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## Pastoral counselling in Asian context

### topics

- *culture and religion in Asia*
- *the concept of family and filial piety*
- *the cultural concept of shame*
- *poverty and injustice*
- *models and challenges of pastoral counselling in Asia*

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### Asian context or contexts?

One has to think of the plurality of contexts in Asia. Asia is a large continent stretching from Afghanistan (if one excludes the Middle-east) to the far reaches of the Siberian region in eastern Russia. There are at least 26 countries in this region. If the Middle-east is included, the number increases to some 45 countries. More than 60% of the world's population live in Asia. The continent expresses a rich diversity of cultures, languages, lands, religions, lifestyles, and economies. In this sense, I cannot adequately represent Asia. What I present cannot fully capture the diversity and vastness of the Asian contexts. Nevertheless, I am an Asian, living and working in Asia, and therefore my paper, though limited by my particular context, will attempt to discuss some aspects of my own as well as other Asian contexts to the best of my knowledge and experience.

### My own context

I live in Singapore which is one of the smallest nations in Asia. It is an Island state measuring some 25 miles in length and 15 miles across, with a population of 2.7 million people. The island is part of the Southeast Asian region, comprising countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. This part of the world is a rapidly growing region economically though there are also many serious problems.

Singapore is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nation. It has four official languages and has Chinese, Malay and Indian, and Eurasian communities in addition to other minority groups. It is thus an interesting "melting pot" of different cultures and peoples. In that sense, I am happy to be staying here as I am exposed to some aspects of the rich diversity in Asia.

I teach in a theological college as well as serving as an associate pastor in a Tamil Methodist - church which has both English and Tamil services. My teaching min-

istry extends to several churches and Christian organisations in Singapore as well as some in the region. I also have opportunities to do pastoral counselling with church members, seminary students, pastors, and others referred to me.

In the rest of the paper, I will raise some issues which I have found to be important. They represent my own experience and reflection.

## Culture and religion

When Asia is mentioned, culture is one major consideration that immediately comes to mind. I use the phrase “culture and religion” because in the Asian contexts, culture and religion are generally closely related. The ancient religions of Asia have shaped Asian cultures for centuries. The pastoral care-giver and the pastoral counsellor (who generally is trained with western models and methods since the modern pastoral counselling movement has largely developed in the west) thus have to be particularly aware of cultural realities and issues when working in the Asian contexts.

Culture has to do with beliefs, values, customs, and institutions<sup>1</sup>. While we recognize certain aspects of culture which seem universal across cultures, there are also particularities regarding the above dimensions in any given culture which affect the way pastoral counselling is conceived and practised.

Beliefs have to do with how reality is perceived. They help to shape world views which are hermeneutic sieves through which experiences are interpreted and assessed. If in a culture there is a strong belief in spirits, then that becomes an important part of the world view which therefore has to be taken into consideration by the pastoral counsellor.

Values have to do with what we value. Cultures may have different values though there may also be similarities across cultures. Our values affect the way we pursue certain things or goals, and determine how we react when we are unable to fulfil our goals or when we lose what we value. Pastoral counselling cannot be done effectively without due recognition of cultural values.

Customs have to do with how we do things. Cultures develop ways of doing things both at individual as well as communal levels. In a sense, customs determine what is normal or abnormal. What is customary is normal. What is customary in the west may not be so in the east. How then do we determine whether a particular act or experience is healthy or not? What norms do we use? These are questions which a pastoral care giver struggles in the Asian contexts as many of the texts on pastoral counselling come from the West and may need to be re-interpreted and modified in the light of Asian cultures.

Institutions represent how a particular culture has organized itself. Cultures may vary in terms of the presence or absence, strength and weakness, relative importance and other aspects of institutions. Examples of institutions are family, courts, churches, schools, village councils etc.

The best way to look at culture and pastoral counselling is to consider some issues which I have found to be relevant in the region I come from.

### *The supernatural*

In Indonesia, “belief in God” is the first of five national values (pancasila). Several Asian countries have state religions, especially Islam. Religion is thus important in the Asian contexts. Sociologists such as John Clammer have noted that in Singapore and other Asian countries, with modernisation one has not seen a parallel secularisation process as has been seen in western countries<sup>2</sup>. In fact, with modernisation has come a resurgence of Asian religions. In Singapore, for example, the fastest growing religion is Buddhism<sup>3</sup>.

What is of particular importance in the Asian contexts in terms of counselling is what Paul Hiebert has called the “excluded middle zone”<sup>4</sup>. This “middle zone” represents beliefs in the existence of spirits, demons, ghosts, and how they influence or affect us. It exists between beliefs concerning heaven and our experience of empirical earthly life. In many Asian contexts, including the developed countries such as Japan, the “middle zone” is alive and well<sup>5</sup>.

