

'EVANGELISATION TOWARDS TRINITARIAN INCLUSIVENESS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION' (A WESLEYAN'S PERSPECTIVE)

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Introduction

The Christian conviction of God as triune has not always been good news especially in a context of volatile Asian religious pluralism. The Islamic writer Imad ad-Din describes walking through the battle field at Hattin in July 1187 after the crusader's army had been crushed decisively by Saladin's army. There he saw 'heads cracked open, spines broken, eyes gouged out, stomachs disembowelled' and he concludes with the word-play observation: 'that many "Trinitarians" were cut in two.' (Ronald C. Finucane *'Soldiers of the Faith'* 1983, St Martin's Press, NY. pg 104)

Bearing in mind therefore that something as precious as the triune reality of God can be understood and applied in such a way that instead of seeing God as God wishes to reveal God's Self to us, we may actually be projecting our own distortions in the name of the triune God, which we then impose upon others around. Theology then becomes oppressive and stifling.

Our Trinitarian faith must therefore not result in human destruction or enslavement but rather in the further and more complete humanisation of all humankind in the Image of Christ, who is the very Image of God. 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I (Jesus Christ) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. (John 10:10)

This paper tries to reflect on how Trinitarian religion can make possible the further humanisation of community in the Asia Pacific Region.

I. Community, Power and Powerlessness in the Asia Pacific Region

a. Regional Realities

The Asia Pacific Region usually refers to those countries encompassed in the triangular region, from India down to New Zealand and up to China and Japan. This triangle includes the countries of South East Asia and North East Asia. (see map in Appendix A)

'The old Asia was divided by culture, language, political ideology, religious philosophies and geography. The new Asia, forged by economic integration, technology, especially telecommunications, travel and mobility of people, will increasingly look like one coherent region.'

(John Naisbitt '*Megatrends Asia*' Nicholas Brealey Pub. 1996, London pg ix)

b. Asia as an interdependent region was the creation of International Capital

4 stages can be traced historically

- i. Mid 19th Century - Western Colonialism and the Treaty Port System - regional trade by network of ports in the region
- ii. Second World War - Japanese Imperialism and the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' - resulting in South East Asia being incorporated with the East Asia Regional bloc.
- iii. Cold War Period - U.S. Military and economic aid stabilised the regional economy & helped in development, resulting in the orientation of most non-communist Asian economies towards the U.S.
- iv. Creation of EC and NAFTA and the possibility of protectionism causing Asian countries to learn to depend more on each other in order to survive economically.

(Iyanatul Islam and Anis Chowdhury '*Asia Pacific Economies: A Survey*' 1997 Routledge, London pg 17)

c. Western Imperialism not only brought mercantile capitalism but also Christianity into the Asia Pacific Region

'From the time of the Portuguese to the end of the Second World War, the association of Christian Missionary Work with aggressive imperialism introduced political complications into Christian work. Inevitably national sentiment looked upon missionary activity as inimical to the country's interests and native Christians as "secondary barbarians".'

(K.M. Pannikar '*Asia and Western Dominance*' 1953 Allen & Unwin, London pg 455)

In many parts of the region, it will take a long time more before the Asia Christian Community will be able to live down this stigma and reputation from history of a previous generation.

Consequently, there is the need for both numerical church growth and the further asianisation of the Asian church to show that the Gospel can flourish on Asian soil.

d. **Power Projection into the Asia Pacific Region**

Since the time of the Portuguese to the time of the coming of the Dutch and English and even to our present time (post cold war) where the United States is the relatively declining hegemonic power in the region, power has been projected into the Asia Pacific as Hard and Soft Power.

Hard Power referring to Military aggression, together with direct political and economic pressure. (Sometimes Hard Power is non military in nature with only diplomatic and economic pressure applied)

Soft Power referring to the persuasive power of cultural influence and ideological promotion.

China as the up and coming regional power is also learning the power projection game from previous hegemonic powers in the region, being herself, a previous victim of such power projection games

For smaller countries in the region, the proverb is appropriate:

'When the elephants fight, the grass is the one which gets trampled.'

e. **Power Projection from the Asia Pacific Region**

If John Naisbitt is right then the tables will be turned by the mid 21st century when non-military hard power and ideological/cultural soft power will be projected from the Asia Pacific Region to have significant impact on the rest of the globe.

