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# My Pilgrimage in Mission

Kosuke Koyama

**B**orn in 1929 in Tokyo, Japan, I was about ten years old when I was introduced to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I still remember the excitement with which I held the book in my hands and examined the picture of the weary traveler, kneeling before the cross. It was the first theological book I read in my life. Though my understanding of it was limited, its symbolism beyond my comprehension, I was drawn by the devotion of Christian, the main character of the book. His determination to reach the goal, overcoming all obstacles and temptations on the way, left a deep impression on my soul. Finally, he arrives at the cross, and the burden he has been carrying falls from his shoulders. The strange impression of this travelogue has stayed with me as though it were my personal secret. Today I can see that the book introduced me to the Christian understanding of history. Our lives, and even the great panorama of human history, have beginnings and ends that contain the movement (i.e., the pilgrim's progress) toward God. This understanding of life and of history gives a fundamental orientation for the Christian understanding of mission.

## Pilgrim's Progress versus Demon Progress

About the time I encountered *Pilgrim's Progress*, the Japanese military was already active against Manchuria and China. The war thus begun eventually became the Fifteen-Year War. At the time of Japanese surrender in 1945, Japan was at enmity with fifty-two nations. Between 1941 and 1945 I experienced utter confusion, violence, and destruction. Night after night the bombs rained down upon us. Yet, somehow, the idea that our life, personally and collectively, must be a movement toward God survived in my soul. I sensed, though vaguely, a great contrast between pilgrim progress and the "demon progress," as it were, of the cult of emperor worship. I concluded that Japan became a heap of ruins because it engaged in the cult of a false god—in idolatry. Perceiving that this would sound extremely strange to my friends, I kept it to myself. My thought was simple. The emperor is human. It is not right to say that he is divine. Idolatry, a theme foreign to Japanese culture, became a part of my mental vocabulary. It came together with the experience of the terrifying violence of war. I was baptized during the war years not so much from an awareness of my personal sinfulness as from the immediate experience of the destruction of my country by war. The minister who baptized me told me that the God of the Bible is concerned about the well-being of all nations, even including Japan and America. To hear this at the same time that we were being bombed by America was quite startling. This was my first ecumenical lesson.

My life, spanning the bulk of this century, has been continuously invaded by the violence of wars. The twentieth century has been a century of genocide and wars. When I pray, "Lead us not into temptation," I am, in fact, saying, "Lead us to the eradication of violence." It is violence, not temptation, that has defined my life in this century.

The Christian faith came into the Koyama clan when my paternal grandfather became a Christian some 130 years ago.

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With his grandfatherly authority, he encouraged us to read the Bible and to freely discuss our thoughts about it. Strange names—Adam, Eve, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul, Peter—gradually became familiar to us. Because of my grandfather's wisdom, the Bible has always been for me a companion book that initiates fascinating and serious discussion about our life in the world. I hold today that the Bible is the Word of God not because it is so defined by the church, but because it speaks to us urgently and deeply. Many years later my mother told me that my grandfather had been praying for one of his grandchildren to become an evangelist. Without knowing this, I entered the preparatory course of Tokyo Union Theological Seminary in 1946. Tokyo was desolate, and I was tormented by hunger.

I remember that one morning at chapel Dr. Kuwada, president of the seminary, read from 2 Kings 25:6–7. The American president, Mr. Truman, he said, treated the Japanese emperor Hirohito far more mercifully than Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had treated Zedekiah, the king of Judah. I felt thankful for that. On the day when the top Japanese war criminals were hanged, Dr. Kuwada spoke of international justice. But, I thought, had Japan won the war, they would surely not have been hanged.

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Through these "international" events, I learned to pronounce the names of Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah, turning them over on my tongue in my Japanese accent with great delight. They sounded impressive!

I graduated from Tokyo Union Theological Seminary in 1952 with a thesis on St. Francis of Assisi. In my mind St. Francis's ability to converse with a wild wolf was united with his mystical reception of the holy stigmata of Christ. I concluded that the lifestyle of the stigmata overcame all barriers to communication, even between the animal and human worlds. I seemed to detect an Oriental (India, China) element of saintliness in Francis.

