
On the Continuity of the Western Christian Tradition in Asia: A Metatheological Concern

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Abstract

In this essay I address whether the Western Christian heritage is suitable for theologizing in Asian contexts or whether it is insufficient and ought to be discarded by the Asian church, as suggested by various Asian theologians. I respond primarily to the arguments put forward by Hwa Yung in his seminal book *Mangoes or Bananas*. Hwa's critiques of the Western tradition have been influential in shaping the Malaysian and Southeast Asian theological context. I hope to show that his view is untenable and ultimately mistaken. The solution I advance takes seriously the concerns raised by Hwa but suggests that the goal should not be to part with the Western theological tradition, which is indispensable in maintaining orthodoxy. Rather, the answer lies in distinguishing between orthodoxy and orthopraxis in such a way that allows the Asian theologian to address context-specific needs without the danger of being lost in a sea of cultural relativism.

Keywords

Western tradition, Asian theology, Hwa Yung, analytic theology

INTRODUCTION

There is a range of sentiments from different theologians regarding how Asian theology ought to understand its relationship to its Western heritage. Here I have in mind the metatheological question regarding whether the Western Christian tradition is suitable for theologizing in Asian contexts and whether such theologizing is appropriate/edifying

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for the life of the local church.¹ Timoteo D. Gener writes that Asian theologies are “theologies that engage with issues, questions, and concerns arising from Asian contexts while giving priority to the embodiment of those theologies in ecclesial engagements and experiences.”² This seems obvious enough—Asian theology is just theology done in a specific context. However, identifying which context in particular is not always a straightforward task. Under the umbrella of “Asian theology,” there are a myriad of different countries and cultures with equal claim to belonging to this broad characterization.³ From the outset, then, it is necessary to clarify what Asian theology refers to here, especially if one is to avoid the trap of attempting to speak of a single Asian theology as though Asian culture is something homogeneous or monolithic. The use of the phrase “Asian theologies” in the plural as is sometimes found in the literature expresses the outworking of Christian beliefs and practices in different cultures. Here, wherever possible, I use Asian theology in the singular. There appears to be some justification for doing so—first, this refers to the basic shared practices of adherents of Christianity around Asia, similarities among differing expressions—whatever it is they have in common in their respective manifestations of the gospel. Second, while the region in question is expansive, and though each country contained within has its own unique histories, cultures, and religious traditions, it is often observed that there are common characteristics and features among the various cultures and Christian theologies of each country such that the

1 Metatheological questions are questions about the discipline of theology itself rather than questions about theological topics. Michael C. Rea, *Essays in Analytic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

2 Timoteo D. Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects,” *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 22, nos. 1-2 (Mar.-Sept. 2018): 60.

3 Derek Nelson notes that “[e]ven the briefest, most cursory examination of topics headed under the category of ‘Asian theology’ prompts serious reservations about the effectiveness, or even the applicability, of that geographic designator.” He goes on to note that “Asia stretches from the Ural Mountains in the northwest, through Muslim former Soviet Republics to the Indian subcontinent, and from Sri Lanka through the Southeast Asian peninsula up through China, Japan and Korea. Traversing this course, one would meet thousands of different ethnic or cultural groups, hear hundreds of languages and encounter dozens of religions and myriad forms of each religion.” Derek R. Nelson, *What’s Wrong with Sin?: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 160.

term “Asian theology” remains a meaningful designation. The Asian-ness in Asian theology, as I see it, refers not so much to a collection of geographical territories but, rather, the constellation of common values embodied by the Christian residents of those countries. Such values include filial piety, the respecting of past orientation, tradition, and beliefs, the prioritizing of social relationships typically in the form of collectivism, and “relational hierarchy where respect for elders is accorded and harmony with others highly valued.”⁴

Broadly speaking, we might identify two positions held by Asian theologians in response to this question of Western heritage.⁵ The first, which we might call the *Abstraction* view, is advanced by Choan-Seng Song, Hwa Yung, and others, and argues that the Western tradition is insufficient and inappropriate to address an Asian context—they believe that a true Asian theology must somehow be defined independently from the Western tradition from which it arises.⁶ These Abstractionists give various reasons for these claims, as I discuss in detail below. One motivation often given is the West’s history of the Enlightenment and other corporate experiences that Asia never had; because of this, the theology formed in the West is said to be unsuitable to address the *sitz im leben* in the East.

The *Continuity* view holds that the Western tradition is indispensable but needs to be adapted for it to be useful and relevant in an Asian context. Theologians such as Miyon Chung, Anri Morimoto, and Simon Chan believe that Christian tradition, regardless of its cultural provenance, is indispensable for Asian theology.⁷ Additionally, Chan states that we should

4 Lim Kar Yong, “The New Testament and the Socio-Cultural and Religious Realities of the Asian Contexts,” in Johnson Thomaskutty, ed., *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021), 5.