'What is happening in Asia is by far the most important development in the World today. Nothing else comes close, not only for Asians but for the entire planet. The modernisation of Asia will forever reshape the world as we move towards the next millennium ... (by) the year 2000, Asia will become the dominant region of the world: economically, politically and culturally.'

This 'Asian Renaissance' will be characterised by the following Mega trends according to Naisbitt

1. Overseas Chinese economic network to overtake Japan's economic importance
2. Asian economic development will create a sizeable middle class (½ billion by 2000 AD)
3. Asian style development will not follow foreign models blindly

4. Regional market economies to be more important than centralised economies
 5. Rural to urban migration will turn Asia into a continent of Mega cities
 6. High technology to replace labour intensive agriculture and manufacturing
 7. Emergence of women as entrepreneurs, voters, consumers & members of the workforce - resulting in the erosion of male dominance in the region.
 8. Asian confucianist civilisation in the modern world will have global significance
- (John Naisbitt '*Megatrends Asia*' Nicholas Brealey Pub. London 1996)

See Newsweek July 21 1997 pg 2 for a recent critique of the above and a possible alternative scenario; that the coming Asian renaissance would be focused on India rather than on the more Confucianist countries of the region.

f. **Reflections on Regional Power Projection**

Upon reflection, Power projection to and from the region seems to merit the following comments:

- * All forms of power projection whether Hard Power as military, political and economic or Soft Power as culture and ideology seems to be preoccupied with the intention of Dominance. The winner gets to dominate and the loser gets to be dominated.
- * Mammon seems to be the energiser of power projection. It is wealth that buys military hardware, political influence, generate more wealth and controls the media to voice out one's point of view. It appears that the Asia Pacific century will send forth a loud message that power comes from the acquisition and possession of wealth/Mammon.
- * The converse is also true that poverty will result in powerlessness in the coming Asia Pacific century. If one does not want to play or does not learn to play the economic game well enough, then one remains in poverty and powerlessness
- * A harsh and commercialised version of meritocracy appears to prevail in which only 'the fit will survive', with 'fitness' and 'survival' being interpreted in terms of economic success. Therefore the economically unsuccessful will be the unfit who do not deserve to 'survive' as part of the economically booming future. This heartless version of meritocracy is Exclusive towards the 'failures' and Inclusive towards the 'successful'. This will breed a very ugly sub-culture and lifestyle of wanting to 'get ahead' and not be 'left behind' at all costs. Envy and crass materialism will be some of its eventual by-products, blossoming throughout most of the urbanised centres of commerce found within this Region.

- * Hearing all that Naisbitt has to say and prognosticate, one wonders if that is all there is to be said about the Asia Pacific Region? Is there not more to say about the Region than its inevitable drive towards market economy and liberal democracy? (Francis Fukuyama '*The End of History and the Last Man*') Naisbitt has told us about the "Haves" of Asia, it is important to also hear about the "Have-nots"

II. The Third World and the Asia Pacific Region

Naisbitt's generalisations about Asia's staggering wealth must not blind us from recognising the staggering poor of Asia whom we appear always to have with us.

'The simple dichotomies of the past imposed their own gross distortion. Even the so-called poorest country has its clutch of millionaires living in the same lifestyle as their peers in the richest country. Each so-called rich country has, trapped in the cruel interstices of its economy, thousands of hungry and poor. The division between rich and poor is represented in each microcosm of the system; poverty at the global level was never a territorial concept.'

(Nigel Harris '*The End of the third World*' Tauris & Co, London 1986 pg 200)

Besides having the poor within the borders of rich countries, there will be entire regions in South Asia primarily, given to poverty. The 1997 UN Human Development Report informs us that Asia today is the Continent with the largest amount of poor people.

'The combined region of South Asia, East Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific alone has 950 million of the world's 1.3 billion income-poor people.'

