and inculturation have made an impact in some Christian communities. There are theologians who have taken up the challenge to do Christology using their own cultural resources. External changes have been visible in terms of training a native clergy, portraying an Asian Jesus in visual arts and iconography, and using indigenous elements in liturgies. Inculturation has also sown the seeds of interreligious dialogue. Christology, however, must take another step. It must face the challenge of exposing the oppressive elements of religion and the dehumanizing structures of society. Christology should not endorse the oppressive structures in culture, religion, and society by being silent and by hiding behind metaphysical concepts while the broad masses of Asian peoples, mostly adherents of Asian religions, suffer poverty, exploitation, and marginalization under the imperial powers of this world. Women and children in particular continue to suffer under patriarchy and sexism in church and society.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM IN ASIA

The peoples of Asia always have had a deep sense of identity; their cultures and religious practices give witness to this consciousness. The pre-colonial Asian peoples may not have been conscious of forging a collective identity,⁷⁰ but trade has certainly connected peoples, religions, and cultures.⁷¹ The sense of being “one Asia” may have arisen in resistance to Western colonization.

Typhoons, earthquakes, and tsunamis often visit Asia. But the arrival of the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama, in Calicut (now India) in 1498⁷² and their conquest of Malacca in 1511⁷³ signaled the beginning of more devastating storms of foreign domination. In Europe, conflicts between church and state ended with the agreement

that territorial extension of kingdoms also meant the expansion of Christendom.⁷⁴ Thus, geographical explorers had to secure from the Holy See in Rome the *Patronato Real* or *Padroado* that gave them exclusive rights over particular territories in Asia, so long as they established missions in the area.⁷⁵ The Protestant Dutch and the Anglican British also were catching up in the race to found colonies in Asia.

The Industrial Revolution in the latter half of the eighteenth century gave rise to new desires. The craving to control capital, production, and distribution of goods transformed European economies. Land was reduced to a capital good, and people became mere tools of production. Nature, once sacred, was stripped of its mystery and became an object of scrutiny, manipulation, and exploitation.⁷⁶ Reason and theology supplied justifications for the colonialist projects of Europe.⁷⁷ Christianity became a tool of colonization, and, to use K. M. Panikkar's phrase, the "Vasco da Gama epoch of Asian history," a storm of enslavement and defilement of people and nature, of genocide and ecocide, swept over Asia. The land of the spirits, gods, and goddesses became a land of tears.

For a time, the use of the adaptation or accommodation approach in mission was useful. The employment of native clergy and the adaptation of some aspects of local culture began.⁷⁸ Despite the positive results of this approach, the International Missionary Council⁷⁹ of the Protestant group was still wary about adaptations in the non-Western world. In 1938, in Tambaram (Madras, India),⁸⁰ the IMC's position was given voice by Hendrik Kraemer, who advocated reinstalling the Western hegemony over the church in Asia:

The conference was the first act of united and co-ordinated reconnoitring [*sic*] of the non-Christian world . . . by . . . the Protestant missions. It seemed as if the non-Christian world was spread out before the eye as a world to be conquered. It was not only the eye of faith, but also the eye of the Westerner, who subconsciously lived in the conviction that he could dispose of the destiny of the world, because the absorption of the Eastern by the Western world appeared to come inevitably.⁸¹

A Dutch Reformed lay theologian, missiologist, and expert in Indonesian Islam, Kraemer (1888–1965) wrote a book commissioned by the IMC in preparation for the Tambaram meeting. This book echoes the thoughts particularly of Karl Barth⁸² and insists that there is no

continuity between nature and revelation, that is, Jesus the Christ. Asserting the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and of Christianity, Kraemer regarded Asian religions as merely a culture of group solidarity.⁸³ He chided scholars—both European and Asians—who held on to the idea that the primitive and tribal religions are preparation for the fulfillment of the gospel through the church.⁸⁴ Kraemer argued that “paganism and the prophetic revelation of biblical realism are not continuous with each other.”⁸⁵ Biblical realism holds that scripture, particularly the New Testament, contains the fundamental core of Christian doctrines; therefore, it contains all the doctrines needed for salvation. Kraemer concluded that the aim of mission work is to “persuade the non-Christian world to surrender to Christ as the sole Lord of Life.”⁸⁶

Kraemer’s position has drawn strong criticism from some theologians.⁸⁷ The criticism indicates that some Asians saw the irrelevance of the colonizers’ Jesus to Asia’s multicultural setting. What happened in Tambaram stoked the fire of their desire to make sense of Jesus the Christ in the midst of the non-Christian world. Consequently, their Christologies seek to remember Jesus and to reconnect him to the Asian life and milieu.

INDIGENIZATION/INCULTURATION: RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF RISING NATIONALISM

The colonization of the Asian mind was inherent in the scheme of Western education. Missionaries believed that “Western culture was a real preparation for the gospel of Christ.”⁸⁸ In practical terms this meant training intellectuals to embody a colonial mentality and grooming them for leadership in their own countries, thus ensuring a smooth transition to neocolonialism. The scheme proved successful. Yet, paradoxically, the impact of the Western ethos awakened the people to a sense of nationalism. In the Philippines, intellectuals became involved in the peasant-led nationalist resistance to colonialism, the goals of which included the indigenization of the clergy, religious rituals, and church properties.⁸⁹ The founding of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (Philippine Independent Church), also called the Philippine Catholic Church, indicated the success of the revolutionary effort to promote indigenization. The emergence of an icon of a woman garbed with the Philippine flag leading a small boy along a path strewn with images of colonial violence demonstrates the shift of the theological

paradigm. It is a variation of the Pieta, of course, but the woman is also the Motherland leading the nation to freedom.

In India the impact of the nationalist awakening, led by the Western educated intellectuals in the Christian church, led to the exploration of the theology of nationalism.⁹⁰ The rise in the nineteenth century of nationalist movements to reform Hinduism brought about the Indian Renaissance, a blossoming of intellectual work and flourishing of literature that addressed politics, culture, society, and religion. This movement gave rise to the non-Western, inculturated images of Jesus Christ that Christian and Hindu leaders conceived to institute reforms in their nation and respective religions.

The term *inculturation*, which appeared in the 1970s, refers to a missiological approach that introduces the gospel into a new culture without losing or distorting the gospel's essential nature. In 1977 the Catholic Synod of Bishops used it to stress the reciprocity between a particular people in a specific culture and the gospel that makes both flourish.⁹¹ Inculturation points to the transformation of the "authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the rooting of Christianity in various human cultures."⁹²

Among Roman Catholics the term *incarnation* was used interchangeably with *inculturation*, while Protestants preferred the term *indigenization*. Some assert that *indigenization* has even deeper meaning, as it seeks to set free the community of faith from colonized consciousness, the "most damaging legacy of colonialism" that churches continue to perpetuate.⁹³ In liturgy, *indigenization* was understood not only as "Indianization" or "Filipinization" or conferring on liturgy a cultural form native to the community; it also meant reading the Rig Vedas "as part of the Liturgy of the Word."⁹⁴

The earliest experiment with inculturation and indigenization in Asia goes back to the seventh century, when Asians searched for a meaningful image of Jesus the Christ in their lives. Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris calls this early attempt at inculturation "inter-religionization," a process whereby a religion that holds on to the reality of an immanent-and-transcendent God, such as Christianity, cultivated "a new Asian identity within the idiom and ethos of another metacosmic religion,"⁹⁵ such as Buddhism.

Thriving between 635 to 845 CE, the Nestorian community in China experimented with interreligionization.⁹⁶ Though labeled Nestorian, this community had nothing to do with the Nestorianism of the fifth century.⁹⁷ The community emerged with the concept of

the Christ that was shaped according to the Buddhist world view. This “Buddhist Christ” emerged from the Chinese community, following the model of the transformation of the Hindu god Avalokitesvara into the Buddhist goddess Kuan-yin. In this case Jesus Christ is one who manifests the character of Kuan-yin. The Nestorian community not only came up with a Buddhist Christ, but it also developed a religious text called the Jesus-Messiah *sutra*, which is full of ideas from the Gospels. Christian historians of China found that the section on salvation in the *sutra* contains borrowings from Chinese religions, though the predominant concepts and images are from Buddhism. Jesus is the “boat of mercy,” which obviously points to the goddess of compassion, Kuan-yin, who is the “boat of mercy” to Buddhists.⁹⁸

It is unfortunate that this religious experiment did not survive. In 845 the moody Taoist emperor Wu-tsung, who hated foreign religions, issued a decree that suppressed the Nestorian community, along with the Buddhists.⁹⁹ Some scholars believed that the Nestorians in China were simply heretics, that “there was nothing Christian” in these Nestorian communities, as shown by their writings, which are littered with concepts from Chinese religions. This is the reason, they believed, that these communities failed to survive.¹⁰⁰ One should not forget, however, the strong impact of political factors on its disappearance. It would have been fascinating to see how the Nestorian christological model that incorporated the transcultural and transgendered images of Avalokitesvara/Kuan-yin would have impacted later Christologies. Had it survived, this Nestorian Christology could have served as an antidote to the patriarchal model that became dominant for so long in the Christian world.