## A Time of Cultural and Theological "Floating"

From 1952 to 1959 I studied "Western theology" in theological schools in Madison and Princeton in New Jersey. During those years I was convinced that whatever my professors taught me was universally valid, since, after all, Christian theology had been developed in the West. Almost intentionally, I ignored my own culture and language, deciding that they were worthless. It was a time of cultural and theological floating that continued for seven years. I was able to obtain the doctoral degree in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary without bringing what I learned in New Jersey to dialogue with my own spiritual and cultural roots. Vaguely, however, I was aware of the need for integration.

One steamy night in August 1960, I flew with my young family into Bangkok, Thailand. We were missionaries sent by the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyodan) to the Church of Christ in Thailand. Through the desk of Ecumenical Relations of the Kyodan, the financial support for this project came mostly from Presbyterian, Disciples, and Baptist churches in America. Though we were called "missionaries from Japan," the Kyodan was not able, at that time, to support us fully. This dependence arrangement continued for fifteen years, supporting me and my immediate Japanese successor in Thailand. I learned that any ecumenical project involves complicated financial arrangements.

In Bangkok we immediately plunged into language study. For one full year our life was totally circumscribed and consumed by language study. Being unable to produce certain sounds, my tongue was twisted, my lungs pained, and my intelligence humiliated. Learning the Thai language was my second spiritual baptism, a baptism into the unfamiliar sounds and symbols of a different culture and religion. Today I am

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tempted to say that anyone who wants to understand multiculturalism or religious pluralism would first have to endure this linguistic baptism. It was the language study that grounded me from that rootless floating. For all the tongue twisting and mental humiliation, after a year of language study I ventured to lecture in Thai at Thailand Theological Seminary in Chiangmai. My students heard the countless mistakes, both hilarious and dangerous, that I made in the classroom.

Coming to Thailand, I entered the young yet venerable heritage of Asian ecumenism, which began in 1949 with the Bangkok conference entitled "The Christian Prospect in Eastern Asia." Under the leadership of D. T. Niles, U Kyaw Than, and Alan Brash, the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) was formed in 1957. The theme of its inaugural conference at Prapat, Indonesia—"The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia"—was still echoing when I arrived in Chiangmai. I experienced firsthand the reality of the community of faith spread throughout Asia. My theological ministry found a new strong context in the "Common Evangelistic Task."

### Luther's Theology in Chiangmai

With the kind help of John Hamlin, the principal of the seminary, and of faculty colleagues, my appreciation of the Thai Theravada Buddhist-animist culture gradually deepened. This new development shook my confidence in the New Jersey theology. When one day in the classroom I realized that my lecture on Luther's theology was a complete flop, I panicked. The waves of the panic reached back all the way to my wartime experience. The realization that many of my EACC friends also knew the war, but as the victims of Japanese imperialism, was important for my new theological orientation.

What, I asked myself, is the connection between Chiangmai and Wittenberg? I could not justify myself by saying that for my New Jersey professors, Wittenberg was important. There was a

serious question of relevance here, as the EACC was pointing out. Between northern Thailand and New Jersey there are such vast differences in religion, culture, and language. If I speak about Luther's theology in Chiangmai, I must know what my Chiangmai students need to know and understand about such theology. If I did not face these questions, how could I participate in "the Christian prospect in Asia"?

This simple question of relevance was for me Elijah's hand-sized cloud that became, in a short time, a storm. I found the question far more difficult to answer than I at first anticipated. I saw that I must first understand the history of the Thai people and their religion and culture. This would take, I said to myself, more than my lifetime. To begin with, why did I, a man from Tokyo, think Luther's theology was meaningful to me? This question revealed to me how long I had been floating from my own roots. Even this personal question I was not sure how to answer! Suddenly I was confronted by the question of my own personal and theological identity. I realized that the last time I was really I was during the daily bombings of the war. Under the bomb I was totally vulnerable and naked. *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy!) was the only word left for me then. And that was a strong identity!

Yet I could not allow what I learned in New Jersey to simply disappear like a mist. I needed to reconstruct my theological knowledge in terms of my experience in Thailand. I was involved in a triple accommodation process with Tokyo, New Jersey, and Chiangmai. Should I look at New Jersey and Chiangmai from Tokyo? Or Tokyo and New Jersey from Chiangmai? Or Tokyo and Chiangmai from New Jersey? How could I come to some kind of meaningful integration of my theological thought that would express itself in Japanese, English, and Thai? Gradually, the intense wartime experience of *Kyrie eleison* reclaimed the center of my theological thinking.

