



*Grassroots Asian Theology:
Thinking the Faith from the
Ground Up*

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“This book offers thought-provoking assessments of foundational Christian doctrines from close engagement with Asian circumstances and Asian Christian teachers. . . . Insights from western Protestants, Catholics and the Orthodox are put to good use, but always with the aim of articulating genuinely Asian theologies. Much of the future of Christian theology worldwide is outlined in this helpful study.”

— Mark A. Noll, Francis McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame

Doing Away with Elitist Asian Theology

Much of what the West knows as Asian theology consists largely of elitist accounts of what Asian theologians are saying, and elitist theologians seldom take grassroots Christianity seriously. Yet it is at the grassroots level that we encounter a vibrant, albeit implicit, theology. It is this theology that I wish to highlight. If we accept Prosper of Aquitaine’s dictum that the rule of faith should be based on the rule of prayer (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*), then a study of the lived theology of the people of God in Asia will yield a better theology for the Asian church and perhaps for the global church as well.

Such a theology, however, cannot be derived solely from Asian cultural resources. Any authentic theology must be developed in light of the larger Christian tradition. The appeal to Christian tradition is not simply a matter of preference but essential to our theological quest. If the Asian church is truly a part of the church catholic, the accumulated contributions of the past and present are essential to moving the church forward wherever it is found. This point has been strongly argued by the Japanese theologian Anri Morimoto against postmodern attempts to deconstruct tradition. A theology developed in this way would not only be a theology for Asia but also from Asia to the universal body of Christ.

In light of this imperative I have drawn freely from Catholic and Orthodox sources. I believe they offer a broader and more solid basis for contextual theologies compared with what goes on in much of mainline Protestantism and evangelicalism today. Putting it another way, any healthy theological development requires holding together two processes in a healthy tension: *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*. *Ressourcement* is not merely a return to the past; rather it is a creative engagement with earlier sources, the fountainhead of spiritual life. Only in this way can we begin to engage in the work of *aggiornamento*, or adaptation and updating in light of the new situations in which the church finds itself. Without the prerequisite of *ressourcement*, *aggiornamento* could easily end up with the church capitulating to the spirit of the age.

I have not adopted any standardized format in the development of each theological locus but have sought to let the grassroots dictate shape and direction. Generally, however, I will present a brief sketch of elitist theologies followed by an exploration of theologies found in sermons, devotional works, testimonies and other popular writings by Asian Christians. Sometimes we will look at case studies; at other times we will examine the works of historians, sociologists and anthropologists for what light they can shed on popular thought and practices. I will use whatever resources are available within my limited competence in a highly complex situation to understand grassroots Christian experiences theologically. There is admittedly some unevenness in such an approach, but it allows for ideas to be elucidated from a number of perspectives.

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BOOK EXCERPT



This is not a systematic theology. My main focus is on how theology ought to be done. This book is as much concerned with the processes as the content of theology. Only the content that has a particular bearing on the Asian context is highlighted in each theological locus. My aim is to force a rethink on the way Asian theology is currently undertaken and in so doing show the distinctive contributions of Asian grassroots Christianity to the wider church's theological endeavors.

– Taken from the preface

Simon Chan (PhD, Cambridge) is Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. He is the author of *Man and Sin*, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* and *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community*. He is also the associate editor of the *Global Dictionary of Theology* and the *Dictionary of Mission Theology*.

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