

Contra “Asian Theology” – We confess one holy and καθολικός faith

by Daniel H. Chew

It has come to my attention that an article has been posted on the "Christian Post" on the topic of so-called "Asian Theology"¹. In this short missive, I would like to analyze the Christian post article according to Scripture.

In the Christian Post article, Dr. Augustine Pagolu's main thesis is that the only way Christian missions is to advance in Asia is for more "contextualization" to be done in which Christianity is to jettison its "Greco-Roman" framework that is evidently prevalent today in westernized circles. Instead, just as Christianity contextualized its message to the Greco-Roman world then, Christianity is to be contextualized now for the Asian context, thus giving us the idea of "Asian Theology". Dr. Pagolu then suggests various ways such contextualization should be done in the so-called Asian context.

However, how does his theory and suggestions line up according to the truths of God's Word?

The Greco-Roman framework?

Dr. Pagolu's main argument rests on various assumptions which are unbiblical and unhistorical. The first major error can be seen in his historical revisionism of the Greco-Roman world. Pagolu claims that the Greco-Roman framework is "primarily rationalistic and analytical". This betrays an ignorance of the Greco-Roman culture. The Greco-Roman culture was very much "spiritual" with many gods who behave worse than humans sometimes. Paul at Athens was provoked within his spirit with the many idols in the city (Acts 17:16). Greco-Roman philosophy was more rationalistic and analytical, yet there is no such thing as a uniform theme of Greco-Roman philosophy as being rationalistic and analytical either. Gnosticism for instance was a very much spiritual yet philosophical religion. The idea of gnosis or secret knowledge was not an end in itself, but rather "passwords" which enable the soul to proceed towards the direction of absolute being². Such gnosis was not propositional knowledge, but rather esoteric empirical knowledge towards union in the divine.

As I have written in my review of the late Pinnock's et al book *The Openness of God*, the whole idea of Greco-Roman framework is nonsensical. Refuting Sanders, I wrote³:

One major problem with Sanders' thesis is that to postulate that the concept (not just the language) of immutability and impassibility as applied to God as being Greek concepts and not Christian concepts, it must be the case that in Greek thought there must be only one concept of God in these aspects. In other words, there cannot exist in Greek thought concurrently the concept of God being immutable and that of being mutable, or being passable and impassable. If that were to be the case, then either way Christianity can be

¹ Edmond Chua, "Asian Theologies are Critical to Christianity's Expansion: Theologian", *Christian Post*, Sept 15 2010 (Accessed Sept 16, 2010, <http://sg.christianpost.com/dbase.php?cat=education&id=808>)

² Class notes taken by me for ST501: Christian Mind, by Dr. Michael S. Horton

³ Daniel H. Chew, *Book Review: The Openness of God*. (accessed Sept 16th 2010, http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/articles/openness_god.html)

said to imbibe on Greek thought either way, since both logically contradictory positions are covered by Greek thought. And this is what we will see to the case in Greek culture. The gods present in the popular Greek religion are mutable and passable, whereas the philosopher's Ideal or idea of God is immutable and impassable. Since this is the case, how then can Sanders prove his position? We could say that the Open Theists view is actually the **Christianization of Greek popular religion**, and that would be even more accurate, since the worldviews of both the modern age and during the times of the Greeks are very similar.

Similarly, the whole idea of **the** Greco-Roman framework is nonsense. No such common framework exists. There is the Platonic framework, the Stoic framework, the Greek popular religion framework etc, but no Greco-Roman framework. Much less is there a so-called unified theme of rationalism and of being analytical in the pluralities in the Greco-Roman frameworks. After all, Gnosticism is anything BUT analytical. Platonism and Neo-Platonism is analytical and rationalistic but it is also spiritual in nature.

Contextualization of the "Greco-Roman framework"?

The next error is the contention that the church contextualized her message towards the so-called Greco-Roman framework. We will address this by looking at (1) the Apostolic church, (2) the early church.

(i) Contextualization in the Apostolic church?

