



In Search of a God Who Eats Rice

In Thailand and many Asian countries, truth is not defined in terms of objective, coherent logic systems. Truth is what works.

by Siroj Sorajjakool

The weaker and more helpless you know yourself to be, the stronger will you become in His strength. The heavier your burdens, the more blessed the rest in casting them upon your Burden Bearer.

—*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 72

Religion is the involvement in the matters relating to the marginal people. . . .

—Kosuke Koyama, "Apostle James in Thailand," *Waterbuffalo Theology*, p. 169

IN THIS ARTICLE I ATTEMPT TO RAISE QUESTIONS that I find pertinent to me in particular, and to Asian theologians in general. I do not have solutions to the questions raised, only suggestions. In Thailand there is a saying: "Mistake is my teacher. A lot of mistakes make

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me a professor." It is my conviction that the courage to err is necessary if we are to pursue this venture of defining Adventist theology.¹ It is also my intention to point out that, from an Asian perspective, the future of Adventist theology is reflected in a revised version of Carl Junior's advertisement: "If it does not get you engaged, it does not belong in your faith."

Theology is a study of God. But the question is, "How can we ever study God?" By attempting to study God we have placed God as an object of thought. If we can know God, the God we know is no longer God.² Taoism has a saying that "the Way that can be named is not the eternal Way."³ This can perhaps be translated into our context: "The God that can be studied is not an eternal God."⁴ We cannot study God because God refuses to be studied. *God refuses to be captured by human reasoning and logic.*⁵ God refuses to be captured by human language. This, to me, is crucial in attempting to understand the future of Adventist theology.

When we ponder questions such as "What is the future of Adventist theology?" or "What is

the direction of Adventist theology?" the words *future* and *direction* imply movement, and movement in turn suggests that our theology is fluid (to a certain extent). Theology as an attempt to understand God is fluid because we are finite. We are finite because we are finite,⁶ period. And because we are finite, there will always be movement in theology. This is so in view of the fact that finiteness implies contingency. We are historical beings, and we will always be affected by the contingency of our lives. As such, our theology can never remain purely objective. To reflect on God within the room filled with a nice aroma of vegetarian rib-bone steak is very different from thinking about God while waiting in a line for rationed food at a Thai-Cambodian refugee camp.

In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer argues that we do not employ our rationality as a means to arrive at an objective end. Rather, we start from the end and use rational capacity to justify our means. We will what we want, and justify our wants using our reasoning. We boast of our intellect when in actuality we are governed by our will and desire. We think that we are led by our intellect when in actuality we are driven by our feelings—"by instincts of whose operation they are half the time unconscious." "Men," says Schopenhauer, "are only apparently drawn from in front; in reality they are pushed from behind."⁷

Although I do not subscribe to his metaphysical application of this "will" (the external reality is the construction of the "will"),⁸ his perception of human will as a means toward an end is real in our day-to-day lives.⁹ We come into the world as contingent historical beings. We act contingently, based on the contingency of the historicity of our beings. Most of our learning that impacts us in our everyday life is derived from our experiences. It dictates our directions. It decides for us what we ordinarily do in our everyday encounters. It informs our sense of morality and prioritizes our values.

While teaching comparative religions to my Buddhist students in Bangkok, I once asked, "Do you believe in *Ganapati* (the elephant god of the Hindu religion)?" They replied in the negative. I asked about *Kali* (the goddess of vengeance with eight arms) and the response was negative. I asked if they believed that Jesus walked on water, and they shook their heads, grinning from ear to ear. Then I asked if they believed that when Lord Buddha was born, he walked eight steps, and they unanimously responded in the affirmative. We like to think of ourselves as rational beings, when in reality we mostly function from experiences registered within our unconscious mind. In life we may be able to deny ideas and logic but not our personal experiences. In India, while people were facing suffering, *Gotama* (Buddha) suggested *anatta* or non-being as a solution to the problem of suffering. If to be is to suffer, then not to be is not to suffer. When Buddhism spread to Thailand, the people were not suffering. An inscription in 1283 by King Ramkamaeng reads: "This land of Thai is good. In the waters are fish; in the fields is rice. . . . Coconut groves abound in this land. Jackfruit abounds in this land. Mango trees abound in this land. . . . Whoever wants to play, plays. Whoever wants to laugh, laughs. Whoever wants to sing, sings."¹⁰ Therefore Buddhism in Thailand is not a striving for non-being but a better life in the new life cycle.

