
BEYOND CHRIST AND CULTURE

Hitoshi (Paul) Fukue

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Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-19

The purpose of an induction address, I presume, is to describe what I, as a teacher of APNTS, intend to do in my theological responsibility. In order to do so, first I feel I must trace what kind of theological journey I have tread in my personal history. Only in doing so do I feel it will become clearer what I intend to do theologically here at APNTS.

Theological Journey

I was converted to the Christian faith while I was studying at Northwest Nazarene University in Idaho, United States. Since my conversion I concentrated on theological studies for five years, two years at NNU and three years at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, United States. My faith was deeply rooted in Wesleyan understanding of Christian faith during those five years in the United States. I am grateful for many teachers who had not only high academic quality but also genuine Christlike personality. It is during those years when I learned academia and spirituality must go hand in hand.

After completing my Master of Divinity degree, I came back to Japan to begin my Christian ministry. By the way, I was already married in the United States, so my wife and I returned to Japan together. Through a strange providence of God we began to pioneer a church in my home town, Kochi City in Shikoku Island. During the early stages of our pioneer work, I came across a Japanese minister by the name of Rev. Yasuro Enomoto, who started a Christian movement called *Asbram*. Under his influence I learned to read the Bible with greater

intensity and meditation. Rev. Enomoto was deeply influenced by the ministry of E. Stanley Jones who introduced the Ashram movement into Japan.

After seven years of pioneer work, my wife and I were able to see a new sanctuary and a congregation of born again Christians, including many of our relatives. However, I felt I faced a great cultural wall which seemed to refuse Christianity. It was during those early years of ministry that I began to explore the relationship between Christian faith and Japanese culture and society. And I felt a need to further study the relationship between so-called Christ and Culture. I was led to Boston University School of Theology to explore my inquiries on the issue. There at BU two theological areas of study, namely, Sociology of Religion and Christian Social Ethics captured my attention among other things.

Sociology of Religion has helped me to understand the social dynamics of religious phenomena. My special interest has been to explore the relationship between Christian faith and social change. My concept of ministry was broadened by the studies of Sociology of Religion as well as Christian Social Ethics and different Christian ethicists. In my dissertation I attempted to explore Japanese worldviews in terms of historical, religious, cultural, and social changes. These studies broadened my academic interests and helped me to explore the works of both western and Asian theologians who grappled with the problem of Christ and Culture. These studies also helped me to broaden my concept of ministry after we returned to Japan to continue to pastor the same church we had pioneered.

Daisetsu Suzuki, a renowned Zen master of Japan, once told a parable. The parable goes something like this. Once there was a painter. He began to paint on a white sheet of paper. In the early years of his career as a painter he drew only simple pictures. He felt the blank space on his paper was very important, so he drew only a few lines and used minimum colors. But as the years went by he began to experiment with all kinds of paintings, and his paintings became more and more elaborate with complicated drawings and multiple colors until very little blank space was left in his drawing paper. Then as he grew older, after

passing through all kinds of artificial experiments, his paintings began to be simple again. So much so in his last years, that his paintings had only a few lines and a few simple colors again just as in his younger age. Then the Zen master, Daisetsu, asks the question. Are his early paintings with a few lines and simple colors same as those of his last years? Both are simple pictures with abundant blank space, but are they the same? Naturally the Zen master is attempting to draw a strong negative answer, no! They are not the same! The artist started out his career with simple paintings and ended his career with simple paintings also, but there is an ocean- wide difference between the two. So the Zen master seems to teach.

If I am allowed to apply this parable to my theological journey, I can say that I started out the journey with a simple faith in the love of God in Christ Jesus. Then as the years went by, I explored all kinds of theological perspectives and painted my journey with diverse theological colors. But then as I grew older (not old but simply older), I have become more convinced that the most crucial matter in Christian faith is the simple faith in the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is the same simple faith in the love of God as I started my theological journey many years ago. But is it really the same? No! My faith has been broadened in scope, widened in perspective, deepened in understanding, and heightened in force. Through the meanderings of diverse theological paths and no doubt through the many struggles of actual ministries, my simple faith in Christ has been tried and tested and reinforced. But the difference with the parable of Daisetsu is that I intend to continue to paint my theological journey with diverse colors and multiple lines. I intend to continue to deepen my understanding of Holiness Theology, Systematic Theology, Christian Ethics, Asian context of Christian faith and ministry, as well as Sociology of Religion, Homiletics along with some fresh areas of theology. In other words, I wish to deepen my understanding of God in Christ, the Scriptures, society, culture, mind and heart. And all of this I intend to do with the Pauline conviction that the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

Christ and Culture

Now I would like to focus particularly on the issue of “Christ and Culture.” I have mentioned that during my early pastoral ministry, I came across the problem of “Christ and Culture” by encountering an invisible cultural wall which seemed to resist Christian faith. It emerged out of my actual pastoral experiences. During those years I came across the works of two Japanese intellectuals: Shusaku Endo and Yoji Inoue. These two Christians, Endo being a novelist, Inoue a theologian, also struggled with the problem of Christ and Culture and attempted to solve this in their writings. In the case of Endo, he was baptized into Christian faith at a young age by influence of his mother. He confessed that he felt as if he put on western clothes which did not quite fit him. Christian faith, as presented to him, seemed a very foreign worldview and did not quite ring his heart chords. He searched for Christian faith in Kimono. Yoji Inoue also struggled with the foreignness of Christian faith and wished to find a faith which touched the heart of Japanese sentiment. He struggled to resolve the problem of the tension between Christian faith and Japanese religious, cultural and intellectual heritage.

