

programme of contemplation, of practical life in the loving presence of Christ present everywhere and in all. It is difficult and almost impossible. It is even illusory. Yes, it would be, if we didn't have Christ with us right from the start; if to begin with we were not already living in the grace of his friendship. The initiation is indispensable, as in every science and practical skill.

How should we get to see and love Christ in the communists? Certainly not by contemplative prayers in the oratory, nor by secret resolutions made in the shadow of our cell. Here it is a practical apprenticeship in encounters, in active collaboration, in interpersonal relations, with faith that the Spirit of Christ is constantly at work there, even in situations where atheists shout out insults against the 'impostor Christ' of the Christians. That should create in us a true passion for Christ, precisely because of the provocation from nonbelieving brothers who have rightfully been disgusted by the 'impostures' of a false Christianity. As we told you in our last letter, the Incarnation of the Word and so of Christianity itself is lived today by means of socialist expressions laden with materiality, just the opposite of a platonising conception, which in order to establish contemplation takes man out of the material world. As testimony of the contemplative aspect of our life, i.e. its transcendental dimension, we must each day learn to understand more deeply and develop in ourselves the free giving of one's life to others because of Christ, through concrete acts done clearly for the common good of society.

Because we are convinced of this we shall always to the end of our lives try to make eternity bloom in this world, where in fact are the seeds of blessedness, by drawing the logic of the Incarnation out to its end.

Koson Srisang · *Recovering the Power of Life*

Koson Srisang, 'Recovering the Power of Life', *Ecumenical Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 1980, pp. 66-74

What is it, then, that we are searching for? Naturally, we are searching for what we need but do not now have. Or perhaps we had it once but have somehow lost it. We are searching to be who we are not yet – a fully human-people – as God intended. More

specifically, in the context of contemporary Asia, from the perspective of the overwhelming majority (which includes the ethnic and cultural minorities) who are poor and oppressed, what is desperately needed now is the power of life. That is to say, the power not only to survive the present oppression and exploitation but also to actualize their full humanity, the power not only to produce and enjoy material life sustenance but also to live in freedom and community, justice and dignity, friendship and celebration. In short, the power to love God and to be in union with him . . . the power to be truly human.

1 The Human Condition in Asia Today

Mountains of documents are available and millions of eye-witnesses are there to testify that the people of Asia are crying and dying in pain today. The pain in Kampuchea is but an example, a consequence or a result of a much deeper pain:

- the costly struggle of Koreans against the oppressive *Yushin* system;
- the popular unrest in China;
- the atrocities against the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes in India;
- the plight of tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka and the Tamil minority there;
- the systematic oppression of the Koreans in Japan along with the Buraku minority in that country;
- the land-rights struggles of the Aborigines in Australia and the Maoris in New Zealand;
- the sense of meaninglessness and alienation of the relatively well-paid workers in Singapore;
- the increasing poverty of the Thai peasants and the systematic assassinations of their leaders . . .

All these, and thousands more, are other examples of this same pain. Truly, if we have anything in common in Asia today, it is certainly this pain of our people.

The painful destruction of life, culture and nature by international and systematic human actions is by no means limited to the above examples. Nor is it decreasing. As a matter of fact, the ugly threats of more death and destruction seem imminent, especially in Southeast Asia. Only a few years after the most destructive war in human history, the people in Kampuchea have suffered another

war. Whether this war is called 'Vietnamese invasions' or 'national salvation' supported by the Vietnamese is immaterial for the present purpose, for the suffering it has brought to the people is clear. The Chinese 'teaching a lesson' or 'invasion' of Vietnam is part of the same story. And finally, if the mounting tension between Vietnam and Thailand is not peaceably resolved, a violent encounter between these two countries could, God forbid, escalate into a major war involving their respective powerful allies and perhaps the whole of Asia, if not the whole world. In that event, the pain would be even greater than ever before.

Distortion of Asian spirituality: the root cause

Why are the people in Asia suffering so much pain? What is the root cause of this pain? And what does it take to get rid of this pain?