In my own experience, I repeatedly encounter counselees who believe in spirits and demons, and wonder whether their problems are due to these entities. This motivated me to write my doctoral dissertation on pastoral responses to demon possession in Singapore<sup>6</sup>. How should I respond as a pastoral care giver? I should not dismiss the “middle zone” lest I create, in my case, a split level Christianity with people seeking help from pastors as well as from *bomohs*<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, I have the benefit of being exposed to a multiplicity of perspectives and I can reframe problems for people. Reality and truth become important issues in counselling.

### *Family and filial piety*

The family remains a resilient institution in Asia though in many places it is experiencing serious challenges arising from the modernisation, urbanisation, and economisation of life. The family unit (whether extended or nuclear) is an important consideration for pastoral counsellors in Asia. On one hand, the family is an important aspect of well-being and pathology in people. On the other hand, the Asian family is generally wary of seeking professional counselling which uses models of family therapy developed in the west. Family counselling has been traditionally done by the larger extended family though in many urban places in Asia, the extended family is threatened. In these places, the church, for example, can be the new extended family and pastoral care can be done using more traditional paradigms.

One related issue is filial piety, especially in Chinese cultures. It is an important virtue and is expressed in various forms of ancestor worship (or veneration, as some would say). In my own ecclesial context, this has remained a big issue. Should Christians continue the practice of ancestor worship? Is this a cultural custom or is it a religious rite?<sup>8</sup> From a more psychological perspective, is filial piety a way of retaining the power structures of traditional society? Parents, especially the father, are to be honoured. What has filial piety got to do with the common experience of the “distant father” and sometimes the abusive father?

Recently, there was a seminar in Singapore in which some retired people shared from their experiences under Japanese occupation during the Second World War. One historian, a friend of mine, suggested that one of the reasons why the Japanese seem to be having great difficulty in apologising for the atrocities during the war was possibly filial piety.

Besides the above issues, the family in Asia is going through rapid changes, much faster than those in the west. Ten major changes in the Asian family have been noted in a well-known work on the family in Asia. These include egalitarian family relations, greater individualism and independence, marital disruption, urbanisation, and so on<sup>9</sup>. Pastoral counselling has to note these stresses and challenges to family life. In Singapore, the government as well as major institutions are taking an active role in developing family values and life.

### *Shame*

David Augsburger has noted that Asian cultures are shame oriented cultures<sup>10</sup>. While that may be too much of a generalisation, I think it is still true to say that shame plays an important role in Asian cultures. Shame has tended to be seen in a negative way, and often as inferior to guilt. I like to see shame in a more positive light. Healthy shame is discretionary shame. It does allow for the well being of individuals and societies through the process of shared goals and values.

At the same time, however, shame can also cripple someone by preventing him or her to move on in life. A deep sense of shame can be motivation enough for a suicide attempt. This is especially the case in Japanese society. The pastoral counsellor must approach facts with a sensitivity to the counsellees' shame. "Losing face" is a disaster in Asian cultures. In counselling I have found the need to be sensitive to the importance of "keeping face" and "losing face" while helping people to find solutions to their problems. In the process I am also aware of my own "face" and have found avenues of personal growth through the experience of cultural relevance as well as countercultural stances. I am also exploring my experience as a pastoral care giver in a region which has many cultural practices involving masks and shadow-play, through the concepts of a "demonology of masks" and a "theology of the face"<sup>11</sup>.

### *Smooth interpersonal relationships (SIR)*

When I was studying in the Philippines, I was introduced to the concept of SIR which is a key value in Filipino culture. Facts and justice are secondary to the primary value of interpersonal harmony. In Chinese culture too, social harmony, group consensus rather than confrontation are highly held values. One of the national values in Singapore is decision making through consensus rather than contention or confrontational means<sup>12</sup>. Pastoral counselling in conflict situations will have to bear this cultural ethos in mind.

### *An Asian psychology / Asian psychologies*

William Wundt, the father of modern psychology saw psychology based on two traditions: the natural sciences and the social sciences traditions. From the latter arose cultural psychology (Völkerpsychologie) or indigenous psychology, which Wundt predicted would be the more important kind of psychology in the future<sup>13</sup>. In the Asian contexts, attempts have been made to develop such indigenous psychologies such as in India<sup>14</sup> and other countries.