The experience of vulnerability under the bomb began to cast its light upon the confusing triple accommodation process. I became Tokyo-centered, but this Tokyo has, in my theological map, remained ever desolate. Tokyo, in being reduced to a ruin, participated in the ancient story associated with Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah. From that memorable day when I lectured on Luther in Chiangmai up to the present, I have been continuously challenged by the question of "one Gospel and many cultures." Often this challenge comes to my mind with the image of King Zedekiah, his eyes torn out and taken into exile. The theme of "Christ and culture" and my firsthand experience of the destruction of Japan were welded together in my soul. Ecumenism is a serious subject because it affects the destiny of nations. Japan, behaving like Nebuchadnezzar, "put out the eyes" of countless Asians. How do we affirm the ecumenical Gospel in the face of global violence?

### Singapore: The Decolonization of Theology

In 1968 I moved to Singapore to take up the position of dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST), which was formed in 1966. This school was an outcome of a historic theological education consultation held in Bangkok in 1956. In the record of the consultation we read, "The teaching of systematic theology must be relevant to the environment. It must, on the one hand, be grounded in the Bible; and on the other, related to the actual situation . . . The Christian faith should be presented in relation to the totality of questions raised by the local situation, and *it should not be assumed that certain questions are relevant to all times and situations*" (italics added). Repeating in my

mind the last line of the above quotation, I succeeded John Fleming from Scotland. With the 1956 Bangkok conference, we consciously began the process of the decolonization of theology. The selfhood of the Asian church became a subject of serious discussion.

Though my office was located at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, I was kept busy most of the time flying around in the countries of Southeast Asia. From the beginning, the SEAGST faculty knew that there are not one but many religious and cultural contexts in Asia. In fact, the variety in Asia is both staggering and impressive. The SEAGST focused its attention on the academic and historic strength of schools in various cultural contexts. Thailand offered Buddhist studies, while Indonesia and Malaysia were responsible for the study of Islam. Hong Kong and Taiwan presented Confucian studies. The Philippine seminaries were the locus for the study of church history. In 1975, after three years of study and discussion, the Senate of SEAGST came to a consensus to adopt a "Critical Asian Principle" in theological education. It urged the schools to be contextual to regional situations and called the faculty's attention to at least four principles: situational, hermeneutical, missiological, and educational. The Senate approved the presentation of graduating theses in the students' own Asian languages if they preferred. Studying Christianity under these principles, my students of a Buddhist land and students of other Asian cultures could see afresh their own religious heritage, and in doing so, they saw Christianity afresh. By providing theological students with the opportunity to study in other Southeast Asian countries, SEAGST made it possible for them to get out of their own cultural turf for a while in order to become more communicative in theology and language. This is what makes ecumenical education exciting.

While I was the dean, some eighty Ph.D.s constituted the federated faculty of professors who taught in the theological schools in several countries of Southeast Asia. The degrees of all of these professors, including my own, were earned from theological schools in the West. All of the professors were people of two cultures ("fork and chopsticks"), committed to the direction of theological education expressed at the Bangkok conference of 1956. In our Senate discussions we explored together the nature and limits of cultural accommodation of the Gospel not from the

## **I found that blacks and Jews assess the Christian faith from their historical experience of violence.**

North Atlantic theological perspective but from the contexts of diverse local cultures in Asia. A marked absence of paternalism and imperialism among these multicultural faculty members nurtured the healthy growth of the school.

The SEAGST viewed Asia as one part of the global web of cultures and languages. It affirmed an ecological image of interrelatedness instead of viewing Asia as an independent, isolated entity. In my mind the ecological opposes violence, and the image of interrelatedness replaces that of "superiority." I decided not to use the language of superiority within the context of theology. Superiority is a cultural, not theological, concept. To say that Christianity is superior to Buddhism, or vice versa, is empty talk. The Gospel is not to be called superior. It calls us to

bear "good fruits" (Matt. 7:17). The "no other name" theology (Acts 4:12) signifies an exclusiveness whose character is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Unlike the ordinary cultural concept of exclusiveness, this Christological exclusiveness, drawing its life from love of unfathomable depth (1 Cor. 13:13), goes far beyond any comparative discussion of superiority or inferiority of religions.