INDIAN EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENIZATION/ INCULTURATION

Among the Indian Christian pioneers of indigenization was Bhawani Charan Banerji, a Brahma Samaj member. He took the name Brahmobandhav (Theophilus) Upadhyaya (1861–1907) when he became a Christian because he was drawn to Jesus’ faultless life. He was baptized an Anglican but became a Catholic within the same year. Upadhyaya lived a life of a *sannyasi* and called himself a Hindu Catholic. He held that God the Brahman’s name in Sanskrit, Satchitananda, corresponds to the Christian concept of the Trinity. Thus, he constructed

a Christology from a trinitarian perspective, using a Thomistic framework. God the Father is the Absolute Sat; the Son, the Logos, and the second Person in the Trinity is Chit, the intelligence, thought, and awareness; and the third Person, the Holy Spirit, is Ananda, the bringer of joy. He argued that the teachings of *advaita* Vedanta were very much part of natural theology and as good as the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.¹⁰¹ They teach that among everything that exists, God's existence is the only essential; all the rest have conditional existence.

Upadhyaya's way of translating the Christian faith to the Indian people earned him Rome's rejection, in spite of his view that Christianity is the fulfillment of religions and the purifier of Hinduism.¹⁰² The earlier Upadhyaya seemed to have simply translated the traditional Christian doctrine into Hindu philosophical categories and maintained that Christ is the unique incarnation of God. Yet, he later integrated into his Christian practice the "worship of some Hindu gods and goddesses as 'attributes of God.'"¹⁰³ Upadhyaya's use of the Thomistic paradigm made his version of inculturation problematic. He did not explore the liberating dimension of the Hindu culture in relation to the realities of Indian life. For Upadhyaya, revelation is beyond the natural. Consequently, salvation and revelation remain, for him, at the metaphysical level. Whether Upadhyaya forced Indian thought into the Thomist mold, as some Indian theologians thought,¹⁰⁴ or whether he forced traditional Christian doctrine into the Hindu philosophy, the result is the same: he failed to see revelation as the encounter of Christ with the totality of human life.¹⁰⁵ His metaphysical Christ made him unable to see the evils of the caste system that he integrated into the Indian Christian life.¹⁰⁶ His rejection of the historical Jesus, of Jesus the Avatar (God who came down to earth as human) and his upper-caste background as a Bengali Brahmin caused his failure to address the social realities of India.

Jesus the Most Ego-less Person

Another prominent voice in the era of nationalism in Asia was that of Vengal Chakkarai (1880–1958), who came from a wealthy Hindu family and was a member of the Chetty caste in Madras. He converted to Christianity and was associated with the Danish Lutheran mission but left later to join Gandhi's movement for independence. A lawyer by profession, he became involved with labor unions, and later he became a mayor in Madras. As a lay theologian, he took Upadhyaya's

christological approach of drawing a correspondence between the Sanskrit name of Brahma, Satchitananda, and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Chakkarai was coming close to Keshub Chandra Sen's interpretation of Satchitananda (*sat* as being, truth; *chit* as awareness and intelligence; and *ananda* as bliss or joy). However, he reinterpreted Satchitananda as the unity of the universal spirit of beauty (*sat*), love (*chit*), and truth (*ananda*). Jesus embodies the immortal unity of Satchitananda. Unlike Upadhyaya, Chakkarai held that Jesus is the Avatar. Keshub Chandra Sen, a Hindu devotee of Jesus Christ and leader of Brahma Samaj, influenced Chakkarai's understanding of Jesus. Jesus the Avatar is the "most ego-less person," and this essence makes Jesus the "most universal of all."¹⁰⁷ Jesus' ministry was a manifestation of his "ego-lessness." The ego is the seat of pride and self-consciousness of the "I." It is the location of the original sin of human beings. Chakkarai connects Christology with the ethical demands of the Christian life. Involved with rethinking Christianity and envisioning a reformed Indian society, he urged people to seek union with Christ and to lose their ego and rationality in the "ocean of His life."¹⁰⁸ Like Albert Schweitzer, Chakkarai laments that modern theology's overreliance on reason has reduced the historical Jesus to a "mere dialectician, a reformer, and an asserter of messianic claims."¹⁰⁹ Schweitzer observed that the Jesus of the historical quest was simply a figure made in the image of the theologians who relegated the Christ of faith to the margins.¹¹⁰

Chakkarai equated the ego with egotism, arrogance, narcissism, and bigotry, characteristics of a sick ego. A healthy ego, as a "principle of unity," is important because it secures autonomy for the self and propels the will to be "responsible for making choices and becoming ethically involved."¹¹¹ Jesus of Nazareth lived with a robust ego that made him envision a just society. Such a healthy ego enabled him to wage peace and resist evil in a radical way—even to love his enemy (Mt 5:36–44). Chakkarai's "ego-less Jesus" may pose some danger to women. It could be used to reinforce the passivity and subservience that patriarchy has already instilled in women. It may promote internalization of oppression that makes women lose their sense of self-worth and personhood. The concept of an "ego-less Jesus" glosses over the suffering of women, children, and the vulnerable and may encourage them to sacrifice their bodies at the altar of male-constructed structures in the name of Christ. It may trap people in the abyss of resignation and fear.

Though a pioneer of the trade-union movement in Madras, Chakkarai's Christology does not reflect his engagement with labor issues and classism. Chakkarai may have had the best of intentions, but his upper-caste background, though non-Brahmin, did not allow him to see casteism. Like Upadhyaya, he was not able to connect the universal spirit of Satchitananda with the ugly social realities that encompass caste, class, ethnocentrism, gender, culture, and ecology. Jesus the Avatar, as an embodiment of Satchitananda, remains laudable only in the realm of theoretical discourse.

Jesus Christ as *Bhakti Marga*

Born into a Christian family, Aiyarudai Jesudasan Appasamy (1891–1975) was a former bishop of the Church of South India and an advocate of indigenous Indian Christian theology.¹¹² He used Ramanuja's *visisthadvaita*, the notion of devotional tradition, to approach Christology. Appasamy contends that Christ fulfills the goal of all religious quests to be in communion with God. The union, however, is not metaphysical as the Chalcedonian formula puts it. Jesus was able to do his earthly tasks because he was of the same reality with God. To support this argument, Appasamy connected Jesus' prayerful life and his "I and my Father are one" discourse to the Hindu concept of *bhakti marga*, a path of devotion espoused by Ramanuja. *Advaita* teaches that the goal of religion is for the believer to be absorbed into the divine, or attain a mystical union of non-duality. On the contrary, Appasamy thought that the union is both moral and functional but, more than that, a believer as *bhakti* follows the path of devotion to God in loving and personal union with Christ. Unlike Upadhyaya, Appasamy's inculturation was selective; he rejected aspects of Indian religion and culture that he considered evil, such as the concept of transmigration, the fatalistic interpretation of karma, idolatry, and the caste system.¹¹³

Jesus Giver of Creative Energy

A lawyer and Protestant lay theologian, Pandipeddi Chenchiah (1886–1959) belonged to a Telugu clan in Madras that converted to Christianity. He aimed to articulate an Indian theology that takes Christ as the point from which Christians can "swing" into the new world of understanding and practice.¹¹⁴ To Chenchiah, no religion

has a monopoly on, or contains the full revelation of God. However, he considered Christ as unique in terms of being the “new creative factor” that emerged in cosmic history.¹¹⁵ Christ is “the central point of all religions” in the sense that Jesus the Christ, the reality of the new being and giver of creative energy, is the key to the transformation of humanity, nature, and the whole universe.¹¹⁶ This is where the universality of Christ lies. Chenchiah’s thought is close to Vengal Chakkarai’s understanding of Jesus’ humanity. However, Chakkarai’s Jesus is the Avatar, the human manifestation of God, while Chenchiah’s Jesus is the historic figure, the raw “cosmic fact” that reveals the full meaning of Christ in a cosmic context.¹¹⁷