(Straits Times 12/6/97 See Appendix B)

This unglittering but true picture of the Region is further compounded by present and projected population explosion especially in the poorer parts of Asia. (Straits Times 8/5/97 See Appendix C)

One can only conclude that inspite of Francis Fukuyama's Western capitalistic triumphalism after the fall of communism, the necessity of a third world agenda continues to exist even in the Asia Pacific region and era.

'In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the idea of a third world was beginning to emerge. At that time it did not refer merely to a group of countries... but rather to a political idea. After the terrible deprivations and destruction of the second World War, the globe had become divided between two apparently terrifying alternatives, Washington and Moscow, capitalism and socialism, the first and second worlds. The third world, newly

created from the wreckage of the old, offered a different path for humanity, a third alternative.'

(Nigel Harris, *ibid* pg 7)

This real and significant presence of the poorer third world in the midst of the booming Asia Pacific region necessitates that the third world agenda be taken seriously by all concerned Asians. The Asian Christian community, being dynamically connected to the larger regional community must therefore theologise and carry out theological praxis in full view of the total Asia Pacific reality - the 'Haves' and the 'Have-nots'. Consequently, the need to have authentic third world Asian Christian theologies to address both the 'bulls' and the 'bears' of the coming Asian renaissance. Therefore, we cannot avoid asking the question:

'What is the Word of the True and Trinitarian God for both the Asian Christian Community and the larger Asian Community; so obsessed with acquiring wealth in order to have power in order to avoid being dominated and in order to dominate as well?' Surely the 'Trinity, Community and Power' find an interrelationship especially within the dynamic realities of the Asia Pacific Region.

III Trinitarian - Evangelisation for Asia Today

In the light of the above mentioned contextual realities in the region, it appears that not all forms of Evangelisation are appropriate and relevant for Asia today.

'A merely external institutionalised Evangelisation would be concerned only with adding to the membership of a given church by formal adhesion to it without inner conversion. Such an evangelisation can go hand in hand with an acceptance of injustice and lovelessness; in fact with even their conscious and unconscious promotion. This may build a church, but obstruct God's work on earth. It may build a certain brand of "Christianity" but injure humanity and God's Kingdom.' (see Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelisation 1971, published by St Peter's Seminary, Bangalore, India)

Upon analysis this is nothing but

'an act of spiritual aggression by an outside agent, a forced imposition of something unwanted, or at best it is an act of paternalism and condescension on the part of those who "have" toward the "have-nots".' (Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelisation 1971)

Consequently, true and welcomed evangelisation for Asia today must

- a. take seriously the cultural-religious context and framework by which our proclamation will be understood and judged.
- b. Contribute to the quest for Asian humanisation seen today as liberation, development and community building. (ie redemption of society and individuals)
- c. build 'critical mass' not only from the affluent elite but also from the grass-roots (ie Church Growth as People's Movement) bringing about the further Asianisation of the Asian Christian Community.
- d. Remain rooted in the same conviction as John Wesley, that 'the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion'. Otherwise we have nothing but ourselves to offer our fellow-Asians.

IV Asian Community and Trinitarian-Inclusiveness

a. The Trinity as the One and the Many in the Absolute

'Only in Christianity do we have a God, who is unity and diversity on the high order of the Trinity. Three Persons in existence and in communion with each other, before all else was. If this were not so, we would have had a God who needed to create in order to communicate' (Francis Shaeffer *'He is there and not Silent'* Wheaton, Tyndale House 1972)

b. The Trinity as Inclusive Social Paradigm

'If God were one alone, there would be solitude and concentration in unity and oneness. If God were two, a duality, there would be separation (one being distinct from the other) and exclusion. (one not being the other) But God is three, a Trinity, and being three avoids solitude, overcomes separation and surpasses exclusion. The third figure is the difference, the openness, communion. Trinity is inclusive because it unites what separated and excluded.' (Leonardo Boff *'Trinity and Society'* 1988, Orbisbks, New York pg 3)

Consequently, 'God's triuneness means that the very secret and heart of our universe is the Mystery of interrelational love. We who have come from the triune God cannot find joy or fulfilment except in living this love in fact.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* pg 101 Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