5 There are, of course, non-Asian theologians who comment on these issues, as we shall see anon.

6 Choan-Seng Song, “A Theological Community with a Cutting Edge,” in ATESEA Occasional Papers, No. 7: *Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in Asia*, ed. Yeow Choo Lak (Singapore: ATESEA, 1988), 90. Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 4.

7 “The encounter of Christianity with Asian religious traditions must go through a complex process of negotiation, and it generates a host of creative amalgamation throughout the process. This is a recurring and inevitable process, inasmuch as the gospel is to take root in any given culture.” Anri Morimoto, “Asia Theology

avoid using increasingly unhelpful and inappropriate categories such as “East” and “West” when applied to respective ways of thinking.⁸

In this essay, I outline and respond to the arguments that undergird the *Abstraction* view. I show that this view is untenable and ultimately mistaken. In particular, I respond to several of Hwa’s critiques of the Western tradition that have been influential in shaping the Malaysian and Southeast Asian theological context. I conclude that the *Continuity* view or something like it is best suited for the enterprise of theology in Asia. The solution I advance takes seriously the concerns raised by Hwa but suggests that the goal is not to part with the Western theological tradition, which is vital in maintaining orthodoxy. Rather, the answer lies in distinguishing between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, which allows the Asian theologian to address context-specific needs without the dangers of being lost in a sea of cultural relativism.

VOICES OF DISSENT

The Asia Theological Association was founded in 1970 with a goal to produce and develop “scholars, thinkers and teachers” for the Asian church.⁹ The organization currently boasts a membership of more than 350 theological institutions located across Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.¹⁰ At the Sixth Asia Theological

in the Ablative Case,” *Studies in World Christianity* 17, no. 3 (2011): 204. “[C]ontextualization derives its legitimacy not only from the task of mission but also inherent in the frameworks of the Bible and Western theological tradition.” Miyon Chung, “Theology and the Future of Asia,” in *Theology and the Future: Evangelical Assertions and Explorations* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2014), ed. Trevor Cairney and David Starling, 66. “Church and tradition, therefore, need to play a more critical role in the development of local theologies.... There is no separation between Scripture and tradition since Scripture is apostolic tradition. A genuine development in new contexts must be faithful to the historical trajectory set by Scripture.” Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 12, 14. While Hwa and Song might agree with the process of inculturation and adaptation to the Asian setting, they would clarify that it needs to be done in such a way that sheds the baggage of Western Christianity.

8 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 9.

9 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 191.

10 Despite its geographical spread, the ATA focuses on “strengthening interaction, enhancing scholarship, promoting academic excellence, fostering spiritual and ministerial formation and mobilizing resources to fulfill God’s global mission

Association Theological consultation in August of 1982, eighty-five evangelical leaders from around Asia gathered in Seoul, Korea and produced “The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World.” The main idea behind this statement was the desire to “urgently” produce an “Evangelical theology which is faithful to Scripture and relevant to the varied situations in the Third World.”¹¹ While there was some acknowledgement of the “indebtedness to the creeds of the Early Church, the confessions of the European reformation, and the spiritual awakenings of the revival movements of modern times,” Western theology was summarily dismissed as being irrelevant to Asian concerns:

Western theology is by and large rationalistic, moulded by Western philosophies, preoccupied with intellectual concerns, especially those having to do with faith and reason. All too often, it has reduced the Christian faith to abstract concepts which may have answered the questions of the past, but which fail to grapple with the issues of today. It has consciously been conformed to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. Sometimes it has been used as a means to justify colonialism, exploitation, and oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations. Furthermore, having been wrought within Christendom, it hardly addresses the questions of people living in situations characterized by religious pluralism, secularism, resurgent Islam, or Marxist totalitarianism.¹²

Song, one of Asia’s most prolific scholars, echoes these sentiments. He criticizes Asian theologians’ dependence on the Western theological tradition to supply tools of reflection for their own unique contexts. Song sees the need for Asian theology to “undergo a process of change,” because the theologies of the West are “inappropriate for Asia” and “genetically incapable of knowing what it means to live in the world of Buddhist culture, Hindu culture, or Confucian culture.”¹³ His call to the Asian church is to

within diverse Asian cultures.” <https://www.ataasia.com/about-us/>, last accessed December 12, 2023.

11 B.R. Ro and R.M. Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology*, Asian Evangelical Theological Library (Asia Theological Association, 1984), 23.

