

Journeying in Asia: Incarnational Living with Hope

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INTRODUCTION: Human Nature and Human Destiny

As early as 3000 years ago, the Chinese sought to grapple with changes in life and embraced the Book of Changes (*Yijing*) as a guide to understand change generated by a dynamic which appears to be evolutionary, mysterious and yet discernible. Understanding the mystery of life compels a reverence for the unknown and unknowable, the force behind life itself, whether divine or otherwise. The quest for understanding change remains unabated but the ability to change with the times and to adapt to changes may be more challenging.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused great changes and indeed a great disruption to the world. The rapid responses during the pandemic and drastic measures underlined the reality of the global village with human and information flows made possible by transport and communications technology. The world has changed after the pandemic. Greater disruption is yet to come especially as cities bore the brunt of disruption. The migrant labour and the urban poor were spotlighted as their plight of entrapment in the cities, without jobs, without roof and resources were revealed. The rapid urbanisation in Asia and around the world has made us all neighbours now, especially in the cities. Have we been neighbours to the poor and needy?

It is an opportunity to pause for reflection on history and human civilisations. The Axial Age was said to be the first awakening of human civilisation, when humans had the courage to search and ...to see. According to Karl Jasper, human civilisations developed a sense of philosophical reflection during the Axial Age, circa 800-200 BCE. It was an interesting interregnum resulting from an agrarian revolution, in between great empires and warring states. It was a time of self-transcendence, when humans awakened to their existence beyond material culture, to ponder about the meaning of life and the nature of humanity. It was a season to pause and a time to ask questions about life, about life amidst rapid changes, and especially about human nature and human destiny.

The Church in the aftermath of the pandemic has been reflective, as we shared the pain of locked downs and losses in various contexts. New movements have begun in response to the challenges of the times in the present times. The reflection and responses to changes must continue. The writing has been seen on the wall amidst the winds of change. New wineskins are needed for the new wine of Christian mission which God is doing. Yet the tendency is to

return to normalcy after asserting that there is a “new normalcy”.

CHRISTIANITY IN ASIAN CITIES

Over the past two decades, there is a self-congratulatory note in celebrating the rise of the Church in the Majority World. Perhaps the “Unexpected Christian Century” is not so much as the rise of Christian adherents in Asia, Africa and Latin America as much as it is the decline of the faith in the West. Even as we see the growth of the Church in the non-Western world, we need to assess if that is because Christianity has been successfully commoditised. Has the faith been branded as part of a “McDonaldisation” process and successfully packaged and exported by operationally astute marketeers in the same way hamburger restaurant managers did as Ray Bakke had prophetically warned us 40 years ago¹? Will that which has killed the soul in the West inadvertently impact the modernising societies of Asia in the same way?

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Since 1990, Singapore has also seen a rise in Christian adherents rising from 10% to 18% in 2020. However, the Church membership was perceived to

1. Raymond Bakke, *The Urban Christian*. pp.46-48. Alistair McGrath, *Future of Christianity* pp. 46-57

comprise mainly of the Westernised and the wealthy, which appear to be apathetic to the social concerns in society. This was perhaps because most of the believers were disciplined with good work ethic and made good in society. However, most of the church's resources were spent within the Christian community (especially on religious events for evangelism and mission and also the expensive church-building projects). The evangelicals would need to participate more in social concerns without seeing such as mere baits for converting others and expanding the religion.

With the historical baggage of Western colonisation and imperialism in Asia, the Church was seen as a foreign and Western religion, attractive for those seeking westernisation on the road to modernisation. However those with strong cultural roots and historical minds have strong impressions of believers as allies of western powers and antagonistic to local traditions and values. Inadvertently, the growth of the Church was perceived as a threat to Chinese culture in a Chinese-majority society. It became politicised in the 1997 general election.²

With the 9/11 event sparking religious tensions especially within the geopolitics of Southeast Asia, and the subsequent radicalisation of the youths around the world, churches were targeted as symbols of western powers. Local governments were concerned about religious demographics and the social implications. How can the Church respond to changes in both the local and global environment? Can an active engagement in civil society to contribute to community development and to contextualise the faith help to change the perception of the Church while revealing the hope of the Kingdom in Christ?

N. T. Wright states that the Church needs to find localised faith expressions which "are obedient to the larger *missio Dei*... (and) generate a communal life which becomes like a place in real history where God promises to be truly present and where humans can come to know him as whole persons. The community thus formed, as the Spirit-enabled body of the risen Messiah energised by the outpoured love of God becomes a place where new creation, glimpses of the dawn, can be discerned. History then has a vital role to play as a source and resource for that mission."³

JOURNEYING IN ASIA

In view of the contexts at the turn of the century, Asian Journeys Ltd (AJ) was founded as a social enterprise to help reach out to the *heartlanders* of Singapore especially in the social cultural arena. Developing global-ready youths with rooted cosmopolitanism was needed to help the next generation understand the past in order to face the rapidly changing future.

