

New Developments in Theology in Asia

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Editorial

Theologies in Asia, Asian Theologies

Theology in Asia is constantly on the move, engaging local cultural developments, resisting Western and colonial domination, and exploring new ways of imagining and expressing the teachings of the Gospel. Though, or because Christianity is a minority religion in most Asian countries, it has been forced, more than in most other continents, to reflect self-critically on what it has to offer and how it is to relate to other religions and to secular culture. In those respects, it has much to offer to the rest of the theological world.

While we often think of contextual theology as relevant only for a particular culture or historical context, many social, ethical and theological questions and problems similarly affect Christians throughout the world. The articles in this volume on end of life questions and on gender dynamics are current in theological ethics everywhere. And the question of how to confront the reality of populism also affects Christians worldwide. The answers to these questions by Asian theologians may at times be distinctive, exposed as they are to different cultural realities and religious influences. But that is precisely what makes Asian theology, and all contextual theology interesting and important for the rest of the Christian world to engage.

Peter Phan lays out what is distinctive about Asian theology, reminding us from the outset that Asia is more internally diverse than most continents. Some of the common challenges for Asian theology are poverty, migration, colonization, religious pluralism, minority status, atheism, and ecological degeneration, each calling for their own type of theological response. Huang Po-Ho calls attention to the fact that Asian culture is not different from or “other” or “alien” with regard to the Gospel, as if Western culture would be the natural or normal habitat for Christianity. Asian theology must thus understand the process of contextualization as one of discovering its own already innate Christian identity, and thus re-confessing Christian faith. With its centuries of experience as a minority religion, Christianity in Asia has abundant experience in reflecting on

the particularity of Christianity and what it may have to offer to local cultures and traditions. Catherine Cornille discusses various ways in which engagement with Asian religious traditions may shed new light on the distinctiveness of Christianity and thus help to shift the discussion from traditional *a priori* ideas of the uniqueness of Christianity to an *a posteriori* realization of the particularity of Christianity.

Part two of this volume focuses on concrete examples of the inculturation of Christianity in various Asian contexts. All of the contributions focus on current realities and examples, from the engagement with Daoist thought among Christian theologians in Taiwan to a subaltern Indian approach to Biblical interpretation, and from a discussion of the story theology of Choan Seng Song to an appeal to do theology in Vietnam from the lived experience of the Vietnamese people, or the need to develop a new form of liberation theology in the Philippines that confronts the challenges of populism. As the presence of Tantric Buddhism is one of the common features of Asian cultures, Thierry-Marie Courau emphasizes the urgent need for Christianity to engage this particular type of Buddhism in a constructive theological way.

Though certain ethical questions are similarly alive and pressing in different parts of the world, Asian Christianity faces these questions in a particular way as a minority religion within cultures shaped by particular social values and mores. The contributions to this volume by Selvamani and Bong are therefore all the more striking in that they express bold and prophetic positions on social and ethical issues of gender, sexual orientation, and end-of-life issues.

Together, the articles in this volume illustrate that the more grounded theology is in a local culture, the more relevant it may be for global theology. To be sure, the primary audience of Asian theology are the people of Asia, and the primary goal of Asian theology is to make Christian theology intelligible and inspiring within an Asian context. But as these articles bear out, Christianity has much to learn not only from the way in which Asian theologians engage the Asian cultures, but also from the fruits of that engagement.

*Catherine Cornille, Huang Po Ho, Stephan Van Erp, Daniel Pilario,
Tran Van Doan*

Part One: General Approaches to Asian Theology

Part Two: Inculturation of Christianity in Particular Asian Contexts

Part Three: Asian Questions and Approaches to Christian Ethics

THEOLOGICAL FORUM

Catholicity as a Principle for a Dissenting Church

WILIBALDUS GAUT

Do differences and disagreements in the Church contradict its unity, and should they therefore be avoided? This article, initially presented during the Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology (LEST) XIII Conference on “Dissenting Church” (October 2021), seeks to address this question by means of the notion of catholicity. I would argue that insofar as the Church’s catholicity is carefully concerned, differences and disagreements are not against its unity, but rather lie at the heart of its existence. The notion of catholicity envisions a certain model of the unity of the Church and in turn shapes the way of exercising the Church governance, in which differences and dissents might become commonplace. For this reason, catholicity then underpins the practice of synodality in the Church.