12 Ro and Eshenaur, *The Bible & Theology*, 22-23.

13 Song, "A Theological Community," 90.

construct Asia's own theology "with Bible and Asian resources in Asia," to cultivate a theology of the East.¹⁴ Similarly, Hwa is another outspoken advocate of moving away from the Western tradition. In his seminal book, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, he lists various reasons why "Western" theology is unsuitable for Asian theology; in short, given the negative impact of Enlightenment thought on the formation of Western theology there is "an entirely different and irrelevant worldview presupposed" that results in a theology that is "unengaged and unhelpful for Asia."¹⁵

A comprehensive treatment of the criticisms from the Seoul Declaration and Song are beyond the scope of this essay. I limit my response to Hwa's two most serious objections and their corollaries:

1. That between the East and West there is a different reality presupposed and that Asian and Western minds are diametrically opposed. This is expressed in a number of ways, for example, the Western way of thinking is usually characterized as "either/or," disjunctive thought, while the Asian way is more commonly seen as "and/both," inclusive thought. Other ways that this difference has been highlighted is by reference to the underlying and significant Greek influence of Western thought which is deemed "foreign" or "alien" to the Eastern way of thinking.
2. A related but distinct concern is that the Enlightenment and its lasting influence on the Western tradition renders it unfit for use in Asia—the East never experienced anything like an Enlightenment firsthand, nor are the logical outworking of Enlightenment principles (that are allegedly utilized in a Western theological setting) suitable for the Asian context.

After outlining and responding to these critiques I discuss some of the theological problems that are manifested as a result of ignoring the importance of the Western heritage, the most worrying being that when breaking away from this tradition there is no anchor for correct belief and the result are contextual theologies that fall outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

14 Song, "A Theological Community," 90.

15 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 20.

A DIFFERENT REALITY PRESUPPOSED

Conceptual Frameworks: Inclusive / Exclusive

Chung Miyong writes, “[G]iven the fact that the conceptual frameworks of the East and West are inherently and markedly different, the value of expressing theological reflections from Asian contexts is vital.”¹⁶ Chung is not alone in her belief that there are differences in conceptual frameworks between the East and the West. Consider the following from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen:

One of the distinctive features of Asian thinking is the reluctance to employ the Western either-or dialectic. Instead, most Asians feel comfortable thinking in terms of yin-yang inclusiveness. This term goes back to Taoism and Confucianism in their Chinese forms. According to such philosophies, change is the interplay of yin and yang. These two terms, crucial to much of Eastern thought (and expressed in different Asian languages and thought forms in varying terminology), mean female-male, weak-strong, light-dark, and so on.¹⁷

However, it cannot be the case that the rejection of “the Western either-or dialectic” is a “distinctive feature of Asian thinking” (or any coherent system of thinking, for that matter), as this is entirely self-stultifying: the very act of rejecting an either-or dialectic is *an example* of using an either-or dialectic, as it results in the choosing of one option instead of another, as opposed to including both. Thus, if such a mode of thinking is categorized as a feature of Western thought, then regardless of its origin, an Asian theology cannot fully remove this aspect of its Western heritage from its way of thinking, on pain of contradiction. It would appear, then, that there are supposed tools from the Western theological tradition that one *must* continue using in order to do Asian theology.

Here we might conclude that one cannot differentiate between Eastern- and Western-minded thinking in such a way that the Asian is said never to use either/or thinking, and it cannot be that either/or thinking is *not* a part

16 Chung, “Theology and the Future of Asia,” 67.

17 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 218.

of Asian thinking. But perhaps one can be more charitable to Kärkkäinen's reading of the situation, especially since he has said it is a "reluctance to employ" a particular mode of thinking rather than an outright rejection. Perhaps what is meant here is simply that an Asian mindset is, on aggregate, more inclusivist or less reluctant to hold things in tension than a Western mind. One such example we might use are the traditional beliefs of Japanese Buddhists who hold a broad religious model consisting of a plurality of traditions rooted in it that "enable them to come to a characteristic understanding of Christian tradition without serious displacement from their accustomed outlook."¹⁸ It appears that they are less reluctant to see different ideas as inherently contradictory. But it is not the case that they reject either/or thinking altogether, as we can see in Zen priest Suzuki Shōsan's (1579–1655) response to Christianity—there are some elements of Christianity that *are* said to be incompatible with Buddhist doctrine.¹⁹ If the Asian mind was, strictly speaking, *only* and/both inclusive, how then would they be able to make such an assertion? Given that it is impossible to attempt to remove either/or thinking from any system of thought entirely, more nuance needs to be applied when demarcating Western and Eastern thought in this way; though Asian thought may err toward being more inclusive, to attempt to identify each respective way of thinking as mutually exclusive results in a logical contradiction.

The Problem of Oversimplified Rejection

In addition to the notion that Asian thinking is more inclusive than its exclusive Western counterpart, Hwa and others have often claimed that Eastern and Western minds are diametrically opposed when it comes to their approaches to theology.²⁰ The first difficulty with this assertion is in trying to reduce Western theology, which is by no means a monolithic tradition, to a singular view or set of views. The insurmountable problem that emerges, then, is this: it is not clear that one can identify Western

18 Felix Wilfred and Dennis Hirota, "Christian Tradition in the Eyes of Asian Buddhists," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 413.

