

Christian Conference In Asia (1996)

RESPONSE TO DR. JUDO POERWOWIDEGO'S PAPER

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Thanks a lot for Judo's provocative paper. He is indeed good at raising questions and I certainly appreciate his honesty and penetration. However, as a respondent I perhaps need to say something a bit different in order to stimulate further thoughts & discussions.

Firstly, it seems to me the paper tends to imply a kind of dichotomy between doctrine/system on the one hand, and experience/action on the other. It may not be Judo's intention but his handling of the problem may well suggest to the readers that the above two poles are mutually exclusive. I think that they are in fact closely related. I fully agree that dogmatic or systematic theology sometimes tends to a kind of intellectualism which is rigid & impotent (& at times oppressive). However, this calls for a better way of doing systematic theology instead of simply abandoning it.

I believe that a renewal of systematic theology will involve a new appreciation of the dialectical relationship between theory & praxis (or between doctrine & action). On the one hand, just as all experiences are theory-laden, all actions are also theory-guided, at least implicitly. When we perform an action, we are pursuing a goal by doing something, by which we hope the goal can be realized. This entails we are holding to some values- some goals are deemed worth pursuing. Furthermore, it implies we have some grasp of our situation, i.e. we have some beliefs about our environment & human nature. Otherwise we wouldn't know what actions are appropriate to implementing our goals. If our actions are at least implicitly theory-guided, then it may be a good thing to make explicit our values & beliefs. This will encourage a more reflective & more self-critical praxis.

On the other hand, if some doctrine has been held tenaciously by at least some Christian traditions, it is probable that there is something in it. Of course, there are cases when some doctrines are upheld for idiosyncratic reasons or for reasons that were once valid but no longer so. However, it may also be possible that some doctrines are the sediments of basic Christian experiences which continue to illuminate the lives of Christians in widely differing epochs & places. Such doctrines provide stuff for a common identity. Perhaps these doctrines may not be immediately appealing to every Christian but it is not uncommon that they help to evoke experiences & insights when they are taken seriously. Of course how the doctrines are formulated are often tradition-bound (& hence can be reformulated) but what they point to may be of lasting significance.

To sum up my contention so far: theory & praxis have to be dialectically related. Ignoring theoretical discussions may lead to unreflective praxis. When our presuppositions are never made explicit, they may be absolutized beyond the legitimate scope. Ignoring praxis may lead to irrelevant theorizing as well as ideological theorizing- we pretend that our doctrines are neutral when they are in reality legitimizing vested interests. Fruitful theologizing is possible only when both theory & praxis are held in creative tension, & when they are allowed to inform & correct one another in the community of faith.

My second line of question to Judo will concern the tension between his double emphasis on unity & contextual theology. He deplores the *sin* of church division. To this I am not unsympathetic. However, at the same time he encourages contextual theologizing to such a degree that it is not clear that he will hold to some core theological beliefs as common to all or most Christian traditions. To this I am also not wholly unsympathetic. Surely gone are the days when we can just confidently impose a *whole theological package* on all Christians as *the* whole truth about Christianity. My question here is that how the two emphases can be reconciled. If it is really the case that we can no longer confess a common

faith in whatever form across traditions, i.e. we are only left with *merely* contextual theologies of particular traditions, then what can be the basis of unity of different traditions? What can be the unifying vision or mission that can hold them together & give them a common identity? I understand some may reject the last question as totally uncalled for- but I just wonder how can this attitude coexist with a strongly negative attitude towards church division?

