

Asian Christology will be Mahayana Christology

Some 50 years ago Karl Rahner remarked that the Church can become universal Church only when it opens itself to the Asian culture and philosophy. The Vatican Council gave the idea the impulse and inspiration. The Indian Church took the inspiration and there was a flurry of ideas and practices such as inculturation, ashrams and Indian theology as well as option for the poor and struggle for justice. However, all this seems to have been only a day-dream. The institutional Church has been back-tracking on the Council reforms and the Indian Church has fallen into the business-as-usual mentality. I do not feel that there will be any change of course in the near future, nor even in the distant one. But of course, the ways of the Spirit are unforeseeable, the wind will blow where it will.

Leaving apart the institutional Church's problems and politics, the core problem of Indian and Asian theology has been the failure to formulate and envision a viable, inspiring and creative Christology. The Indian Christian efflorescence was some ashram movement, some Indian motives and rites in the liturgy, some Indian way of fashioning the holy images as of Christ like a seated guru, and so on. On the justice and option for the poor front there has been some good work, but often lacking in satya(truth) and ahimsa(non-violence). What is sorely needed is a creative Asian Christology and a life of discipleship inspired by such a vision.

There have been of course some attempts by some theologians to formulate an Indian Christology. Christ has been imaged as an avatar, as an advaitin, as a yogi, as a guru, even as a dancer and so on. All these attempts are only external dress-make-ups. Further, such plethora of types can be inspirational and yet they are distraction and dispersal and create an illusion of grasping the core meaning. They also take for granted the Chalcedon Christological formula as their unchanging, irreformable frame, which is a blind alley for the Asian vision. The Chalcedon formula was a Western philosophical formula, good for those times and circumstances but not for Asia today.

What will be most relevant will be a Mahayana vision of Christ and God. John P. Keenan has been for years formulating such a Christological vision and I would like to say a few words on this. Of course, Keenan has his critics, he himself does not claim a final resolution but his vision and formulation have been most inspiring, viable and creative for an Asian Christology. Keenan takes three Mahayana themes as most vital for a Mahayana Christology: emptiness, inter-dependence and two truths. I cannot go into the details but let me mention a few points.

Emptiness: Christ's self-nature is empty—that is, he is the door and the way to the Father and to us humans; he has no essential, substantial, objectified, reified individual nature as such as an end and terminus in itself. His nature is essentially as a pointer to the Father, and a call to us humans for compassionate living with each other. His nature is no-nature, except the relational one of being-towards- the-Father and being-for-us. In the Mahayana vision, there is no independent, objectified, substantial, self-identical self or things. Each and every person and thing is a relational openness to the others—this is what it means emptiness: empty of independent self-being. (Keenan equates Mahayana

emptiness with inter-dependence, which is Nagarjuna's view, but it is partial and inadequate).

Second is interdependence or co-arising of everything and every person. Christ as well as every being is inter-dependent with history, culture, society, nature, and world; and also with gods and God. Hence, Christ partakes in the history of his people, society, culture, nature; and in human suffering, joy, love, infirmity and mortality. He is human with all of us humans.

Third theme is two truths. They are the absolute truth, the *paramartha satya*, and the worldly or conventional truth, *samvrti satya*. The *Paramartha satya* is ineffable, imageless; silence is its language. It is asymptotically pointed to by the conventional truth. A saying of the Diamond Sutra, as well as of zen, points to this realization: *the world is not the world, therefore the world is the world*.

Keenan remarks: "Ultimate meaning remains other in silence and is always distinct from human constructs.....The positing of any identifiable truth as ultimate meaning self-destructs and tumbles from its august position, for there is no conventionally perfected state of any ultimately meaningful selfhood. Nevertheless, just as emptiness is not simply the negation of dependent co-arising, so ultimate meaning is not simply the negation of worldly convention. Rather, having gained silent insight into ultimate meaning, one becomes reengaged in worldly convention and restores selfhood not now as an absolute, but simply as worldly and conventional" (p. 138-9, *The Meaning of Christ*).

