A Note to Western Theologians: The Significance of Asian Christianity

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When I returned to the United States after a ten-year absence, I found that one of the many changes which had occurred and which interested me most was the new interest among Americans in Oriental religions.

This change is quite evident among young people, especially among students. If you visit any university campus, you will immediately notice that not a few meetings on Oriental religions, like Zen or Yoga, are being held. At some university bookstores, you will see more books on Oriental religions than on Christianity; and you will often find that more courses on Oriental religions than on Christianity are offered in departments of religion.

It is a great change from the sixties, let alone the fifties. In a way, it is a welcome change. Americans are more open-minded toward and less ignorant of the Oriental religions than before. I am pleased to see this change, for I was used to complaining about the arrogant yet ignorant attitude of Americans and their closed mind toward Oriental religions.

On the other hand, however, I am now disturbed by a certain consequence of this change. For there are a number of people among Christians, even among theologians, who tend to think that Christianity and other religions are equally valid and ultimately the same.

Of course, it is good that Western theologians are beginning to take the existence of other religions seriously in their theological thinking. As Paul Tillich hoped for, in his last lecture, new types
of systematic theology should be developed in a dialogue with the insights of other religions. It was during his visit to Japan, when he encountered the living religions of Japan, that he began to take account of the significance of Oriental religions.

Once one has opened one’s eyes to the other religions, one can no longer proceed theologically as though Christianity were the only religion in the world. This is what John Hick, professor of theology at the University of Birmingham, seems to have discovered, to his great excitement. Now he proposes what he calls a “Copernican Revolution in Theology”! What he means by it is for us to take a decisive step from a Christianity-centered (“Ptolemaic”) to a God-centered (“Copernican”) view of the religious life of humanity.

We Asian Christians are glad to see this awakening from slumber, so to speak, and the recognition of other religions along with the including of them in theological thinking. It is a welcome change. However, what disturbs us is the sort of conclusion Prof. Hick draws from his discovery: according to him, all religions are equally valid so that “it is not appropriate to speak of religion as being true or false, any more than it is to speak of civilization as being true or false”.

If Christianity is identical with Western civilization, then he is right. But, is it identical? We Asian Christians did not become Christian because Christianity is a true religion as Western civilization is true over against false religions and false civilizations of Asia. For us who all along have lived in multi-cultural and multi-faith societies, Christianity (or, to be exact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ) is not another religion beside other religions. We cannot, therefore, agree with his prediction when he says that, “the relation between them (religions) will then perhaps be somewhat like that now obtaining between the different denominations of Christianity in Europe or the United States”.

If Hick were right, then we Asian Christians would be “of all men most to be pitied”. (I Cor. 15:19) We might have been
deceived in some things by Western Christian missionaries. But we surely did not become Christian because of Western Christianity and civilization. On the contrary, we became Christian in spite of Western Christianity and civilization. For we saw in Jesus Christ the judgment and grace of God on all religions and civilizations of both East and West, including Christianity and Western civilization.

When you, Western Christians and theologians become fascinated with Oriental religions, I wish you would show at least a matching interest in Asian Christianity and Christians. For we have been living with Oriental religions for centuries, not merely on a theoretical but on a daily, practical level. Yet, we do not think, as some of you do, that Christianity is no better than other religions which we left. When we were converted, we did not change from one “Ptolemaic” (i.e. Buddhist- or Shinto-centered) to another “Ptolemaic” (i.e. Christianity-centered) view. Rather, we had precisely an experience of a “Copernican Revolution”, that is to say, the radical change from man-centered to God-centered view of the religious life of humanity.

Accordingly, while you are excited about the dialogue with other religions, I wish you would also have dialogue with your fellow Christians and theologians in Asia. For they have been already for many years in dialogue and in day-to-day contact with other religions. Even if they do not have many so-called dialogue conferences, they can not escape from the dialogue within themselves. For they have been always surrounded as a minority by other religions which are in the majority in their countries. It is true that there are not many writings by Asian theologians (except probably in India) dealing directly with the problem of Christianity and other religions. This does not mean, however, that they are oblivious to this question. On the contrary, they know that it is a matter of life and death in their own existence. Precisely because of this awareness, they have to be cautious and prudent about entering into direct dialogue with other religions. On this point, Western theologians seem to be
imprudent and unprepared.

In order to have a fruitful dialogue with other religions, we must have our homework on them well done. Take Buddhism, for example. It is as vast and complicated a subject to study as Christianity, if not more so. We Oriental Christians are surrounded by many Buddhist scholars and specialists who point out the ignorance, misunderstanding, generalization and oversimplification often made by Western theologians. By contrast, Asian theologians know what the real issues are, especially the vulnerable points on both sides.

Furthermore, we know through our own experiences not only in academic settings, but also in mission fields, that these Oriental religions are, to use Hendrik Kraemer's words, "formidable opponents". These opponents of Christianity are probably more formidable than any which have ever appeared in Christian history. They confront Christians with an "unprecedented challenge". This challenge is such that it easily makes even Christian theologians think that all religions are equally valid, and blind Western Christians so they no longer see the significance of Asian Christianity and Christian mission.

However, Asian Christians themselves do not come to the same conclusions. We know that hitherto Western Christianity had many "Ptolemaic" views, and we hope to contribute to correcting them. But we do not believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a "Ptolemaic" view which is to be changed into a "Copernican" view. Who is the deceived one, the Asian Christian or the Western theologian? Anyway, I hope you Western theologians who are now very much interested in Oriental religions, will take the existence of Asian Christians more seriously and will see the significance of their existence in the midst Oriental religions.