As an Asian I strongly believe that theology is not a quest for an objective knowledge of God (because the God that can be named is not an eternal God) but a quest for God from the full awareness of the historical nature of our beings. Theology is to study God with a full awareness of our biases and prejudices, of the contingency of our beings. D. Z. Phillips, in his article on *Philosophy, Theology, and the Reality of God*, writes ". . . theology is personal, since it is based on one's own experience of God. Where the connection between theol-

ogy and experience is missing, there is a danger of theology becoming an academic game.”¹¹

Methods of Theological Construction: Thai Perspective

Clifton Maberly, director of the Buddhist Center for Global Mission in Thailand, asked me these questions: “If a *farang* [white Caucasian] man and a Thai woman were to approach a door, who would step in first?” I said that no one would have entered the door since both expect the other to precede. “If a *farang* lady and a Thai man were to approach a door, what would happen?” Both would get stuck at the door, I replied, since both expect the other to defer. This is a cultural issue where there is no right and wrong. But the question is, In constructing theology, are we allowed to be as fluid? It is my belief that we all come with our baggage even in our theological thinking. Further, I believe the understanding of God is meaningful only when it is rooted in our historical and cultural ways of being.¹²

In Thailand we do things very differently from America. North Americans say that “time flies,” or “my watch is running.” Thais use the expression “time walks,” or “my watch is walking.” This is so because in the Buddhist world view there are endless rounds of reincarnation, so why not take your time? Many foreigners who have visited Thailand are usually impressed with the Thai smile, not realizing that it has many meanings. It could mean “how wonderful,” “I really don’t want to do it,” “I don’t really care,” or it could mean “I don’t like it, but I don’t want to hurt your feelings.” We see things differently and we do things differently.

Lots of evangelists who went to Thailand loved to start their meetings with Daniel and the 2300-day prophecy. Many Thais were

attracted to the meetings because, to them, prediction was an important subject. They wanted to know who they were going to marry, how many children they were going to have, how rich or poor they would become, how long they were going to live, and what lotto number they should buy. Hence Daniel’s prophecy was very intriguing to them because of all the numbers and the calculations. They saw the evangelist as another *farang* fortune-teller. I had a chance to visit an old folks’ home (a close approximation to retirement homes) a couple of years back. While I was there an old lady asked to look at my palm. She studied my palm and asked, “Are you married?” I said yes. She looked at my palm and pointed out a line to me. “See this line? . . . You are married.” Then she asked, “What is your occupation?” I told her that I was a teacher. She looked at my palm again and pointed out another line and said, “See this, this is a career line, and you are a teacher.” This is a classic case of interpolation.

To bring in logical arguments that work in North America is not going to work for the Thai people.¹³ Theology has to take root in the local soil. For it to do so requires an understanding of the way people think and function. In Thailand, systems of logic or reason or even an attempt to construct a theology is not going to make lots of difference in people’s hearts. John Lee, president of AHSA, once said, “If you were to rub the skin of most Thai Adventists, you would see Buddhists on the inside. If you were to rub further, you would see animists.” In Thailand and many Asian countries, truth is not defined in terms of objective, coherent logical systems. Truth is what works. It is common to see people go and pray to *Kuan Im* (Goddess of Mercy), *Kali* (Goddess of Vengeance), Christ, and Buddha at the same time. To them, if one of the gods cannot answer their prayers, at least the other should be able to. From a probability point of

view, it is practical. If you pray to one god, your chance of getting an answer to your prayer is less than if you were to pray to all the gods.

