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**Lecture organized by the Centre for Asian Theology
Emmanuel College, Victoria University
Toronto, 2 October 2014**

**Subaltern Challenges from Asia to the Ecumenical Movement: Through an Indian
feminist lens***

Introduction:

Ecumenical cooperation and joint action have been a hallmark of the life of the churches in Asia and it is important to acknowledge the many positive experiences of the churches in their search for unity and ecumenical action – there are records of important dates and descriptions of institutional ecumenical formations that emerged during the past decades, in response to the political, social and cultural challenges at each period in history, right from the times when the majority of the churches in Asia were still in formation.¹ Christians, who are a minority in most Asian countries, have recognized the need for working together if they are to have an impact on Asian societies. Today, I will not reiterate the history of the ecumenical ventures, I will instead raise some of the challenges in the history and how this impacts ecumenical cooperation today.

The present Christian Conference of Asia (originally East Asia Christian Conference) was formed in 1949 and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) was officially constituted in 1972 - both have, since their inception, cooperated with other ecumenical bodies in Asia. The global youth movements, the World Young Women's Christian Association, (1844); the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (1854); and the World Student Christian Federation (1895); all of which in their regional formation brought Asian Christian young people together, inspired by Christian convictions and a missionary zeal. They continue to play an important role as is pertinent to the present context.

More recently, apart from the more formal and institutional efforts at ecumenical engagement, there are many initiatives by groups of Christians, most often working with people of other faiths, outside the frame of the institutional churches or ecumenical organisations. Some of these include the Asian Women's Resource Centre and its journal *In God's Image*; the Asian Commission on Human Rights, EASY Net – a web based network of youth and students (both Protestant and Roman Catholic), as well as the Peace for Life network to name a few. These are all signs of a new ecumenism.

The churches in Asia:

It is important to briefly address the history of the churches in Asia, though it is beyond the scope of this talk to go deep into this. Suffice it to say that there has been recent contestation of the way in which the history of the Asian churches has been recorded. The churches in Asia are often depicted as having their origins in the Western Missionary movements some

have said that in recent years the centre of Christianity is “moving to the South”. Ninan Koshy challenges this assumption by quoting the historian K.M. Panikkar:

Christianity has existed in different parts of Persia, India and China from the earliest times. The church in Malabar claims apostolic origin from St. Thomas, and in any case its existence is attested by outside authority as early as AD 182. The Nestorians were a flourishing community in Persia and we have evidence of the Sianfu tablet, discovered in 1695 that Nestorian Christians had reached China in the 7th century.²

It can be deduced that Nestorian merchants and missionaries as well as other than Nestorians from East Syria came to India in those early decades. Panikkar, speaks of crosses and inscriptions from the 6th century that have been found in Sri Lanka, Tibet and South China; Syriac literature found in South Asia and West China; relics in Burma and Malaysia and contemporary manuscript evidence of Christian activity in Syria, Iran, Turkmenistan, Indo-China, Sumatra and North and East China.³

Mission history and the anticipation of the ecumenical movement:

The other significant stream of Asian Christianity is connected with missionary activity that coincided with the colonization project and the establishment of European powers in Asia. Historians, theologians and missiologists all affirm the missionary movement’s contributions to the growth of Christianity in Asia and to its institutional life. Perhaps the most significant of the contributions of the missionary movement was in the area of conversions to Christianity which many of the poor and outcaste in Asia saw as a form of social mobility in a context of religious and ritual discrimination.

The missionary movement in Asia could be said to have impacted the ecumenical movement in two ways which contradict one another. Firstly, it brought to Asia inherited denominational identities thus affecting the ecumenical spirit of the churches. Many critique the European brand of Christianity that came to Asia with its denominationalism. C.H.Hwang from China for example wrote:

The sad thing is that, before becoming first a confessing Church in the missionary situation, the younger churches were prematurely projected into a “confessional” situation which was not their own, before they became a Community of Christ they were told to become a Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist or Anglican church.”⁴