Therefore human community can only find their true destiny and greater fulfilment when the inclusive Trinity becomes a social paradigm for all human communities.

c. **The East-West debate about Asian Community**

In spite of Asian cultural diversities certain characteristics have been observed to be common:

'Even the change brought by political modernisation and economic development in Asia have not eradicated the features of Asian cultures that distinguish them...These include "collectivism", strong identification as members of groups; "consensus", the harmony of group life by avoiding confrontation; "hierarchy", acceptance of authority based on superior-inferior rankings and "power as status", in order to generate order out of chaos.' (Vera Simone & Anne Thompson Feraru *'The Asia Pacific: Political & Economic Development in a Global Context'* pg 218-219, 1995, Longman, USA)

What is at issue here between East and West, is actually the 'rights of the individual' which seem to be sacrificed when Asians emphasize 'collectiveness', 'consensus', 'hierarchy' and the 'status quo'. The Eastern point of view is that the human rights of individualism will result in societal chaos and need to be checked by the Asian-preferred values enumerated above. Hence both East and West engage each other from an 'either-or' position in the dispute.

Moreover, the linkage between Asian communal values and Asia cultural-religious traditions seem hard to deny.

'Asia is the homeland of ancient and living world religions, alive and revitalised, they come to have value and standing as part and parcel of a community, culture and identity.' (Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelisation 1971)

However it appears that traditional religions no longer have ideological monopoly in the Region.

'In addition to traditional cultural and religious values, the (educated) Asian has benefited by the new personalist and secular values such as (humankind's) unique personality, (personal) dignity and social justice, scope for responsible participation, autonomy and value of this world, of the present age, of life here below, advantages of separation between religion and state. Besides, the process of secularisation, spread of mass education, modern means of social communication and the marvels of technology have altered the relationships, thought-patterns, value-systems and style of life, and made the modern Asian secular in many aspects; a new materialism having a sway, on the educated people, the wealthier and urban classes' (Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelisation 1971)

Consequently Asia is now in the mood to consider and receive any new truths and ideas which will provide a more believable explanation of reality than their traditional religious philosophies.

All Asia, rural and urban is willing today to consider the example and message of the Asian Church, to see if a quantum leap can be made in practical moral spirituality through the God of Jesus Christ.

d. **God the Trinity as the Perfect Community**

It is neither in the East nor in the West, nor in the first or second or third world, that we have perfect community. It is only in God - the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - that Perfect Community can be seen. Therefore community life gets better the more we are transformed into the image of God, the Trinity

'The Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the Prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.' (Leonardo Boff *'Trinity and Society'* 1988 Orbis Bks, NY)

'The triune mystery of mutual delight in one another, therefore has everything to do with the very meaning of our own humanity, with our inmost call to live in love and in love for one another rather than in fear and isolation and domination.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

e. **The Trinity as the Key to the Humanising of Asian Community**

Asian Community must be called to be inwardly and outwardly converted to this True and Trinitarian God who alone can make possible for all; a Community where Collectivism, Consensus, Hierarchy and Status Quo will not lead to perverse domination and the snuffing out of the creative individual. It is the Inclusive Trinitarian God that makes it possible for us to have the power and courage to BE, BELONG and BECOME.

Through the reconciling work of Christ and the empowering witness of the Spirit we experience God as Father. Unlike dictatorial paternalism, to experience and know God as Father is to find out who we are. This sense of identity and self-worth will empower us to resist being dominated.

'In the arms of my Abba, I find my beginning and end, my name and identity, my family roots and heritage, my own personal meaning and irreplaceable reason for existence. It is to enter into the very heart of God and to find here my own ultimate origin and identity.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

People who know who they are and why they are here, will not be so easily told what to do by others seeking to dominate them. Being converted to the Trinity gives us the courage to BE.

The courage to BELONG (collectivism and consensus) is very often seen as being antithetical to the courage to BE (individuality). When the courage to BELONG is emphasized, the individual is threatened. The individual loses the power for creative free choice resulting in becoming nothing but a mere digit in the whole system - a state of depersonalisation. However when individuality is so emphasized that the one with the courage to BE does not have the courage to BELONG, the individual lives in a state of powerless loneliness. It is in the Trinity that we can have the power and courage to BE and BELONG at the same time.