I do not claim here that Judo has a necessarily irresolvable problem. He may just lack the time to deal with it. The above is meant only to raise a question that I think relevant & difficult. For myself, I recognize the legitimacy of diverse traditions in Christianity. For example, I think we can accept both Calvinism & Arminianism as legitimate expressions of the Christian faith. They just arose from different contexts which cause them to put different emphases on different strands of the Bible. The Calvinists think that the sovereignty of God is the key to all the rest while the Arminians think that God's respect for human freedom & responsibility is the overriding theme. I think the debate between them will never be conclusive but this may not be a bad thing for them to co-exist. Each of them appeals to people with different temperaments & philosophical assumptions. Any monopoly of Christianity by either tradition will be intolerable for some type of Christian. So why not recognize the reason for the existence of both traditions? While I recognize a kind of legitimate theological pluralism, I also think that the *regulative ideal* of a common faith or unifying vision should not be lost or dismissed slightly. (For example, both Calvinists & Arminians agree to the power & mercy of God.) Of course any claim to that is controversial but we should not lose hope so easily. Both Western & Asian theologians should come together in a spirit of humility to work things out.

Thirdly, as for Judo's proposal for doing theology, I agree with him whole-heartedly over several things: a prayerful, humble attitude is needed; theology is the work of a believing individual in a believing community; we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit; we need sensitivity to contexts & people's experiences in view of what we should do. However, I find some of his suggestions unclear. For example, what actually is "theological action"? Isn't it quite vague & general? If every action counts as doing theology, isn't it trivializing the concept of "theology"? Perhaps it is insightful to say that every action of ours is doing theology. But then we need to distinguish two types of action: more reflective, theoretical "actions" & more practical, active actions. Also: what is the definition of the believing "community"? When we talk about discerning God's presence, who is this God? I do not mean to dispute Judo's claims here. I just want to indicate that it is not so easy to do theology, *fullstop*. Some theoretical issues are well-nigh unavoidable & we'd better face them squarely.

Lastly, I just indicate briefly my own understanding of the way of doing theology. Doing theology is like cooking a dish. Usually a good dish has multiple ingredients: meat, vegetable, etc. Assessing a dish also includes multiple criteria: its look, its smell, & its taste. Similarly, theology certainly has multiple ingredients: the Bible, the tradition, experience & reason. A good theology should also satisfy multiple criteria. *All other things equal*, it should be faithful to the Bible & the Christian tradition; it should be rationally coherent; it should fit with & illuminate our experiences; it should be practically relevant-can guide our search for meaning, goodness, peace & justice. Doing theology is a dialogical process, we need to question our texts & traditions as well as to be prepared to be questioned

by our texts & traditions. (The title of Judo's paper contains the phrase "dialogues with texts & traditions" & I would like to see Judo explaining more about this thing called "dialogue".) Theology certainly needs to be constantly reworked in each age but it should not be sheer invention either. Texts & traditions have lives of their own: we need to dwell in them & then develop them in our own contexts.

Certainly, I am fully aware of the fact that the above may have raised even more questions. Of course I cannot provide all the answers. But perhaps we can make progress when we try to answer these questions in more details. For example, how should we dialogue with the Biblical texts? How should we utilize our contemporary experiences & stories? What should we do when different criteria point in different directions? ...

Personal Reflections on the Conference

Kwan Kai Man

I am really grateful for the opportunity to be present in this conference & I deeply appreciate the efforts of those which make the whole thing possible. As for my feeling towards the whole conference, on the whole it is very positive but I also have moments when I feel a bit mixed. Let me explain.

First of all, I certainly feel stimulated. Although not that many ideas are altogether new to me, ideas that were only theoretical before become vivid to me. In general, the seriousness of the participants about contextual theology makes me think harder in this direction. Other ideas are quite new to me, e.g. doing theology with Noh drama or social biography. I find them quite tied to their own contexts but seeing the Japanese colleagues' presentation stimulates me to think about doing similar things in my own context.

Secondly, I am impressed. The passion for women's predicament shown by the feminist theologians; the enthusiasm of some for the marginalized & the dispossessed; the humility, helpfulness & faithfulness of the Western theologians present ... All these make deep impressions on my mind. It is a wonderful occasion that while many of us are very different, we can gather together to share with & learn from one another.

However, sometimes I feel frustrated. Many questions that have been raised are very important. They should also be familiar questions to many of the participants. It is a pity that we usually only have time to raise these familiar questions again but can't manage to explore them more deeply in view of finding some tentative solutions.