2. See Choong Chee Pang, "Religious Composition of the Chinese in Singapore: Some Comments on the Census 2000" in Leo Suryadinata ed., *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002. pp. 325-336.

3. N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology*. p.277

Training youths to be altruistic in giving through serving others while they are young is imperative for them to understand the values of benefaction and become benefactors to seek the welfare of the city⁴ in time to come. This is not only Christian but also Asian.

Understanding the challenge of developing local expressions of the faith and for a representation of the gospel which is truly Christian (without the syncretistic Western cultural expression of church), the journey to work the cultural ground of Asian philosophical and religious worldviews continue. Disciples of Christ need to be rooted in the cultural soil of Asia in order for the faith to be truly Asian, with shoots and fruits that can sprout and multiply for a truly Asian harvest. With a desire to unearth ancient wisdom of the Asian civilisation for contemporary life, as well as developing a contextual faith expression for Christians in Singapore, AJ would focus on discovering and recovering Asian cultural resources for community living, with a particular emphasis on Chinese culture and civilisation.

AJ's programme scope comprises the 3 categories of Cultural Journeys, Learning Journeys and Spiritual Journeys. This was based on Soren Kierkegaard's model of stages on life's way viz., aesthetics, ethics and religions.⁵ This model correlates with the Chinese framework in self-cultivation and moral formation in the Quest for Beauty, Good and Truth.

CULTURAL JOURNEYS (Self-Creation)

Asian Journeys Ltd is positioned as a non-religious organisation and a social enterprise, seeking to partner with local museums and libraries to serve in outreach to the community. Through organising talks and workshops, AJ was able to bring like-minded people together to reflect on Chinese literature, ranging from Laozi's *Daodejing* to Laoshe's plays, from Luxun's short stories to Qian Zhongshu's novels, which provided analyses and commentaries on the social and political changes in Chinese history.

In 2003, we worked with churches to organise Chinese drama "Heshibi" (based on a tale of angst and despair by Hanfeizi, a sage in the Axial Age!) staged not in churches but in the national theatre. This surprised some of the Chinese community leaders as they realised that Christians were interested in Chinese culture and had the passion and expertise to stage a play.

There were also programmes organised on cultural appreciation of Beijing's imperial architecture as well as Chinese calligraphy. By teaching and speaking at local churches, AJ helped to promote better understanding of Chinese culture and religion, along with other religious festival cultures. AJ unearthed

4. Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*. Pp. 19-40

5. See Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. *Soren Kierkegaard: Stages on Life's Way*. Kierkegaard was acclaimed as the father of Existentialism who provided a Christian vision to engage with the questions of anxiety and despair, and proposed aesthetics, ethics and religions as the pathway for a searching soul towards meaning and selfhood.

and invited Chinese writers and cultural experts as speakers and helped them realise this was a way they could contribute vocationally in missions.

In 2019, AJ Chinese Calligraphy Club was launched on 19 January. The aim was to engage the Chinese intellectuals in the city and encouraging Christian participation in these cultural events. The Chinese adage to “Review the Past to Understand the New” (wenguzhixin) still holds true especially for a historically-oriented nation with a long civilisational history.

We hope that through cultural participation, and cultural self-creation, Christians can begin to engage and reflect with the local community on the human condition and our common human destiny. This would be a vital first step towards using these works of art and cultural resources to point to divine hope and reveal the presence of transcendence in and through Christ.

LEARNING JOURNEYS (Self-Integration)

AJ has plugged into the local government’s National Youth Council programmes since its inception in 2002. We were thus able to mobilise nearly a thousand youth volunteers for international volunteerism funded partially by the government’s grant for the Youth Expedition Projects. They would learn the spirit of volunteerism from the volunteer par excellence, viz., the Good Samaritan.

Working with teams of 20-40 students from the universities and polytechnics, we would spend 6 months interacting and equipping these youths to help them self-discover, build teams, and develop skills to live and work cross-culturally in the countries in Southeast Asia as well as China on overseas community development projects. The overseas stints would last 2-3 weeks long preceded and followed by local projects, giving us ample time for relationship building and mentoring.

Since 2002, our projects were focused on urban and environmental issues. The Green Desert Project in Inner Mongolia was our signature project until it was disrupted by the pandemic. Working with the local governments and local host communities, we exposed our youth volunteers to the macro and micro issues in urbanisation challenges and the impacts of climate crises on the local communities. The teams were able to apply learning and mobilise resources to collaborate with the local beneficiaries in combating pollution and mitigating climate change.