The SEAGST, from its inception, has been a busy center of ecumenical theological discussion. John Fleming, Shoki Coe, Erick Nielson, D. T. Niles, U Kyaw Than, Ivy Chou, Alan Brash, M. M. Thomas, Alan Thomson, Henry P. Van Dusen, John Bennett, and Charles West, just to mention a few, were dear friends always ready to become most serious discussion partners with SEAGST.

## **An Unexpected "Bombing" in New York**

In 1974 I left Singapore for New Zealand, where I was senior lecturer in religious studies at the University of Otago. Six years later, in 1980, I received a long-distance call from Donald Shriver, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, inviting me to become professor of ecumenics and world Christianity. In this exciting environment I experienced a "bombing" quite different from that I had known during the wartime of my youth. There, for the first time, I encountered the Jewish and black peoples. New York abruptly forced me to respond theologically to the fact of enormous violence suffered by these two peoples. My concept of theology, which is ecumenical by nature, did not allow me the excuse that I come from a land in which these two peoples had no historical connections. I sensed that my identity would be directly threatened if I did not come to terms with the twofold encounter. My happy confidence that I was bringing the excitement of Asia to Union was thus shaken soon after I came.

In Asia I had learned that culture is an extremely ambiguous concept. The male-dominated culture of China, in its ten centuries of foot binding, had crippled one billion women. For centuries Hindu caste culture has delegated millions to lives of hopeless poverty and despair. In my thinking, I had come to a *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) in which love, becoming completely vulnerable to violence, conquers violence. In my Asian *theologia crucis* "Christ and culture" and "Christ and liberation" were united. New York approved the essential relatedness of the two, but it questioned my *theologia crucis*.

The experience of blacks and Jews challenged the heart of the Christian faith as I understood it at that time. I came to see that their critical appraisal of Christian faith derives from their historical experience of violence. It is sad to know that Christian theology and the church have participated in the violence they suffered. These two peoples are a symbol representing millions of other people who have suffered violence and perished in the course of human history. Their very presence in our midst raises the ultimate question of violence in human civilization. This was the same question I had whispered to myself in the war years; why is it that someone throws bombs upon us from the sky?

Previously, I had read books by Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, and Louis Finkelstein. But the living presence of a vibrant Jewish community, with their erudite and influential rabbis, their lively theological education, and the ongoing ancient tradition of the synagogue worship in which I participated from time to time in the city, impressed upon me the truth of the continuity of the Abrahamic covenant. One must not speak easily, I said to myself, of the superseding of the Old Covenant by the New Covenant. With this monologue, my Jewish-Christian

dialogue in New York began. I noticed that the theology of superseding has given to Christians a specious sense of superiority, not only over Jews, but over peoples of other faiths as well, an attitude that has contributed to the increase of violence in the world. A sense of superiority too quickly becomes a self-righteous complex that generates violence.

Theologically, I began to notice a difference between the Jesus I had known in Tokyo and the Jesus I found in New York. My Tokyo Jesus was the divine redeemer of the Gentiles. His Gospel could be proclaimed without making one reference to the Jewish people of today. There is Christology in Tokyo.

In New York, however, Jesus is, first of all, a Jewish person of great spiritual stature. And equally important as Jesus of Nazareth is the name of Rabbi Akiba. There is no Christology here. One has to come to New York to experience Jesus the Jew without a trace of Christology. This absence of Christology shakes the foundation of the Christian faith. The *theologia crucis* may speak of the theology of the Suffering Servant of God (Isa. 53) but nothing more. What the name Jesus stands for is no more than a part of the historical experience of the people of Israel. In the same way that the message of Jeremiah is universal, Jesus is universal. Jesus in Jewish New York is "down-sized." Here, he is no longer *vere Deus vere homo*.

A critical moment came to me when I finally came to feel the enormity of evil of the holocaust of European Jewry. In Asia I had been able to engage in theology at a safe distance from Auschwitz. In New York that distance once for all disappeared. All civilizations are violent, I saw. But why should Christian civilization be so especially violent?