Chenchiah implied that religions are the “pre-Christian revelation” that serve as the platform on which one could perch to “catch the dawn of the new day.”¹¹⁸ This approach makes Chenchiah’s Christology sound inclusivist, a posture that displays different levels of openness to religions but ultimately claims that the salvific principle, such as Christ, is located only in Christianity. Inclusivism holds that religions may have some sparks of God’s revelation only because the Christ of Christianity operates secretly in them. However, one needs also to understand that Chenchiah considered Hinduism his “spiritual mother.” Thus, he blended his theology with the Hindu concept of the integral yoga that aims to attain the transformed human being as its goal. *Yoga* means “union.” It is a discipline and a way of attaining unity with God. The term also refers to a school of philosophy and to techniques of spiritual discipline and prayer.¹¹⁹ Hinduism had nurtured Chenchiah to discern spiritual greatness and had led him to grasp the meaning of Christ. Consequently, he did not discount the possibility of syncretism. In fact, he even challenged the Indian church to take a brave “plunge into the depths” of intimate relationship with Hinduism and Islam and to emerge with an “enlarged and renovated Life.”¹²⁰ Those who knew him note that Chenchiah was able to synthesize Western naturalist philosophy and Indian spirituality—two streams enriched by Christian cosmology, that is, Jesus’ teachings of the kingdom of God.¹²¹

Chenchiah’s notion of Christ as “creative energy” could be a refreshing starting point for dialogue with Asian religions. However, this view shows some strains of anthropocentrism. For him, one may attain a new life when “in man as in Jesus, a new creative factor has entered” and, therefore, “man” becomes the “centre and the creator of a new order.”¹²² Although this view may have some positive value,

in the male-dominated societies in Asia the anthropocentric view has done much violence to women and the earth. Anthropocentrism has provided a theological justification for male domination over women, the earth, and everything therein. It is surprising that while Chenchiah encouraged different revelations to “flow into each other,” he did not make a connection between Christ as the “creative energy” and Shakti, the “creative energy” and the feminine principle in the goddess tradition of Hinduism, his “spiritual mother.” While one should not underestimate the contribution of Chenchiah to the effort of forging relationships with other religions in India, Chenchiah’s Christology was silent about the reality of the caste system in India.

REINSCRIBING ADAPTATION AS AN APPROACH TO RELIGIO-CULTURAL PLURALITY

Paul David Devanandan (1901–62), born in Madras and an ordained presbyter of the Church of South India, basked in the light of the great minds that pioneered dialogue among the religions of Asia. However, a closer look at the writings of the Yale-educated Devanandan shows that, at the core, his Christology hardly moved beyond adaptation, if adaptation is understood as a low-level interaction between religions and cultures. He strongly objected to Chenchiah’s position regarding the possibility of syncretism, and he also had reservations about the Indian church’s forging a close relationship with Hinduism and Islam. He recognized that the Holy Spirit works in religions, but he insisted that there is nothing in Hindu doctrine that is compatible with Christian thought. His interest in using the philosophical and religious discourse of the non-Christian faith was functional, he admitted. These frameworks are mere “instruments” through which the gospel could be translated and interpreted into Indian idioms. Dialogue is useful to edify Christian life only in terms of practical matters such as the adaptation of some Hindu religious practices to enrich approaches in religious education.¹²³

Rather than placing stress on Jesus of Nazareth, Devanandan was drawn closer to the metaphysical notion of the Christ. He disagreed with Chakkarai’s view that human beings can mold themselves into “Christ-likeness.” This is not possible, he argued, because people

cannot duplicate Jesus' "perfect manhood," which was a "minor incident in the eternal fact of Christ."¹²⁴ To Chenchiah's view that Jesus is the "new man" and "raw cosmic fact," Devanandan countered that the Hindu avatar simply teaches ethics, while Jesus Christ in fact "stands for the Divine power" and for the "central doctrine" of the Christian creed.¹²⁵ Christianity is not a mere ethical culture or a moral endeavor. The ethics of Jesus were ideal, not practical. The resurrected Jesus offers spiritual salvation, in the sense that "the symbol of triumphant Christendom is not the cross; it is the Open Tomb."¹²⁶

Devanandan appropriated and Christianized Hindu terms. He used the term *avatara* for the "fact of Christ," that Christ the Avatar's absolute purpose is redemption. Christ's historical fact must be substantiated by the eternal fact.¹²⁷ What is crucial is believers' abiding faith in the Avatar's redemptive fact, not their being a *bhakti* or devotee of Christ. Jesus as the Avatar opens the channel of grace for the forgiveness, healing, and perfection of those who discern the mystery of God.¹²⁸ Although he spoke very briefly of Christ as Shakti, the Eternal Life, and as the content of the Christian *dharma* that animates one to do good works,¹²⁹ the bottom line for Devanandan was this: in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God has been manifest unequivocally and finally. Devanandan does not give in to Chenchiah's plea for Christianity to find a common ground with Hinduism, to consider religious experience, and to rethink its claim on the "finality" in salvation. Instead, Devanandan adamantly argues that it has "been decided once and for all," that "in Christ God Himself has spoken," and that "in the Gospel there can be no element of falsehood."¹³⁰ Jesus Christ is the event. God entered into history in Jesus Christ, became human, "unique, final and completely adequate."¹³¹

Devanandan would repeatedly argue that syncretism is impossible because fundamentally, the "Gospel and Hindu *dharma* are more than oil and water";¹³² they never mix. Furthermore, he dismissed Chenchiah's notion of Jesus as the universal teacher and of Christ as the creative agency of a new cosmic order. To Devanandan, this notion "will not get the Christians anywhere."¹³³ Some Indian theologians follow Devanandan and argue that, unlike the Christian faith that values the right relationship of God with human beings, Hinduism "lacks emphasis on the sinful nature of human person and the purposive will of a personal God."¹³⁴

THE TRAGEDY OF POVERTY: A CONTINUING LEGACY OF NEOCOLONIALISM

Poverty continues to be a stark reality in Asia. It is a continuing legacy of neocolonialism. The Asian countries succeeded in gaining independence from their colonizers, but before long they fell into a new form of domination. Strong nations, such as the United States and the dominant European countries, exercised political, economic, and social hegemony over them. Once the sole colony of the United States in Asia, the Philippines served as a launching pad for US political and economic maneuvers in Asia. Thus, the United States established control over not only the Philippines¹³⁵ but South Korea, Taiwan, and even to some extent Japan.¹³⁶

After its defeat in Vietnam the United States launched a more aggressive policy of political and economic control¹³⁷ through the Bretton-Woods¹³⁸ international financial system, the rules of which became instruments of “colonization without an occupation force.”¹³⁹ Through infusion of funds in the form of loans and aid, the Bretton-Woods financial system sought to promote “economic growth” in Asia¹⁴⁰ without paying attention to the issues of justice, equal distribution of wealth, and ecological balance. Through the IMF and the World Bank powerful countries are able to manipulate the finances, economic reconstructions, and trade systems of the “beneficiary” countries.¹⁴¹ This neocolonial scheme traps developing countries in enormous debt and uneven economic growth, while the powerful nations subjugate their priorities and interests.

South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong emerged as dragons and tigers, newly industrializing countries (NICs) aiming to catch up with Japan even at the expense of their people and of nature.¹⁴² As these tiger economies became a threat to their interests, the powerful nations sought to drive the tigers to extinction.¹⁴³ The tigers collapsed by the end of the 1990s, ending the Asian “miracle.” The tigers recovered after some time, but the collapse exposed the cause of the Asian crisis.

Asian countries like the Philippines literally mortgaged their future when they took the bait of the international financial institutions. Poverty is harder on women and children. Sex tours and sex trafficking also contributed to the rise of HIV and AIDS, as “more than half of all infections have been contracted during paid sex.”¹⁴⁴ There is

also an increase in child labor and migration of workers. Such a system leaves an increasing number of people with feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, despair, and meaninglessness.

