
The editor has done future researchers a great service by providing a ‘sourcebook’ consisting of 27 dissertations focusing on the work of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences which was formed shortly after the visit of Pope Paul VI to Asia in 1970. The dissertations cover the period from 1985 to 2008. They are particularly significant considering that FABC represents the face and voice of Asian Catholicism. As Kroeger puts it in the Introduction, the collection ‘preserves the most important theological writings of the Asian Churches in the post-Vatican II period.’ The topics covered are wide-ranging: the role of the laity (nos. 4, 14, 16, 23), the theology of liberation and social engagement (nos. 2, 5, 9), mission (nos. 13, 18), evangelization (nos. 7, 8, 10, 27), inculturation (nos. 6, 25), the church (nos. 1, 11, 21, 22), Christology (no. 12), spirituality for the laity (no. 14), inter-religious dialogue (nos.15, 19, 26), and the priesthood and the religious life (nos. 17, 20, 24). Seven of the dissertations have been published as books (nos. 3, 11, 12, 13, 19, 22, and 24). The general orientation of these dissertations appears to be towards the socio-political aspects of the Asian contexts rather than the ethnographic (the use Schreiter’s distinction). This is broadly in line with what we see in the documents produced by the FABC over the years.

For each dissertation the editor has included the title page, the full table of contents, and the complete bibliography of the original thesis (although some of them contain only a ‘select bibliography’). The table of contents, while giving us an idea of the thesis’ scope and structure, is often tantalizingly suggestive but does not reveal how the author’s arguments are developed substantially. The inclusion of an abstract or a brief introduction for each dissertation, therefore, would have increased its usefulness immeasurably.

Based on what the editor has offered us, one could make only a tentative assessment at best. Researchers will probably find the extensive bibliographies especially helpful. I hasten, however, to add a qualification. Although the bibliographies contain references to Western scholarship in varying extent, I suspect that most researchers are likely to find more value in the Asian sources cited than in the Western ones. The latter are often dated and incomplete. E.g., Abraham Kadaliyil’s Toward A Relational Spirit
Ecclesiology in Asia‘ omits important works in the field such as by Geoffrey Lampe, Ralph del Colle, and James Dunn. In two of the three dissertations on inter-religious dialogue (nos. 15 and 19) important works (such as Mark Heim’s) which have moved the discussion beyond the threefold paradigm (exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist) are not included. On the other hand, the strong presence of works by Küng, Hick, Knitter and the like seem to suggest that the old paradigm for understanding the religions is still operative. Similarly the treatment of ‘liberation theology’ appears to be somewhat dated and not very nuanced. The phrase may be appropriate in a country like the Philippines which shares certain commonalities with Latin American culture but is problematic when applied to Asia as a whole with its vastly divergent cultures, socio-political dynamics and ways of structuring relationships.

Two other broad impressions stand out. Kroeger in his Introduction states that the compilation hopes ‘to assist the local Churches of Asia grow and mature in their self-identity’. The dissertations reflect some aspects Asian self-identity quite clearly. One does get the distinct impression that the Catholic Church in Asia has been experiencing vigorous theological ferment since Vatican II. As Kroeger observes, FABC is ‘Asia’s Continuing Vatican II’. Vatican II not only opened the Church to needed change; it also unleashed forces within the Church which are unexpected and sometimes alarming. The dissertations in various ways reflect these changes and tensions that impact Catholicism in Asia. E.g., Edmund Chia’s ‘Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx’s Method as a Bridge between Vatican’s Dominus Iesus and Asia’s FABC’s Theology’ deals with a critical issue that continues to be debated within the Church. Thus on the whole, the works reveal something of the Asian face of the Catholic Church. But given what I have just said about the bibliographies, I cannot help feeling that these dissertations broadly represent an Asian Catholicism that is somewhat lagging behind its Western counterparts. They also seem to reflect more the face of liberal Catholicism than current official teaching.

A second impression is that while the Church is conscious of its relation to non-Christian religions, there is no dissertation in whole or in part that addresses relations with non-Catholic Christians. E.g., on the topic of ‘Evangelization in India’, which covers the period from 1970-1991, by Vincent Ezhanikatt (no. 6) one would have expected some reference to the Pentecostal movement and the impact of some of its salient teachings and practices (not to mention the charismatic renewal within the Catholic Church). Ezhanikatt presents various models of Jesus (Jesus the hope,