These two intellectuals produced many inspiring literary and theological works: *Silence*¹ by Endo and *The Face of Jesus in Japan*² by Inoue, among other works. They made explicit what I was struggling with subconsciously as a pastor in the dominant non-Christian culture and society. I felt empathic with their attempts to bring Christ to the core of Japanese minds and hearts. Then I came across a book called *Islam Observed*³ by Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist. This book has left an indelible impression on my mind and a clue to solve the problem of “Christ and Culture.” In this book Geertz attempts to analyze the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting cultures, the Indonesian and the Moroccan. His

¹Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1966).

²Yoji Inoue, *The Face of Jesus in Japan* (Tokyo: Kindai Bungeisha, 1994).

³Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

concern is to discern the interrelations of particular kinds of culture with particular kinds of faith. And as a result of field research which extended to several years in both countries, he describes the traits of Islam in each country. Traits of Islam in Morocco, as he observed, were “uncompromising rigorism, aggressive fundamentalism, seamless orthodoxy, moral perfectionism, and completely uniform creed.” On the other hand, the traits of Islam in Indonesia, as he observed, were “adaptive, absorbent, pragmatic, gradualistic, a matter of partial compromises, outright evasions, and it pretended to comprehensiveness, not to an intensity but to a largeness of spirit.”

Geertz points out the fact that what is believed to be true has not changed for these two peoples, or not changed very much. What has changed is the way in which it is believed. He believes that the reason why Moroccan Islam became activist, rigorous, dogmatic, and why Indonesian Islam became syncretistic, reflective, and multifarious, lie in the sort of collective life within which and along which they evolved. This cultural anthropological analysis of Geertz helped me to understand the difference between *what* is believed and *how* it is believed. And it seemed to imply that there is a relative freedom in *how* we believe. I began to feel more free in giving expressions to Christian faith in terms of my own cultural heritage and sensitivity. And I believe Christian faith has been brought closer and made more intimate to the core of our personality. It goes without saying that we need to be careful not to fall into religious syncretism.

In addition to the analysis of Clifford Geertz on the interrelation between religious faith and culture/society, such work as *Christ and Culture*⁴ by Richard Niebuhr also helped me to resolve the problem of Christian faith and cultural/social context. Through *Christ and Culture*, I could perceive that Christians everywhere have attempted to resolve the problem of culture since the beginning of the Christian Church for two millenniums, that the answers to the problem are not singlefaced but multifarious, and that there is no single absolutely right expression

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951).

of faith which applies anywhere anytime. With the help of these analyses, I began to feel less guilty in searching for expressions that are more genuine and authentic to our cultural sensitivity. I believe, as a matter of fact, that this is what we need to do in each of our own cultural and social contexts.

Back To the Roots

I am made aware that there are not a few Asian Christians who assert that theology as developed in the western countries during these two thousand years is too rationalistic and abstract for Asian minds which are more relational and concrete. They claim that western theology (if there is such a thing) is too philosophical, too analytical and too conceptual. I believe these claims are overgeneralizations of western theology. But I also think that there is some truth in their claims. There may be some fundamental differences in cognition, namely how a person perceives a truth.

Once a group of Japanese Zen Buddhist monks stayed at a European Catholic monastery on the occasion of spiritual exchange. Japanese monks found amazingly that there was much commonality between them and the European Catholic monks in their daily religious disciplines, their daily labors, and life style as a whole. But they discovered one fundamental and perhaps a decisive difference between them and the European monks. It was a fact that in the European monastery there was a library with a large collection of religious books which were intended to assist them with their spiritual and intellectual life. On the contrary, in the Zen monastery in Japan, there was no library and no books at all. In fact the Zen monks try to rid any books or any human knowledge from their mind. They attempt to search for supernatural enlightenment only through wisdom beyond human knowledge. They do so through meditation under the guidance of a Zen master. This may be an extreme illustration but there may be stronger inclinations for rational knowledge in the western people than those of Asia, and there may be stronger inclination for intuitive knowledge for people of Asia than those of the West.

The need for Christian faith through Asian perceptions has been voiced more strongly than anyone else by C. S. Song, a well known Asian theologian.