19 For example, Shōsan pointed out that the Christian practice is fraught with attachments. Wilfred and Hirota, "Christian Tradition," 418.

20 See Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, chap. 1.

thought as a homogenous entity that reflects a well-defined system or unique way of doing theology. When describing a tradition that itself comprises many traditions represented by various approaches and responses to any particular issue, how does one give a representative view on that subject and label that *the* Western stance? Within a tradition as rich and deep as the Western theological tradition there are numerous instances of mutually exclusive positions on any given topic. Take, for example, two opposing views in Christology with respect to wills: how many did Christ have? According to monothelitism, Christ is taken to have one will, namely, a divine one. According to dyothelitism, Christ has two wills, a divine will *and* a human will.²¹ The former view is not compatible with the latter. Thus, a major problem with attempting to reject the entire Western tradition can be spelled out as follows: rejecting the tradition wholesale results in the negation of a thesis and its antithesis given that *both* are contained within that same tradition. In this example, thesis A = “Christ has a human will,” and its negation or antithesis, not-A, = “It is not the case that Christ has a human will.” The attempted rejection of the entire Western tradition results in the negation of both theses and antitheses on respective issues on any given topic. This results in the rejection of a proposition but also its negation for any issue that has mutually exclusive positions. The result, then, is either silence on those subjects or self-contradiction. We may call this the *problem of oversimplified rejection*. Thus, Hwa and other Asian theologians cannot call for the rejection of the Western tradition in its entirety as it results in absurdity. Rather, they need to identify the particular elements of this tradition that require contextualization.

Greek Thought, Substance Dualism, and Asia

In a separate line of criticism also intended to highlight the incompatibility of the Western and Eastern minds, Hwa states that Augustinian dualism is innately foreign to Asia. He writes,

Another important influence has been the whole dualistic tradition in Western thought which, even though less obvious, is no less significant.

21 Here it might be worth pointing out that while dyothelitism was affirmed at the sixth ecumenical council of Constantinople (680-681 CE), which was an Eastern council, the matter of Christ's wills and subsequent debate surrounding them is still very much part of the Western tradition.

Indeed, this dualism, which is rooted in Greek philosophy, has been accepted into Enlightenment thinking itself and works in concert with it to shape modern Western thought into what it is today.²²

Elsewhere Hwa goes on to say, “Whereas the Bible conceives of the human person as holistic, Christian theology under the influence of Greek philosophy increasingly saw the human in dualistic terms, with the soul being treated with greater importance than the body.”²³ There are various claims here that need to be unpacked. First, Hwa claims that substance dualism, the view that soul and body are separate and radically different substances (the soul identified as the Augustinian variety here), is what undergirds the Western mindset. This mindset, claims Hwa, is un-Asian in the sense that it is countercultural (in Asian contexts) and ought to be jettisoned along with much of the Western intellectual tradition.²⁴ Second, Hwa claims that with respect to the metaphysics of persons, holism is the biblical view of human beings and offers a more coherent interpretation of Scripture, though he does not elaborate on his position. Part of Hwa’s reasoning seems to be based on an incorrect conflation of substance dualism and the immortality of the soul. Hwa wrongly understands the former to entail the latter, and because he is convinced that the immortality of the soul is a wrongheaded Greek import, he rejects substance dualism via *modus tollens*.²⁵ However, substance dualism entails neither the preexistence of a soul nor its immortality. Third, in light of this, Hwa makes an implicit reference to the Hellenization thesis, the idea that Greek philosophical concepts were mistakenly adopted into the theological life of the church, which underscores his added skepticism about a Western worldview.²⁶

22 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 24.

23 Hwa Yung, *Bribery and Corruption* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018), 7.

24 Hwa, *Bribery and Corruption*, 7.

25 That is:

1. If substance dualism is correct, this entails the immortality of the soul ($A \rightarrow B$)
2. But the idea of immortality of the soul is mistaken ($\neg B$)
- c. Therefore substance dualism is false and does not obtain ($\therefore \neg A$)

While the argument form is clearly valid, premise one is false: substance dualism does not necessarily entail the immortality of the soul.

26 “That the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which presupposes the body-soul dualism [*sic*], is alien to biblical thought, which conceives of the person in holistic terms... The biblical emphasis on the resurrection of the body, in contrast to the

Thus, there are three arguments that need to be addressed: first, that body-soul dualism is countercultural in Asian contexts, second, that according to Scripture, holism is the correct view of human nature and is incompatible with dualism, and third, Greek thought permeated the thinking of the early church to its detriment. Here I will address points one and three. As for point two, whether there is a correct theological anthropology that is best suited to Asian theology and whether the biblical consensus is holistic is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, I simply point out that the notion of holism with respect to human persons is compatible with both dualistic and physicalist interpretations.²⁷

