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CHRISTIANITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Editorial Introduction to Special Issue

Hans A. Harmakaputra

Hartford Seminary

hharmakaputra@hartsem.edu

Christopher M. The

Fuller Theological Seminary

the@fuller.edu

Last year (2020), the Editorial Board of the *Indonesian Journal of Theology* decided to expand the journal's scope to "the wider academic theological discourse in today's world Christianity, especially in the Asian context."¹ This comes after the journal has focused primarily on the Indonesian context in its first eight volumes (since July 2013). The current special issue on Christianities in Southeast Asia represents this new direction, and the collection is guided by that expanded vision to cultivate broader theological conversations, especially between and among theologians working in these locales. Of the many factors bringing the current project to fruition in these pages, two warrants in particular call for further elaboration.

The first and more obvious concern is the lack of discourse between and among theologians from Southeast Asian countries, despite ongoing ecumenical cooperation between institutions, such as the Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA).² Western theology still dominates the theological curricula of seminaries and departments of theology in the region. Although local theological expressions have begun to emerge for some time, it seems plain to say that many of Southeast Asia's theologians are better versed in the modes of Western theological discourse. Certainly, there are institutional reasons for this. The problematics of power play a significant role, given that Western missionaries from various denominations founded the most

¹ "About the Journal," *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, <https://indotheologyjournal.org/index.php/home/about>.

² Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia, "ATESEA History," <https://atesea.net/about/history/>.

influential of the Christian churches in Southeast Asia.³ In spite of the West's discursive (*inter alia*) influence, the main hindrance to a robust theological discourse among theologians of Southeast Asia is, ironically, practical—the language barrier. Francis Alvarez rightly notes that, not unlike their East Asian counterparts, Southeast Asian countries are “multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious.”⁴ Although some might view the *strategy* of using English as perpetuating a form of colonial power and exhibiting an overreliance on Western theology, we see this *stratagem* as a pragmatic and reasonable way to cultivate theological exchanges.⁵ As an Indonesian, one might not understand Thai, Tagalog, or even Malay. Therefore, we agree with Stephen B. Bevans' comment that theology developed in a particular context needs dialogue or communication with theology from different loci.⁶ Each author in this issue continues to engage deeply the theological ferment of Southeast Asia.

The second warrant for the present intervention in the global theological discourse relates directly to what Lisa Asedillo observes in her contribution featured later in this issue, namely that Southeast Asian theology is often subsumed “under the ‘Asian’ category without true representation.”⁷ In the West, Asian theology

³ This does not mean that Southeast Asian Christians naively mime their colonial heritages (where applicable) or merely imitate what they see in the so-called Global North (which includes certain Asian countries). As Julius Bautista observes, the adoption of Christianity in the region often entails “pragmatic and calculated reception,” which also includes the impetus for anti-colonial subject positions. As such, Southeast Asian Christians maintain their agency in developing and nurturing the Christian faith. See Julius Bautista, “Christianity in Southeast Asia Colonialism, Nationalism and the Caveats to Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed., Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227.

⁴ Francis D. Alvarez, “Christianity in East and Southeast Asia,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 33. See also Georg Evers, “‘On the Trail of Spices’: Christianity in Southeast Asia: Common Traits of the Encounter of Christianity with Societies, Cultures, and Religions in Southeast Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed., Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Stephen B. Bevans, “What Has Contextual Theology to Offer the Church of the Twenty-First Century?” in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Stephen B. Bevans and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011), 15. Throughout its own publication history, the *Indonesian Journal of Theology* (IJT) has sought to hybridize the global theological discourse by means of publishing also in English. Similar, subversive notions of such an impulse toward *hybridity* pepper this special issue, in particular, which furthers anti-imperialist agendas even and especially while articulating those contestations in the anglophone empire's own tongue.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lisa Asedillo, “The Theology of Struggle: Critiques of Church and Society in the Philippines (1970s-90s),” *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2021): 89.

