This book by Jesuit priest Michael Amaladoss consists of a compilation of twenty lectures given by the author in Chennai, India, in 2018. The book addresses various theological themes in Asian contexts and also deals with epistemological concerns. More than merely describing theological themes that arise from Asia, the author also strives to explain how and why these themes are intrinsic to the concerns of Asian Christians and Asian peoples at large.

The author’s investigation begins with a delineation of how theology is to be understood as more than a mere series of faith statements. Theology is not just an expression of faith in the divine; it represents the struggles of the people such that theological enunciations possess a transformative and liberating quality. Against this background of human experience, the author argues against the presumption of a “normative” theology, for the experiences of the peoples are what color theological interpretations. In this light, he submits that theology is an exercise meant to be undertaken with a dialogical instead of an imperial posture.

While one may agree with the author on the need for Asian theologians to be accorded a credible voice in the global theological melting pot, this necessity need not be framed as a contradistinction to the time-honored theological enterprise of the ancient church across time and space. Surely, by now, if one recognizes the dealings of the Spirit of God in one’s own church, there must have been some degree of convergence of age-old human struggles. It remains a valid question whether the human

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struggle has actually been so varied across generations and cultures that our theologies ought to be drastically different and exclusively localized. Furthermore, in direct response to the prolegomenon of this book, one submits that magisterial theology is not necessarily Western or Latin in character, for the ancient church also emerged from an Eastern (Byzantine) context during which the first several ecumenical councils were convened. A good number of dogmatic prescriptions held to be binding even today actually emerged from these Eastern councils, which the author indirectly acknowledges in later portions of the book. Hence, theology need not be posited as an East-versus-West endeavor. A more useful paradigm than one that insinuates that there is no universality in matters of faith might be to consider Asian theology as a local reflection of the lived universal faith.

The first segment of the book is an elaboration of how the church has come to understand itself over time and how this self-understanding needs to be transformed to make way for a more conducive environment for Asian theological construction. Some criticisms of the current state of the Catholic Church follow. First, clericalism in the church is pointed out as a phenomenon that severely restricts the role of the laity and limits their self-understanding. Second, the author argues that the church must be a sign of the kingdom of God rather than an institution or hierarchy. Bishops and popes should not take on the role of temporal rulers; the church must not be self-serving. It may be said that the way the hierarchy functions depends on the view of its incumbents on the paradoxical role of servant-kingship. After all, a bishop or pope, despite being somewhat monarchical in role, can be rather powerless in many matters. Third, the author also argues for a recognition that the mission of the church has not always been the same as she evolved through the ages. This purportedly (but, in my view, questionably) justifies the need of the church in Asia for a unique mission. Although different facets of the gospel have emerged over the centuries, leading to varied emphases in the church’s mission, these different accents of the one mission need not be construed as mutually exclusive or standing in contradiction to one another. Rather than seeing the mission of the church as having evolved over time, it may be more useful to see them as varied expressions of the church’s one mission. Fourth, the author submits that other religions in Asia ought to be seen in a more positive light. While I do not disagree with the author’s stance, caution is required, especially
when the tendency in interreligious relations nowadays is to be all too ready to be self-deprecating toward one’s own faith while being too reticent to critique the misconceptions of truth and reality in other religions. Fifth, the author calls upon the church to be more dialogical and tolerant, using Asian religions as examples of openness, receptivity, sensitivity, tolerance, and forgiveness in an environment of religious plurality. However, given the plethora of religious disputes and rivalry that have been inimical to justice and peace throughout Asian history, is this claim tenable? Having noted that, one must hasten to agree with the author that mutual respect between Christians and people of other religions is not an option but a necessity.

The author’s sixth major point warrants a separate side discussion. For Amaladoss the figure of Christ should be universalized and understood apart from the Word incarnate in the man Jesus, for Christ is purportedly present universally whereas Jesus is not. This artificial dichotomy poses a danger of misconstruing God’s self-imposed binding of his eternal Word to the person of God incarnate. That the Word was made flesh by divine design and intention is a fact. Inasmuch as a “universalized” Christ may evoke warm fuzzy feelings, there is no indication that God intended to universalize the means of salvation by availing it to all religions as various paths leading toward a happy eternal harmony. Had God intended to do so, his numerous exclusive admissions regarding himself, together with his mandate for evangelization, not to mention his self-sacrifice on Calvary, would have been rather self-contradictory. Perhaps Christians should not be apologetic about advancing exclusive faith statements; it is not unique to Christianity and can be found in any religion. The fact that people may find it socially or psychologically challenging to join the church even though they desire to follow the person of Jesus Christ does not for that reason make the church as the Christus totus, the union between Christ and his church, unnecessary. While it is true that Christ need not have bound himself to his church and the sacraments, he intentionally has done so. While Jesus can be understood in different capacities apart from being the Christ, over-belaboring the point not only represents a departure from the Christ of Scripture, it could lead to the creation of a new eclectic religion.