I am prepared to say this pain is rooted in the Asian spiritual alienation itself. Therefore, in order to deal with it adequately we must 'enter the struggle at the level of spirituality,' as M. M. Thomas has pointed out.¹⁴ By spirituality he means 'the structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness within which man lives and enters into a relationship with nature and with fellow men in politics, economics, society and culture'.¹⁵ In a similar vein, C. S. Song perceives spirituality in terms of the 'totality of being that expresses itself in ways of life, modes of thinking, patterns of behaviour and conduct, and attitudes towards the mystery that surrounds our immediate world and that beckons us on to the height beyond heights, to the depth below depths, and to light beyond lights'.¹⁶

While agreeing with the encompassing character of spirituality as defined by Thomas and Song, I would simply specify it as the divine or sacred dimension of human life. This divine dimension is experienced most fully at the traumatic moments of life and death. It is also experienced when people meditate, contemplate, suffer, celebrate and grieve. As such, it is at once personal and communal, at once temporal and spatial. Experiencing the sacred or the divine, people become aware of their power and limitations, their freedom and compassion, their identity and obedience. Because of its profundity, the experience of the sacred often defies verbalization. In that case, a certain object most vital to that experience – such as the sun, the sky, the land, a mountain, a river, a tree or a piece of stone – is lifted up to signify the divine

experience. And when the experience is articulated, such sounds as Yahweh, Om, God, Dhamma, Allah are the result.

This human experiencing of the divine is precisely what authentic religion is all about. Spirituality, therefore, is identical with religious vision, that is, the fullest expression of the divine dimension of human experience. It is precisely this religious vision which orders the human community. That is, it constitutes the community, unites its members, underlies its history, motivates its historiography, emanates its power and authority, and provides its sense of identity and integrity, honour and destiny. When this ordering religious vision is concealed, forgotten, distorted or abused by the community, particularly by its ruling elite, injustice and oppression prevail. People are overtaxed, their dignity is robbed, their wives and daughters are raped, their sons are taken away, their land is snatched, and their very life is threatened. This is substantially the human condition in Asia today. The distortion of the Asian spirituality, the concealment of the Asian religious vision, has brought about the massive pain and suffering among the people.

Perverved kind of western spirituality

But that is only half the picture, for at the very least the western imperialist onslaught has certainly precipitated the distortion of Asian spirituality and the concealment of Asian religious vision. Among other things, the privileged status of the missionaries and their converts in the eyes of the colonial rulers – one of the scandals in church history – was far from bearing witness to Jesus Christ the suffering Lord. Even today the situation has not changed very much. The 1977 workshop report of the All-Asia Consultation on Theological Education for Christian Ministry in Asia, in which 110 Christian leaders participated, had this to say:

The Churches have continued to support intentionally and unintentionally the exploiters and those in power, and neglected the needy far too often. The majority of churches are middle class institutions preaching a gospel identified with middle class values. When the Church does minister to the poor, the effect is very often that of an other-worldly religion.¹⁷

Recently another remarkable group of Asian Christian leaders met in Manila to examine the patterns of domination and people's power in Asia. While recognizing and affirming the positive signs

of Christianity in Asia, they have, in the spirit of repentance, stated:

Because the Church is often found on the side of political powers against the people, it very easily participates in programmes and structures which not only cause injustice and oppression but which also reinforce the suffering of the people.¹⁸

The two quotations above are cited in order to illustrate a simple point. As spiritual legacy from the West, the Christian churches in Asia have largely remained aloof if not alienated from the struggle of the poor and the oppressed. This is part of what I mean by spiritual alienation, mentioned earlier. But sad as it is, this aspect of spiritual alienation is no more than a footnote in comparison to the point which follows.

If the distortion and concealment of the Asian spirituality or the Asian religious vision is one side of the spiritual-alienation coin, the other side is what may be called 'western spiritual imperialism'. Strong words, but do not panic yet.

Let me explain. First of all, the western spirituality which rears its ugly head in Asia is not authentic western spirituality. In fact, it is a perversion of true western spirituality which is destructive even for the western world itself. Authentic western spirituality by nature does not become imperialistic. It would be welcome, for it would enrich authentic Asian spirituality and vice versa. I shall return to this subject in the next section. But before that, a few more words on western spiritual imperialism.

Put simply, the perverted form of western spirituality which has become imperialistic is nothing more than greed itself: the love of money (and profit) and the idolatry of the self. This greed leads to the concentration of wealth and power which has its own dynamics (the law of the market) and ideology (capitalism - both private and state).

