

## **CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH THE RELIGIONS OF ASIA**

By Dr. Bong Rin Ro<sup>1</sup>

Christianity is a minority religion in Asia. The vast majority of three billion people in Asia are influenced by their own traditional religions. These Asian religions have their own world view which control the minds and behavior of the people. Although Christian missions started in South Asia in the early centuries, the beginning of Protestant missions goes back to William Carey when he went to India in 1792. The gospel of Jesus Christ was introduced to most Asian countries in the nineteenth century.

During the Western colonial period starting from the sixteenth century, Christianity was riding on the wave of Western colonialism. Western powers controlled all Asian nations except three: Japan and Thailand were independent, and Korea was controlled by the Japanese. The gentry class of Asian nations was very much influenced by Western education and culture including Christianity; therefore, in spite of conflicts and clashes which often occurred between Christianity and the traditional religions of Asia, the Christian gospel was able to penetrate into the societies of Asian nations. As Christianity was the religion of Western nations, Westerners were generally considered "Christians" by Asians.

During the Cold War following the end of World War II, "Christian Europe and America" were combating the atheistic countries of Eastern Europe; it was a conflict between the "Christian West" and atheistic communism. Most of the Asian nations with strong traditional religions sided with the "Christian" West rather than with the atheistic Soviet Union and Communist China.

When national political independence came from the West, each nation was consolidating its own cultural mandate. As a result, there has been a resurgence of traditional cultures and values, including the revival of traditional religions. National governments have strongly promoted the resurgence of traditional cultures and religions in order to unify different tribes and languages against the pressing influences of

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Western culture and religion. As Western missionaries activated mission work which resulted in very rapid growth of the Church in different parts of Asia, many national political and religious leaders began to be alarmed by the intrusion of Christianity into their countries. As the Asian Church experienced rapid church growth, it began to experience increasing opposition and persecution.

## **CULTURAL CONFLICTS AFTER THE COLD WAR**

In 1993, Dr. Samuel Huntington, Director of the John M. Olin Institute for the Strategic Studies at Harvard University, wrote an essay entitled "The Clash of Civilization?" His argument was that, since the Cold War ended, ideological battle lines between communism and democracy are drawn away, and new divisions among six major great cultures are vying for their positions. He especially warned about the combined Confucian and Islamic cultures:

A Confucian-Islamic connection has emerged to challenge Western interests, values, and powers. . . . History shows that as countries industrialize rapidly they tend to become much more assertive. At times, they become expansionist and imperialist. It seems to me very likely that China will want to assert itself. . . . So naturally they want to resume what they view as their natural place in the world. And that will have destabilizing consequences.<sup>2</sup>

This cultural conflict between East and West is illustrated in a recent book, *The Voice of Asia*. Two renowned political leaders in Asia spoke loudly on the defense of their own Asian cultural values against the influx of Western culture into Asia. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's prime minister since 1981, and Mr. Shintaro Ishihara, a Japanese parliamentary member for over twenty-five years and who was the co-author (with SONY chairman Akio Morita) of *The Japan That Can Say No*, sharply criticized the West, especially the United States, for its cultural and economic intervention into Asian nations.

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<sup>2</sup>Samuel Huntington, "Watch Out for China," *Newsweek*, November 21, 1994, 62.

An American magazine, *World Press Review*, also carried an interview with these two political leaders in December 1995 entitled, "Will East Beat West?" They vehemently attacked Western domination of Asia with its economic, political, and cultural powers, and defended their strong feeling of nationalism and their own traditional culture--sentiments which represent the typical attitude of many political, socioeconomic, and educational leaders in Asia. Consequently, they ignited the cultural conflict between East and West. On the subjects of Christianity, economic power, and cultural values, Dr. Mohamad and Mr. Ishihara made the following statements. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said,

