

In the season of Passover, when evening had come, Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples. At the beginning of the main course, Jesus takes bread and says the blessing; he breaks it and gives it to his disciples, saying: 'This is my body for you'. At the end of the meal, having taken the cup and given thanks (and having said: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you'), he says to them: 'Never more shall I drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

The words in brackets are doubtful, probably to be excluded. From that beginning, the operation of tradition can be followed until it produces the existing texts.

None of this implies that the existing texts are to be abandoned. But their force cannot properly be understood unless the reader has in mind both their historical origin and the motives of tradition. Part III therefore very properly allows each scriptural writer to have his say. First the message of Mk where the supper is located within the total purpose of the Gospel. As one conclusion: its significance is 'to be found first and foremost not in the transformation of the bread and the cup or even in the meaning assigned to the bread and the cup, but rather in the establishment of a community that is united to Jesus in a special way.' Then to Paul and the Lord's Supper, the testament of Jesus according to Lk, and the eucharist according to Jn. With special reference to Jn, 'sacramental practice is only *one* way of encountering the risen Jesus, whereas the practice of mutual service is both the indispensable condition for the encounter and the indispensable expression of it.'

This extremely interesting book is by no means easy to read, even for a professional. Non-professionals might well begin with Part III and find much to reward them. Professionals will need to work through it in detail and probe what seem to be the weaknesses, not entirely concealed by much speaking. For example, I myself think that L-D makes too much of 'covenant' which is a minority theme in the New Testament except for Hebrews. But at least this book will prompt any reader to disturb settled ideas and think fruitfully about the centre of the Christian gospel. Only when I had finished it did I realise why the title—which seems only half a title—is what it is.

KENNETH GRAYSTON

THEOLOGY FROM THE WOMB OF ASIA BY C.S. Song. SCM Press, 1988, xiv + 241, £8.95

This is a book about the rebirth of theology in Asia, or more accurately the birth of a specifically Asian theology. To continue the metaphor, it is a time of pain and danger, but also a creative moment of great excitement and hope. C.S. Song is one of the most distinguished participants in this process. When we first met, twenty-five years ago as graduate students in New York, he was working on Barth and Tillich. There was no doubt about his intellectual capability to deal with these great thinkers, and he and his

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contemporaries took back to Asia the best of western theology. In retrospect that great achievement is seen as a mixed blessing.

In the continents of the world Christianity occupies a dominant place, with the exception of Asia. Here alone it is faced with more ancient, indigenous world religions. Christianity came to Asia as an alien system developed, as we are now conscious, within the constraints of European intellectual and cultural life, European climatic and geographical determinants. It therefore tended to call Asians out from Asian life and culture, to deny value to Asian religious experience.

What was Christ doing in Asia before the missionaries arrived? C.S. Song therefore asks how the history of each country can be understood as God's history. Asian Christians have to seek God in their own traditions, their own forms of speech, their own folktales and myths. And so the book is full of stories and poems drawn from many countries. There are also songs, and this is the first theological book I can recall which includes the score of a song. (I remember Mei-man Song as a Juillard scholar and concert pianist). C.S. Song is from Taiwan, but is well-travelled and acquainted with many Asian cultures. He is a committed Christian, but sensitive to Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian insights. The book is about a new method of doing theology appropriate to Asian experience and culture, valuing specifically Asian sources, both ancient and contemporary.

Clearly this is a project that can only be carried out by Asians, by Christians living in Asia. The fact that it will produce forms of Christian faith, practice and spirituality different from those of the west cannot in itself be a criticism. We can send fraternal good wishes, yet we may have some reservations too.

In the general criticism of western attitudes, the book displays a certain primitivism. Reminiscent of various Romantic movements in the west, it reasserts the wholesomeness of nature and man's place in nature. But is this the experience of Asia today, divided into countries of rapid industrialisation, countries devastated by floods, countries torn apart by civil strife. Forty years after de-colonisation criticism of the western way is a poor basis for identifying what is truly Asian.

The book is about a new way of doing theology, but it is not yet an example of a new theology. The author belongs to an important generation which began to reassert the values of their own traditions, but perhaps it will be another generation yet before we have theologians who write in a less self-conscious and contrived way from within Asia. In a book of parables, it may be relevant to note that this book about the Asian way was written in Geneva, just before the author took up a new appointment in San Francisco.

ALISTAIR KEE