Let us first examine the argument that Augustinian dualism is un-Asian. For context, in characterizing the Western worldview, Hwa quotes anthropologist Charles H. Kraft, who writes that the “Western worldview [is] naturalistic, with the supernatural largely disregarded as being governed by materialistic values, as being humanistic, thus making God largely irrelevant; as being rationalistic, thus rejecting anything that appears to fall outside the purview of rigorous rational analysis.”²⁸ An initial observation is that these features of a Western worldview as described appear to be at odds with the metaphysics of Augustinian dualism. The soul, an *immaterial* substance, sits outside the realm of the empirical, natural sciences. One would be hard pressed to think of an entity more foreign to the naturalistic world described by Kraft where the supernatural is “largely disregarded” than the soul. Yet for some reason, Hwa understands the belief in Augustinian dualism to be a staple of the Western mindset. But this seems to be confused: either the Western mindset is naturalistic (*non*-dualistic with respect to persons, as described by Kraft, and quoted by Hwa) or it is dualistic with respect to persons in the Augustinian sense—it cannot be both. Let us disregard this internal consistency for the time being and grant that Augustinian dualism is somehow representative of

Greek idea of the immortality of the soul, is clear from passages like 1 Cor. 15.’ Hwa, *Bribery and Corruption*, 8.

27 See Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Kevin Corcoran, ed., *Soul, Body and Survival* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) for some examples of this in the contemporary philosophical theological literature.

28 Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture. A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 27-34.

the Western worldview. Even if this is the case there is a further problem. Hwa's claim that it is dualism that is alien to the Asian mindset appears both unsubstantiated and contrary to plain observation—surely the idea of a soul-body dichotomy fits into a broadly Asian ontology much more intuitively than that of ontological holism.²⁹ It is especially strange that Hwa thinks that dualism is countercultural from the Malaysian context in which he is writing. Given the Malaysian multireligious and multicultural context, dualism and the soul with respect to the nature of humans lives at the heart of at least three resident major Asian religions: Buddhism and Hinduism with their assertion of reincarnation, and Islam with its doctrine of post-mortem resurrection.³⁰ Moreover, in Malaysia there are common folk beliefs in spiritual charms, *bomoh* (witch doctors), ancestral spirits, *toyol*, and *pontianak* (different forms of evil spirits and ghosts). An ontology of immaterial substances seems to intuitively undergird such beliefs. Ironically then, it is Hwa's rejection of dualism which is more countercultural than the Augustinian dualism he associates with the Western tradition.

Most telling, however, is that this exposes a serious problem with Hwa's own argument against the West. By rejecting Augustinian dualism, Hwa cuts off his own methodological legs from under him: he opts for holism with respect to human beings due to *biblical* considerations; whether he is correct on this is beside the point. But what he demonstrates in practice, then, is that the norm of formulating theology is first and foremost a correct interpretation of Scripture, whether the resulting doctrines are countercultural or not. He rejects a dualism of persons because he believes holism is the correct interpretation of Scripture, despite the fact

29 Hwa does not outline a particular holistic metaphysics of persons or theory of human nature, but given his repudiation of substance dualism, I assume here that he does not think that persons are able to “come apart” at death.

30 With respect to reincarnation, the soul is typically thought to be the vehicle of transmigration. See Paul Edwards, “Introduction,” in *Immortality* (New York: Macmillan, 1997), ed. Paul Edwards, 4. Edwards writes, “If a person is to survive after death there must be something in or relating to him that continues to be alive.” With respect to post-mortem resurrection, there are plenty of non-dualist or physicalist construals of the resurrection of the body in the contemporary Christian philosophical literature; see Corcoran, ed., *Soul, Body and Survival* for examples of this. But I would argue that the pre-theoretical/precritical view of someone who believes in the afterlife via bodily resurrection would tend to take dualism as a given, especially in an Asian context where belief in a spiritual realm is common.

that immaterial souls provide less friction for Asian contextualization. Therefore, Hwa's main thesis of rejecting traditions based on best-fit to culture fails by his own methods of interpreting Scripture!

Moving on to a related criticism, Hwa gives two explanations for why he rejects Greek thought. The first is similar to the reasons he gives for rejection of the Western tradition in general, that is, the categories of thought are inapplicable to the East. Second, he argues that Greek thought somehow found its way into the early church by mistake, erroneously becoming part of the Western theological tradition, and ought also to be rejected. With respect to the first issue, given the variegated history of Greek thought, this is another example of the problem of oversimplified rejection. Greek thought is not monolithic. What precisely is being rejected by the Asian theologian when she rejects "Greek thought"? Is this a reference to Epicureanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, or one of the other numerous schools of thought? And so, the same arguments against being able to reject the Western tradition in one fell swoop apply here again, *mutatis mutandis*.