Modern Europe eclipsed Asia in terms of industrial strength, and the booty of imperialism gave it great economic and political power. Europeans felt they were a superior people with a superior culture and a duty to civilize the world, which meant, first of all converting people to Christianity. They reasoned that Europe's own prosperity stemmed from Christianity and that by spreading the faith they would be raising the general level of culture elsewhere, though this seems like flimsy logic to us now. Even today, Westerners generally cannot rid themselves of this sense of superiority. They still consider their values and political and economic systems better than any others. It would not be so bad if it stopped at that; it seems, however, that they will not be satisfied until they have forced other countries to adopt their ways as well. . . . I could go on and on, but the point is that, though the West has hardly been a paragon of democracy and justice, it feels it must criticize others. This groundless sense of superiority prevents the West from seeing the rationality in Eastern values.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Ishihara also challenged the West:

The fundamental difference between (Asians) and Westerners is that they used military and political power to force their culture, dressed up as "modernization," on areas and countries

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<sup>3</sup>Mahathir Mohamad and Shintaro Ishihara, "Will East Beat West?" *World Press Review*, December 1995, 6-7.

that rejected it. You must be flagrantly self-righteous--have no doubts about the superiority of your ways--to try to civilize foreigners. Their driving force behind Western expansionism was monotheistic Christianity. . . . Western workers feel they are selling their souls to the company to put bread on the table, whereas Asians perceive doing their job as an act of gratitude to the gods and Buddha for the blessings of life. To us, honest toil is a sacred obligation, but tell that to a European and he would think, "That's absurd." I suspect the average American cannot imagine this kind of gratefulness.<sup>4</sup>

This anti-Western attitude of these Asian political leaders has been manifested in two ways at the grassroots level. First, many Asian political leaders adopted policies to stop or to minimize the inflow of Western culture into their countries; secondly, they want to gradually eliminate the presence of Christian missionaries in their countries.

Against the mounting infiltration of Hollywood culture into the life style of so many young people in Asia today, Asian leaders are trying to protect their own cultural and moral values through their traditional religions. The moral decline of the West in terms of rising divorce rate and single parents, sexual revolution and teen-age pregnancy, drugs, and crime, Hollywood movies filled with sex and violence have been widely reported on the front pages of daily newspapers and magazines and other mass media in order to warn of the danger of the importation of Western culture. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had this to say:

The West has its cultural traditions, and I do not wish to suggest that Eastern logic and culture are always correct or appropriate. Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I failed to point out what I perceive as the West's moral degeneration. Although predominantly Christian, in recent times Western societies have witnessed an almost complete separation of religion from secular life and the gradual replacement of religious with hedonistic values. Materialism, secular gratification, and selfishness are rife. The people living in such milieu have nothing to hold on to. They are as uprooted and

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 10.

directionless as flotsam adrift in the ocean. Even their pleasure-seeking has begun to bore them, leaving them totally empty or addicted to the thrills of drugs and other vices. Surely these are the signs of an impending collapse.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Christianity has been accused by many Asians for its association with Western colonialism in the past and the present Western moral decline which has affected the moral degeneration of their own people. Whether this kind of argument against the West is correct is debatable; however, one thing is clear in Asia: Many secular and religious leaders in Asia today are threatened by the increasing Christian growth in their nations.

In fact, many religious fanatics are insisting that Christian activities (including those of foreign missionaries) in their countries must be carefully controlled by the government lest the Christians bring division and confusion among their own people. Hindu fanatics in India are emphasizing that "to be truly an Indian, one must be a Hindu." The foreign ministers of fifty-two Islamic nations agreed to implement a common religious policy to gradually reduce foreign missionaries in their countries by refusing visas to them as well as controlling Christian activities in their countries.

When we were in Taiwan for twelve years as missionaries, we observed the Taiwan government spending millions of dollars to renovate many historic Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian temples to attract tourists and promote Chinese traditional culture. One can easily see huge billboards on main streets of major cities with six big Chinese characters, "Let Us Revive Chinese Traditional Culture."