The prime example of such contextualization in the Apostolic church is normally taken to be Acts 17. Paul supposedly approved of the religiosity of the Athenians in his speech in the Aeropagus, and approvingly quoted from two of their religious poets in order to create "common ground" with them.

Such however is a misrepresentation of what actually happened in the Aeropagus. In Act 17:22, Paul mentioned that he looked at or perceived (θεωρω; Lexical form θεωρεω) the Athenians as being "κατα παντα ως δεισιδαιμονεστερους". The adjective δεισιδαιμονεστερους seems to be a hapax-legomena, yet according to the lexicon⁴ is based upon two words of which the second word is δαίμονιον or demon. This gives credence to the view that what Paul was actually describing was not being religious in a virtuous sense, but rather superstitious in a weak negative sense — "Men of Athens, I see that [in] according to all things [you are being] superstitious" (literally translated).

In his book *Presuppositional Confrontations*⁵, apologist Vincent Cheung addresses the exegesis of this clause. Instead of being a positive commendation of how much they seek after God,

Rather, the point is that they did not know the true God at all. They may realize that there

⁴ The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon (accessed Sept 16th 2010, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/deisidaimonesteros.html>)

⁵ Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations* (Boston, MA: Reformation Ministries International, 2003). I do not necessarily endorse everything by Cheung but on this issue there is large agreement

may be a divine existence beyond and other than what they were worshiping, and so constructed altars to these "unknown gods" just as a safety measure. One cannot conclude from this that they were already worshiping the God of Christianity. In fact, the point is that they were not worshiping the God of Christianity. Their altars to "unknown gods" merely constitute a confession of ignorance, and Paul's statement intends to exploit this confession without conceding anything positive about their present way of worship.⁶

While it may not be a direct insult, Paul was negative about their religiosity and contrasts their admitted ignorance with the truths of Christ he positively knows and will proclaim to the Athenians. The only "common ground" seen here is to use their cultural artefacts to show forth their ignorance of God in order to launch forth the proclamation of the Gospel.

What about the two quotations of the pagan poets by Paul? Here however Paul gives no grounds to the Athenians. Rather, his quoting of the pagan poets was appropriated for the Gospel message, not an accommodating to the poets at all, in the same way as John used the word *logos* and turned the concept upside down from the Greek point of view.

The first quotation "In him we live and move and have our being" is stated to be from Epimenides of Crete⁷. In its original context it is talking about Zeus. However, we can see in context that Paul uses the phrase to refer to the fact that we can come to know God; that "God is not far from each one of us". Paul is thus using the words of the pagan poet as an unconscious reflection of the truths of General Revelation which they consciously reject. Although the Athenians have rejected God and are thoroughly pagan, yet remnants of General Revelation still remain (cf Rom. 1:18-23). The Greeks knew that God can be known, yet they twist that into a pantheistic idea of God permeating the creation. Paul eviscerates the quote (if it is one which I do think it is) of its original meaning to show the General Revelation that the Greeks have rejected in their sinfulness.

Such a reading can also be applied to the second explicit quotation in the later part of verse 28. The original intent was to say that the Greeks especially were Zeus' offspring. Instead, Paul took the same saying and showed that the Greeks had an idea of being created by God, although they twisted it into making an immanent finite deity Zeus their creator.

The whole sermon by Paul at the Aeropagus therefore was not in any way "contextualized". As much of the Gospel was preached by Paul before the Greeks could not stand it any longer. Even before arriving at the Gospel proper, the Greeks were offended by Paul's teaching of such ideas as [the highest] God [of spirit] being the Creator [of matter], the idea of **bodily** resurrection, of final judgment, of them not being special above other nations etc. The Gospel cuts and offends those who are perishing, while bringing salvation to those who repent and believe, and this two-fold response can be seen in verses 32-34.

Paul's sermon at the Aeropagus has nothing to do with contextualization with the Greco-Roman framework. His message was a thoroughly Jewish Messianic one which is indeed foolishness to Greeks

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35

⁷ See *Ibid.*, 56-57 for discussion regarding whether it really is a citation

(ii) Contextualization in the early church?