The second segment of the book contains propositions on how the divine can be experienced outside of traditional Christianity through the
different cultures and religions of Asia. The author begins with an assertion that the Spirit of God is actively at work in the various cultures and religions of the Asian peoples. Furthermore, rather than leaving this mystical recognition as a mystery, he goes on to identify visible signs of this divine presence in the mystical elements of various Asian cultures and religions. In another chapter, he also suggests that God incarnates himself in various ways within Asian cultures. On yet another matter, he focuses on the feminine aspect of the divine in Christian theology and then elaborates on how this agrees with the concept of deity in other Asian religions. Separate but related to this chapter is a peculiarly brief but admirable segment on the place of the Virgin Mary in the Christian call to constant transformation. Moving forward, the sacraments of the church are discussed as communal rituals, as are the rituals of the various Asian religions. While this, in and of itself, is true, the danger is to emphasize the anthropocentric aspect at the expense of the historical church’s understanding of the sacraments as divine activity and initiative. Caution is in order. The author also speaks of how God’s “uncreated energies” (a phrase commonly employed in Eastern Christianity) finds its presence in the spiritual practices of other Asian religious traditions. In another chapter, he points out that these spiritual practices, in Asian religious traditions, are well integrated into the mundane life of the Asian peoples rather than being embodied as mere formally instituted practices divorced from the daily experiences of the lived Asian life. Another point of interest is found in the author’s exposition of themes relating to ecological concerns that run through various Asian religions, including Christianity. There is much in this segment to which I would like to respond but space does not permit it. Broadly speaking, pinpointing specific non-Christian religious practices as the work of God’s Spirit requires a rather huge logical leap. Even though many such practices may bear some sort of semblance to traditional Christian belief and praxis, they need not necessarily be synonymous with the latter, let alone have emerged as a result of the Spirit’s work. The eagerness to recognize the all-encompassing work of the Holy Spirit in other religions may lead to fallacious conclusions. This is not to say that the divine is not in some way present in various religions and cultures, but stated so categorically, the divine activity outside of magisterial recognition is presumptuous. It is one thing to hold that religions are a preparation for the gospel and quite
another to say that religions are themselves self-sufficient revelations of the gospel. Again, prudence counsels caution: one cannot conclude from phenomenological similarities that the different religions are talking about the same thing.

The third segment of the book proposes the various challenges that the church in Asia must face. At the outset of this portion of the book, the author demonstrates a genuine struggle to come to terms with the dialogue between the gospel and culture. If the gospel is to demonstrate any transformative power, especially given the situation of poverty in Asia, it must be embodied by the faithful through proactive association with human society in such way as to uplift the dignity of its members. The church community cannot deal with poverty in condescending ways and, much less, exist in alienation from the realities of societal poverty. Another challenge posited to Asian theologians is that of recognizing the immanence of the divine in Asian cultures and religions, especially among the indigenous peoples. Taken in a right perspective, this assertion is well noted, so long as one can concur with the dictum, “God is in all things, but not all things are God.” But this begs the question of how we can ascertain when something per se is not God, or not of God.

Yet another challenge is modernity. The author explains that in the face of modernity, the dialogue between faith and science requires comprehensive interaction. He correctly points out that the two fields need not be defined antithetically; they are autonomous from but not independent of each other. Modernity has also given rise to ideologies, one of which is feminism—thus a discourse on the role of women in society and the church. Space does not permit any sustained discussion; suffice it to say that, against the magisterial position, the author favors women’s ordination. Another challenge is religious conflict. One wonders whether the author’s assertion that monotheistic religions have a greater tendency toward aggression is borne out by the facts. Adherents of the supposedly most passivistic religion—Buddhism—have been perpetrators of violence in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The book concludes with a resounding proposition that efforts toward a more just and harmonious human society can come only through healthy, life-giving dialogue among religions. In fact, dialogue should not remain within the proprietary realm of the experts. It should flow into the daily
lived experiences of the members of human society. How this can be done in concerted fashion remains a challenge.

This book favors dogmatic deconstruction for the sake of reconciliation with “the other” to the point of self-deprecation. It begs the question of the purpose and the goal of dialogue with various cultures and religions and, on a larger scale, the intent of dialogue in the mind of the council fathers at the Second Vatican Council (and more recently, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences). The questions that persist, and that await a lucid response from Asian theologians, are whether dialogue aims to “Christify” various cultures and religions, or whether it is aimed at being transformed through these encounters, or both. To either of these options, a further question is, how so?

One final point to note is that perhaps the concerns of the West and those of the East are not entirely different after all. There are more than a few ongoing discourses among Western theologians pertaining to some of the issues discussed in this book, and continual dialogue may perhaps, in time to come, bring about some sort of convergence of collective wisdom for subsequent generations.

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