This is an important process since it addresses important questions. For example, in Filipino culture, the concepts of shame (hiya), pakikisama (yielding to the leader or the majority), and utang na loob (gratitude) are all based on the core cultural value of kapwa (shared identity with others)<sup>15</sup>. A mature Filipino person is one who shares his or her identity with others. The most mature person is one who belongs, not one who is independent. Many western psychologies are based on

views of maturity linked with growing independence. The implication is that what is seen as healthy behaviour in one culture (say, in California) may be seen as unhealthy in another (say, China).

### *The global village*

The discussion on cultural particularities must also be balanced with the trend of universal cultural patterns created by the media and technology. Many parts of Asia are open to modernity and the mass media originating in the West. The result is what Japanese writer Kenichi Ohmae terms the “californianisation of taste” with the phenomenon of common cultural icons in many different contexts: Nike shoes, Levi’s Jeans, Windows 95, Mr. Bean, Michael Jackson, coke etc.<sup>16</sup> In fact, it may be true that teenagers across cultures may be more similar to each other to their own elders. In this sense, I feel that what is written in one culture may increasingly have currency value and relevance in many other cultures.

I live in the midst of these phenomena where there is a resurgence of traditional cultures but also a growing similarity of popular cultures with other cultures largely because of new subcultures being promoted by the mass media as well as being created by new technologies e.g. the Internet, karaoke etc. We all seem to be riding the same waves of information these days.

### **Economic tigers and dragons**

Discussions on Asia inevitably also deal with the social contexts. Here again, there is a wide variety. Life span in Japan is 81 years, while it is only 50 years in Bangladesh. In Japan, the infant mortality rate is 5 per thousand live births while it is 118 per thousand live births in Bangladesh. The GDP in Singapore is twenty times that in Pakistan<sup>17</sup>.

I live in a region where economies are growing rapidly. There is a growing economisation of life. The economy has become the major paradigm of life in several Asian nations. How does this affect people? One obvious sign is the increasing stresses of life due to the rapid changes and pace of life. People work longer hours, are fatigued and stressed out, and have little time for relationships and family life. Social pathologies are on the rise in many Asian countries. Family breakdown, drug addiction, suicide, violence and prostitution are some such signs.

Another question is how the social environment defines and shapes the self. In these economically vibrant societies, the self is increasingly seen as efficient worker and increasingly wealthy consumer. Christopher Lasch has written about the “minimal self” as the product of a marketplace paradigm<sup>18</sup>. He is right, and I believe that as a pastoral counsellor, I am faced with evaluating such definitions of self in the light of what I understand to be human dignity and personhood through theological anthropology.

The marketplace may be forcing people to be functioning as efficient but hollow selves. The challenge for pastoral care giving is obvious.

### *Poverty and injustice*

Many sections of Asian society are also marked with poverty and injustice, whether it is a village in Bihar or a kampong in Kalimantan. In our college, we have some students from Nagaland, a politically restricted area in India. Last year,

two of these students had to return home because of the death of loved ones through malaria and dysentery epidemics<sup>19</sup>. The health care system is poorly managed. Through corruption, supplies are diverted into the black market and the money is pocketed.

How does the pastoral counsellor function in such situations? Where corruption is strife, how does one guide? What advice can be given? In a “corrupto-metre” study<sup>20</sup>, six of the ten most corrupt nations are Asian.

How can pastoral care be given to people suffering from poverty? Are western models of pastoral counselling sufficient? Pastoral care in such situations has to take a more communal approach, since the problem is usually systemic in nature, and a social relief, social action, or development kind of approach.

### *Pastoral care as prophetic*

Whether in a rapidly developing economy or a poor nation, the pastoral counsellor may often have to challenge the social assumptions or inertia. The role of the pastoral counsellor may be to go beyond helping the person to merely cope in the situation. If that is all the pastoral care giver does, he or she is no more than a servant of the unhealthy or unjust system. The care giver may have to challenge the social system itself which produces such social pathologies and dehumanizes people either through consumerism or poverty.

## **Doing pastoral care and counselling in Asia**

Before I conclude, I wish to mention two other issues briefly.

### *Models and training*

Working in Asia I search for relevant home-grown models of counselling and care giving. There are some interesting models. One example is the “quiet therapy” model in Japan. Morita psychotherapy is a case in point<sup>21</sup>. It uses Japanese ideas and methods together with western concepts to develop an indigenous model of therapy. The therapy involves putting a person in a simple room to be alone without the usual sensory stimuli and activities. The patient discovers his or her own addictions, and also gratitude to significant people.

The interesting thing I have discovered is the close relationship between psychology and spirituality in traditional Asian societies. In the light of modern western exploration of the interface between spirituality and psychology, it must be noted that this has been going on for centuries in the Asian contexts. The “quiet therapies” are a modern version of this process.