We have observed the increasing persecution against Christians, especially in the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Communist countries in Asia and Africa. Christians lose their jobs, are arrested and tortured for their faith, and even are secretly murdered by religious fanatics. For example, *Christianity Today* reports that since June 1996 at least fifty churches in Indonesia have been damaged or destroyed by the fanatic Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Several Iranian pastors were imprisoned and later secretly martyred in recent years. In October 1995, tens of thousands of Christians were captured and held as slaves in northern Sudan.<sup>7</sup> China,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ethan Casey, "A Nation out of Control," *Christianity Today*, March 3, 1997, 50-52.

<sup>7</sup>Brian Eads, "Slavery's Shameful Return to Africa," *Reader's Digest*, March 1996, 77-81.

North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam are known to have practiced Christian persecution for many years.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA) held a consultation, "Christian Suffering in Asia," in Hong Kong in April 1985 in order that the Asian Church would be able to prepare to meet the challenge of persecution. Later, a book, entitled *Christian Suffering in Asia*, was published in 1986 with ten major papers presented at the Hong Kong consultation.<sup>8</sup> Dr. James Dobson stated in his monthly letter (April 1997) that over 160,000 Christians became martyrs in 1996, and countless other Christians experienced terrible horrors. Members of the United States Congress became alarmed about torture and murder in several countries in Asia and Africa, and a House resolution which was passed in late September 1996 stated that the twentieth century has produced more Christian martyrs than the previous nineteen centuries put together. Dr. Dobson indicated that the persecution appears to be escalating exponentially. He asked Christians around the world to pray for these suffering Christians.<sup>9</sup> The World Evangelical Fellowship designates the last Sunday of every September as "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church."

## **EPHESUS PROJECT: BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF HEATHEN CULTURE**

There are at least three marked similarities between the city of Ephesus in the first century and major cities of Asia in the twentieth century. First, Ephesus was the largest city in Asia Minor with 500,000 people, the capital city in the Asia Minor province of the Roman Empire, and the center for commerce, education and culture in the first century. Likewise, Asia contains three billion people, representing approximately 60% of the world population. Asian streets are filled with people rubbing against each other.

Secondly, Ephesus was a religious city with the great temple of the goddess of Artemis (or Diana, according to the Romans) located just outside the city (Acts 19:23-41). This temple was considered to be one of the seven wonders in the ancient world. Likewise, Asia is the continent of the major living religions. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and many other religions with a pantheon

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<sup>8</sup>Bong Rin Ro, ed., *Christian Suffering in Asia*, Taiwan: Evangelical Fellowship of Asia, 1986.

<sup>9</sup>James Dobson, "Family News," *Focus on the Family*, April 1997, 1.

of gods and goddesses have filled the minds and hearts of Asians. Many Asians claim to be believers of their traditional religions, but their religious faith has little to do with their life-style.

Thirdly, Ephesus was a sinful city. Paul described Ephesus: "Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" (Eph 4:19). Likewise, Asian cities today are also filled with sexual immorality, crime, homicide, greed, bribery, and all kinds of unimaginable sins. What a challenge the city of Ephesus was to Paul in the first century, even as the cities of Asia are to the Christians today.

There are also some marked similarities between the Ephesian church and the churches in Asia. First, as the Ephesian church was a small congregation consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers, so also is the Asian Christian minority which represents only approximately 3-5% of 3 billion people. Besides the Philippines and Korea, the Christian population represents a very small minority of the total population in other nations of Asia.

Secondly, the Ephesian church was deeply divided between the circumcised and uncircumcised Christians in the same congregation (Eph 2:11-18). Likewise, the Christians in most Asian nations have also experienced schism and divisions among themselves according to denominations, ecumenical persuasion, and personality conflicts among leaders. This division among Christians in the nations has caused a negative testimony to the non-Christian society.

Thirdly, the Ephesian church was in need of spiritual leadership and of a consistent teaching ministry of the Word. Although there are some twenty different kinds of spiritual gifts given to Christians, Paul emphasized only five leadership gifts for this church: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers" (Eph 4:11). Paul gives his reasons for these leadership gifts of the church as being

. . . to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful

scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ (Eph 4:12-15).