Again in another place he remarks, "In the Mahayana perspective, then, the being of Jesus is not the outflow of some divine essence into the human nature of Christ... Jesus embodies the divine by being truly and fully human, not by participating in a divine essence..... In virtue of his abandonment of essence and self-definition, Christ reflects the direct experience of Abba and calls others to engagement in the tasks of the compassionate kingdom. It is in virtue of his identity as dependently co-arisen that he experiences Abba and embodies the rule of justice. It is as "worldly convention-only" that Christ shares in the divine otherness of God. That is to say, it is not by clinging to an exalted, divine being, but by emptying himself of being that Christ mirrors the divine and is one with the silent Father. And as with Christ himself, so the Christian theologian is ill-served by clinging to essentialist notions of divinity, attempting to reconcile human and divine characteristics in the one person of Christ" (*Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 75, No.1. 1993).

Christ is empty, in that he has no selfhood as objectified terminus ad quem; he is the pointer to the ineffable Father, and he points to the way how humans are to walk in the way of compassion and justice. He is human with us in all but sin, and in his humanness he is the door to the Father as well as our way. However, all this is still only conceptual and not enough. Keenan does not seem to talk about this other dimension, though he may be pointing to this. What I mean is that it is in the liturgy that we can encounter Christ, particularly the Eucharist. Rosemary Haughton has beautifully portrayed the Eucharistic celebration as the liminal performance, which is life-giving and creative. I summarized some years ago part of her thesis, here some excerpt:

"The people gathered around the Eucharistic table talk and hear of events of long ago, but those events are taking place here and now. They commemorate the death of Jesus but he is living eternally. They talk of eschatology, of the end of the world and of the coming times, but the end is here and now and time is no

more. They hope for Resurrection, but it is about the coming of the Self, in which death and brokenness are part of. They aspire to be God-like, but godlikeness is sharing in human condition. They eat bread and drink wine, but it is not really bread and wine-- It is the body of Christ; it is the blood of Christ. That is, Christ himself: the people are the body of Christ; the universe is the body of Christ, the bread and wine are the body of Christ. You are sinner, and you are the body of Christ. They pray to Christ the Lord, but they are Christ to each other. They pray to be saved but they are already "raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," Eph.2:6(*The Zen Way*, p. 160).

The Eucharistic situation and structure are shot through with ambiguity, paradox, uncertainties and tension. When you enter the Eucharistic situation, you enter into a 'wilderness,' you fall into a void of the in-between. Who are you in this ritual structure? Where do you stand? When irreconcilables are juxtaposed, the mind and heart have to take a leap. Then faith can happen and conversion can take place. Let me quote Haughton:

"The ambiguity does not always present itself in the same conceptual form, it is true. It has no fixed form; even the poles of the space which demands to be filled with power are, at the moment of conversion, unclear. Indeed at the moment they are irrelevant. The sacrament is a means to the encounter with grace only by holding in tension the two irreconcilables, not by reconciling them. It does not stand between the believer and Christ, or bring Christ to the believer, but simply forces him to choose Christ or reject him. And at the moment of choice the name by which we describe what is chosen - Christ - has no content either. The leap into the void means, in fact, so complete an encounter that the conflict, the sharp-edged dilemma of intransigent otherness, disappears and there is a meeting which is more like a fusion. I am not talking about emotions, but about events, for in the act of faith nothing whatever is believed, there is an identification of the believer with object of his faith, so that he doesn't, at that point, believe anything. He just is, in it. To the thing the believer is in we give the name Christ, because Christ is the self-awareness of the cultic community to which the conversion occurs. He is the symbolic centre, first as a separate symbol to which people can make conscious reference. This is the formative function of the Christ-idea, and it includes what little we know of the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth. But he is also the symbolic centre because he is the self-awareness, the personal life, of the community." (*The Transformation of Man*, p. 276-7).

Keenan has given us a marvelous Christological frame. Mahayana vision and ideas can serve the faith uniquely for an Asian Christology as no other philosophy or world-view can do: it is the vision of Christ as the door and way, and not as an object standing in our way demanding all our attention and worship, which is the function of an idol. The privileged space of realizing the vision will be in the liturgy, and if I may add, in a spiritual practice of dialogue such as in zen.

January 2012, Ama Samy