He says that “a journey from Israel to Asia needs to be undertaken all over again.”⁵ He emphasizes the need for theology in Asian sensitivity by saying parabolically,

the airplane ticket purchased for us to reach Asia from the biblical land was a nonnegotiable discount ticket... It had many intermediary stopovers. The most frustrating part of it was that the itinerary could not be altered. Everything had been decided in advance at a travel agency in the West. It is true that ... there was much to see and learn on the way. . . . We also found ourselves in the company of very learned persons who seemed to know Aristotle and Kant, and also the Christian Bible, inside out. On the whole, it was a rewarding journey. But it took too long and there were too many interruptions.⁶

Then he asserts that “it suddenly occurred to us that there must be a more direct flight from Israel to Asia, a flight which would have fewer stopovers and would allow changes of itinerary when occasions demand.”⁷ C. S. Song’s thesis is a strong criticism of western theology and assertions of Christian faith in a radically different manner of expression from that of western Christianity. One positive aspect of his thesis is that he encourages Asian Christians to listen to the Bible directly with our minds and hearts in our cultural context. God speaks to each one of us directly through the Scripture by the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit. The “direct flight from Israel to Asia” in C. S. Song’s words means, I presume, that we can and need to listen to and discover the meaning of the Word of God directly without having to rid ourselves of our cultural and intellectual and religious legacies of Asia.

⁵C. S. Song, *The Compassionate God* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 7.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

Listening to the Word of God directly and sensitively is the primary and first task for any Christian. But I do not and cannot go so far as to say that we can discard the two thousand years of Christian understanding and theology developed in the western countries. I cannot agree with C. S. Song that the direct flight from Israel to Asia is sufficient. We still owe greatly to the theological legacies of the western churches. The long complicated Christian history of the West represents Christian faith in all possible perspectives of human experiences. It is no doubt that the history of the western church reveals human weakness in the forms of religious wars and colonialism and sometimes oppressions and exploitations in the name of God. But at the same time Christians of the West have been salt of the earth and light of the world. Through their witness and their spiritual life and missional passion the majority of Asians came to know Christ. Through ministers like John Wesley and his followers we came to know the fuller and deeper meaning of Christian faith. We owe immensely to these western Christians and theologians for our salvation and hope in Christ. Because of these reasons I would have to put some reservations upon some parts of the thesis of C. S. Song.

I would much rather like to take an interpenetrating approach in the matter of Christ and Culture. In the interpenetrating approach Asian Christians will continue to learn greatly from the western understanding and history of Christian faith but at the same time attempt to explore Asian expression of faith with keen sensitivity to Asian culture and history. In this approach western Christians and theologians will also learn from Asian expressions of faith and perhaps find fresh perspectives in their understanding of faith. Asians and western Christians will interpenetrate each other with their own unique understanding of faith and greatly contribute to each other. In this approach, as much as Asians learn from western theologies, the latter will also benefit from the studies of emerging theologies of Asia. By this interpenetrating approach we would be able to edify each other and appreciate the width, length, depth and height of the love of God in Christ Jesus. The median way of John Wesley's approach seems to be practical here again in this crucial matter of Christ and Culture. It is not an either/or but a

both/and approach. And in taking this approach we would perhaps become more authentic Christians for the twenty- first century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to give an illustration which, I hope, will reinforce my contention. The illustration is taken from a book called *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*⁸ by David J. Hesselgrave, who was once a missionary to Japan. He talks about a Japanese pastor by the name of Ryouin Kamegaya who was a converted Buddhist priest. Ryouin Kamegaya was a well known pastor in Japan and an extremely effective communicator of the gospel of Christ. Ryouin wrote a book called *From Buddhism to Christ* which is a classic now. Now Dr. Hesselgrave tells of an episode about when he was with Pastor Kamegaya during a series of evangelistic meetings in Urawa City, Japan. I quote the episode from his book.

As a small group of us walked down the street and headed out across the rice paddies one day, it became apparent that something within Pastor Kamegaya reached out in profound appreciation for the simple beauties of nature that surrounded us as the sun settled behind the soft clouds in the western sky. The cherry blossoms with their ever-so-delicate pinkness were the special objects of his fascination. Sensing this, one Japanese youth made a move to pick a small branch... Quickly the *Sensei* raised his hand, saying, "Please... let them be." His would-be benefactor stopped short and in an apologetic tone explained that he wanted just a few for the *Sensei's* room. Pastor Kamegaya smiled, thanked him, and added, "You must understand that they are the gift of my heavenly

⁸David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd Edition (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991).

Father. Since He has given me all things in Christ, they are mine. I prefer to keep my blossoms right there on the tree.⁹

In that moment Dr. Hesselgrave was quite amazed at the faith of Pastor Kamegaya and describes his surprise in the following words.

With him (Pastor Kamegaya) this was indeed his Father's world in an arrestingly practical and yet profound sense. . . . It was little wonder that he had so effectively communicated the greatness of God, the grace of Christ, and the wealth of true Christians. This was beyond the West and beyond the East. It was biblical Christianity. What made it important was that God had said it. But Kamegaya Sensei had repeated it in a way that most effectively communicated Christ to the Japanese.¹⁰

This is the goal of my approach of interpenetration. This is the kind of authentic Christians we would hope to become for the twenty-first century. And this is the genuine Christianity that touches the hearts of both the western as well as the Asian people.

⁹Ibid., 159-160.

¹⁰Ibid., 160.