The expression of this western spiritual imperialism takes many shapes and forms. Let us take note here of the four most obvious: the transnational corporations which buy off lands from the poor farmers and exploit their cheap labour; the doctrine of national security with its concomitant militarism and armaments race promoting the use of force to safeguard 'national security', benefiting the few elite at the expense of the life of the people; the western-supported patterns of 'mission and evangelism' which

pluck out their converts from their own culture, emphasizing individual conversions and life beyond death at the expense of authentic Christian compassion and concern for social justice; and the economic growth-oriented development with massive government (and church) schemes that eventually deprive people of the lands and fatten the cheque-books of the economic and political elite, making the poor even poorer still.

This, then, is the human condition in Asia today. The poor and the oppressed are crying and dying in pain. They cannot participate in the economic and political power structures, they are out of their reach. The land of their ancestors has been taken away. Their families are breaking down, separated by economic necessities and wars. They are deprived of the opportunity to produce, or if they do produce, someone else enjoys the harvest. Their precious culture and tradition have been suppressed. Behind all this is the loss of a heritage, the general malaise of spiritual alienation, the losing of the power of life. Yet the people survive. They continue to struggle, in hope, to recover the power of life!

II The Christian Response, now and in the future

In the light of the above description of the human condition in Asia, what has been the response of churches and Christians? What are the prospects? And what should happen in the years ahead?

I have no intention here to preach nor to bother you with a theological exercise. Rather, I am trying to look at our history and to probe, to hope, to dream and to pray that God may lead the poor and the oppressed of Asia, along with the rest of his people, to the promised land, into his Kingdom where love and justice, freedom and compassion, dignity and celebration are not only a dream but also a reality.

In his excellent article 'The Church and the Poor in Asian History', C. I. Itty traces the early missionary-churches' 'alliance with the ruling powers and the dominant classes'. In many countries, Christian participation in the struggle for freedom and independence is noteworthy. The churches have also been involved in social services. Their work among the low castes, the tribal communities, the marginalized and the oppressed sectors of society indicates their concern. And, finally, Itty lifts up the challenge of evangelical poverty in the face of expensive institutions

and methods of work of the churches. To him, evangelical poverty for the Christians would be in tune with Hindu and Buddhist spirituality which believes that voluntary poverty is a supreme virtue and a religious value. He concludes that:

... the attitudes and concern of the churches for the poor during the missionary era were ambiguous, if not contradictory. However ... there were lay leaders and charismatic movements which challenged the churches to recognize the wholeness of the Gospel, the liberating power of Christ, and to make a radical option for the struggle of the poor and the oppressed.¹⁹

As early as 1949, almost a decade before the creation of an ecumenical regional body, Dr Manikam of India and Dr S. C. Leung of China organized a conference of leaders of Asian churches in Bangkok. It was the era of the Chinese Revolution and national independence. The building of nation-states was a dominant theme. But concern for the 'majority of the people ... who live in conditions of abject poverty and under oppressive systems' was clear. It was recognized that these people are demanding 'fuller participation in the life of society, at the level where power is exercised'. Such is the revolutionary ferment, the statement says, and the churches 'must welcome' it, for in it are elements which are 'an expression of the human dignity' affirmed by God's love in Christ.²⁰

United concern of Asian churches

The Bangkok Conference came to three radical conclusions: God may be active in revolutionary events; what God does in the revolutions may be outside the Church, but may not be outside Jesus Christ; and if what God does may not be outside Jesus Christ, the Church has to make a response.

In 1958 the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) held its inaugural assembly. At its Fourth Assembly in 1973 the name was changed to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). It is fair to say that one cannot talk about the Christian concern for the poor and the oppressed in Asia today without talking at the same time about the EACC/CCA, particularly since the creation of the Urban Industrial Mission work in 1968, exactly a decade after the First Assembly. The same can be said about the role of the World Council of Churches (WCC), particularly during the last decade when various sub-units of the Programme Unit on Justice and

Service have become more actively involved in Asia. But since we are dealing specifically with Asia, let us focus on the EACC/CCA, mentioning WCC and others only in that connection.

For the EACC in 1958 the concern for development was seen in terms of economic growth, 'accompanied by a determined will to distribute equitably the new wealth created by this economic development'. The role of trade unions and peasant organizations as well as that of women was recognized. In 1964 EACC focused on lay training for their effective participation in the struggle of the Asian peoples for new life and new societies.

