

KOSUKE KOYAMA AND 'WATER BUFFALO' THEOLOGY

Kosuke Koyama (1929-) was born in a Christian home in Tokyo. There he lived through the war years and witnessed the devastation brought by American bombs in response to the 'idolatry' and 'greed' of Meiji Japan (Koyama 1984:3ff). Graduating from Tokyo Union Theological Seminary in 1952, he served for a while as a minister of the United Church of Christ in Japan, before furthering his studies at Drew University and Princeton Theological Seminary in United States. Subsequently he taught at the Thailand Theological Seminary (1960-8), was Director of the Association of Theological Schools in South-East Asia (1968-74), lectured at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Since 1980 he has been teaching at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

What are some distinctives of Koyama's theology? First, his writings often dazzle by their vivid imageries borrowed from everyday life and human history, ranging from frogs croaking in the Thai monsoon rains, to modern technology wherein a *Three Mile an Hour God* (Koyama 1978) may be down-right more efficient than a jumbo-jet. He detests theology written in an academic style wherein authors do their best 'to discourage *people* from reading them' (Koyama 1993:156). Often he is less concerned with logical analysis and arguments than with the incessant probing of questions which forces the issues back to the reader for further reflection.

Second, his hermeneutic is strongly people-centered and contextual (Adams 1987:56-59). In his best known book, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (1974:129f), he speaks of how he soon came to realize in his work in Thailand that 'what really matters is not a set of doctrines called Buddhism, but *people* who ...are trying to live according to the doctrine of Buddha', and of how he found 'the study of *ist* ...far more interesting and exciting than of *ism*'. For him the test of any theology in a given situation, lies in its ability to address the concerns of the listener. Thus, all theology have to be subordinated, in his particular case, to the needs of the 'cock-fighting' farmers of Thailand (:vii-ix).

Throughout his writings is found a serious concern to root theology in the various cultural, religious and historical contexts. This is powerfully illustrated in his *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai* (1984). In a sustained theological reflection upon his own historical

experience of an arrogant and imperialistic Meiji Japan, Koyama fashions a devastating critique against idolatry and greed in all their various manifestations in the modern world. At the same time he manages throughout to weave a continuous dialogue between Christianity, Japanese culture and Shintoism-Buddhism.

If there is one theological center in Koyama's thought, it would be the *theologia crucis* of Luther, on whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation. For him, only 'the crucified mind ...can meaningfully participate in authentic contextualization' (Koyama 1974:24). Because it is firmly rooted in self-denial (1 Cor 2:2; Matt 16:24) it is fundamentally different from the 'crusading mind' (Koyama 1977:28-43). 'It is the crucified Christ who exposes the subtle essence and manifestation of idolatry' (Koyama 1984:261). It is this 'broken Christ' who 'heals the world broken by idolatry' (:240).

How missiological is Koyama's theology according to the criteria set out? First, with respect to the sociopolitical context, although his theology may not be as rooted in grass-root involvement as it is with Thomas', his wrestling with these issues are no less genuine. Throughout his writings there is the constant interaction with imperialism, both past and present, idolatry of power and wealth in national and international affairs, problems faced by racial, economic, religious and other minorities, ecology and the like, in light of the cross of Christ. If Thomas' writings possess a stronger bent towards ideology, Koyama's are theologically more reflective. But both emphases are necessary. He quotes from one Asian theologians' conference report to make the point: 'Ideology without theology—that leaves little room for hope; theology without ideology—that leaves little scope for action' (Koyama 1984:259). And, against the background of a religious tendency to be indifferent to historical realities in the socioeconomic realm, he hastens to remind us in his charming Japanese manner that 'A bank account and an abundant diet somehow (I cannot explain it quite satisfactorily) insulate man from coming to feel the primary truth of history' (Koyama 1974:23).