Secondly, ironically it is that same missionary movement, which played a pivotal role in nurturing cooperation and unity among the churches. An important landmark in mission history is the World Missionary Conference which was held in Edinburgh, in 1910. This was the first major truly ecumenical effort when different denominations, with their own mission work in different parts of the world, including Asia, came together to reflect on the possibility of increased cooperation and unity in their efforts paving the way for the formation of the World Council of Churches, among others. At Edinburgh 1910, the Asian presence was insignificant in numerical strength, yet the clear and challenging voice of Asia was heard. Among them, V.S. Azariah of the still in formation Church of South India, spoke

passionately for a new understanding of inter-church cooperation where partnership and friendship rather than paternal relationships would be the governing principle. He, with other Asians, made strong pleas for autonomy and for an Asian brand of Christianity, with the possibility for local forms of worship and spirituality. There was another Asian voice there - the 28 year old pastor from China, Cheng Jingyi who had urged the conference to not be afraid to allow the Chinese church to sustain and manage its own life, as it tries to build a non-denominational church.⁵

M.M. Thomas, recognizes the inevitable link between Asia and western culture because of the years of colonial rule in different parts of Asia, but also affirms that as Christians in Asia we are called to critical engagement with the national aspirations of Asian nations as churches together:

Christians need not be apologetic about their connection with western culture. But Christians have to be apologetic about their uncritical approach to western culture. Today, when our national goals are western, we are not able to critically evaluate them in the name of Christ...our contribution to “secular” ecumenism depends on our having a “Christian” ecumenism ourselves.”⁶

The ecumenical movement in Asia has attempted to define what ecumenism means to their life and witness in Asia, in a multi religious context where, in most nations, Christians are a minority. Situated in the midst of great living faiths, Christians in Asia have contributed skilled leadership and theological freshness to ecumenical discussions on dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths - Stanley Samartha and Wesley Ariarajah being outstanding examples of this.

A new time – new challenges:

Today there is an urgent need for the global ecumenical movement to redefine itself in the context of the diminishing power and influence of the churches in the West. This is mainly due to their reducing numerical strength and due to the increasing disenchantment with religion and with the institutional church in many European countries and perhaps in North America too (please correct me if I am making a wrong assumption about Canada). Added to this are the tensions faced by the Eastern family of Orthodox churches due to geo-political changes with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, as well as internal power struggles within those churches. The increasing neo-liberal economic and political policies of governments and the growth of the political and religious right is also having its impact on the churches in the global north as well as on the ecumenical movement, forcing them to “let go” of many of their initial commitments to justice and partnership with the global south. This has definitely had a bearing on the Asian churches, who have not always been strong enough to assert an alternate vision. Today with the increasing religious fundamentalism and conservatism in the dominant religions in Asia (as also in Christianity); the churches’ confidence in their strength and creative contributions to global ecumenism has become rather fragile – many focus all their energy on their own survival – even as they grow in numbers, establishing the fact that growth in numbers is not an adequate sign of a vibrant and engaged church!

A “new ecumenism” in Asia – reemergence of an Asian voice:

“There is a felt need for a rethinking of the ecumenical enterprise against the background of manifold and complex challenges. There are calls for a “new ecumenism”⁷ – the ecumenical movement in Asia has the opportunity to go back to its foundations and recommit itself to contribute this renewal movement.

There is hope yet because Asian church leaders and theologians made a successful intervention on the global ecumenical stage in determining the theme of the last Assembly of the World Council of Churches which was held in Busan, South Korea, in 2013. The South Korean churches with representatives from other Asian countries came well prepared to the WCC central committee meeting in Geneva in February 2011– having had a preliminary discussion to reflect on a possible theme. The document they came with persuaded the 150 strong, globally and ecumenically constituted, central committee that the theme must include the words ‘justice and peace’. In spite of resistance from some quarters the theme finally approved was, **“God of life, lead us to justice and peace”**. The Asian theologians and leaders who met in South Korea wrote: “An exclusive accent on justice at an Assembly taking place in a diverse and multi-faith context such as Asia, which is featured by strife and struggles for justice, is likely to throw light on many creative possibilities for the ecumenical movement to discover itself afresh as it engages in conversation with global realities and the challenges that Asia so well represents.”⁸