By 1968 the EACC began to talk about 'the dehumanizing factors inherent in the process of modernization and secularization'. It affirmed, for example, the necessity of 'revolutionary change in power-structures' as well as the necessity to create a new ethos of values, attitudes and personality structure. Furthermore, it saw that 'the organization of the masses on the basis of their demands and rights, and the involvement of these people in mass struggles, are necessary to secure a just share of power for them'. Even 'civil disobedience in cases where the law and the distribution of power are manifestly unjust' was also approved by the 1968 EACC Assembly. It was this Assembly which authorized the creation of the Urban Industrial Mission desk which has loomed very large in people's struggles and people's movements in Asia.

Promoting people's power

Initially inspired by urban industrial mission work in the West, Asian UIM has now come of age. Its present scope includes the rural concern as well. Thus a new name: Urban Rural Mission (URM). In terms of ecumenical collaboration and solidarity, URM is an integral yet very distinct part of the Urban Industrial and Rural Mission (UIRM) network, loosely but effectively 'coordinated' by the UIRM desk of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC.

What is UIRM or URM? What is it doing? How does it operate? The 1977 booklet, *Struggle to be Human*, is an excellent introduction to UIRM. A few quotations will help:

UIRM is clearly a story-telling sign of the presence of God in this world, its cities and its industries, its rural lands and people's movements (p. 50).

Motivated by the biblical message and the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, UIRM has this to say:

The event of Incarnation is the visible historical happening which fulfilled God's promise of Immanuel, God with us. Christ's earthly ministry was to bring justice and love to the poor and the oppressed; he identified himself with the homeless, the hungry and the poor, and he proclaimed their salvation. The salvation he brought was comprehensive and extended to all people. But Christ has shown a particular concern for the nameless and the powerless people to the extent of saying that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like them, and in his life Christ fulfilled Mary's Song of Magnificat: 'He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.' . . .

A just society is possible

The final report of Jae Shik Oh as URM secretary of CCA, before he took on the position of CCA secretary for international affairs, reflects best the URM experience in Asia. As he anticipates Asian URM in the 1980s, three symbols loom large for Jae Shik Oh: people, land and power. URM in Asia flatly rejects the greed-based development syndrome for it 'has forced the majority of the people into the periphery'. He says:

We have stuck to modest methodologies as a realistic approach to building people's power. We have emphasized local involvement rather than working on the national or international level. We have taken the process seriously, paying detailed attention to each step of tactics and strategies. We have dealt not with the nations as entities, but with people. We have subscribed to positions of particulars, rather than to universal statements.

The goal, of course, is to achieve a just society. But Asian URM believes that the method of achieving that goal is first and foremost the 'sharing with the people in their suffering'. For that is what Jesus Christ did. Professing Jesus Christ as Lord, we really have no choice but to obey his most important command: 'Love one another, just as I loved you. The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them.' That's the way of the Cross, the true meaning of sharing the cup of suffering.

Sharing this cup in love and faith, in life and death, brings true

victory, creates real unity and establishes new community – where love and justice, freedom and dignity, friendship and communion are the order of the day. Sharing the cup of suffering therefore is the key to recovering the power of life.

But sharing this cup of suffering is by no means romantic. In fact it is very costly. Loneliness, persecution and even death itself are no strangers to those walking this path. Therefore, an ethical courage is required, for no one should underestimate the massive, well-organized and technologically sophisticated powers of the oppressors of people. Equally true, however, is the fact that, in spite of the odds and the risks involved, God has ordained men and women with such ethical courage to grace history. In truth, He sent his own Son to set the example. Their actions constitute the sign of hope, the power of life over death and the advent of the Kingdom of God. As disciples of Christ, can we do otherwise than walk with them?

Alan Saw U · *Justing Love*

Alan Saw U, 'Christian Mission within the Socialist System', in Oh Jae Shik (ed.), *Towards a Theology of People*, Christian Conference of Asia 1977, pp. 72-74, 77-79

For a wealthy man Jesus simply asked him to share his wealth with others. Had the man been a learned man, Jesus would have requested him to share his educational knowledge and wisdom with others. This social principle of Jesus Christ applies to all people from all walks of life who are endowed with particular skills, power, personality and authority.

Jesus Christ is simply requesting us to work in solidarity with each other by sharing whatever we particularly possess for the benefit of others. We ought to be reminded that this kind of sharing is directly concerned with the 'Eternal Life' and the 'Kingdom of God' that we have been recklessly and meaninglessly preaching and talking about without really knowing the real implications from the bottom of our hearts.

Jesus in his life and mission spoke very clearly about concern for both people and society . . . to make and keep human life more humane. He takes into account the total life of the people