CONTEXTUALIZATION: TOWARD A RELEVANT CHRISTOLOGY

Asian theologians realized the critical role of people's experience of oppression and poverty in doing Christology. Inculturation did not pay attention to the social context of believers. The term *contextualization*, introduced by the World Council of Churches, takes seriously the contexts of contemporary struggles for economic progress, social justice, and political freedom. It challenges the church to be relevant.¹⁴⁵

The early development of contextualization theologies goes back to movements in reaction to the authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic Church. Churches supportive of the anti-capitalist and anti-neocolonialist struggles of oppressed peoples, such as those in Russia, China, and Vietnam, reflected their engagement with the people in socialist settings. They also needed, however, to give voice to prophetic theologies that criticized the weaknesses of their own societies.¹⁴⁶ Outside Asia, contextualization theologies found expression in a variety of liberation theologies in the Third World. The first was James H. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), followed closely by Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (1971).¹⁴⁷ These works have had strong influence on some Asian theologians, although the Asian contexts caused the Asian theologies to emerge. Asian contextualized theologies usually locate Jesus the Christ in the faces of the poor, deprived, and oppressed—the dalits, the *minjung*, and other Asians—struggling for justice, freedom, and full humanity. Owing to Asia's contextual diversity, one finds different faces of Jesus in Asia.

Jesus the Secular Christ

A militant image of Jesus is prevalent in Asian contexts where people struggle for freedom from neocolonization and autocratic governments. One sees this image in the work of M. M. Thomas (1916–96), an Indian theologian who became a world figure in the ecumenical movement. His life and ministry reflected his rootedness in

the tradition of Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Thomas held that Jesus is the secular Christ. Trained in sociology and economics, Thomas found it important to reflect on the significance of Jesus the Christ not only in the realm of religions but also in the secular, political world.¹⁴⁸ Thus, Thomas consistently connected Christology with his understanding of humanity and salvation in the historical realm. He derived his theological anthropology from secular humanism, a system that affirms human creativity and humanization of nature, the basic need of freedom from the bondage of social evils, and the realization of love in human relationships. To believe that God in Christ works for human salvation is to see Jesus as the ultimate pattern for human existence and the epitome of mutual self-giving love.¹⁴⁹

In some ways, M. M. Thomas reflects the Christian, especially Protestant, aversion to the powers of nature, cosmos, spirits, gods, and goddesses. He thinks these divinized powers have enslaved humanity, and that Christ came to liberate humanity from this enslavement. Certainly, he valued the Enlightenment-inspired secularization of nature. Yet, he also saw that in the process of secularizing nature, human beings had divinized science and technology and thus become slaves of their own tools. Now, Christ must liberate human beings from the divinized power of science and technology that has turned human beings and the organic bases of human life into sacrifices—fodder to be fed into the machines of imperialism and war.¹⁵⁰ For M. M. Thomas, the metaphysical Christ of the traditional theologies—Indian and Western alike—is powerless in the face of this condition.

The notions of the unknown Christ and the anonymous Christian may seem to validate the universal Christ. However, to Thomas, the historical cross of Jesus is still the decisive criterion for discerning the stirrings of positive responses of faiths to the universal cross, upon which hangs the world's suffering.¹⁵¹ The crucifixion of Jesus exposed the adversaries of God and the misdirection of humanity. Jesus Christ crucified is the "prototype of true manhood" in the historical realm and becomes a source of humanization for *homo sapiens*.¹⁵² The cross provides the answer to the problem of justification of human existence. When humanity responds to the cross, the crucified Christ offers divine forgiveness that releases us from our obsession for selfish security. Jesus Christ moves others toward the mutual self-giving love of God that ultimately measures individual and collective maturity. Thomas also recognized that Christ is at work even in secular and non-Christian movements, in their creative struggle for freedom and

for an independent home for the Asian spirit. The church, therefore, must discern Christ in the aspirations and events of the times.¹⁵³

M. M. Thomas obviously stirred up neo-orthodox nervousness when he asserted that the revolutionary ferments in Asia have within them “the promise of Christ for a fuller and richer life for man and society.”¹⁵⁴ He recognized the role of human structures and ideologies in creating conditions of political freedom and social justice. He suggested that these conditions could pave the way for human beings to respond to Christ in faith and love. Yet, he was also cautious of the way some ideologies and politics of justice turned themselves into new monsters of oppression, of “liberators-turning-oppressors” who become “self-idolatrous, . . . devouring their children.”¹⁵⁵ He made it clear that the secular messiahs have their place, but they cannot replace the crucified Messiah. The gospel is about what God has done in the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth in one particular historical moment. This Christ-event gives all history a spiritual relevance and affirms God’s act “through, in, and for Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁶ According to Thomas, we can only speak of the new humanity in terms of being in Christ, and it must transcend and transform Christianity, religions, and ideologies from within. Then we can envision a unity in Christ that accommodates diversity in fellowship.¹⁵⁷ Some Indian theologians note that M. M. Thomas’s theological anthropology laid the foundation for a more active theological engagement in India.¹⁵⁸

Jesus the Crucified People

The suffering brought about by historical evils has destroyed the beauty and humanity of Mother Asia’s children.¹⁵⁹ Being conscious of Taiwan’s religions and cultures, C. S. Song, a Protestant theologian, took indigenization as the central theme of his theological work. However, his awareness of the suffering of the poor not only of Taiwan but also of Asia challenged his theological vocation. This led to his personal participation in the political struggles over his homeland’s future in relation to mainland China.¹⁶⁰ Song argues for a theology that balances the intellectual articulation with compassion. He takes Christology as a story of a Jesus who arises from the ashes of people killed in the battlefields and destroyed in the slums. The historical Jesus, not the domesticated Jesus of traditional historicism that propounds a posture of superiority over other religions, is significant in this Christology. God has been active in Asian people’s cultures and

histories, and Jesus the Christ deepens our understanding of God's "ways with *all* people." In Jesus, God meets humanity. Jesus' death on the cross is a judgment not only upon the sins of the world, but also upon a religion that "hides God from the people" and "misrepresents God to them."¹⁶¹ We cannot locate Jesus in marble statues or in the ancient creeds and formulas. In Asia, the "who" cannot be severed from the question of the "where" when we speak of Jesus. Song demonstrates this for us. He connects the identity and location of Jesus with that of the suffering people—not just any people. Jesus is God made known in the midst of the suffering people.¹⁶²

The phrase "crucified people" was used by El Salvadoran Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría to refer to the suffering people of Latin America. In the same way, C. S. Song used the phrase to describe Jesus as embodied by the crucified people of Asia. He grounds this interpretation in his understanding of a phrase in Mark 14:22 (cf. Mt 26:28), the Greek *huper pollon*, "for many" or "in behalf of many." Rather than sticking to the translation that suggests Jesus as superior and not like ordinary human beings, Song preferred the translation of *huper pollon* as "to be on someone's side." Thus, Jesus is not only a representative of human beings; Jesus himself is one with the suffering people. Jesus becomes the people, not just a Passover lamb. Thus the historical Jesus, who is alive in the life stories of the oppressed people, becomes the historical Christ, who crosses geographical, time, and metaphorical barriers. The historical Jesus, who went through "christological conversion," therefore, can be any oppressed people in Asia.¹⁶³

Although he does not go deeply into gender analysis, Song, who is now based in the United States, is one of the few male theologians in Asia who are sensitive to gender issues in their reflections. In his reflection on Edwina Sandy's sculpture of a woman crucified, *Christa*, Song notes that *Christa* reveals the basic inadequacies of traditional androcentric or male-centered theology. Christa is "the female Christ, the story of suffering women."¹⁶⁴ Song sees the divine compassion for the suffering actualized in human power to endure and to bear the burden for others.¹⁶⁵

Song does not, however, comfort my uneasiness with the notion of Jesus' death as an act of obedience to God.¹⁶⁶ Patriarchy could easily twist and use this notion to perpetuate injustices done to women and to powerless people. Song's assertion that Jesus' death was not passive obedience to a wrathful God but that Jesus embodied a childlike obedience to a loving parent God also sparks some reservations because

the analogy brings, to some women and even to some men, memories of child abuse by parents and trusted adults. One must note, however, that Song helps us remember that while Jesus was “obedient to the point of death” (Phil 2:8), Jesus was not submissive. Jesus painfully wrestled with the possibility of death (Mk 14:34) and prayed to God, “Remove this cup from me” (Mk 14:36). Taking the clue from Song, I am able to see Jesus as one who exercised moral agency. This made him bold in facing death. Jesus knew he could end up on the cross if he did not give up the life-giving, christic vision he shared with God, the essence of being anointed or set apart for the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus extracted this understanding from the prophet Isaiah (Is 61:1–2) and articulated it, according to Luke (Lk 4:1–13). Jesus followed his own conviction and vision in light of his love for the world. This understanding challenges contemporary persons, Christian or not, to listen critically and courageously to the christic voice inside them. I recognize the tragic reality that human life is imperfect and sad because human beings are inevitably involved with corruption and evil. Thus, human constructions, including religion and theology, are always imperfect. Yet, this reality makes it urgent for Christians to consider Jesus seriously, for he gives us hope for redemption, shows us the way to humility, and models how to struggle against corruption.