Jooseop Keum from South Korea who is the present director of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Mission and Evangelism, describes the ecumenical imperative for justice with these strong words, “Any concept of unity that does not begin with the need of restoring and addressing the question of justice is in danger of becoming merely an approximation of the dynamics of power relations..... While being cautious about notions of unity which thrive on the co-option of the weak, we can re-conceive unity as solidarity, even widening it to include the oppressor but on the precondition of his/her commitment to be just and to restore justice.”⁹

Asia spoke and the world listened! The themes “justice and peace” have never been explicitly stated as a part of a WCC Assembly theme in its history spanning over six decades (Busan 2013 was the WCC’s 10th Assembly). Justice and peace have been largely viewed as programmatic foci of the WCC and several attempts to make them an integral part of the search for conciliar unity have been only partially successful. The significance of this victory on the theme is bigger than on first sight – the concern for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is severely under threat in the global ecumenical arena. Today, there are strong currents within the WCC that would assert that these are not core theological principles in the search for unity of the churches or in their mission to the world, but that it is a specialised ministry of the churches and therefore the domain of development agencies. These life and death concerns for millions in our world are fading in ecumenical debates. The Assembly theme can be said to be a kairos moment for Asia, in its making a tangible contribution to the

development of new theological, liturgical, missiological and spiritual resources for the global ecumenical movement. Whether the opportunity was grasped is to be seen.

Emergence of subaltern voices:

A second sign of hope in Asia for the birth of a “new ecumenism” is in the coming to life of subaltern voices in Asia. The word subaltern here refers to those relegated to the margins of society because of their race, gender, caste, ethnicity, and in recent times, sexual orientation. To this we could add the earth itself. One cannot underestimate the significance of the growing strength of movements of Indigenous Peoples (Aboriginals, Tribals, Adivasis, Maoris etc.) and Dalits, Burakamin, women, youth, LBGTQ communities, and other subaltern identities in different parts of Asia. Asian churches are still caught in the stranglehold of a colonial past, but the agency of subaltern communities to break through the bastions of conservatism is evident in the new movements as well as in writings and theological challenges coming from these communities. This is an important contribution from the Asian ecumenical movement, to Asian society and to the global ecumenical movement:

To that extent, Asian ecumenism has time and again, upheld that its purpose is neither to serve the institutional interests of the churches nor Christian interests alone, but essentially to serve the cause of justice, peace and life, and to transform situations through critical and creative engagement in partnership with others. It has asserted that ecumenism is not about overcoming diversity and difference but celebrating diversity, and being able to live with differences guided by the values of openness and inclusivity. It has also drawn on Asian theologies with the conviction that the western ecclesiastical theological resources formulated mainly for the sake of Christian ecclesiastical interests cannot address the complex existential realities of our world today. To that extent, it has opted for theologies arising out of struggles for life. Minjung Theology in Korea, Dalit theology in India, theology of Struggle in the Philippines, theology of Homeland in Taiwan, Asian Feminist theologies, theology of Tribal peoples as well as many indigenous and contextual theologies, are but a few to mention.¹⁰

Deenabandhu Manchala, an eminent Dalit theologian asks very pertinently,

If the purpose of Christian unity is to witness together the ‘one hope, one lord, one faith and one baptism’How do we account for the shameful reality of churches organised along racial and ethnic identities, the practise of caste discrimination and the exclusion of Dalits, and the insensitivity towards the rejection of people living with disabilities....The reality of these abhorrent practices exposes the shallowness of our concepts and of efforts towards interchurch cooperation. This is where Dalit theological and ecclesiological reflections with their strong accent on justice, equality, and human dignity, can contribute to the discourse on Christian unity.¹¹