Any model must take into consideration the way problems, the helper, and the helping process are perceived. In Asian contexts, these are shaped by culture and social factors as discussed above. Many problems are given a supernatural angle. The helper is seen as wise rather than as an expert. The helping process is strongly directive in many places. These facts must be remembered in developing culturally relevant models of pastoral counselling.

One interesting phenomenon in the west is the growing popularity of alternative medicine and a growing disenchantment with western medicine. In the Singapore scene, western modern medicine co-exists with traditional Chinese medicine. Would there be a growing popularity of traditional ways of caring and helping at

the expense of modern professional counselling (cf. with western modern medicine)?<sup>22</sup>

### Networks

Modern pastoral counselling came to Asia when Carl Rogers visited Japan in 1952. The first pastoral counselling course was conducted at the Union Theological Seminary in Tokyo. Paul Johnson visited Japan in 1964 and started the CPE movement in Asia. In 1966, one of the pioneer counselling centres, the Churches Counselling Centre was started in Singapore. In 1981, the journal *Bokkai Shinri* (Pastoral Psychology) was launched.

Since then, the Asian Congress on Pastoral Care and Counselling was organized in Manila (1982), Tokyo (1984), New Delhi (1986), Manila (1989), and Bali (1993)<sup>23</sup>. The sixth Congress will be held in Seoul in 1997. Recently a Christian Counselling Conference in Asia was held in Singapore with more than 800 people attending. Representatives from several Asian countries were present.

There is a need for more work to be done in thinking about pastoral counselling in the Asian contexts. I would like to see more Asian contributions in terms of theory-building, writing, training, and leadership.

### Conclusion

I have recorded impressions and thoughts on some issues which I think are important based on my own reflection and experience. I live in an exciting region though it also has many dangers and difficulties. As a pastoral care giver, I am reminded daily to live and minister as a wise-fool, wounded healer, servant-guru, and powerless miracle worker in a rapidly changing context where good and evil, order and chaos, and life and death exist side by side.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See the *Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 2, 1978, p.7.
- <sup>2</sup> John Clammer, *Sociology of Singapore Religion*, Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991, chapt. 5, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Eddie C. Y. Kuo and Tong Chee Kiong, *Religion in Singapore*, Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle", in: *Missiology: An International Review*, 10:1, 1982, p.35-47.
- <sup>5</sup> See e.g. Winston Davis, *Dojo: Magic and Exorcism in Modern Japan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Solomon, *Living in Two Worlds: Pastoral Responses to Possession in Singapore*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994.
- <sup>7</sup> See Rodney Henry, *Filipino Split World: A Challenge to the Church*, Manila: OMF, 1986.
- <sup>8</sup> See Bong Rin Ro (ed.), *Christian Alternatives to Ancestral Practices*, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985.
- <sup>9</sup> Man Singh Das and Panos D. Bardis (eds.), *The Family in Asia* (Boston, Sydney, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), p.419.
- <sup>10</sup> David Augsburg, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986, chapt. 4.

- <sup>11</sup> See Christopher Nugent, *Masks of Satan: The Demonic in History*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1983, p.2, where these phrases are found.
- <sup>12</sup> Jon S. T. Quah (ed.), *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies, Times Academic Press, 1990, chapt. 7.
- <sup>13</sup> See Uichol Kim and John W. Berry (eds.), *Indigenous Psychologies: Research and Experience in Cultural Context*, Newbury Park / London / New Delhi: SAGE, 1993.
- <sup>14</sup> See e.g. see D. Sinha, *Psychology in a Third World Country: The Indian Experience*, New Delhi: SAGE, 1986.
- <sup>15</sup> As noted by Virgilio G. Enriquez, "Developing a Filipino Psychology", in Kim and Berry (eds.), *Indigenous Psychologies*, op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York: Free Press, 1995, pp. 28ff.
- <sup>17</sup> These figures are obtained from *The Economist Book of Vital World Statistics*, London: Hutchinson, 1990.
- <sup>18</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self. Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1985.
- <sup>19</sup> See Robert Solomon, "Epidemics in Nagaland", *Newsletter of the International Pastoral Care Network for Social Responsibility*, Spring-Summer 1995, p.16-17.
- <sup>20</sup> Reported in *The Straits Times*, Singapore, 26 August 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> See David K. Reynolds, *The Quiet Therapies: Japanese Pathways to Personal Growth*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980, especially chapt. 2.
- <sup>22</sup> See e.g. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, for an interesting account of how various traditional healing traditions co-exist with modern medical and psychological healing establishments.
- <sup>23</sup> The above facts are described and more information can be found in Robert Solomon, "Pastoral Care and Counselling", in *The Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, to be published in the near future by Eerdmans in Grand Rapids, USA.