Jesus the Counter-Culture Prophet

Following M. M. Thomas, Jesuit priest Sebastian Kappen of India paid attention to the revolutionary message of Jesus in the face of the social realities and human life in Asia.¹⁶⁷ Kappen’s consciousness of the Indian context and his association with Indian activists impassioned him to construct an Indian theology of liberation that incorporates ecological issues. He takes the experiences of ordinary Indian people as his starting point. His work reveals the insights he gathered from the “radical elements” of Indian religions and “positive insights” from Marxist thought and practice.

Moving away from Indian and traditional speculative Christologies, Kappen focused his attention on the historical, secular Jesus who addresses the social problems of Indian society. He sees Jesus as the “unique, intense, unparalleled manifestation of the transcendent in the flow of history.”¹⁶⁸ In this sense Jesus is a prophet of new humanity, one who manifests the Divine whom we encounter in beauty, love,

friendship, and community. This encounter demands a “theandric practice,” that is, the human being’s embodied response to the Divine. As the divine appearance in history is a divine “gift-call,”¹⁶⁹ theandric practice is an expression of joy for the blessing received and an exercise of one’s potentials to meet the challenge of the Divine’s beckoning. Theandric practice is expressed in the interplay of “contemplation-action, celebration-creation, safeguarding-subverting, memory-hope, and self-transformation-world-transformation.”¹⁷⁰ In practical terms the gift-call beckons one to practice discipleship, rather than just being a worshiper, and to follow Jesus in the journey to confront the cultures of oppression. Kappen’s creation of a phrase to capture the meaning of Jesus’ appearance in history to show that we have the gift to transform a decadent world into a better place is novel. Although Kappen does not explain the root of the term *theandric*, we gather that it is a combination of two Greek words, namely, *theos*, “god,” and *andros* (*aner*), “male person.” One may note, however, that his choice of the Greek word *andros* over *anthropos*, which is more inclusive of male and female persons, makes the term *theandric* itself androcentric or male centered.

For Kappen, Jesus is the counter-culture prophet, one who creates a liberating culture and whose allies are the social and political forces that fight the oppressive castes and capitalism.¹⁷¹ This secular Jesus has impact beyond the boundaries of Christianity because he lived what he taught, made history with God the center of his life, and met God in the heart of the world. Jesus’ death is a consequence of his work for existential liberation.¹⁷² Jesus transforms cultures from complacency to resistance, from the “pie in the sky” piety to ethical religiosity, from individualism to communitarian salvation, and from fear to freedom.¹⁷³ Kappen retrieves the goals of Indian religion, namely, union of the self with the divine and non-attachment, and reinterprets them in terms of people moving toward a spirituality of commitment through a process called integrated yogic concentration.¹⁷⁴

Kappen addressed the issues of class, race, and caste extensively in his earlier writings, and in his later works he discussed the issues of gender and ecology briefly but profoundly. The Jesus of history, unlike the Jesus of dogma, initiated a humanizing praxis and proclaimed equality of all women and men of whatever race, color, caste, or class. Kappen holds that Jesus’ teachings resonate with Asian sensibilities, that God reveals “himself not only in, but also as nature and history,” and even beyond it. Jesus, therefore, urged the people to trust the

motherhood of the earth to provide for our daily needs. However, a few pages earlier, Kappen seems to view history only from the scientific angle and tends to disconnect the indigenous or cosmic reality from Jesus of history.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, like many other contextual theologians, he tends to downplay any ethical and liberating dimension of cosmic religiosity.

Jesus and the *Minjung*

Earlier, we discussed C. S. Song's view of Jesus as the crucified people. The idea of connecting the suffering people with the crucified Jesus finds continuity in the Korean concept of *minjung*. Korean poet Kim Chi Ha's play "The Gold-Crowned Jesus" gives us a picture of people suffering poverty, discrimination, and oppression, such as jobless people, beggars, and prostitutes. The church venerates a Jesus imprisoned in a concrete statue crowned with gold. Jesus urges the beggars to set him free from the concrete prison and from the burden of the gold crown. Once freed, Jesus tells the beggars, "You have helped give me life again. You removed the gold crown from my head and so freed my lips to speak. People like you will be my liberators."¹⁷⁶ The police, of course, catch the beggars, put them in jail, and place the crown back on Jesus' head. The poet thus suggests that the church has reduced Jesus once again into a frozen statue, a decoration. As Jesus longed for liberation from classical notions formulated by Western churches, the poor people became the liberators of the colonial Christologies.

Taking the alienated and oppressed people referred to as *minjung*, Korean Protestant biblical scholar Ahn Byung Mu developed *minjung* theology. Ahn, born in 1922, spent part of his childhood in North Korea before it gained independence from the control of Japan. Ahn's passion for the *minjung*—not only the poor but also people who suffer from discrimination—led him to political activism and imprisonment as a political detainee. His experience of solidarity with the *minjung* in their struggle for democracy and for the removal of military dictatorship had a strong impact on his Christology.¹⁷⁷

Ahn lamented over the tendency of some scholars to reinforce the Pauline disinterest in the historical Jesus and over their emphasis on making the Christ of the *kerygma* an object of worship.¹⁷⁸ The phrase Christ of the *kerygma*, that is, the Christ of faith who is being preached, has been distinguished from the Jesus of history. This distinction

emerged from the debate over the liberal quests for the historical Jesus. To Ahn, the *kerygma* paradigm not only de-historicized the Jesus-event, but it also propped up the authority of the church.¹⁷⁹ He criticized the paradigm because, in his view, “the Christology in this Kerygma has greatly served as an ideology to preserve the Church, but at the cost of silencing Jesus.”¹⁸⁰ The *kerygma* paradigm blurred the picture of the historical Jesus, spiritualized the events surrounding the murder of Jesus, and distorted the meaning of people in the Gospels.

In the Gospel according to Mark, Ahn discovered that the writer used the Greek word *ochlos* more than *laos*. This gave him a better understanding of the deeper connection between Jesus and the people. Rather than using the word *laos*, which means “the people of God,”¹⁸¹ the Gospel writer used *ochlos*, which includes the crowd of sick people, tax collectors, sinners, the materially poor, and the women.¹⁸² *Laos* also refers to those whom the Pharisees define within the frame of national and religious boundaries. We can only understand the *ochlos* in a relational way. Although potentially powerful, these followers were unorganized. Jesus had compassion for them, and he described them as being like sheep without a shepherd.¹⁸³ The *ochlos* is the *minjung*. Jesus did not operate within the framework of the drama of obedience and fulfillment of God’s will according to Ahn. It was the will of the *ochlos* to be healed that drew out Jesus’ potential power to heal. Jesus’ posture of standing with the *minjung*, facing God from their side, defines his Christhood. Thus, for Ahn, this makes Jesus *minjung*, noting also that the Jesus in the Gospels is a “collective being,” for “where there is Jesus, there is the *minjung*; and where there is the *minjung*, there is Jesus.”¹⁸⁴

Another Korean *minjung* theologian, Kim Yong-Bock, sees Jesus in a different way. Like most of the first-generation *minjung* theologians, Kim Yong-Bock, a Protestant, was also involved with the *minjung* struggles against the military dictatorship in Korea. He preferred to identify Jesus as the Messiah of the *minjung*. This implies that Jesus is different from but identifies with the *minjung*. Kim continues to be in solidarity with the *minjung* of this world who struggle against neoliberal globalization.¹⁸⁵

Protestant theologian Suh David Kwang-sun, born in North Korea, moved to South Korea at a tender age. He shared the *minjung* experience of being harassed during the military dictatorship. As a *minjung* theologian he followed Ahn to a certain point. However, he goes beyond Ahn and asserts that the stories of the *minjung* and Jesus

are identical only on the metaphorical level.¹⁸⁶ The *minjung* suffered, just as Jesus suffered, but they are not the same. This view is different from the dalit view that the dalit Jesus literally went through dalit experiences. Suh places more importance on the spirituality Jesus learned through his theological education in the desert. Suh asserts that Jesus' spirituality of love and grace, voluntary poverty, and liberation politics culminated in the cross. To Suh, the cross is the point where spirituality and politics converge.¹⁸⁷