Likewise, the Asian church needs dynamic spiritual leadership. While working for the Asia Theological Association for twenty years, I realized that the shortage of trained Asian church leaders was the most crucial problem for the Asian church.

Why did Paul emphasize the spiritual gifts of church leadership instead of other spiritual gifts? As he was walking the streets of Ephesus, praying for that big city, the Lord gave him the idea of leadership training in order to train other lay leaders to reach out to the large number of Ephesians. Likewise, the best method to encounter the vast number of Asians who have been affected by their traditional religions is the training of church leaders on both pastoral and lay levels. Asian Christians who understand their culture and religions are also able to reach out to their own people with the gospel.

## **HOW TO ENCOUNTER OTHER RELIGIONS**

### **Theological Issues at Stake**

First of all, it is mandatory for Christians to understand what they believe in regard to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Church; then, they must be able to know some of the major tenets of other religions in order to have intelligent conversation with other religionists. However, there has been theological confusion within the church, especially on the Christian interpretation of other religions. As this theological confusion exists among theologians, so does utter confusion exist among the laity of the church at the grassroots level.

The ecumenical leaders of the WCC have widely applied the syncretistic and pluralistic approaches to other religions. The Parliament of World Religions which met in Chicago in 1993 is a good example of the religious pluralism which liberal Protestant and Catholic leaders have been promoting for the last thirty years. The liberal syncretistic approach to other religions has been one of the reasons for the downfall of the modern missionary movement in mainline denominations in the West.

In response to the syncretistic approach, evangelical theologians around the world have organized theological consultations to deal with religious syncretism and pluralism. The Asia Theological Association has conducted theological consultations on the subjects of Asian theology, ancestor worship, God in Asian contexts, and salvation in Asian contexts. Several books have been published as a result of these consultations: *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, *God in Asian Contexts*, and *Salvation in Asian Contexts*.<sup>10</sup>

The World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission (WEF-TC) held a consultation in Manila in July 1992 on the subject, "The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World," with eighty-five participants from six continents. The WEF-TC published a monograph, entitled "An Evangelical Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ in Our Pluralistic World," and a book, entitled *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World*, which contains the major papers of the consultation.<sup>11</sup> The main theological theme in the twenty-first century will be on the relationship between Christianity and other living religions. Evangelical Christianity must win the theological battle on the uniqueness of Christ and the Bible in our pluralistic society.

### **The Need for Cross-Cultural Training**

Seminary education today needs to put more emphasis on cross-cultural training. The International Students Incorporated (ISI) reports that there are more than 500,000 international students and researchers in the United States, many of whom come from the countries with doors closed to foreign missionaries. Korea has more than 200,000 foreign factory workers from many developing countries in Asia and Africa, 60% of whom are illegal residents. Most of these foreign workers come from countries which are known as "the unreached peoples of the world." What an opportunity for Christian

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<sup>10</sup>Bong Rin Ro, ed., *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1987; Bong Rin Ro, ed., *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Worship*, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1987; Bong Rin Ro, ed., *God in Asian Contexts*, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1987; and Ken Gnanakan, ed., *Salvation in Asian Contexts*, Bangalore, India: Asia Theological Association, 1990.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce Nicholls, ed., *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World*, London: Paternoster Press, 1994.

churches in the West and Korea to reach out to these foreign visitors for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our theological education must be missiological and require more courses on religions and cross-cultural studies in the M.Div. curriculum.

I also strongly recommend that seminary students and professors, both in the West and Asia, need to have cross-cultural experiences by taking courses or teaching overseas for a semester or a year. For example, Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis has a joint program with Korean Lutheran Seminary in Suwon and sends seminarians and a professor to Korea to study theology and Asian religions for a semester in an Asian context.