Secondly, how strongly do evangelistic and pastoral concerns feature in Koyama's thinking? It would be wrong to suggest that he shows no interest in these areas. In one discussion on 'Men of other faiths and ideologies', he notes Vatican II's affirmation on the possibility of salvation of those who are without explicit knowledge of Christ but genuinely strive after God. He then asks,

'What are the pastoral and missiological implications of this in South East Asia' (Koyama 1974:110)? But this appears to be his theological starting point on evangelism, rather than being one of the issues that an evangelist and pastor must grapple with along the way. Consequently, unlike Niles whose affirmation of evangelism and building the church is so unhesitating, Koyama is apologetic at best.

In one of his clearest statements on evangelism, 'Christianity Suffers from "Teacher Complex"', he writes:

Christianity is so self-righteous that I do not see much future for it. It wants to teach. It does not want to learn ...It is suffering from a 'teaching complex'People have become the object of evangelism since it is understood by Christians that people are 'automatically' living in the darkness, untrustworthy, wicked, adulterous and un-saved ...The 'teacher complex' expresses itself in a 'crusade complex'Christian faith does not and cannot be spread by crusading. It will spread without money, without bishops, without theologians, without plannings, if people see a crucified mind, not a crusading mind, in Christians (Koyama 1979:51-54).

Further, in every human enterprise, the center has always demanded sacrifices from the periphery for the sake of its own self-glorification (Koyama 1984:83-102). In Christian evangelism and missions, the West has been the center for four centuries. But their "'center-theologies" (of the "blond Jesus") have had more than a hundred years of painful irrelevance to the world outside of the West' (Koyama 1993:155). Again, in response to the claim of a Western missiologist that 'the first stirrings of the new life' were given by the gospel to millions in Asia, Koyama (1993a:73) counters by saying that 'Eastern civilization has refused to become Christian.' Moreover he asks, 'Do "the first stirrings of the new life" come from missiology of *theologia crucis* or from the rage of the Western psyche?'

Koyama is obviously saying things that the church needs to hear more often. But at the same time, he is also clearly overstating his case. His description of the Christianity's 'teacher complex' is true only within limits. There are abundant examples of those who did not and do not function in this manner. After all he could say that his own grandfather became a Christian through a missionary, a Cambridge graduate, who could speak of the lordship of Jesus

without running down Buddhism or Japanese culture (Koyama 1984:15f)! Further, when he says that 'Eastern civilization' has refused Christianity, one wonders what he is referring to. This may be true of Japan and India where the percentages of Christians in the population are relatively low. But this certainly does not apply to countries like Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea and, possibly, even China, not to mention Philippines¹⁰.

It appears here that Koyama is deeply burdened by the 'Western guilt complex' in missions. The ethnocentricity of Christian missions in the last two hundred years is a well-established fact which no one would deny. Yet, perceptions of this history are also in the process of being revised. Increasingly, it is being recognized that 'Missions in the modern era has been far more, and far less, than the argument about motive customarily portrays' (Sanneh 1987:331). What comes across so powerfully in Koyama's writings is the Christian's need to put on 'the crucified mind'. But when this plea is adulterated by a distorted 'Western guilt complex', then one can only end up, as he does, with being almost apologetic about the proclamation of the gospel. If I may be allowed to rephrase Koyama's question on our motivations for missions quoted above, I would like to ask him in return: Does this hesitation about preaching the gospel come from a missiology of *theologia crucis* or from the unresolved conscience of the *Japanese* psyche, burdened by a national history no less imperialistic than the West in the first half of this century?

Coming to the question of Hiebert's (1982) 'excluded middle', and the healing and exorcism ministry of the church, Koyama shows little or no awareness of these. Of course he speaks about the world of spirits in Asian thought (e.g. Koyama 1979:20f; 1984:145ff), but only as images. At every point his interpretation of anything related to this realm is secularized (e.g. Koyama 1984:183ff). The best example of his rationalistic approach comes from his repeated references (:52, 214ff, 248ff) to the confrontation between Elijah and prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). His reflections on this passage are invariably focused on the theological and moral ideas of Hiebert's (1982) 'high religion' zone, but never in terms of the power encounter wherein God defeats the 'powers'. This also further explains why he is so apologetic about evangelism.