Although *minjung* theologians explicate their Christologies with particular nuances, they agree that the suffering of Jesus is the core of Christology, for it unveils the immorality and sin of the powerful against the *minjung*. Ahn Byung Mu and Suh Kwang-sun understood that women are among the *ochlos*. They have seen the role of patriarchy in the suffering of women as the "minjung among the minjung."¹⁸⁸ Currently the director of the Asian Christian Higher Education Institute of the United Board for Higher Christian Education in Asia, Suh consciously connects the issues of women in the discussion on education in the pluralistic world of Asia. Yet, the task of articulating Christology from *minjung* women's perspective remains the job of women. In totality, *minjung* theologians converge at the point where they see Jesus from the historical perspective and recognize him as a secular person, liberator, and friend of the *minjung*, who "provides the key to understanding Jesus as the living Christ of the present."¹⁸⁹

Christology of Struggle

In the Philippines, theologians sensitive to context emerged with a theology of struggle that addresses the plight of the people. While liberation is the ultimate vision, the theology of struggle focuses on the lifestyle of constant struggle as the goal and main facet of Christian spirituality. The theology of struggle gives importance to the historicity of Jesus. It confronts the question of where to find Jesus and how to follow Jesus. The historicity of Jesus is significant because it is only in Jesus' humanity that we understand the Christ as liberator. The human Jesus went through a life of struggle.

Filipino Roman Catholic theologian and artist Karl Gaspar lived and worked with poor communities and had been a political detainee himself. He lifted up the reflections of a Filipino nun, Sr. Asuncion Martinez, on the image of Jesus that the theology of struggle resonates with and seeks to follow. It takes the Christ who is engaged in the

struggle. The theology of struggle does not take the image of the cute Santo Niño, or the “sweet face of the Sacred Heart,” or the “resigned Nazareno.” It is Jesus the Christ who was poor, who struggled to cleanse the Temple, who was crucified for political charges, and who was a “failure in life but a victor in death.”¹⁹⁰ Gaspar notes the inability of the Christology of struggle to make a connection with Filipino indigenous spiritualities and cosmic religiosities. He acknowledges that it may still be the task of the theology of struggle to bring genuine inculturation to the Philippines, considering that it is the most colonized and most Christianized country in Asia. Without this genuine recognition of the religious plurality and without a profound effort to engage with these religions at its core, the Christology of struggle will be inadequate.¹⁹¹

Considering himself a student of the Bible, Carlos H. Abesamis, a Jesuit priest, considers Third-Worldness and Asianness to be inseparable in doing theology. Though he trained in Europe with the renowned Karl Rahner, his immersion in communities of struggling people in the context of poverty and injustice challenged Abesamis to see Jesus “by and through the eyes of . . . the awakened, struggling and selfless poor, who want to create a just, humane and sustainable world.”¹⁹² He calls this the third look at Jesus. To Abesamis, Jesus stood on the same ground where the poor people stand, and Jesus is truly the bearer of the good news to the poor. Jesus continues to beckon people to alternative lifestyles of acting out the good news he proclaimed.¹⁹³ Jesus was the “first activist in the Christian history,”¹⁹⁴ one who accompanied struggling women, men, and children on their journey and engaged in conversation with them at different stations and locations. This challenges an advocate of a Christology of struggle to take seriously the praxis of immersion in the suffering and struggles of the people. Concurring with Abesamis, Julio X. Labayen, activist Catholic bishop of Infanta, lifts up the exploited but struggling peasants, workers, fisherfolks, tribals, and squatters as the reflection of the “new face of Jesus.”¹⁹⁵

A pastor of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), Luna Dingayan articulates a Christology of struggle that sees the resurrection event in the rising of the suffering people. To Dingayan, “the extraordinary Christ was found in the ordinary Jesus.” Jesus the Christ is present in the struggle of the people, and is continually struggling to make each person a new being.¹⁹⁶ In agreement with Dingayan, Levi V. Oracion, also of the UCCP, reiterates the Matthean

affirmation that Jesus is God with us.¹⁹⁷ Feliciano Cariño, who at separate times served as general secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines and of the Christian Conference of Asia, notes that a person can only follow Jesus by being with the struggling people.¹⁹⁸

It must be pointed out, however, that the Christology of struggle hardly addressed the struggles of women against patriarchy. Patriarchy and sexism are still deeply ingrained in the colonized Filipino consciousness, even among politically progressive theologians. Abesamis, Dingayan, and Oracion are among the few Filipino males who have attempted to say something about the problems affecting women and children. However, they have not gone deeply into the analysis of gender issues and patriarchy.

CHRISTOLOGY AND ASIAN RELIGIONS: TOWARD AN EYE-TO-EYE ENCOUNTER

Early Attempts at Cross-Textual Approaches to Religious Plurality

One approach to religious plurality is to do a comparative study of religious traditions. Raymond (Raimundo) Panikkar, a product of an interreligious, intercultural, and interracial marriage, his father being a Hindu Indian and his mother a Catholic Spaniard, did this but also went beyond. Delving into his works is like going into the thick forest of technical terms—Buddhist, Thomistic, secular, and particularly Hindu. His efforts in comparing the religious traditions may be considered an early attempt to a cross-textual approach to religious plurality. He coined the term *cosmotheandric*, which comes from three Greek words that mean “cosmos,” “divine,” and “human,” all put together in one entity. Panikkar uses this term to construct a Christology that seeks to make a connection between Indian religions and Christian faith. Panikkar’s starting point is the realm of philosophy, which he thinks is a common ground for a conversation between Hinduism and Christianity. Taking the Thomistic method¹⁹⁹ and following Paul’s approach in Acts 17:22–31, this Roman Catholic priest draws our attention to the “unknown Christ of Hinduism.” Some critics assert that Panikkar’s reinterpretation of *Isvara* to fit him into the traditional understanding of Christ is conflated and forced.²⁰⁰ *Isvara* is the Sanskrit word for “Lord” or “powerful one,” who is “desired by all those

who seek to escape from suffering.”²⁰¹ Panikkar, however, need not make Isvara a Christian because, to him, Isvara is already the Christ embedded in the heart of Hinduism. Christ, though an unknown reality in Hinduism, is actually present in its heart as the principle of life that gives light to every soul in this world.²⁰²

The phrase “cosmotheandric Christ” immediately suggests that Panikkar sees in Christ the union of the cosmos, the divine, and the human. Christ, the central symbol of life and truth in the Christian faith, is the one—not the same—Mystery that draws all other human beings.²⁰³ Panikkar sees a correspondence between the place of Isvara (Lord God), the revelation of the Brahman in the Vedanta, and the place of Christ in Christian thought. The Vedanta, for example, sees Isvara as “the first issue of the unfathomable womb of Brahman,”²⁰⁴ just as the New Testament sees Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation” (Col 1:15). This correspondence makes it possible for Christianity and Hinduism to provide loci for Isvara and Christ respectively.²⁰⁵ Panikkar’s Christology is grounded in his understanding of the trinitarian unity of the cosmotheandric and the Isvaric principles that articulate a cosmic, divine, and human manifestation. Thus, in both traditions, it is not difficult to see Christ as the living symbol for the totality of reality. Christ, as the totality of reality is—not has—many names, and each name is simply a new dimension and revelation of the reality of the undivided Mystery. From this vantage point one can appreciate that Christ the Logos is not just the meeting point for Hinduism and Christianity.²⁰⁶ Rather, Christ is the theandric point of convergence for all realms; the meeting place of humanity and the Absolute Mystery, the embodiment of divine Grace that leads humanity to God. Panikkar holds that when Christians meet and accept Hinduism as it is, they find Christ already there.²⁰⁷ Every being who meets this Mystery has the capacity of christophany—the revelation of the Christ-principle.²⁰⁸ No one has the monopoly on either Christ or Jesus of Nazareth, and because “whatever God does *ad extra* happens through Christ,”²⁰⁹ there is no reason why people cannot attain unity in Christ.