With respect to the idea that Greek thought was indiscriminately used by the early church, there are several responses. Asian theologians often argue for the need of contextualization, but it is not a new phenomenon. Culture has always shaped the ideas of the time, and so it is unsurprising that Greek concepts and categories of thought made it into the language of the early church. However, an important point to make here is that the early church only used certain Greek concepts in a bid to give language to preexisting church practice and doctrines. What is key is that there were other concepts that were *not* adopted by the church, but rather rejected, and often times vehemently so. Thus, doctrines were shaped in distinction from contemporary pagan philosophical beliefs and concepts that were deemed unsuitable.³¹ That Justin Martyr, Augustine, and Irenaeus battled certain strains of Stoicism and Gnosticism is evidence that not all thought from the Greek worldview was indiscriminately assimilated into the Church's system of belief.³² Gavin D'Costa summarizes this point lucidly:

31 Michael Ward, "Theopaschitism: Is Jesus Christ Able or Unable to Suffer in His Divine Nature?," in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe*, ed. Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 61-62.

32 Ward, "Theopaschitism," 61-62. See also Justin Martyr's "First Apology" and

Were Greek concepts of substance simply and uncritically used by Christians to say what they wanted to about God in Christ, or did they actually employ, develop, and modify these concepts in a novel and unique manner? I think the latter, and in this sense, Greek philosophy was not being celebrated in its own right, nor seen as a legitimate salvific structure.³³

Thus, we can allay the fears of the Asian theologian who views Greek thought as a pagan, Trojan horse of Western theology.³⁴

Enlightenment Thought in the Western Tradition

“Unlike the West, Asia has never walked through the collective experience of Christendom or encountered the paradigm shifts birthed by the Age of Enlightenment.”³⁵ In *Mangoes or Bananas*, Hwa Yung writes that “there is little doubt that the main influence that shaped modern Western thought and theology is the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries.”³⁶ He goes on to list various problematic features of the Enlightenment, developments that led to undesirable consequences in the field of theology. This includes the empiricist trend initiated by Copernicus, Bacon, and others, combined with the rationalism introduced by Descartes that resulted in the autonomy of human reasoning being the final arbiter of truth. Reason replaced faith as the point of departure that led to a radical anthropocentrism, gradually pushing God out of the picture. Enlightenment thought is also said to have operated with a subject-object distinction. This dichotomy brought about by a subject-object distinction

Irenaeus’s “Against Heresies” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), and Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 2010).

33 Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 24.

34 See also Paul. L Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), where he argues that “[t]he Theory of Theology’s Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy must be once and for all buried with honours, as one of the most enduring and illuminating mistakes among the interpretations of the development of Christian doctrine,” 46.

35 Chung, “Theology and the Future of Asia,” 64.

36 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 34.

in the natural sciences soon came to be applied in theology as well, in particular in the area of literary criticism, where the status of the Bible was lowered to that of any other document. This faith in humanity—the mechanistic view of a closed and deterministic universe and a recognition that humanity was made of autonomous individuals—was based on an optimism about human nature, in contrast to Augustinian and Reformation doctrines.³⁷

Hwa's overarching argument with respect to the Enlightenment may be summarized as follows: the Enlightenment is one of the main influences and shapers of Western thought, and given that Enlightenment thought consists of views that are either inapplicable to the East or have untoward consequences for theology, we therefore ought to move away from Western thought. There are two main responses here:

First, this line of criticism ignores theological work that focuses on the rejection of Enlightenment thought and its trajectory. The Enlightenment project has been viewed as negative by theologians such as Alisdair MacIntyre and Gavin D'Costa, among others.³⁸ Thus Hwa overlooks a whole swathe of scholarship. The Western tradition is incorrectly conflated with only one particular stream of post-Enlightenment thought, namely, liberal Western theology. Hwa's critique of Enlightenment thought and its contemporary shaping of Western theology turn out to be nothing more than a straw man, given that it does not take into account the great amount of work within the Western tradition to push away from the parts of the Enlightenment heritage that is negative to Christian scholarship. D'Costa writes

The Enlightenment project, in so much as it has dominated philosophy and moral and political thought, has inevitably affected religious thought, primarily Christian, but also other religions in differing ways.... First, the Enlightenment trajectory in part accounts for the demise of trinitarian theology and Christian practice in rendering and reconstructing the world within the grand-narratives of philosophy. Within these narratives the world is best understood and analyzed without God.... Deism was

37 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 34.