As we move away from the apostolic era, error of course starts to creep in, thus the various controversies in the churches. The Gnostic error of Docetism came in early, of which it is likely that the epistles of John were written to combat it. The Gnostic heresies are the epitome of any capitulation to Greco-Roman religions and philosophies, and the church did not accede to it at any time, kicking out Marcion and the Valentinians from the church⁸.

Of course, it cannot be doubted that some form of syncretism happened especially in the person and teachings of Origen⁹. However, even then there was controversy as some churches reject Origen's teachings. At the Reformation, the battle cry of *ad fontes* expunged as much as possible pagan teachings that has infiltrated the church between the apostolic age and then, and seeks as much as possible to obey Scripture alone.

So while there is some contextualization in the ancient churches, by and large the compromise was slow and not contested. Since the Reformation removed as much of pagan infiltration into the churches as possible, it is not true that there is a capitulation to any kind of so-called Greco-Roman framework within the Christian church in general.

The truth behind the evangelism of the West

Implicit in Pagolu's article is the idea that "the West" as defined by those following in the Greco-Roman tradition was its culture of rationalistic and analytical philosophy. The West somehow was never truly "spiritual" in the sense that the East or Asia is "spiritual". Pointing to the fact that "there is the practice of the offering of joss sticks, meat and other kinds of food to ancestral and other spirits at home and at the workplace" in Asian culture, Pagolu had the idea that the West was never liked that at all. So the West is identified with rationalism and analytical philosophy, while the East is identified with spirituality.

The problem with such a dichotomy is that one wouldn't recognize it in pre-Christian Western culture. While Greco-Roman philosophy is indeed somewhat rationalistic and has some unique features, one can get similar philosophies in China (i.e. Confucious, Mencius etc) or India with her many philosophers. The Franks and Goths were animists, the Greeks were pantheists or polytheists, the Egyptians were also polytheists. Before Christ, are there really any features in the East that cannot be found in the West? Joss sticks? Incense is offered in almost every religion. Union with the divine? You can even find that in Eastern Orthodoxy in their doctrine of *theosis*. Offering food to idols? That is even addressed clearly in the Bible!

There is thus no real substantial difference between what the early church faced and what we see now in Asia. Yet we see the apostolic method remained the same. Paul preached the Gospel in Jerusalem among the Jews, he preached the Gospel to the Syrians in Damascus, he preached the same Gospel in Athens, he preached the same Gospel ... everywhere he went. Do we see Paul

⁸ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London, England, UK: Penguin, 1967, 1993), 33-41

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-114, 180-181

coming up with an "Asia Minor" theology, a "Roman" theology, a "Grecian" theology, or even a "Spanish" theology (assuming he really did go to Spain as he had desired to do so - Rom. 15:24)? Are we so ethnocentric and arrogant that we think we need a special "Gospel" for Asia, as the "old Gospel" is somehow insufficient for the task God has send it out for?

Although the secularists can deny it all they want, the fact is that Christianity or rather the Christian world-view is the mother of Western civilization. It is Christianity that turns the West from what it was to what it now is¹⁰. Apart from Christ and His Gospel, the West would be no different from the East in terms of its worldviews and cultures.

The eternal Gospel is altogether sufficient for the task at hand

If we do not need a new theology for any and ever culture back then, we do not need any new theologies for our modern times either. The method of preaching of the Gospel is foolishness to many (1 Cor. 1:18-25), and it seems to Dr Pagolu too, as he insists on the need to "demonstrate the power of God in daily living". However, what exactly in Scripture is the power of God? It is to be found in the "foolishness of preaching" (της μωρίας του κηρυγματος) (1 Cor. 1:21), which is for those who are called both power and wisdom of God.

It is the Scriptures that show us the way of engaging the culture, indeed any culture. It is not so much how much "the faith" was able or unable "to influence places". We are not to influence places period! The Gospel is to be proclaimed although it is regarded as the most foolish thing to do! It is God who will save His elect through the preached Word, not for us to attempt new methods to being in the goats. God's sheep hear His voice (Jn. 10:4); they will come to faith through the instrument of His preached Word without the blasphemous actions of tampering with both the message and the means God has ordained through the creation of such "disciplines" as "Asian theology".