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) in Deerfield and Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology (TTGST) in Seoul, Korea, have a joint program to offer courses for the M.A., M.Div., and Th.M. degrees from March 1997. Two professors from TEDS and eight Korean professors will teach at TTGST, using English as the medium of instruction. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and North Central Association (NCA) will evaluate TTGST in the near future to insure that the credits at both institutions can be mutually transferable. This joint program will also provide ample opportunities for American seminarians and professors to spend their time in Asia.

### **Importance of Christian Ethics**

One of the best ways to present the gospel of Jesus Christ to Asians is through the ethical life of the Christian. The high moral and ethical standard of the Christian community is doubly important in the non-Christian continent of Asia, because Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in Asia are able to see distinctive differences in the Christian lifestyle from theirs. One of my students in the Comparative Religions course at Tung Hai University in Taiwan asked, "Dr. Ro, how can Christians show that they are different from Buddhists in their moral standards?"

It is very common in Asia to observe bribery, corruption, cheating, immorality, injustice, and discrimination in society. Christians' honesty in business, respect for all members of the family, and love and concern for the poor and needy are very highly valued in

Asian cultures. Therefore, Christian lifestyle evangelism is often more important than verbal witnessing to non-Christians.

### **Christian Social Responsibility for the Nation**

Christian social responsibility is another important area in making an impact in society. Asian religions teach salvation by works-- i.e., by making contributions to individuals, society, and their nation. How much has the Christian Church contributed to the well-being of the society in terms of establishing hospitals, orphanages, senior citizen homes, and caring for those with special needs? The holistic approach to the nation and the people creates positive effects and images of Christianity to a non-Christian world and provides better soil for the gospel seed.

We are experiencing this issue in the Korean church. The missionaries and Korean churches established many hospitals, orphanages, and senior citizen homes, and supported the patriotic movement against Japanese colonialism (1910-45). The churches provided food and shelter for the poor and homeless during the Korean War (1950-53). The average Korean recognized the Christian contribution to the nation and was willing to listen to the message of the gospel.

Consequently, the Korean Church experienced rapid church growth at the rate of six new churches a day in the 1970s. And yet today, the Korean Church with 12 million Christians (25% of the total population) is experiencing a painful, slow growth of the church. Many non-Christians, as well as Christians, are asking a challenging question to the Christian Church: "What contributions does the Korean Church make for the well-being of the society and the nation?"

### **Aggressive Missionary Endeavor for Unreached Peoples**

Active commitment for world evangelization, particularly the unreached peoples of the world, must still be the mandate of the church. The aggressive missionary endeavor at the seminary level is still vitally important against the challenge of non-Christian religions. Many Christian churches and seminaries in the West have been defensive so

long in their approach to other religions and unreached peoples that they have been experiencing the decline of the church. The Asian Church is facing a similar challenge and is afraid of facing consequences similar to the Western church.

We need to take the offensive role in world evangelization by reemphasizing world missions at the heart of theological education and at the center of local church activities. Every seminary graduate must be fervent in world missions as he/she leaves the seminary and enters into the ministry of the local church. Christ's Great Commission still stands for the church today as it did for the Christians of the New Testament times.

### **Spiritual Battle**

Finally, we must realize that it is a spiritual battle between the Spirit of God and the gods of this world. As you walk on the streets of Asia, you can see, smell, touch, and feel the spiritual impact of the heathen religions of Asia. As Paul walked on the streets of Athens, Ephesus, and Rome, he was facing Satanic powers in those cities. He testified that he was not fighting "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

Thus, human strategy and effort for encountering Asian religions are hopeless and helpless. More church growth strategy and evangelism courses at the seminary alone are not sufficient, because we must understand that it is basically a spiritual battle with the spirits of heathen religions. Therefore, we need the whole armor of God to fight this spiritual battle (Eph 6). The word of the Lord to Zerubbabel through the prophet, Zechariah, was quite appropriate to the Christians of the twentieth century: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zech 4:6). The spiritual vitality of a Christian through prayer, fasting, and aggressive evangelism thrust can overcome the overwhelming pressures of the religions that exist in Asia today.