38 See D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions*, and Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Though beyond the scope of this article, MacIntyre argues here that the Enlightenment project was doomed to failure.

the initial home for this unemployed God, but agnosticism, atheism, and secularism were the inevitable trajectories.³⁹

These effects of the Enlightenment that are listed by Hwa are identified by D'Costa and others and criticized. Thus, the negative features of the Enlightenment are far from universally accepted in Western theology. They are recognized and rejected. Moreover, according to Kevin Vanhoozer, there is a clear waning of these aspects of Enlightenment—they are not the predominant force that Hwa makes them out to be.⁴⁰

The second issue is, we encounter yet again the problem of oversimplified rejection given that Enlightenment thought is not monolithic. Hwa writes that “humanity was regarded as ‘emancipated, autonomous individuals’ in contrast to Augustinian and Reformation doctrine.”⁴¹ But Western thought as claimed by Hwa owes much of its legacy to Augustinian/Platonic thought (which, as noted previously, Hwa has spoken out against). In addition to this (perhaps unsurprisingly given that there are a number of different strands of Enlightenment thought and thinkers), Hwa ends up aligning himself with one Enlightenment proponent in his theological methodology, namely, Descartes. In doing so Hwa Yung draws on an Enlightenment position to both criticize the Enlightenment and advance his idea that Asian theology is best done apart from the Western tradition—a self-contradictory position.

In *Reading Theology*, John Webster considers the ways in which “theological thinking is informed by reading the enduring textual deposit of the Christian tradition.” In the process of doing so he analyzes the contrasting approaches that Descartes and Hegel take with respect to tradition. According to Webster, Descartes displays a “history of progressive detachment from common meanings, roles or bodies of opinion and his slow attainment of sheer transparent self-presence...stripped of texts,

39 D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions*, 4.

40 “What is new is the waning of the influence of the Enlightenment and of modernity’s tendency to decide the legitimacy of all human enterprises, including exegesis and theology, on the basis of allegedly universal criteria of rationality,” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 7.

41 Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 34.

customs and practices.”⁴² What Hegel is combatting, then, is “the Cartesian image of thinking as traditionless, unshaped awareness, encountering no ‘existing spiritual world’ and ‘always beginning afresh.’”⁴³ Hwa’s approach to contextualization and the West might be described as a view of tradition that can be stripped of its customs and practices.

My last counterargument to Hwa’s criticisms is that *even if* his foregoing arguments regarding the radically differing mindsets between the West and Asia and the Enlightenment are correct, his underlying contextualizing principle turns out to be self-stultifying. Here is why: Hwa uses the difference in culture and experience as his primary reasons for arguing why the Western tradition is unsuitable for Asia. But what makes the cultural setting of where Christianity was born any more appropriate for Asia? Hwa seems to disregard the fact that the gospel was delivered already soaked in a particular culture. Therefore, if we were to concede to Hwa’s arguments that the Western tradition is irrelevant to Asia because its culture is so different due to the Enlightenment mindset, underlying Greek influence, and diametrically opposed mindset—then *mutatis mutandis*, the gospel itself, given similar reasoning, is just as unsuitable for Asian contexts. Asia never knew what it was like to be under the imperial rule of Rome, nor has it ever had experience of a Jewish cultural mindset, and so on. If we *can* use New Testament concepts and contextualize those successfully given all these inherent differences, then surely the same can be done with Western theological thought.

CONTEXTUALIZATION WITH NO CONTEXT

In this final section I discuss some of the problems with contextualization as a result of attempting to theologize in Asia apart from the Western tradition.

Alister McGrath, reflecting on theology in Asia, expresses the following,

42 John Webster, “Reading Theology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 53–64.

43 Webster, “Reading Theology”: 54. A similar criticism is leveled against Song by Simon Chan. Chan notes that Song sees the particularization of the gospel as Western but fails to identify his own position as “an uncritical application of the Tillichian correlationist theology in which the concrete particularity of the gospel is reduced to an abstraction,” Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 37.

Why, for example, should an Asian feel in the slightest degree obligated to continue such a tradition? Is not the correct and obvious way ahead in the next century to develop theologies that arise out of her own engagement with the realities of the gospel, rather than accept what someone else—generally from a Western context—has bequeathed her? . . . The history of evangelicalism suggests that the success of the movement rests on its willingness to correlate Scripture with the context in which it finds itself, rather than simply reaching backward into evangelical history to draw out past correlations.⁴⁴

Here we might find ourselves both agreeing and disagreeing with McGrath. On the one hand, of course, the Asian theologian ought to develop theologies that arise out of her specific context, but on the other, this is not mutually exclusive with the continuation of the Western tradition. The Asian is obligated to listen to what the “Western context has bequeathed her” because only from the larger Christian tradition are we able to do theology within the bounds of orthodoxy.⁴⁵ As Webster has pointed out, “Theology serves the Word of God by assisting the church to remain faithful to the gospel as it is manifest in Holy Scripture.”⁴⁶ In attempting to shift away from what is perceived as a Western dominated tradition in favor of a prioritization of the Asian context, these sentiments forget the maxim that “all theology is ultimately ‘contextual’”—this includes theology from the Western tradition. Asian contextualization is not something that can be had at the expense of all previous forms of contextualization, nor is there an option to remove the cultural context from which the gospel was initially communicated. Often, however, this is the way contextualization is understood, that is, as consisting in a kernel and a husk—the kernel being the core message and the husk the culture in which it sits, which can be removed and reseeded in a different exterior.⁴⁷ However, this is

44 Alister McGrath, “Evangelical Theological Method,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 36.

45 At the risk of somewhat begging the question, I use “Tradition” here in the singular to refer to the wider, full spectrum of Christian tradition of which the Western tradition is but a part. What exactly that consists in is beyond the scope of this essay.