Such immersive learning experiences especially with the attitude of servanthood and washing feet, were helpful in building deep relationships and understanding with the local residents. They helped stretched the vista of youths and exposed them to visions and possibilities of social transformation. The Singapore youth volunteers, mostly non-believers and a good mix of Chinese, Malay and Indians, learned to live in community and mediate differences and

conflicts faced along the way. We organised annual Youth Environmental Stewardship (YES) forums where the tertiary students reached out to the school students, bringing their academic and industrial knowledge along with performance arts and artistic expressions to raise awareness for climate change and creation care.

They learned the Asian way of establishing harmonious relations not only with humans per se, but also with the other creatures in the environment and also the relationship with the divine. As the church in China has understand it, it was living harmoniously with God, with nature and with one another.

As we share life journeys, sitting around the campfires in the cold grassland of Inner Mongolia or mountains of Chiang Mai, or sit in the longhouses of the Ibans in Sarawak, we appreciated our interdependence with nature and with one another which is grounded in God. We discover commonality despite our ethnic and faith differences. We extended hospitality to one another and built friendships. For many of my youths, my team leaders and facilitators could have been the first Christian friends they have met.

I remember the surprise which one youth expressed on learning that I was the director of Asian Journeys and was yet working and living among them for the entire 2 weeks. He gasped, “This is like the president coming to live with us”. By bringing leaders from army colonels to captains of industry to interact with youths as friends, we hope these servants of God who took extended time to be with the community at the street level had created an experience of the kenosis and Incarnation of Christ for these youths.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS (Self-Transcendence)

The Chinese have emphasised humanism as the basis of Chinese civilisation. Harvard professor Tu Weiming explained that spirituality is an integral part of human selfhood which needs cultivation in both our need for rootedness and self-transcendence. Paul Tillich however elaborated that spirituality is grounded in not only self-affirmation and self-transcendence but also in self-surrender to the Other (human as well as divine). In other words, the pursuit of selfhood is necessarily the ability of the person to relate with one’s own self, and with the other (including other humans, creatures and the Creator God).⁶ It affirms the Chinese quest for unity between heaven and humanity (tianrenheyi).

Asian Journeys provided training programmes for schools in youth development, from self-awareness courses (like personality-profiling, team roles and sharpening personal skills) to communications (especially public speaking which builds self-

⁶. See Lawrence Ko, “The Religious life as the Highest Stage of Selfhood: An analysis of Kierkegaard’s Three Stages”. (unpublished MDiv dissertation submitted to Trinity Theological College, 1995)

confidence) and leadership development. The key emphasis is on coaching towards the future, towards hope, where they discover the questions of human nature and destiny, personalised for themselves.

The act of self-discovery when we invite the youths to reflect and share stories of their 18-20 years of life journeys can hopefully provide a deeper sense of appreciation of life. We help them realise that life is not genetically or historically determined per se, and that one has the power to act in the present for the sake of the future, the past notwithstanding. That is the sense of self-transcendence and existential awareness of choices in being and becoming. Hopefully, these urban youths in their quest for aesthetics, ethics and religions, will be led through existential angst and despair to make the leap of faith into hope in the Kingdom of God.

During the pandemic, AJ was active to help raise prayers and needed resources for the cities of Asia through the network of relations developed with various local host communities. Prayer emphasis will need to continue as it represents a divine gift of seeing, a transcendent vision of hope. Prayer gives us eyes to see the presence of the divine and appreciate life with all its mystery. It strengthens us to participate in history with hope. As Symond Kock once said, "Prayer is the action before the action". Prayer precedes action which enables Christian participation in social impact and transformation in history. Jacques Ellul says, prayer can make and shape history.⁷

CONCLUSION: Incarnational Living in the 21st Century

History is the arena where God acts and "the new creational eschatology has come to birth within history".⁸ His Church, as the called out ones, need to be sent out missionally to live out the gospel of Christ at street level, not merely to proclaim the gospel but to engage and serve the community as our witness to the gospel. This can be done when we engage vocationally in the city as the urban challenges are great in the 21st Century but the opportunities immense.

The world after the pandemic is never the same. The changes are not necessarily spiralling upwards towards progress. The masses of humanity continue to cry for help and hope. The Church can learn to be responsive, and to seize the kairoic moments in history to serve God's agenda and purpose. Believers can use the resources God has placed at our disposal to serve the poor and become benefactors in the city. The Church in Asia needs to be rooted in our own cultural soil and sprout shoots and bear fruits that can multiply in the Asian milieu. As Jurgen Moltmann says, the Church as an eschatological community can act in history with the end in mind. This will be incarnational living as we look forward to the hope that reveals the vision of the eternal which is now here

7. Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and the Modern Man*. p. 175

8. Wright, *History*. p.227

in time.⁹

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9. Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* p.26-27



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