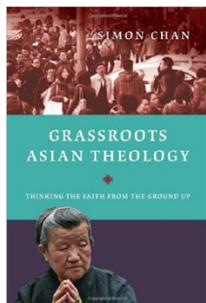


Book Reviews

Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up, by Simon Chan (IVP Academic, 2014, pp. 217)

—Reviewed by Patrick Krayter, Ph.D.



Western theologians appear to have a reified understanding of “Asian Theology,” and that reification troubles one Asian theologian, Simon Chan, professor of systematic theology at Trinity College in Singapore. He feels this is due to an almost exclusive focus on the writings of a limited number of elite Asian theologians. His recent *Grassroots Asian Theology* offers

western academic circles the opportunity to enlarge their field of vision.

By comparing the theologizing of these elite intellectuals with that of actual faith communities across Asia, Chan is able to show the significant difference between grassroots and elitist theologies. Ironically, these often Western-trained Asian theologians appear to use presuppositions and methods shaped by Enlightenment thinking rather than by those arising from Asian cultures. Chan also unveils the theological diversity of these grassroots theologies, a diversity that exists because these Asian faith communities seek to address in a biblical manner the needs and questions that arise in daily life, and which differ from context to context.

Chan begins by laying a methodological groundwork for his reflections. Fully aware that such theological diversity across Asian communities could be negatively perceived as relativizing the gospel, he asserts that these faith communities demonstrate continuity with the Church and historic Christian traditions not by alignment with specific dogmatic articulations but by being an integral part of the Church. As a “community with a history,” the Church is a faith community that exists across time and space in historical continuity with the story of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, the sending of the Spirit, and his *parousia* (pp. 11-12). Chan asks us to view these faith communities through the Catholic and Orthodox lens of *ecclesial experience*, thereby allowing us to affirm these faith communities. Their *ecclesial experience* clearly demonstrates their continuity with the historic, global Church: they live out the Gospel under the instruction of the Scriptures, and are led by the Holy Spirit in each of their specific contexts. The

benefit of this lens is that it avoids the temptation to reduce theology to objective propositions, subjective experiences, or to view theology as an individual rather than a corporate endeavor (pp. 15-18).

Chan’s scope of analysis is quite broad. He looks at how elite theologians and faith communities living in Muslim, Indian (Hindu), and Chinese (Buddhist-Confucian) contexts theologize about God (chapter 2), humanity and sin (chapter 3), Christ and salvation (chapter 4), the Holy Spirit and spirituality (chapter 5), and ecclesiology (chapter 6). Chan’s analysis is a bit weak when looking at the theology of God by those within Islamic contexts. This weakness is understandable, since one individual cannot master every area. However, his reflections about how faith communities theologize about humanity, sin, Christ, and salvation (Chapters 3 and 4) are particularly valuable. Chan shows how key contextual constructs of family, honor and shame can shape grassroots readings of Scripture, and how these constructs, so central to Asian contexts, have been largely ignored in western theological discourse. For example, the issue of shame arises 300 times in the Old Testament and 45 times in the New Testament. In contrast, guilt is mentioned 145 times in the Old Testament and only 10 times in the New (p. 83). This data alone should awaken us to the significance of Chan’s reflections.

Grassroots theologies also tend to emphasize Christ’s victory over our enemies, such as Satan, sin, sickness, and death. Chan is sensitive to a grassroots Christ who allays our fears. In contrasting elitist theologies with grassroots theologies, he points out how elitist theologians tend to focus on the socio-political dimensions of life. Such a view is largely irrelevant for those at the grassroots level. Chan writes:

“It does not occur to these [elitist] theologians that the poor might be looking for another kind of liberation; spiritual liberation from fear and fatalism created by centuries of internalizing the law of karma; freedom from the fear of spirits; deliverance from demonic oppression, real or perceived; healing for their sicknesses, and so on” (p. 103).

An intimate understanding of Jesus as the Victorious Lord stems from personal encounters with Jesus and their reception of the Holy Spirit (see Chapter 5). Liberating, transformative, personal encounters with God in Christ through the Spirit open new vistas for them. This emphasis on the Spirit is drawn largely from Pentecostalism, a field in which Chan has tremendous analytic expertise, and this global movement tends to influence the shape many of these grassroots theologies take.

Chan points out how conversion in Asian contexts, though sharing similarities with western cultures, has its own distinctives. In Asian contexts there is a dynamic interplay between an individual and one’s community, a dynamic very apparent in the Confucian family. Chan writes: “In

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a Confucian culture that highly values family solidarity, conversion transforms family relationships from that of domination to that of respect and reciprocity” (p. 121). There is a complexity and variety to conversions in Asia that defies the Western categorization of conversion as an individual decision and momentary event. Conversions may begin with a hazy understanding of Jesus and faith may develop over time, making conversion more of a process than an instantaneous event. In addition, group conversions are more likely to occur in some contexts.

Variety also exists in the ecclesiology of these diverse Asian grassroots communities (chapter 6). Chan addresses a cross-section of ecclesial movements that includes “Churchless Christianity,” informal fellowships, and indigenous church organizations. Chan asserts that the established institutional church does not “exhaust the meaning of the church as the body of Christ since it is still *in via* ... There are individuals, loose fellowships and informal ecclesial bodies that are not formally associated with the church, but that does not make them any less a true part of the body of Christ” (p. 170). He suggests that all these individuals and groups be placed at different points on an

ecclesial continuum, all being in process towards the goal of final unity as the holy city (p. 171).

There is a particularly interesting development in the Japanese Indigenous Christian Movements (JICM). Ancestor veneration is a major concern in the Confucian cultures of East Asia. Recognizing that salvation is found in Christ alone has led the JICM to institute rites for the evangelism of and prayer and baptism for the dead (p. 174). Since I personally have never lived in that context, I acknowledge that I am unable to even fully consider this. I look forward to the lively discussion that will arise among faith communities in East Asia about this important ritual.

In conclusion, though some may take issue with particular aspects of the theologies of these Asian grassroots faith communities, every intercultural worker should read this book in order to become sensitive to how local cultures not only do theology, but also how they should impact the process of doing theology. Chan clearly lays out the diverse theologizing that is arising across the Asian world. He also shows that the Spirit enables contextual theologies to emerge as the church seeks to faithfully model and represent Christ in each new situation. **IJFM**