Panikkar suggests pluralism as a way of relating with Asian religions. In pluralism one accepts differences and celebrates commonalities; one does not aim for uniformity or dualism. In pluralism one accepts the reality that there is no way that humanity will ever know everything but holds onto that cosmic trust that gives space for creative tension and peaceful coexistence among human beings, religions,

and cosmologies. Moreover, pluralism welcomes the Logos and appreciates myths, which “makes thinking and belief possible.”²¹⁰ In spite of this view, Panikkar still seems captive to Karl Rahner’s concept of the anonymous Christian in relation to Hinduism. He does not see any need to rethink the classical Christology that hinges on the concepts of obedience and disobedience. While Panikkar speaks of the importance of experience and of the call to be a new way of being in this world, his disinterest in the historical Jesus gives rise to weaknesses. Like the Indian inculturationists, Panikkar has not paid attention to the social realities of Asia, its impact on the life of people, and the crucial intersecting issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and race.

The Relevance of the Cosmic Christ in Asia

In Asia, an eye-to-eye encounter means the meeting of two entities who acknowledge each other to be on the same level. It is a meeting of equals. This is a vision of some theologians. One who recognizes and appreciates the beauty of religious plurality does not seek to absorb the other into one’s religion. Rather, such recognition and appreciation bring openness to understanding the other better, to being enriched, and for one’s own faith to be strengthened. Many Christians who believe they have the monopoly on God’s love and revelation find this eye-to-eye encounter difficult. However, some appreciate the necessity of interreligious conversations, especially when issues and problems that affect the well being of the Asian people—regardless of race, religion, and culture—are at stake. Thus, some Asian theologians have moved beyond the discourse of inculturation and contextualization to gain deeper insight into the challenges the Christian faith has to face in the midst of a pluralistic world.

In this vein Catholic priest Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka has shaped his Christology, which is reflective of his interest in interreligious dialogue. His involvement with social justice issues and his openness to religions of Asia led Balasuriya to assert that Asian Christology should open more space for dialogue with other living faiths.²¹¹ He weaves the social, cultural, and religious concerns in doing theology. Trained in economics, he brings into his theology the issues of the suffering of peoples and the degradation of the earth perpetrated by the oppressive structures that the powerful few have created. Thus, Balasuriya proposes a cosmic Christology that could be the basis for a planetary theology.²¹² He sees Jesus as the cosmic Christ, one who manifests the

universal and the christic in the reality of people's suffering worldwide and of the destruction of the earth. Jesus of Nazareth exemplified the supreme example of commitment to human liberation. Balasuriya criticizes traditional Christologies that have contributed to the formation of guiltless greed and arrogance among white "Christian" cultures in Europe and America. He cites the notion of Christ the victor as an example of a Christology that became useful in justifying imperialist conquest and plunder of the earth.

Moreover, Balasuriya's cosmic Christ is a critique of Christologies that hinge upon the notion that Jesus' death is a corrective to the sin of disobedience of Adam and Eve. This Christology justified the Christian colonizers' refusal to see the connection between the historical context of Jesus' death and the suffering inflicted on the colonized peoples by the colonizers.²¹³ In this sense, religion is indeed an opiate that numbs the consciences of those who enjoy first-world convenience at the expense of the peoples they exploit. Balasuriya suggests that rethinking the assumptions of the myths of paradise lost and of the fall of humanity will liberate Jesus from being an "ontological savior of humanity from irremediable enmity with God."²¹⁴ It will also liberate God from the image of an offended God sulking about the fall of humanity. Christians must face the connection between the life and death of Jesus and his commitment to human liberation toward an abundant life. Yet, though Jesus is the Christ, Balasuriya asserts that Christ is wider than Jesus of Nazareth. The revelation of Jesus as the cosmic Christ gives us deeper insight and understanding into the ongoing growth, or evolution, of the whole universe and of human history. Christ is the principle of universal human solidarity.²¹⁵ Revelation is a continuing process, and one can discern it in the christic dimension of all realities. Balasuriya envisions that the liberation of Jesus, Christology, and humanity from narrow concepts and myths of paradise lost and original sin will make theology humble and "Jesus-like."

Balasuriya acknowledges that humanity originated from God, but that origin does not make humanity perfect. Its tendency to do evil results in an "accumulation of historical and structural sin."²¹⁶ Balasuriya seems to follow the tragic heuristic in his understanding of humanity. This view challenges humanity to be self-critical of its statements and actions and to be more accountable for its complicity in bringing out the face of evil that it sees and experiences. In this light

Christians need to focus on the best of Jesus' life and teachings that manifest the Divine and the salvific practice of loving God and loving others as one's self.

In line with Balasuriya, Protestant theologian Stanley J. Samartha also viewed Jesus as the cosmic Christ. Samartha belonged to the Church of South India and was the first director of the Dialogue Program of the World Council of Churches. The overarching issue that Samartha tries to address is the necessity for interreligious dialogue both in India and in Asia as a whole. He aims to arrive at a theocentric Christology by advancing the understanding that God reveals the Godself through Jesus the Christ to people in many ways unknown to human beings. Christ incognito is already present in significant areas of the Asian (Hindu) life and thought. This unbound Christ is the cosmic Christ, whose presence and teachings are neither a possession nor a monopoly of the Christian church.²¹⁷

Balasuriya and Samartha insist that there is no need to waste energy in dissecting the nature of Jesus the Christ. No one can ever claim to know how a coexistence of the human and divine nature happens in one person, and no intellectual formula can exhaust the fullness of God's mystery in Christ. We must, therefore "respect the realm of Mystery that is beyond human understanding."²¹⁸

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTOLOGY IN ASIA

Christology is the heart of the Christianity. A Christology that does not speak to Asian peoples' lives makes Christianity meaningless and irrelevant. Thus, it is vital to the Christian faith and practice. The christological trends discussed above are inadequate because they have their own limitations. The inculturated Christ, whether the unknown Christ or the acknowledged Christ of religions, remained Gnostic and metaphysical—oblivious of the social realities that an ordinary Asian person faces every day. The Christ of most contextualized Christologies stressed social realities but pushed the Asian cultures to the periphery and remained Western at heart. As we have seen above, there are definitely some exceptions. Considering the limitations of Christologies constructed by Asian male theologians, I will describe the kind of Christology that may truly be called Asian.

Christology from People's Gut-Level Experiences

First, if Christology is an articulation of one's response or reaction to an encounter with God through Jesus the Christ, then it has to start from the experiences of the Asian people, the majority of whom are poor and non-Christian. The Christologies of the missionaries, as well as those of inculturation and indigenization, ignored the Asian peoples' struggles for fullness of life. They were so full of words that people could hardly hear the voice of or see the face of Christ. Samartha's alternative, "bullock-cart Christology," may move slowly, but its wheels turn on Asian soil and it speaks to the daily life of the majority of the Asian people.²¹⁹ The imagery of the bullock-cart graphically suggests the situation of the many Asians who continue to suffer exploitation and poverty.

Aloysius Pieris considers the Christologies of indigenization and contextualization inadequate because the former seemed to trick Asians to accept Christianity²²⁰ and the latter did not take Asian culture seriously.²²¹ What matters to him is not so much the Asianness of Christ but the "Christness of those categories of Asians who alone can reveal his Asian features."²²² Thus, he appreciates Christologies that envision the Christ of Asia as dalit, the *han*-ridden Christ, the breast-feeding *Christa*, and the third-world Christ of Asia who dwells among the humble of the earth as they strive for human liberation.²²³ To Pieris Jesus "remains the absolute norm in Christology" because Jesus "corrects our preconceptions about what it means to be divine and what it means to be human."²²⁴ He asserts that Jesus became the Messiah only at the moment he humbled himself to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.²²⁵ An Asian Christology follows what Pieris calls the "two-fold ascesis" or the liberative practice of Jesus, namely, his struggle to be poor and his denunciation of Mammon in the struggle for the poor. This constitutes the meaning of the cross and salvation for Asian people.²²⁶

In light of Asia's religious multiplicity, Pieris calls for a Christology that recognizes the liberative core of religions and engages in a core-to-core dialogue with the non-Christian Christ, thus stretching Christology's boundaries of orthodoxy.²²⁷ Pieris believes that this double ascesis is a point around which Christology could develop without competing with other religions. In fact, on this basis Buddhism and other Asian religions can forge a symbiotic relationship in their journey. Both can walk the path of practicing voluntary poverty and

agapeic engagement in resisting imposed poverty. The fact that pockets of basic human communities in Asia have practiced this twofold asceticism shows that this option is possible.²²⁸ The symbiotic relationship of religions wherein religions challenge each other is a unique approach to the liberationist aspirations of the poor, without negating their cosmic religiosity.²²⁹