Dr. Pagolu states that "even if Christians succeed in winning the argument, intellectual efforts alone are incapable of persuading people to embrace the faith". That is most evidently true, but what exactly is the Gospel method in the first place? What is conversion and what is evangelism? If we truly believe in the Scriptures which claim divine sovereignty over every new birth (Jn. 3:8), then we know that evangelism is **never** about converting souls. Only God can covert souls; we can't. Evangelism is always about proclaiming the Gospel and showing people their sins before a holy God, the wrath of God upon their sins, and their need to flee to Christ for their salvation. The revivalism (a Western American phenomenon by the way) and Arminianism present in Dr. Pagolu's sentence is striking and gives us a hint why the Church is not making much progress in Asia. How can progress be made when we have bad theology permeating the churches? Is God honored by falsehoods about Him?

¹⁰ Greek philosophy does contribute somewhat in form to Western civilization. Yet, which of the major breakthroughs did Greek philosophy had a part to play in? Did Greek philosophy contribute anything to the idea of universal human rights, the stability of the family unit, the abolishing of slavery, education of the masses (as opposed to the elite only), the growth of free market enterprise, the "Protestant" work ethic, the absolute rule of law over kings and leaders of a nation (*Lex Rex*), the consistency of nature which science assumes, and most importantly the civilizing of the former barbarians (ie Goths Franks, Vikings etc)? None!

One holy, catholic faith

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:
And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary:
Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell:
The third day he rose again from the dead:
He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead:
I believe in the Holy Ghost:
I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints:
The forgiveness of sins:
The resurrection of the body:
And the life everlasting. Amen
(The Apostles' Creed)

The last nail in the coffin for "Asian theology" is the fact that Christ is one and His Church is one. We believe in one holy and *katholic* (καθολικός, -η, -ο) or universal church, and therefore one holy and universal faith. The Faith is one, not many. The last thing we want is to balkanize the church into competing theologies, one for every people group.

The same Gospel that is preached to the Jews is the same Gospel that is preached to the Greeks, the same Gospel that is preached to the Brits, to the Chinese, Japanese, Tibetans, Uighurs etc. There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism (Eph. 4:5), NOT many faiths, many baptisms and one Lord. This catholicity goes through time as well, and it is incredible how much is being embraced by the Asian churches that have neither basis in Scripture nor tradition.

An Alternate Proposal: Sound Doctrine is Critical to Christianity's Expansion

While anecdotal evidence is always fallacious, they can serve as good illustrations of the truth. The early church turned the world upside down with **one** Gospel, NOT many theologies. The Reformation destroyed the grip of the papacy over entire countries and was on its way to conquering France if not for the severe persecutions by the Romanists starting with the St. Bartholomew Day's massacre on to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes among other factors. This same Gospel which is the power of God unto salvation will never fail in its task (Is. 55: 10-11, Rom. 10:17, Heb. 4:12) and it does not need our embellishing and "contextualization" at all. We do not need more "signs and wonders" and more "relational evangelism" (as if wordless evangelism ever existed). We need more Christians to understand the Gospel, to understand the whole counsel of God, and to live out these truths. Therefore, we need sound doctrine in the churches, not the mush that passes for instruction especially in Singapore churches. As God's people in the past perish for lack of knowing God's Word (Hosea 4:6), knowing God's Word will be critical for Christianity's very existence, nevermind growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article is manifestly in error. There is no need for any "Asian theology" or "contextualization", both of which are manifestly unbiblical and ahistorical. Rather, the problem with Asia is that the churches are weak. Many are in the state described in Hosea 4:6 and have embraced many errors. False teachers and teachings permeate the churches. For how can we expect God's blessings on us when we tolerate [the equivalent of] Jezebels and Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:12-29) in our midst?

May God grant us a revival of His Word and of sound doctrines in the churches. Amen.