is mainly construed in relation to other parts of Asia, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and India. As a result, the scholarly literature treating Christianities in Southeast Asian contexts is scarce, at least in English.⁸ When I [Hans] was an undergraduate seminarian in Indonesia, I became exposed to notable Asian theologians and to Christianity in their respective contexts, yet none of these exemplars reflected or represented Southeast Asian concerns or contexts—outside of the theology of struggle from the Philippines.⁹ A new awareness of what is considered *Asia(n)* is required, both to transcend Orientalism's demeaning gaze and to get a fuller picture of Asian Christianities. Evoking Alvarez again, we see that “[w]hat is Asian and what is Christian are still being both constructed and discovered. Quite a distance still must be traveled, but we are on the way.”¹⁰ Voices of Southeast Asian Christians deserve to be heard (and thus included) in and for the sake of any global theological discourse.

This special issue comprises, therefore, a humble contribution to the discourse on Christianities in Southeast Asia. The collected articles demonstrate a variety of methods that represent the interdisciplinary nature of world Christianity studies. It is worth noting that the theological dimension or task cannot be gainsaid for doing this work, as it is unwise (if not impossible) to attempt to comprehend the development of Christianity in various locales apart from the motif of theology.¹¹ Yet, at the same time, theology must always intersect with life in life's myriad dimensions. Thus, Southeast Asian theologies are primarily rooted in and concerned with the wellbeing of faith communities vis-à-vis the broader societies in which such communities are situated; to say it differently, theologies in and for Southeast Asia are not to be developed as pure intellectual endeavors as if held in experiential or communal abeyance. For instance, the ATESEA's “Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia” points to such a located awareness by considering situated issues, including the following: religious

⁸ For a modern introduction to the topic, see Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). For a relatively older example, see Robbie B. H. Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).

⁹ For key texts on the theology of struggle, note the contribution of (and works cited in) Asedillo, “Theology of Struggle,” 85-88. Most notable among the precedent literature is Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

¹⁰ Alvarez, “Christianity in East and Southeast Asia,” 36.

¹¹ Peter C. Phan, “Contemporary Christianities in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2021): 18-19. For a general introduction of theology in East and Southeast Asian countries, see Alexander Chow, “Theology,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 375-386.

fundamentalism, gender justice, ecological problems, diseases and disasters, globalization and global empire-building, colonization, spirituality, and the reclaiming of indigenous identity and acknowledgement of minority rights.¹² Adding to these concerns, Peter C. Phan in his introductory remarks for this special issue lists five urgencies facing Southeast Asia's Christianities in the future, viz. subsistence and poverty, human migration, inculturation/contextualization, interreligious dialogue, and a rethinking of Christian mission.¹³ All four essays in this edition touch upon a number of the concerns above in significant ways.

Overview of Articles

As guest editor of this issue, Peter Phan provides an introduction to contemporary Christianities in Southeast Asia that provides context to the other articles. The aforementioned difficulty in setting out to understand the variegated contextualities throughout the region extends beyond its staggering geospatial expanse; numerous differences include variance in histories, languages, scripts and scriptures, religious identities, cultures, ethnicities—among others. However, Phan's essay offers an eminently accessible account, by means of weaving together the region's most pressing challenges and opportunities without overlooking the complexity.

Briana Wong's article, which deals with women's involvement in Cambodian churches, investigates the ways in which Christian women navigate their roles amid marginalization and other challenges. Based on interviews, participant observation with evangelical churches in Cambodia, and archival research, Wong offers a clear portrayal of women's empowerment, namely one that might not fit easily within the dominant narrative of gender equality in the West. Her multimodal analysis yields three interpretive categories, viz. courageous creativity, finding empowerment in physical distance, and the undergirding resoluteness of vocation, all of which help these women to delineate roles for themselves in ministry. Wong's interlocutors do not always assume formal leadership roles, such as pastors (though some do); even so, without any doubt, these women serve their local and global faith communities qua leaders.

In the contribution to follow, Benita Lim proposes an interdisciplinary approach to rethinking Eucharistic theology in cosmopolitan Singapore. Given that the prevalent, generally Protestant theologies of the Holy Communion rite have been imported from the insistent modernizing West, questions arise as

¹² Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia, "Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia," <https://atesea.net/accreditation/doing-theologies-in-asia/>.