In my personal opinion, the way to do theology in Asia is to actually “do.” It is doing because many of us in Asia feel we do not have the luxury of time to reflect, nor are we convinced by logical, coherent, and systematic presentations. Regardless of various convincing rational arguments, Mr. Ng still gets up early in the morning, prepares chicken rice, and pushes his cart to Prakanong for his living. Supadtra still takes her children to school and complains about the parking space. Wanisa still helps her daughter with her homework. Mr. Ng apparently does not realize that the chicken rice he prepares is there only because he and his customers perceive it (as in Berkeley). Supadtra does not realize that her children are spirits that form part of the Absolute Spirit moving continually in dialectic manner toward a greater synthesis (as in Hegel). Wanisa does not realize that she “is” before she helps and that her act of “help” defines her essence (as in existentialism). Life goes on because we are biased thinkers. We are prejudiced, and our prejudice has to do with that which works. And what works is the God we can feel, sense, touch, see, and smell. God can be felt, sensed, touched, seen, and smelled only when we act. To do theology in Asia is to “do” theology.

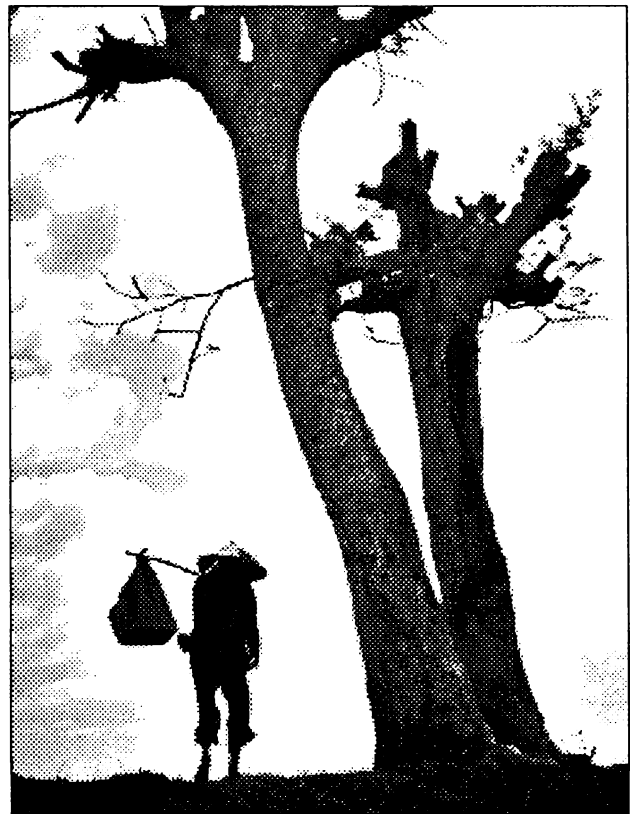
What is the future of Adventist theology in Asia? Whatever form it takes, which I cannot predict with absolute certainty, one thing it probably will not be is a sophisticated academic system or conceptualization. Reflecting on the teachings of Jesus, C. S. Song writes: “It is a theology that tears itself free from the conceptual games of traditional theology. And it is a theology that speaks out of life and speaks back into it—life not as a mere word or sound, but life that is lived in tribulation and expectation, in despair and hope, in anxiety and in a longing for peace.”¹⁴

In many Asian countries we do not have time to think of desserts because we are still struggling to fill our stomachs with rice.¹⁵ We are looking for a God who eats rice; a God who will prevent droughts and send the monsoon rains. We need a God who acts in concrete ways.

Because we are finite beings,¹⁶ our theology reflects movement. And movement, from Asian perspective, means to be moved to the point where we cannot help but reach out and touch others in concrete ways.¹⁷ It takes a God who eats rice to understand what it means to go without rice.

One day I took 15 seminary students to do development work in a tribal village. There was a little girl by the name of Ju who kept peeking through the crack of the wall the whole period we were there. On the last day she said to one of my students, “Why are you so happy? Why are you always smiling and laughing? What is so happy about life?”

Following my student’s reply, Ju sighed and



whispered, "I wish I could die. I hate my mom. She wants to sell me off."¹⁸

Ju does not care if God is a man or a woman. She does not care if the Bible was verbally

inspired or conceptually inspired. She does not care whether we are saved by grace or by works. Ju wonders if there is a God. If there is, where is he/she?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Luther taught us to sin boldly. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer writes: "It depends on a God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture" (D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. [New York: Macmillan Publ. Co., Inc., 1971], p. 6).

