TWO MISSION COMMANDS

An Interpretation of Matthew 28:16-20
in the Light of a Buddhist Text

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As important for the Asian theologian as what Juan Luis Segundo has called the ‘liberation of theology’ has been the postmodern liberation of biblical exegesis. Critical biblical exegesis has been ‘liberated’ from the straight-jacket of the historical critical method to which it was, since its origins, tightly confined; and it is this liberation which has made an Asian interpretation of the Bible possible. Historical criticism emerged as part of the great intellectual revolution of 16th and 17th century Europe in which the modern world was born. It became a part of the dominant ideology of the modern West, and till about thirty years ago was the only method of biblical interpretation recognized as legitimate by the academy. With its pretended objectivity (which tried to emulate the objectivity of the natural sciences), and its precise, univocal understanding of the
meaning of a text (which it identified with its "authorial meaning," what the author intended to say), historical criticism aimed at being a rigorously "objective" method. It purported to disclose the one true meaning of a text through the skilful use of its precisely crafted philological, grammatical and historical tools, without being influenced in any way by the concerns of the interpreter. By bracketing out these concerns, the method aspired to be a universally valid, "scientific" method, without cultural particularity or denominational bias. Like modern science, the method admitted no cultural variants. It was always and everywhere the same.

As long as historical criticism remained the dominant method of biblical exegesis one could, therefore, no more attempt an "Asian" interpretation of the Bible than one could hope to elaborate, say, an Asian physics. The application of a biblical text (that is, the spelling out its "significance" for the reader) might differ from place to place. But its exegesis (the disclosure of its "meaning") would always follow the standard procedures of historical criticism. Attempts at a contextualized interpretation were dismissed by historical critics as uncritical "readings" (lectures in French), which might serve pastoral purposes, but had no place in the serious, "critical" exegesis of the academy.

The Legitimacy of an Asian Interpretation

The situation is very different today, because historical criticism is no longer the dominant model of biblical exegesis in a postmodern world. It has been dethroned by new developments in philosophical hermeneutics and a new postmodern climate which has given up the "positivistic ideal of a scientific realm freed from all interpretation," which used to be the mythos or the unifying narrative of the modern world.

New developments in hermeneutical theory have recognized the fact that a text (1) because of its linguistic structure, enjoys semantic autonomy, that is, has a "textual meaning" (what the words of the text actually say), which is not limited by what the author may have intended; and (2) because of the natural polysemy of language, has a surplus of meaning, that is, is open to different interpretations by