'...because we have come from the triune God of interpersonal love, it is literally not possible for us to gain our human fulfilment as selfish individualists. Our trinitarian faith calls us to commit ourselves to one another, to choose time for and with one another, to listen and speak with respect to one another.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

God the Trinity also calls us to BECOME, become more secure and less manipulative. We become manipulative because we feel endangered. We feel endangered because of previous hurts within, that are still unresolved. God's Power must make us secure enough to relate graciously with others. But only the one touched by Grace can be gracious towards others. God's transforming power is therefore the power that comes from experiencing His Love in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. (Rom 5:5)

'If we could realise how tenderly the triune God rejoices to be God for us, no trouble can finally destroy us. Children sleep in their parent's arms even while everything around them is in confusion and chaos. We, too are held in the arms of the triune God; regardless of how frightened or anxious we feel, because we are held in those arms, everything is well.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

Consequently, having powerfully made us secure, 'our trinitarian faith calls us to a conversion from patterns of using human persons as objects, from valuing things over people'. However, 'most important of all, the triune God is healing for our brokenness and for the wounds deep within us that prevent us from loving and living in mutual respect and care for one another. The Trinity is the very power for our breakthrough from a self-centred existence to a life of mutuality and self-giving.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

Once we are made whole within, we will find strength to appreciate those that meritocratic society have written off as 'failures'.

'Our trinitarian faith of its very nature impels us to relate to every human person, to the most insignificant or poor, to the most deformed or helpless, to the weakest among us, out of the trinitarian vision and values of interrelational love and mutuality' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

It is in this empowered sense of inner security that we are enabled to change whatever it is that is not humanising in our present status quo. In the strong name of the Trinity we are able then to preserve whatever it is in our status quo that humanises relationship, individuals and communities. The triune God helps us not to be afraid to BECOME whenever it is for the betterment of all.

Consequently the Asian Church must loudly proclaim the truth of the triune God in word and life for the good of the future of the Asia Pacific Region. 'The church and the world will be transformed when we ourselves are converted by our trinitarian faith.' (Mary Ann Fatula *'The Triune God of Christian Faith'* Liturgical Press, Minnesota)

