INTRODUCTION, AND SOME THOUGHTS ON ASIAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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‘Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his Ramayana?’ asked Jagan with pugnacity, ‘Strange, notions these boys get nowadays!’, he said avoiding gently any specific reference to his son.
R.K. Narayan, The Vendor of Sweets

O, my shoes are Japanese
These trousers English if you please
The red cap on my head is Russian
In spite of all my heart is Indian

Song from the hindi film Sri 420

This volume, like Asia itself, reflects a multiple reality, and the essays included emanate from diverse Asian cultural and religious traditions, including Hinduism (Premnath, Samartha), Confucianism, Shintoism and Buddhism (Lee, Yeo, Kinukawa and Soares-Prabhu). Though the essayists address different needs, they all work to make sense of an Asian reality which abounds in multiple religious texts. What I propose to do, as a way of introducing this volume, is to highlight some of the issues faced by Asian biblical interpreters and try to move the debate a step further.

Searching for Reading Methods

The first thing that strikes anyone who surveys the Asian hermeneutical output is that Asian biblical interpreters have yet to come up with a distinctive Asian mode of reading. Asian cultures have contributed enormously to human enrichment in other fields. There is music, dance, drama, cooking, and puppet plays, all of which are manifestly Indian, Chinese, Korean, Filipino and Japanese in content, style and flavour. But when it comes to biblical interpretation and evolving reading practices, why are we so unoriginal? We are clearly aware of, and frequently lament the lack of any genuine Asian reading practice, yet we have still to work out alternative indigenous reading theories.
Current Asian biblical interpretations could be roughly categorised under two headings—"metropolitan" and "vernacular." Metropolitan reading is accentuated by the hermeneutical arena becoming, to borrow a phrase from Roland Robertson, "a single place." His reference was made in the light of the rapid globalization caused by transnational corporations and the global diffusion of mass media, which are creating a common context and breaking down national and cultural barriers. This single global effect is very much in evidence in the field of biblical interpretation. To use Kosuke Koyama's phrase, western hermeneutics has attained a "working universality." Interpreters may be from Madras or Seoul or Berkeley but they are part of a metropolitan family and share a collective hermeneutical experience. Their life-styles, modes of thought and exegetical practices are shaped by academies in metropolitan centres such as Chicago, Princeton or Yale. They read the same authors. They are introduced to standard exegetical procedures which include alleged objectivity, and the use of a wide variety of historical, literary, grammatical, philosophical and social scientific methods to recover the meaning of a text. In fact, they are closer in spirit to their colleagues thousands of miles away from them than to their grandparents who live nearby.

Some of the recent exciting approaches to Asian exegesis, such as minjung, dalit, and burakumin, may appear to be original Korean, Indian or Japanese products, yet in a very subtle manner they are based on and re-work western models. In other words, methodological and theoretical approaches worked out and originating in western academies are creatively put to use to meet Asian needs. As Clooney and Segovia rightly point out, most of the essays here are still influenced by various derivatives of the historical method which at the moment is undergoing vigorous re-appraisal in the west. Hitherto we have been the consumers of these methods and have not felt the need to transform them in a distinctively Asian direction. We may invoke what the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe said of the colonialized use of English and assert that we have done unheard

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