1. Catholicity and the Unity of the Church as Communion

The term catholicity is derived from the Greek adjective *katholikos* that means “universal”, and the adverb *kath’ holou* which means “on the whole” or “according to the whole”.¹ According to Avery Dulles, the universality that the term catholic refers to implies the idea of fullness or integral wholeness.² This concept of fullness or integral wholeness, however, does not mean a kind of totality that dismisses every individuality or particularity.

As one of the marks of the Church, according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, catholicity might convey a wide range of meanings. Yet, as Dulles points out, it first and foremost speaks of the internal diversity in the Church, which at the same time should be perceived

in view of its unity. Herein, catholicity denotes a “reconciled diversity”, i.e., a unity that maintains the diversity of its constituting elements and exists by a mutual service and receptivity, as well as a free exchange of trust and respect among them.³

Wolfgang Beinert argued that catholicity envisions a certain model of the unity of the Church, which is best explained through the concept of communion. For Beinert, communion as a model of unity in the Church represents what he calls “a multiple figure of unity”, whereby “each organ is called to fulfill its irreducible and original function within the whole.”⁴ In this model of unity, both distinction and mutual relationship are well maintained.

In sum, the dynamic nature of the communion model of unity implies that it is shaped by the complex interactions of its diverse constitutive elements. A prime reference for the concept of communion as a model of the unity of the Church is the image of the Body of Christ in Pauline writings.⁵ For instance, Paul writes: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). Each part, though in distinct ways thanks to their unique functions, equally contributes to the healthy operating of the whole body.

One can therefore go on to argue that with the vision of the active and equal participation of all the constituting elements, the catholic view of unity as communion also promotes the idea of an inclusive and egalitarian community. No one can be excluded or considered less important for every single element assumes equal significance and each distinct contribution is fully recognized. I would argue that such a vision of the Church has a bearing on the way synodal governance should be exercised, as I shall explain in the following section.

2. Synodality as a Catholic Way of Exercising the Church Governance

For the understanding of synodality, I follow the document of the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.⁶ In it, synodality is understood as “the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church.” Elsewhere in the document, such an understanding of synodality is clearly recognized as giving expression to the catholicity of the Church as communion. Synodality in the Church, it says, “reveals and gives

substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.”⁷

Such a definition of synodality can be attributed to Pope Francis who introduced the concept of “an entirely synodal Church”.⁸ Synodality, in this sense, calls for the recognition of the place of all the baptized and their role “in the prudential discernment about Church decision-making and governance”.⁹ The underlying assumption of such a conviction is that all the members of the Church share the fullness of faith, which they attain “by virtue of the dignity of baptism and their friendship with Christ”.¹⁰ Advocating the notion of a synodal Church, Pope Francis insists that the concept of the people of God should serve as signifying the key feature of the Church. In so doing, he expresses Vatican II’s vision of a participative and dialogical Church.¹¹

Putting forth the active participation of its all members, a synodal Church is against any tendency toward an excessive centralization in the Church that allows the entire process of decision-making to be rendered to a few elites.¹² While acknowledging the various roles to play based on different gifts and charisms, synodality stands for the conviction that everyone in the Church is a subject who retains the right to determine the communal life, which is put into practice through their participation in the decision-making on things that pertain to the life of all.¹³

What is particularly notable in this regard is the far-reaching consequences of this synodal way of decision-making. Indeed, to consult people means to allow them to honestly express their different views and perspectives. The synodal process, understood in this way, will turn out to be a complex one, in which dissent and disagreement are commonplace resulting from the differing standpoints and views.

3. A Synodal Church is a Dissenting Church

A synodal Church, as Massimo Faggioli says, “is no longer a Church that pretends to be in absolute agreement on everything,” but rather the one “that admits that there are disagreements on important issues”.¹⁴ Bradford Hinze shares a similar view. The recognition of the role of conflict and honest speech (*parrhesia*), Hinze argues, is one of the significant achievements of the vision of a synodal Church.¹⁵ So, synodality provides

“a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.”¹⁶

One way to understand how differences come to the fore is by taking into consideration that consultation, the medium of active participation of the faithful in the Church, should not be seen separately from the discernment of the Spirit or from reading the signs of the time. This is because the people of God to consult with, are those who are willing to actively listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying and to discern how it resonates with their life circumstances in view of giving an appropriate response to their Christian calling and mission.¹⁷