His assertion has to be placed against the backdrop of the nature of the church in South Asia in which it is estimated that over 80% of the members are Dalits. The issue of conversions

has been a contested ecumenical theme on the global arena, particularly in the frame of inter-faith dialogue and relations. However, Dalit theologians in India would claim that “Dalit conversions from Hinduism has been an important form of Dalit dissent. The conversion weapon has been dexterously used by Dalits against the upper castes ‘whenever they have been subjected to limits of their endurance in the area of social discrimination as well as economic exploitation’.¹² Mass conversions to Christianity which was often done on the behest of oppressed outcaste groups themselves, challenged not just the upper caste Hindus, but even upper caste converts to Christianity and even the missionaries.¹³ Ironically, this history gets scant mention. Is it any wonder then that enlightened Dalit laity, clergy and ecclesial heads would claim that they cherish more the sense of unity with Dalits of other faiths than with Christians, who they believe are unable to understand fully the Dalit pathos and struggle? This understanding of oneness in solidarity expands the frame of ecumenism. To the Dalit resurgence one can add the movements of Aboriginal and Indigenous Peoples in all parts of Asia, Koreans living in Japan, Burakamin – all of whom are making their mark by challenging traditional ecclesial and theological structures – thus paving a way for new forms of ecumenical partnership and unity.

Asian women’s contributions from a post-colonial perspective:

Asian women have contributed significantly to the ecumenical movement. I mentioned the Asian Women’s Resource Centre earlier as a tangible expression of how women have come together crossing theological positions and social locations to voice an alternative theology. Asian feminist post-colonial scholars and theologians such as Kwok Pui Lan and Mrinalini Sebastian have made a mark on the global scene. In Asia feminism has seen itself as a movement not just for a transformed world for women but for all men and women in this society and for the earth itself. Women have cautioned against sweeping generalizations and urge recognition of the many forms of feminism as they exist in Asia. Generalizations only aggravate tensions between women along lines of class, caste, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Universalising feminism will only make it exclusionary. The use of the words “feminist” and “feminism” do not come easily in Asia – especially in the churches. Some efforts have been made to find more “appropriate” words, including the word “womanist” which is used by some Dalit women. I have personally preferred to continue to use the term “Indian feminist” to describe myself, as I believe, it is theologically and ideologically a holistic word, referring to the opposition to all systems of graded subjugation (gender, caste, class, sexual orientation and of the earth as “the new poor”) all of which are rooted in patriarchy.

Eco-centered spirituality and theology:

All over Asia the most popular words today are “economic development” as nations vie with each other to be counted among the so called “Developed” countries. The earth has been the first victim of this. Last year I was in Jeju Island off the coast of South Korea where Samsung is building a naval base for the storing of nuclear weapons, for the US. I saw pillions, several tons in weight, being dropped into the ocean destroying the fragile coral reef and other sea life, in that region – and in one swoop destroying not just the environment but the lives and

well-being of the largely fishing community who live on that island. This goes on in spite of strong protests of the people who have coexisted peacefully with the land and sea for centuries. In India one of the first executive actions, of the new Prime Minister of India was signing his government's approval for raising of the height by another 17 metres, the now well known Sardar Sarovar Dam on the river Narmada, in the western state of Gujarat. This implies that another over 7000 Indigenous Peoples will lose their homes, their ancestral lands and their way of life. Yesterday I read that Coca Cola has been given access to the waters of the Narmada – they will use 3 million litres of water a day for their bottling plant in that state. (This, even as Coca Cola is being sued in the Supreme Court of India for exploiting water sources in Plachimada in Kerala in South India!) Women in many parts of India still walk distances for safe drinking water!

These moves have been strongly condemned and protested by Indigenous Peoples and Dalits, environmentalists, scientists and human rights activists, who have engaged in the struggle to protect the river Narmada and other ancestral lands of the people for several decades now. I could add to the list - what mining companies are doing (including Canadian mining companies such as Rio Tinto Alcan) on Indigenous Peoples' lands in the state of Orissa in India. These are but a few examples of what is happening all over Asia in the name of development! What is important is that local people in each case are protesting these projects. The churches and the ecumenical movement have been active in their solidarity with people in their struggles.