If Koyama's theology is weak with respect to the second criterion the same cannot be said concerning the third. He is deeply troubled

by the way Western history and theology are being imposed upon the Asian Christian mind with the inevitable consequences. 'Asian Christians are often culturally deformed or even cultural monsters in their own historical communities' (Koyama 1977:100). His response, as we have earlier noted, is constantly to earth the gospel in Asian cultures. Thus, illustrations based on Asian images abound in his theology.

But he goes beyond images and wrestles with cultural realities. For example, he points out that the Buddhist view of history, with its inherent apathy towards empirical evil and suffering, is challenged by that of Israel with unavoidable persistence through the gospel (Koyama 1976). 'The possibilities of neutrality, tranquility, and apathy are denied to history, since the Lord is the creator of events which bring about the "shaking of the foundations" of history' (Koyama 1976:71). Again, for him theological understanding is not always attained through linear logic. Thus 'the finality of Christ' cannot be established even by a hundred quotations from Scripture, or by rationalistic 'objective proofs'. We 'see' when our 'ordinary hearing and seeing are penetrated by an extraordinary hearing and seeing' (Koyama 1977:91). This is consistent with the Japanese approach that truth is often gained by sudden insight.¹¹

We come finally to the fourth criterion, that of faithfulness to Christian tradition. First, it must be said that Koyama does interact constantly with the message of the Bible in his writings. For example, we have already noted his challenge to Buddhist *apathy* towards history with the *passionate* God of Israel's history. If he uses borrowed Buddhist vocabulary to communicate the gospel, he nevertheless seeks to give to it biblical meaning. For example, for him 'the content of the *dharma* is the sacrificial death of Christ' (Koyama 1974:82). Again, his concern to take the message of the Bible seriously is demonstrated in his focus on the *theologia crucis*.

Second, like many modern-day theologians Koyama (1974:132) wants to avoid what he calls 'a tyranny of doctrines', because this leads to our being judgmental and unaccepting of others. In the same vein he argues that our neighbors are less interested in our christology than our 'neighbourology', of how we put into practice Christ's commandment of love (Koyama 1974:91f). Two comments are in place. Firstly, it may be true that our neighbors are more interested in our 'neighbourology' than our christology. But what

cannot be denied is that, ultimately, it is our christology that shapes our neighbourology. How else did Koyama get his neighbourology? Secondly, while he may not display a general doctrinal indifference in his thinking, he has nevertheless shown an increasing ambivalence in his view on Christianity and other religions. We will now look at this in greater detail.

Koyama has always pleaded for a more positive attitude towards other religions against the background of the generally negative view taken earlier by Western Christianity. After all, God has not left himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). Thus he argues that we should avoid speaking of the superiority of Christianity (as opposed to Christ) as a religion over other religions (Koyama 1977:89). One is not syncretistic simply because he or she affirms that which is good and true in other religions. Rather, only if we insist 'that the salvation in Buddha and Jesus Christ are identical ...if we place the name of Jesus with any other name and say that there is really no difference between it and the other names we become syncretic' (Koyama 1979:67f). All these may be regarded as being reasonably orthodox. However, parallel to this strand of his thought and, increasingly more prominent in recent years, is another much more ambivalent one. This can be seen from the following examples.

First, given his indifference to Hiebert's 'excluded middle', his analysis of religions is far too academic for him to take seriously the false and even demonic dimensions in religions as popularly practiced. The clearest example comes from his comment that when the Thai Buddhists bow down to Buddha in the temple, 'they are not engaged in idolatry' (Koyama 1977:101). This statement only makes sense if one assumes that all Thai Buddhists understand and live by the unadulterated doctrines of 'pure' Buddhism. But popular Buddhism as practiced in Thailand is nothing like that.¹²

Secondly, while he had earlier urged Christians not to speak of other religions as inferior (Koyama 1977:89), he now goes on to argue that 'The relationship between Buddhism and Christianity is not that of "true religion" and "false religion"' (Koyama 1984:128). His plea that we should not speak of other religions as inferior is reasonable, I believe, if by that he means that we should not be derogatory about them. After all, we ought to be respectful of others' faiths, and we can recognize certain truths in them. Nevertheless, if Koyama is consistent with what he affirms about the finality of Christ and what he said of syncretism earlier, then

surely Christianity must be true in a way that, for example, Buddhism can never be true, in that it points to Jesus in a way that Buddhism never can. But this is exactly what Koyama appears so reluctant to affirm.