Again, in Asia I had engaged in theological work at a safe distance from the history and the effects of black slavery in the United States. Even in my student days in New Jersey, only rarely had my professors mentioned the violence of the Crusades, of the Inquisition, of the colonization and settling of the Americas, of slavery, and of the Holocaust. Asians are color-conscious racists. Yet it took New York to confront me with the violence of racism. For the first time in my life I asked what had seemed a strange question. Was Jesus white? Was Augustine black? The New Testament and the creeds of the church never mention the color of Jesus. The enormity of the suffering of black people in the time of slavery and the continuing reality of vicious racism today has made me speak carefully about *theologia crucis*.

### "I Desire Mercy and Not Sacrifice"

*Theologia crucis* must not approve or encourage "sacrifice-making." To say that as Jesus sacrificed himself, we too should sacrifice is dangerous because it could suggest that sacrifice-making itself has Christian value. Sacrifice (*sacer*, holy; *facere*, to make) makes human life holy only when it is an expression of love. Sacrifice itself is tragedy. Over the years in New York I have come to see a connection between sacrifice and violence. Sacrifice is often another name for self-protection and even for self-righteousness. In view of the tremendous gap between the affluent and destitute sections of humanity, we find it difficult not to accept the equation that sacrifice is violence. We need to remember that *theologia crucis* is a doctrine of love, not of sacrifice. The predicament of black people has compelled me to meditate upon the words of the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (6:6).

The primary duty of *theologia crucis* is to confront violence and destroy it. Grace is global. Violence also is global. My New York *theologia crucis* began to have the two themes simulta-

neously: grace and violence. I came to understand that grace is the grace of God, but it must become our inner power to resist and eradicate violence as personally demonstrated by Martin Luther King, Jr. In this empowerment the grace of God becomes real.

The power of bombs is naked violence. The Hindus say that those who bomb others will eventually bomb themselves. This is the law of "action and reaction," or *karman*. Impressive as the *karman* philosophy is, the *theologia crucis* is not identical with it. If I were to say that they are identical, all of Asia could be easily evangelized. "Action and reaction," though profoundly understandable, cannot be the final words to bring about the elimination of violence. In fact, somehow the chain of "action and

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reaction" must be cut. It is the power of grace that can cut this chain. At this cutting, the Semitic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) encounter the Hindu spiritual world.

What if the *karman* doctrine were to bring forth a less violent world than the Semitic doctrine does? The final test for the truthfulness of the *theologia crucis* is whether this Christian teaching truly contributes toward the removal of violence in the world. Our commitment to the removal of violence must express itself in a number of important areas. That is the content of ecumenism and mission. In interreligious dialogue we must study how each tradition struggles against violence. Inquisition is violence. Inquisition is the death of evangelization. I believe we can speak forcefully and intelligently about Christian faith only when we are engaged in the common battle against violence. Christian speech on the uniqueness of Christianity would speak to the world if the world had been impressed by Christian work toward the elimination of violence.

The *oikumene* Christ loves is full of violence. Bombing is going on everywhere. Every bomb strikes the God of Jesus Christ. Every bomb is a denial of the "breath of God" that came into our nostrils (Gen. 2:7). Does not this one word—"bombing"—characterize the mode of human life upon this planet in the twentieth century? Perhaps, in different ways, previous centuries were as violent as ours. But we are living in the twentieth century and are responsible to this century and its future. Why is the human being so violent? Why are all civilizations—but in particular, why is the Western civilization, informed by Christianity—so violent? The source of human violence is a mystery. It takes the mystery of Eucharist to counter it. Someday, with the help of the Jewish people, black people, and many others, I may be able to stammer a few words about the mystery of the Eucharist that can expose the mystery of violence and thus move toward its elimination more courageously and intelligently.

My pilgrimage in mission began with my uncomprehending reading of *Pilgrim's Progress*. I have lived all my life from one war to another. My experience of bombing has caused me to be less interested in individual salvation or a blessed eternity after death, and more passionate about salvation now, in this life. Christian "eschatology" is focused on the present. For me the Christian mission is to bring forth the wholesomeness of abundant life to all upon the earth. In this way, perhaps *only* in this way, can we proclaim confidently and joyously the name of Christ.

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