Asian eco-theology offers two strong principles for developing a new relationship with the earth – the first is the recognition of the immanence of God in the earth; a spirituality which does not separate the Creator from creation – the earth as the body of God; and secondly the call for a “non-anthropocentric anthropology that affirms the being and becoming of a new humanity in the community of creation.”¹⁴

Such a world view would put the onus on humanity to develop a political and ethical praxis for living in right relationships with each other and with the earth; and more importantly, would affirm the moral agency of the subaltern, the dispossessed, to subvert, to resist and live towards alternatives. This demands the moral responsibility of theologians to stay in conversation with social movements and recognize them as theological text.¹⁵

Ecumenical spirit inspired by a social gospel!

Ecumenical history in Asia has been dotted with important efforts by Christians to come together to make a difference and contribute to global ecumenism. And yet, it is a fact that individual churches have become more and more preoccupied with their institutional survival and have been unable to make their presence felt in a compelling new way in Asian societies especially in those places where their rights and even existence are being threatened by majority religions. In such a context it is the efforts of subaltern communities, as described above that is the hope! It is their attempts to forge a new ecumenical spirit through joint

actions and reflections that have kept alive the hope embedded in the Christian gospel to shape an ecumenical vision for Asia in response to the struggles for justice and life.

Endnotes:

*Some of the research for the first part of this paper was done for my article published in “The Contributions of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia to World Ecumenism” in The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia ed. Felix Wilfred, Oxford Handbooks in Religion and Theology, July 2014.

¹ See particularly Koshy, Ninan, 2004, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia, Volumes I and II*. World Student Christian Federation Asia Pacific Region, Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCA's, Christian Conference of Asia, Hong Kong; China Christian Conference of Asia, Hong Kong, 2005, *Windows into Ecumenism, Essays in Honour of Ahn Jae Wong*; Fey, Harold C. (Ed.) 1970, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement Vol. 2. 1948-1968*, World Council of Churches, Geneva; Lossky Nicholas, Bonino, Jose Miguez et al, (Eds.) 2002, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Second Edition, World Council of Churches, Geneva.

² Koshy is quoting the eminent historian K.M. Panikkar who in his book *Asia and Western Dominance*, (George Allen and Unwin London, 1953), writes history from the underside, from the perspective of what was happening in Asian Christianity before the missionary movement made inroads into this continent. p. 10

³ Ibid p. 11

⁴ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Out of all Continents and Nations: A Review of Regional Developments in the Ecumenical Movement*, A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 2, 1948-1968 Ed. Harold C.Fey, pp. 72-72

⁵ Stanley, Brian, 2009, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions, William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK. pp. 108-109

⁶ MM Thomas, *The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in Asia*, Papers and Minutes of the EACC. Prapat, Indonesia, 1957, quoted by Ninan Koshy, 2004, p.28.

⁷ Ninan Koshy, Ibid, p. 28.

⁸ A theme proposal for the WCC 10th Assembly (Busan, 2013), from the Korean Assembly Planning Committee and the Christian Conference of Asia The Korean Assembly Planning Committee (KAPC) for the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in partnership with the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and WCC's Asia Desk, convened a Theological Consultation in Hotel Academy House, Seoul, Korea from 10 to 12 November 2010, with a

view to propose a theme for the Assembly from an Asian perspective that would be relevant for the global ecumenical community as it gathers in Busan to discern its vocation and direction in 2013 and beyond. The fifty two participants invited from Australia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Korea included some theologians from evangelical and Pentecostal churches in South Korea. Manuscript.

⁹ Jooseop Keum, Paper presented at Mission 21 (the former Basel Mission of the Reformed Churches in Switzerland). Manuscript.

¹⁰ From the report of the theme proposal for the WCC 10th Assembly 2013. Op. cit.

¹¹ Deenabandhu Manchala in Clarke Sathianathan, Manchala, Deenabandhu, Peacock, Philip Vinod, 2010, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century, Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p. 44

¹² Peniel Rufus Jesudason, a Dalit theologian from India has written extensively on conversion as a tool for resistance in his article in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century, Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*. Op cit. He urged in a presentation that we not “buy into the rhetoric of inducement” that is often thrust on Dalits as the reason for their conversions. pp 55-73.

¹³ See for instance Stanley, Brian, 2009, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions, William B. Eerdmann’s Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK. pp. 153-154

¹⁴ George Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots*, London, Oakville: Equinox, 2011.

¹⁵ Op cit.