2. History of philosophy and theology is filled with humans' attempts to construct God, to come to a full understanding of God. A good example is found in Heidegger's *Dasien*. *Dasien* (as being there in the world) recognizes its being toward death. The recognition of the contingent nature of its being creates a sense of guilt within. Through guilt, *Dasien* seeks to authenticate itself through conscience. The way to authenticate itself through constructing the knowledge of God through the voice of conscience. (D. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology* [New York: Harper and Row, 1961], pp. 51-57). In his book *Creation and Fall*, after analyzing the implication of existentialist philosophy, Bonhoeffer points out that human beings construct the knowledge of God in order that they may know how to act toward God since God is the source of security. To know God is to know what God likes and dislikes and hence there is a way to behave toward God. But, concludes Bonhoeffer, to be aware of the knowledge of good and evil already implies human beings' falling away from God. Such a construct of God is human beings' seeking to define their own path of being for God. (D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: Temptation* [New York: Macmillan, 1959], p. 90).

3. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, R. B. Blakney, trans. (New York: New American Library, 1955), p. 53.

4. From an Asian perspective, Western theology reflects the desire to obtain absolute knowledge of God based on Cartesian dichotomy (the subject-object dichotomy that leads to the Western empirical, scientific, and analytical approaches to knowledge). Cartesian dichotomy, to Bernstein, is characterized by anxiety. In describing Cartesian anxiety, Bernstein refers to both the search for objective knowledge which, to Descartes, is the only solid ground for knowing, and the journey of finite being in search for a power outside that is big enough to contain finitude. Finitude causes anxiety,

and the way to cope with this anxiety is to find a God outside of the self. It is a quest for some fixed point, some stable rock upon which we can secure our lives against the precariousness of finite beings (R. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983], pp. 16-18).

5. We have in the past struggled with the issue of righteousness by faith seeking to arrive at a logical conclusion regarding the faith versus works contradiction. At the core of it we realize that we can not do away with faith and neither can we delineate works. Both stand in tension. But we face the difficulty because in logic there is no both/and. In logic it is either/or. We pull this into the discussion over the nature of Christ and face the question of "the sinful or sinless nature of Christ" or "example versus redemption." This is the question of logic. This is humans' attempt to capture God. In *Christology*, after reviewing history of the development of Christological concepts, Bonhoeffer believes that ultimately the Christological question is not "How" as in 'How are you possible?' but "Who?" "When the Counter-Logos appears in history, no longer as an idea, but as 'Word' becomes flesh, there is no longer any possibility of assimilating him into the existing order of the human logos. The only real question which now remains is: 'Who are you? Speak for yourself!'" (D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology* [London: Collins, 1966], p. 30).

6. Finitude comes with its feeling of insecurity. Perhaps it is the anxiety of being finite that drives and propels us in search of a solid ground upon which we may stand, knowing that the only solid ground is infinity. We reach out to God as a solid rock upon which we stand. But the problem is, we do not seem to be content with just standing. We fear that if we do not know the rock, the ground of our beings, that ground may not hold. We invest our effort into knowing this ground to assure ourselves that the rock is solid. The tune "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand" comes with historical-critical evaluation, archeological affirmation, and philosophical validation. The problem is, finite being wants to stand on solid ground and at the same time wants to know with absolute certainty that this ground is solid (infinity). But the ground cannot remain solid if it could be certified by finite knowledge. The

infinite cannot retain its essence when its essence can be fully grasped by finite being.

7. W. Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961), p. 313.

8. Schopenhauer suggests that through the "will" to know, the brain is built and through the "will" to grasp, a hand is formed just as "the will to eat develops the digestive tract." He concludes, "The action of the body is nothing but the act of the will objectified" (*ibid.*, p. 314).