Thirdly, our suspicion of Koyama's ambivalence is confirmed by his more recent position. In his address at the 1992 meeting of the International Association of Mission Studies, he said, 'To God, the distinctions such as Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, etc. may not be applicable, though these distinctions are important for us (Rom 11:32). The Biblical God is "boundary breaking"' (Koyama 1993a:75f). The ambiguity of the above statement was essentially clarified in the discussion following the address. When the issue of evangelizing Muslims was raised, he publicly stated that he did not think that we should be engaged in it. In light of all these, the question that needs to be asked is: Has Koyama through his Japanese 'Western guilt complex', his aversion for doctrines, and his academic approach to the study of religions which apparently blinds him to the idolatrous and demonic in popular religious practices, finally gravitated towards an implicit pluralist view of religions?

Koyama's theology displays a strong sensitivity to sociopolitical context of Asia. But it is positively weak on the evangelistic and pastoral dimensions. He takes inculturation seriously, although his neglect of the 'excluded middle' reveals his captivity to the Western secularized worldview. Finally, his apparent indifference to doctrines and implicit (?) religious pluralism raises serious questions about his faithfulness to the apostolic faith.

C. S. SONG AND THE THEOLOGY OF TRANSPOSITION

We now turn our attention to today's best known Chinese theologian, Song Choan-seng (1929-). Song comes from the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan. He first studied in Taiwan University, and then in New College, Edinburgh and Union, New York. He was the Principal of Tainan Theological College (1965-70), and served with the Reformed Church of America (1971-73) and, thereafter, as the Associate Director, Commission on Faith and Order, WCC. Since 1985, he has been teaching at the Pacific School of Religion, California.

Of all Asian theologians today, Song is probably the most widely published. Like Koyama, he communicates clearly. He has a simple whimsical style, and uses in great abundance historical parables, folk tales and real life examples, many of which possess Asian religious motifs. There are three key ideas in his writings: rejection of the concept of salvation-history, transposition theology and critique of Christian mission. These were first laid out in his earlier writings and further developed in later ones. We will now look at each of these.

At the heart of Song's radical reinterpretation of Christian theology is his rejection of the salvation history in the Bible as being normative in theology.

The crucial question is obviously this: Is the salvation history intensely exhibited or demonstrated in both the Old and the New Testaments to be looked upon as the absolute norm by which events in secular world history get chosen arbitrarily to be incorporated into God's salvation in Christ, or, is it to be regarded as a pattern or a type of God's salvation manifested in a massively concentrated way in ancient Israel and in the history of the church and therefore to be discovered in varied degrees of intensity and concentration in other nations and peoples also (Song 1974:57)?

Song suggests that the latter is indeed the case. If that is so then 'the theology which regards Israel and the Christian Church as the only bearers and dispensers of God's saving love must be called into question' (Song 1976a:216).

This leads to his second major theme, the theological methodology of transposition, which he develops in detail in *The Compassionate God* (1982). Transposition, for Song (1982:10-12), is essentially another word for incarnation. Thus, in the first half his book he rebuts the theological centrism, which perceives the history of Israel and of Christianity as the controlling factor in theology, as a roadblock 'that creates a major problem for transpositional theology' (:16). God is at work in all cultures, nations and religions. This truth became evident to 'Deutero-Isaiah' through the traumatic experience of dispersal, and is evident in the teachings of Jesus and Paul. He goes on in the second part of the book to argue that the gospel must be fully incarnated into Asia. After all Christianity is not 'change-proof' (:11), nor is it a 'one-size religion' (:181). As he writes elsewhere,