Lastly, I also feel a bit alienated. Sometimes the words "Asian" & "Western" are used in the conference in a parochial sense, i.e. there are two standard things which can be labelled "Asian" & "Western" respectively & they are mutually exclusive. I wonder whether it is a fair construal of both Asian & Western identities. Asia is actually consisting of many countries which have vastly different cultures & socio-political conditions. Whatever it is, it is not altogether monolithic. One thing that seems important to me is that many places of Asia are fastly developing & changing. Certainly we cannot ignore traditional cultures of Asia. We also need to do contextual theologies which integrate traditional Asian cultures with Christian ideas. However, shouldn't we remember that there are Asian contexts (more developed nations & large cities of most Asian countries) in which traditional cultures no longer hold sway & the process of secularization is going strong? How should we then do contextual theology under such conditions? I think this topic: "Secularization & Contextual Theology" needs to be looked into. It also seems to me that in many cases, secularization is accompanied by various degrees of Westernization. Sometimes, Western style of education takes the place of more traditional ones. So it is not unlikely that in some parts of Asia, the new generation may even feel more attracted to Western culture than to traditional culture. More likely, there is a mixture of the two. If the above has some truth in it, then it is not wise to pit Asian contextual theology against Western theology. The reason is simple: in our contexts, it is increasingly unlikely that the Asian & the Western can be sharply demarcated, especially for the new generation.

Another reason I think it is undesirable to over-emphasize the Asian/Western dichotomy relates to my understanding of contextual theology. I agree that every theology is contextual in the sense that every theology necessarily arises from a particular historical

context. But I don't think this implies the stronger claim that every theology is *merely* contextual, i.e. it cannot possibly claim validity apart from the original context in which it arises. Logically speaking, this kind of inference is a *non sequitur*. Moreover, I don't think this idea serves useful purposes. Some may make the stronger claim with the intention to avoid the hegemony of Western theology & to justify contextual theology. However, if this can be achieved, it is at the cost making Asian or other contextual theologies irrelevant. For example, if every theology is merely contextual, then so are feminist theology & liberation theology. It is then hard to understand why feminist theologians or liberation theologians also insist on the hearing of the Westerners. If the feminist ideals are valid *only* for the oppressed women & hence invalid for the oppressing men- why then we blame them? Contrarily, I tend to think that while Asian feminist theology or Latin American liberation theology indeed arise in their contexts, they also embody insights (e.g. the equal dignity of women, the importance of justice & liberation) which are universal & which should be recognized in every context. Of course, the concrete application of these insights may vary from place to place but it will defeat the whole project if we say that these insights are only valid in severely restricted contexts.

The above discussions suggest the principle that while an idea necessarily arises in a particular context, it *may* still apply elsewhere or may even be universal. We should indeed be sceptical of facile claims to universality. However, the thing to do is not to reject all such claims categorically but to examine each of them carefully & critically. Moreover, most claims to universality should be held tentatively - they may need modification or even outright rejection when situation changes. My idea is that we should be tempted neither by dogmatism nor by relativism. Whoever proposes an idea from whatever background, it will then become the potential possession of the whole mankind. It is the same for an Asian as well as for a Westerner. So the label "Western" should not be used dismissively. If we claim that insights of Asian theologies are potentially universal, we should accord the same status to insights of Western theology. (cf. Thomas Kuhn's idea of "paradigm" & Karl Popper's charge of the Myth of the Framework.) Hence I would plead not guilty as an Asian systematic theologian who deeply appreciates "Western" theology (while eschewing any facile claim to Western hegemony & any blanket rejection of Asian traditions)! Of course, I am not against contextual theology. My idea is that systematic theology is not necessarily "Western"; nor is it intrinsically oppressive. Appreciation of systematic theology & emphasis on contextual theology can go hand in hand. (I should add that I do not claim that any participant in the conference is necessarily hostile to what I say above. The reason I feel a little bit alienated is that I don't think my position has been adequately represented- but of course I understand that all the things can't be done in several days.)