Reimagining a Liberated and Liberating Christ

Second, Christology in Asia will have to rethink some themes that hinder, rather than foster, dialogue and block a liberationist direction. The theme of the uniqueness of Christ, for example, will definitely not work as a starting point for a dialogue among religions. As discussed earlier, dialogue among religions will fare better with the soteriological dimension as the point of convergence. Such dialogue is anchored on faith in the human effort to “arrive at liberation” and on the humility of people to acknowledge that final liberation or salvation, the “absolute future,” is beyond human endeavor.²³⁰ This point of convergence will perhaps help reduce fears of syncretism,²³¹ heresy, or unorthodoxy that traditional Western Christianity impose to stifle fresh christological expressions. Furthermore, in christological articulation Christians must view the uniqueness of the title Christ not in terms of Jesus as the “exclusive medium of salvation for all” but in light of the absoluteness that the word *Christ* conveys. The Christ may even take a non-Christian character, because we need to remember that “Jesus is Christ, but not all of Christ is Jesus” (*Jesus est totus Christus, non totum Christi*).²³²

Pieris reminds us that the term *Christ* is only a category invented by believers who made use of culture-bound concepts in their effort to “capture the ineffable mystery of salvation” that the person, life, and teachings of Jesus communicate.²³³ It is only in the continuing embodiment and praxis of liberating efforts by the followers of Jesus that Jesus’ Christhood is experienced. Thus, an Asian Christology cannot proceed meaningfully if it takes the humanity of Jesus lightly. Only a historical Jesus, an embodied Christ, can show the love and compassion that can liberate the oppressed and suffering peoples of the world. Samartha notes that this step will lead to a Christology that is “spiritually satisfying, theologically credible, and ethically helpful to people in the religiously plural world.”²³⁴ This christological criterion finds its basis in the kingdom of God as the focus of Jesus’ life and teachings.

The Gospels are clear about Jesus' preferential option for the poor and the marginalized, and they challenge the privileged to walk the christic path with Jesus.

Christology also needs to rethink the theme of revelation in relation to the humanity of Jesus. All contextualized, liberation Christologies give importance to the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, some of them still tend to share the claim that God's revelation happened in Jesus the Christ once and for all. Samartha argues that this understanding is a "stumbling block" in Asia²³⁵ and that it compromises the basis of monotheistic faith. Theistic faiths use the word *God* to designate Ultimate Truth, Ultimate Reality, or the Transcendent. God was indeed present in Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus was not "ontologically the same as God."²³⁶ In other words, this once-and-for-all idea stifles the christic presence of the Divine in created reality. Revelation is a never-ending story. God does not stop speaking after the historical Jesus-event. Nor can we confine God's revelation solely to scriptures and the Christian tradition. Balasuriya rightly points out that we need to discern the christic revealed in history, nature, religions, ideologies, movements, and even ourselves.²³⁷

Many Christologies, including Samartha's, bask in the notion that Jesus' death on the cross was an act of obedience to God's salvific will, that it was Jesus' "voluntary" and "vicarious" "historical decision to take upon himself the sin of others."²³⁸ However, this whole concept needs rethinking and redefinition. The discourse of obedience is problematic when connected to oppressed peoples' experience of abuse of power. It is all the more problematic in relation to women's and children's experiences of sexual abuse and harassment in society and in church. For it to be truly liberating, it is not enough for Christology to go through the double baptism in the "Jordan of Asian religiosity and in the Calvary of Asian poverty."²³⁹ It is not enough for theologians to examine class, caste, ethnicity, and race in our christological formulations. Christology must give equal importance to the analysis of gender, sexism, and patriarchy. The majority of Asian male theologians is silent on issues unique to women, and the theologians who do speak about them do so only marginally, never in any depth. This is at least partly due to the fact that no man can truly speak for women in Asia. Asian women must speak for themselves and thus articulate their own Christologies.

At Home in Asia: Which Christ? Which Jesus?

Which Jesus, which Christ, then, will find a home in Asia? Is it the unknown Christ of Asian religions? Is it the acknowledged Christ of Hindu renaissance? Is it the incognito, the unbound, the cosmic Christ? Is it the Jesus of biblical history? Christologies are human attempts to make sense of Jesus the Christ in the midst of life's realities. They are never absolute. I can only attempt an answer from the insights gleaned from Asian realities. I am convinced, though, that it is not the Christ who claims to be unique, who claims to be God's revelation once and for all. I contend that the Christ revealed in the praxis of the followers of the Gospels' Jesus is most likely to find a seat in many Asian homes and hearts. This is the Christ found in the liberative efforts and redemptive communities of the suffering peoples—the *minjung*, the dalits, and other Asian peoples who are struggling for justice, freedom, and full humanity. One needs to remember, though, that the Jesus who was "God's defense pact with the non-persons of the earth"²⁴⁰ in biblical history was not a Christian. Yet, the christic praxis of this non-Christian Jesus continues to be God's story mediated in the lives of the Asian poor, who are mostly non-Christian. It may be possible, therefore, that the one who will stay and feel at home in the vast continent of Asia is the non-Christian Christ.

In their search for a Christianity that makes sense in their contexts, Asian theologians began to take a look at Jesus the Christ through Asian eyes. Asian women theologians affirmed much of what the Asian men said in their efforts to indigenize and contextualize Jesus. Yet, Asian women found the Christologies of their male colleagues inadequate. These Christologies did not address the multiplicity of women's oppression and suffering. Very few Asian male theologians addressed gender issues or wrote extensively about them. Exceptions are Aloysius Pieris, Tissa Balasuriya, C. S. Song, Stanley J. Samartha, Suh David Kwang-sun, Sebastian Kappen, and Michael Amaladoss.²⁴¹ Some acknowledged their inadequacy to address gender issues.²⁴² Most of the Asian male theologians, however, chose to ignore the realities of patriarchy, sexism, and androcentrism embedded in Christianity as well as in Asian cultures and religions. Their androcentric concepts and sexist language have, in a negative way, alerted women to the role of language in the formation of concepts and

in the perpetuation of a patriarchal world view. This awareness has led to the emergence of women's voices in the Asian theological world.

The Emergence of Asian Women's Voices

Asian women have heard the voices of women from other continents. They have listened to the white feminist debates over the maleness of Jesus. "Can a male Christ save women?"²⁴³ Was Jesus a feminist? If he was, does he not simply gloss over patriarchy that seeks to impose the oppressive and traditional interpretation of *imitatio Christi*?²⁴⁴ Does a surrogate Jesus have salvific power for black women who bear the suffering brought about by surrogacy and exploitation? Asian women heard the voices of the women among other minority groups in the United States, the Latinas in South America, and African women in protest over the totalizing claims of the male theologians. What is salvific about sacrificial obedience and of Jesus' death on the cross?²⁴⁵ These concepts have been used by those who have power to control and abuse women, children, and other vulnerable peoples. The history of patriarchal Christianity has been littered with crucifixions of the "sacrificial lambs," those who challenged the prevailing doctrinal orthodoxy. On the one hand, Asian women resonate with these women as they point out the inadequacy of Christologies that did not take into account their experiences of oppression because of their gender, class, race, ethnicity, and culture. On the other hand, Asian women also criticized their white sisters, whose claims on women's experience seemed to have a propensity to erase the identities of women of color.

Perhaps the seeds of Asian feminist theologies were sown long ago by Asia's brave but unknown Christian women. But beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, Asian women have made substantial contributions to the understanding of Christology. Women are indeed rising. We hear the voices of Dulcie Abraham from Malaysia and biblical scholar Hisako Kinukawa, along with Yoshiko Isshiki and Satoko Yamaguchi, from Japan.²⁴⁶ I am not able to describe the contributions of women from all the areas of Asia. I am going to focus only on representative theologians from India, Korea, and the Philippines, as well as theologians from Hong Kong, who address Christology from a postcolonial perspective. I believe that these women, in one way or another, stand on the path opened by Marianne Katoppo of Indonesia, whose 1979 book, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's*

Theology, signaled the emergence of Asian women's voices. Asian women's Christologies are marked by their unique contexts and experiences within the vast continent of Asia. By embracing the reality of their differences and celebrating their commonalities, Asian women have forged solidarity in their common experience of suffering. By virtue of their locations, Asian women's christological approaches are diverse. However, they recognize that there are threads that connect Asian women's common dreams and vision; their own liberation from patriarchy is intertwined with their vision of the ultimate liberation of the marginalized and oppressed, and fullness of life for all.