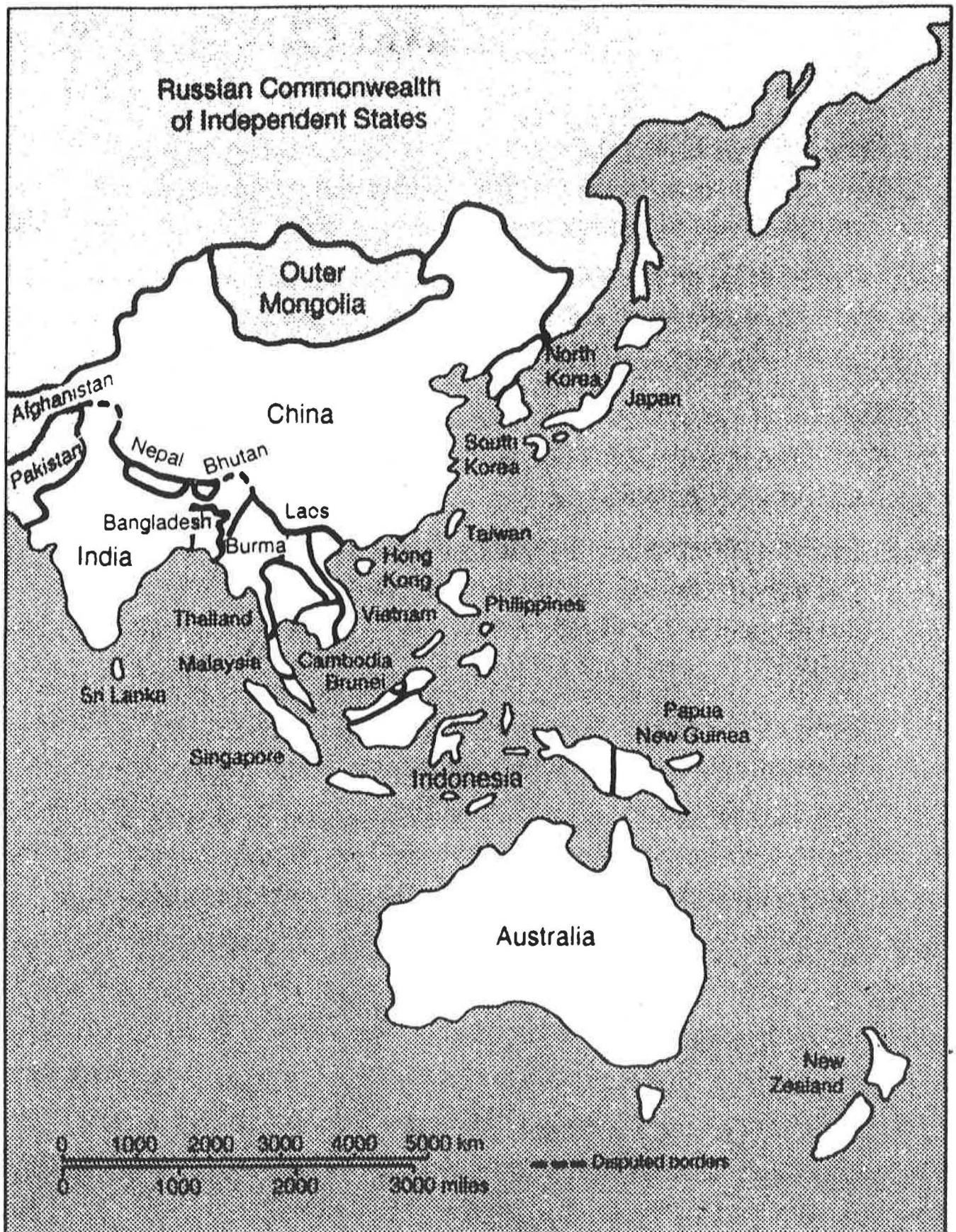
Conclusion

If the Trinity is truly the revelation of God as God really is, always was and forever will be, then no culture or civilisation can claim it to be theirs Exclusively. This truth is theirs and ours as well, Inclusively. To imagine that the truth of the Trinity is the mere product of the genius of any one civilisation is to engage in an infringing of 'intellectual copyright' against the actual owner of this life giving and sustaining truth : God Almighty.

The truth of the Trinity is like life, sunshine, fresh air and clean water - given by God for all humanity to enjoy, experience and be sustained in. All who withhold God's good gifts to all humankind engage in aggression against both God and the entire human family. Truly the World is our Parish still. Surely the sentiments of John Wesley would be a fitting conclusion for this paper :

'I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till...God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son : And, having this witness, he honours the Son, and the blessed Spirit, "even as he honours the Father". Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these Three are One. And all my hope for them is...that God, before they go hence, will "bring them to the knowledge of the truth." ' (Sermon LV 'On the Trinity')

The Asia Pacific Region



WORLD


Global face of poverty

In a breakdown of what it calls the changing face of poverty, the 1997 UN Human Development Report sets out the profile of a poor person today compared to 1970. Here are some of the stark statistics:

How poor is poor?

The World Bank has set a different standard for different regions. A poor person survives on:

 **US\$1 (\$S1.42)** a day in the developing world

 **US\$2** a day in Latin America and the Caribbean

 **US\$4** a day in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States

 **US\$14.40** a day in industrial countries.



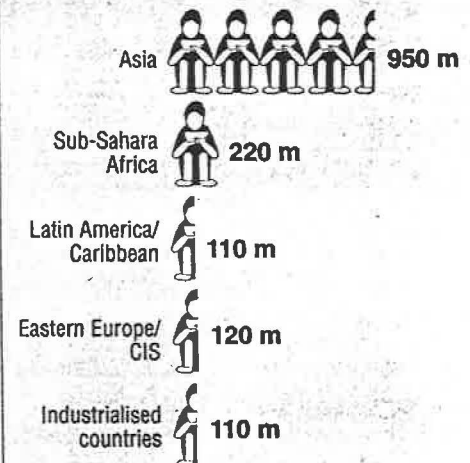
JALEHA HASHMI

Why are they poor?