46 Webster, “Reading Theology”: 56.

47 “Adolf von Harnack was particularly influential in this regard, arguing for an essence of the Christian faith which was hidden within philosophical or ethical trappings. ‘The historian’s task’ was that ‘of distinguishing between what is traditional and what

not the way we have received revelation, as a “pure” message that can somehow be distilled from culture. Asian theology *pace* Hwa must not try to remove itself from the Western tradition *per impossibile*, but rather, build on it. As Simon Chan points out, “local cultures do shape the way the faith is received and expressed, but for a local theology to be authentically Christian, it must have substantial continuity with the larger Christian tradition.”⁴⁸ To borrow a concept from the study of metaphysics, the gospel is not a “bare particular,” it is not a blank slate that underlies properties while being itself a property-less property bearer—the gospel comes to us part and parcel with a specific culture. Common criticisms regarding various Asian theologies are that they tend to emphasize the local settings in contextualization but ignore the broader, transcultural dimensions to the Christian faith.⁴⁹ This results in the “proliferation of multiple local, ethnic, or culturally specific ‘theologies’ at the expense of any unifying framework transcending particular contexts.”⁵⁰ These are problems that can be avoided by keeping in step with *the* tradition—how do we judge an Asian theology as syncretistic without a criterion or correct belief? Vanhoozer makes the important point that “if church practices serve as both source and norm for theology, how can we ever distinguish well-formed practices from those that are deformed?”⁵¹ Likewise, if culture is what is prioritized for an Asian theology, then how are we to tell between faulty cultural practices and those that are acceptable? Culture cannot be what is normative in the formation of theology.

Therefore, what is important for contextualization is distinguishing between orthodoxy, which is correct belief, and orthopraxis, correct practice, which is the outworking of orthodoxy. Hwa himself identifies this, writing that “orthopraxis and orthodoxy need one another, and each is adversely affected when sight is lost of the other”—but to lose sight of

is peculiar, between kernel and husk.” Adam J. Johnson, *God’s Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 6.

48 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 11.

49 Harold A. Netland, “Introduction: Globalization and Theology Today in Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity” (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, 29.

50 Netland, “Introduction,” 29.

51 Van Hoozer, *Drama*, 7.

the tradition is to lose sight of orthodoxy. The solution forward is thus to recognize that contextualization must not be applied only to Scripture but to tradition also, as doctrine is not the result of Scripture alone but Scripture through the lens of tradition.

CONCLUSION

The Asian theologians' proposed migration away from the Western tradition is not unlike modern Protestant theology's move away from the theology of the early church. D.H. Williams writes:

However liberating this may sound, such a position has served to isolate the current Christian experience of God for many believers, disconnecting them from the rich heritage of the church in its formative years, where the doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit were developed, where the experience of Christian martyrs was realized, and where concepts of faithful biblical interpretation were devised.⁵²

This is the same problem Asian theologians face if they attempt to remove themselves from the Western tradition. They become disconnected from various doctrines formulated in the early church and beyond, and the result is heterodoxy. The issue with separating oneself from the Western tradition and prioritizing cultural fit over doctrinal clarity is often syncretism. According to Chung Miyon, the danger of contextualized theologies by nature is that they eventually become detached or eclipsed by the tidal waves of paradigm shifts.⁵³ "Most importantly, theology of this sort inevitably dislocates itself from the core biblical teachings and therefore fails to maintain biblically based constancy. The goal must be to formulate a theology that is both authentically biblical and authentically Asian."⁵⁴ The Asian theologian must sail between the Scylla and Charybdis of a Christianity that is, on the one side, inaccessible and inapplicable to an Asian context and, on the other, solely led by cultural priority that runs the strong risk of syncretism and unorthodox belief. Simon Chan has identified two aspects that would guard between the two poles

52 D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1.

53 Chung, *Theology and the Future of Asia*, 77.

54 Chung, *Theology and the Future of Asia*, 77.

referred to above. He observes first that an Asian theology cannot be derived solely from Asian cultural resources but must be developed in light of the larger Christian tradition to remain authentic: “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.”⁵⁵ Thus Chan states that theological development requires a healthy tension between ‘*ressourcement*’ and ‘*aggiornamento*.’ *Ressourcement* involves drawing from earlier sources in the tradition and *aggiornamento* involves adapting and contextualizing where necessary.⁵⁶

In this essay I hope to have shown that doing theology in the absence of the Western tradition is both unnecessary and detrimental to the life of the Asian church. There are no good reasons presented by Asian theologians to depart from theological tradition, Western or otherwise.⁵⁷

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55 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 7.

56 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 7.

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