This line of argument finds its ground in the awareness that a synodal Church is a missionary Church. A synodal model for governing the Church envisions the realization of God’s mission entrusted to the Church through Christ.¹⁸ Faggioli captures this matter well as he writes that “the rediscovery of a more participative ecclesiological model,” which is the essence of a synodal Church, aims to reaffirm “a missionary ecclesiology”.¹⁹

The fundamental purpose of the practice of synodality is “to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God”, and only in so doing the Church can properly undertake its mission in today’s world.²⁰ As such, a synodal Church is always cognizant of its call to respond effectively to particular circumstances and all the challenges it poses, and such a response is made “in fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and in creative openness to the voice of the Spirit.”²¹

This implies that a synodal Church does take into consideration the concrete experience that surrounds the life and mission of the faithful. Amanda Osheim argued that synodality helps to “foster an understanding of faith incarnated in the diverse cultural and historical contexts characteristic of the Church’s catholicity.”²² Pope Francis has expressed a similar view in which he explicitly recognizes the starting point of a synodal Church. He asserts that a synodal Church begins to take shape only when it is persistently “connected to the ‘base’ and starts from people and their daily problems.”²³

To take people’s real experiences as the starting point means to acknowledge the variety of perspectives and the distinctive aspects that shape their lives as a result of differing contexts and circumstances. Osheim

regards this practice of synodality an expression of catholicity as a unity that maintains diversity. A synodal process in the Church, she remarks, is “a collaborative process inclusive of divergent voices.”²⁴ Therefore, it should also accommodate dissent and disagreement. As Robert Schreiter put it, catholicity denotes “the ability to hold things together in tension with one another,”²⁵ and hence it also envisions what Aloys Grillmeier called “a union of opposites.”²⁶

This model of catholicity strongly promotes pluriformity and upholds decentralization. In this respect, another insight of Hinze is helpful as he links synodality with the notion of polycentrism. A synodal Church, in his view, is of great importance in “promoting a ‘healthy decentralization’ in the Church and a polycentric approach to the Church’s universality.”²⁷ As a result, the decision on certain matters can vary from one context to another. To what extent these decisions can vary, and on which levels of the Church government these variations can be implemented, is a matter of debate on synodality in the period to come.

Notes

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3. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 21-25.
4. Wolfgang Beinert, ‘Catholicity as a Property of the Church’, *The Jurist* 52 (1992):470-471.
5. Beinert, ‘Catholicity as a Property of the Church’, 471.
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7. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 6.
8. Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops’ (October 17, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html [Last accessed October 10, 2017].
9. Daniel P. Horan, ‘Synodality as the Only Way to be Church’, *National Catholic Reporter*, December 27-January 9 (2020): 16.
10. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 25 & 58.
11. Ormond Rush, ‘Inverting the Pyramid: The SensusFidelium in a Synodal Church’, *Theological Studies* 78/2 (2017): 304-305.
12. Massimo Faggioli, ‘From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy’’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85/4 (2020): 354; Cf. Bradford Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’ *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85/3 (2020): 215.
13. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 65.
14. Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 65.

15. Hinze, 'Can We Find a Way Together?', 217, 227-228.
16. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 9.
17. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 55, 113 & 114; Cf. Amanda C. Osheim, 'Stepping toward a Synodal Church', *Theological Studies* 80/2 (2019): 376.
18. Faggioli, 'From Collegiality to Synodality', 5; Cf. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 75-76.
19. Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving towards Global Catholicity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020), 134.
20. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 120.
21. *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 94.
22. Osheim, 'Stepping toward a Synodal Church', 373.
23. Francis, 'Address Commemorating'.
24. Osheim, 'Stepping toward a Synodal Church', 379-380.
25. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 128.
26. Aloys Grillmeier, 'Commentary on Lumen Gentium', in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), vol. I, 167.

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Vision & Mission

What *Concilium* is

Concilium is a journal of Catholic and Ecumenical theological reflection. Founded in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, it seeks to reinterpret and re-apply its vision of openness to new cultural contexts, and to changing social and religious realities. Led by the Spirit, the journal embraces multiple expressions of faith and spirituality arising from cultural plurality as a mark of its catholicity.

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