¹³ Phan, "Contemporary Christianities in Southeast Asia," 18-20.

to the proper place of implicit philosophies and conventional practices concerning food in the context of the post-colony. More specifically, Chinese philosophy's assumptive interconnections, namely between foods and the body, remain influential among those Singaporean Christians who converted from various Chinese religious traditions in the decades since Western occupation. Lim attempts to maintain the balance between the sacramentality of Reformation-era Christian tradition(ing), on the one hand, and the perduring local conventions, implicit worldviews, and functional cosmologies, on the other hand—all of which make the development of an intercultural liturgical theology of the Holy Communion ritual an ongoing, postcolonial challenge.

Related to post(-)coloniality, the next entry by Toar Hutagalung illustrates the need to pursue postcolonial/decolonial approaches for contemporary theology, namely by examining what Hutagalung recognizes is the persistence of a colonial paradigm in Indonesian Christian theology.¹⁴ Hutagalung utilizes postcolonial reading strategies to retrace history through a remarkably apt colonial-era work of literary art. In his analysis of the influential *Max Havelaar*, originally published in 1860, Hutagalung detects something of the novel's ambivalent nature. Widely regarded as an exemplar of anti-colonial literature as a whole, the sardonic novel was written by a Dutchman critical of the Netherlands' occupation of the East Indies. Yet, the novel also serves as a kind of archive, within which a hidden colonialist understanding of humanity has lodged itself within the mentality and imaginary of those regarded as *natives*. Hutagalung's project represents a decolonial endeavor that the author asserts will be indispensable for constructing any morally just theological anthropology for and from the contemporary Indonesian context.

¹⁴ As Hutagalung will also note in his article, Wai Ching Angela Wong distinguishes three meanings for the term "postcolonial." The first, *post-colonial*, denotes the historical period after European and American colonization (hence "post-" with a hyphen, often enough), seen as having unfolded chiefly during the mid-twentieth century. Second, when signifying resistance against the legacy of colonialism, the locution *postcolonial* (sometimes hyphenated) appears to be interchangeable with the term "anti-colonial"; one may be more historically appropriate than the other in certain cases (or equally appropriate, in other situations). The third definition draws on critiques from scholars like Edward Said, Homi K. Babha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in that *postcolonial* implies "a continuing battle internal to the formerly colonised peoples and within the mind of each who lives and grows up in the formerly colonised world." See Wai Ching Angela Wong, "Colonial and Postcolonial Context," in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 464-465. Hutagalung's contribution falls under the final listed definition of *postcolonial*. See Toar B. Hutagalung, "Locations of Theological Anthropology in Indonesia: A Postcolonial Literary Offer in *Max Havelaar*," *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2021): 93-124.

Finally, as alluded to earlier, Lisa Asedillo explores the historical and material conditions for the *theology of struggle*, a theopolitical movement that flourished in the Philippines between the 1970s and 1990s. In her investigation of popular writings, ecclesial sources, and scholarly arguments concerning this social justice movement, Asedillo describes how the movement's proponents involved themselves in the daily struggle of the poor. As her essay shows, it was this material self-involvement that prompted such powerful theological responses, rendered in support of the people of the Philippines. Through her investigation of history and consequent social analysis, Asedillo highlights the inextricable connectivity among grassroots, ecclesiastical, and governmental levels of resistance—domains that intersect for such emancipatory movements, by virtue of the pervasive, negative impact of unjust institutions upon lived life in its myriad complexities, including social, religious, and political dimensions.

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About the Authors

Hans A. Harmakaputra is Visiting Assistant Professor in Comparative Theology and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary and Louisville Institute Postdoctoral Fellow. Hans is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Indonesian Journal of Theology*.

Christopher M. The is the director of commission information services for the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and serves on the BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) board of directors. A former youth pastor of Indonesian American churches, Chris is a PhD candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary.

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