9. There is a growing awareness of the need to recognize that our thinking and actions are not as objective and unbiased as we would like to see in ourselves. In the opening sentences of his book *Manana*, Gonzalez writes: "What follows is not an unbiased theological treatise. It does not even seek to be unbiased. On the contrary, the author is convinced that every theological perspective, no matter how seemingly objective, betrays a bias of which the theologian is not usually aware" (J. L. Gonzalez, *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990], p. 21). In the same manner Gadamer suggests that a true hermeneutic needs to start from the recognition of our prejudices and fore-meanings (H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [New York: Continuum, 1989], p. 269). See also Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980], pp. 118-122).

10. J. P. Fieg, *Thais and North Americans: Interact 3*, George W. Renwick, ed. (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1980), p. 9.

11. D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion: Swansea Studies in Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 6. A somewhat similar concept is expressed by Paul Tillich when he makes the distinction between philosophers and theologians. The philosophers seek to cognitively grasp reality by detaching themselves from reality itself so as to maintain objectivity. The theologians, on the other hand, seek an understanding of reality through existential participation in the reality itself (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, pp. 22, 23).

12. To come without baggage is not only impossible, it is to deny our humanity which, when pursued, leads to all types of abstraction unreal to our everyday life.

13. Sermons I have heard during the 30-some years of my life have been mostly doctrinal sermons. They have been about the state of the dead, tithe, righteousness by faith, Sabbath, last-day events, Sunday law, the nature of Christ, the Great Controversy, the remnant church, health, and on and on. Not much was said about the everyday life of Thai people who have to struggle to get onto the jam-packed bus that crawls at 10 kilometers an hour along Sukumvit Road to get to

work or the exhausting bargaining with vendors along the street for a reasonable price for a bunch of long beans. It has been strongly impressed on me that Adventism is a cognitive thing; that the mind is a very essential organ in the process of becoming an Adventist. If we are not able to cognitively grasp and describe the 27 fundamental beliefs, it is difficult to become a member of the church. There is an ongoing push for us to read for ourselves and to study for ourselves for otherwise, we may not pass the test during the final chapter of the history of the earth.

14. C. S. Song, *Theology From the Womb of Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 45.

15. Or as Martin Weber said in his book *Wrestling With Reality*, "Let's not be so engrossed in discussions about soybeans and wedding rings that we forget about equal rights for women, environmental stewardship, and helping the homeless" (Martin Weber, *Wrestling with Reality* [Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1993], p. 11).

16. According to Richard Rice, theology is a "human enterprise" and therefore its task is never complete. In being humans, theologians are as "susceptible to bias as any other human undertaking" ("Why I Am a Seventh-day Adventist," *Spectrum* 24:1 [July 1994], p. 45).

17. In the West, we also witness a movement toward *praxis*. In practical philosophy Gadamer argues that understanding, interpretation, and application are internally related, in that every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application. Hannah Arendt defines *praxis* as "the highest form of human activity, manifested in speech and deed and rooted in the human condition of plurality" (*Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp. 38-44). In discussing practical philosophy, Don Browning points out that if we take this (practical philosophy) seriously, all theological studies "must be recognized as practical and historical through and through." And hence all theology becomes practical theology (*Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991], p. 36).

18. Eight hundred thousand prostitutes in Thailand are below the age of 16, while an additional 200,000 are under the age of 12. These girls are sold and locked up for two years. They can be called on for sex 24 hours a day. The usual working time starts from 10 a.m. to 4 a.m. Each girl receives \$1.20 a day for meals. Each is forced to accept a minimum of one or two customers per day and a maximum of 26 customers per day. Examinations done on 1,000 children rescued by social welfare showed that 20 percent were HIV positive. According to police reports, the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights reported that on June 4, 1991, 17 young tribal girls between 11-17 years of age were

rescued from a brothel in Phuket. One of the girls was forced to entertain customers while she was seven months pregnant. On April 3, 1991, 20 policemen raided a tea house, arrested the managers, and rescued 100 girls, of which 10 were below the age of 16. Twenty of the girls reported being tricked and coerced into prostitution. Seventeen out of 20 were tested and

reported HIV positive. On November 30, 1991, the police raided one of the prostitute houses at Rayong Province. During this operation, 12 girls were rescued. Most of the girls had been physically abused with plastic pipes and raped before being forced into prostitution. Blood tests showed that 11 out of the 12 were HIV positive.