The UN Development Programme sets out some of the reasons why people are likely to be poor. Some of the key reasons are:

- ▶ Economic stagnation and slow employment growth
- ▶ Increased marginalisation from global trade and financial flows
- ▶ Higher fertility and the spread of HIV/Aids
- ▶ Greater disintegration of the family
- ▶ Rapid demographic change and migration to urban areas
- ▶ Increasing wars and conflicts
- ▶ Deepening economic and environmental crises

Where are the poor?



SOURCE: AFP

1.3 billion people living on just \$1 a day

Poverty worst in South Asia and sub-Saharan region, says UN report

PARIS — A quarter of the world's people still live in severe poverty, including 1.3 billion who must try to survive on less than US\$1 (\$S1.42) a day, according to the UN Development Programme in its latest report released today.

It denounces the state of affairs as "a scandal".

South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa fare the worst, with about 40 per cent of the population considered poor.

The report by the United Nations' main anti-poverty arm blamed the situation on "shameful inequalities and inexcusable failures of national and international policy".

But the 245-page document

carried a message of hope "that poverty is no longer inevitable".

Some stark figures give a regional breakdown at the end of the 20th century and show South Asia as the area most affected by poverty.

The combined region of South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific alone has 950 million of the world's 1.3 billion income-poor people.

This compares with 220 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, though this area had the "highest proportion of people in — and the fastest growth in — human poverty", the report said. It forecast that by the year 2000, 50 per cent of all people in

sub-Saharan Africa will live in poverty.

Latin America and the Caribbean have 110 million people affected by poverty, while Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states in the Commonwealth of Independent States "have seen the greatest deterioration in the past decade", showing the human cost in the difficult transition to democracy and market economies. Poverty has spread to about a third of the population, or 120 million people who live on less than US\$4 a day.

The industrial world, despite its wealth, still has about 100 million people living below poverty levels, including 37 million jobless.

The report stressed that children, women and the aged suffered most in a world that still has one billion illiterate people, 160 million malnourished children and 110 million children deprived of any schooling.

The UN Human Development report said that 20 per cent of the world's poorest people share "a miserable" 1.1 per cent of the world's global income, down from 2.3 per cent in 1960, and it continues to shrink.

While the world economy stands at US\$25 trillion, the ratio between the richest and poorest people on the planet has gone from 30 to one in 1960

to 78 to one in 1994, the report said.

The UN Development Programme insists that "it is well within our grasp" to reduce severe poverty in the first decades of the next century.

"Few people realise the great advances already made. In the past 50 years poverty has fallen more than in the previous 500," it said. Since 1960 child mortality rates have dropped by more than half in developing countries while malnutrition has been trimmed by almost a third.

The report urged pro-poor growth in all countries, including making full employment a high priority in economic poli-

cy and reducing inequalities.

It stressed the urgency for specific action in Africa, including the prevention and negotiation of conflicts, better debt relief and more and better directed aid.

The report put a price tag on reducing world poverty, which it said would cost the planet US\$80 billion or less than 0.5 per cent of global income, or in other terms, less than the combined wealth of the world's seven richest people or 10 per cent of world military expenditures for 1995.

The challenge "is thus mostly a challenge of restructuring priorities", it said. — AFP.

8/5/97

World population 'set to hit 6.1b by 2000'

Bulk of growth will be in poor countries

WASHINGTON — According to the annual report of the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau, the world's population will grow from its current 5.8 billion to 6.1 billion by the year 2000 and reach 6.8 billion by the year 2025.

Most of the population growth would occur in the world's poorest countries, the bureau said in the report.

Last year, developing countries accounted for 4.7 billion of the world's 5.8 billion people and 98 per cent of the population growth that year.

Population in the developed countries was expected to remain flat, at 1.2 billion, until 2025, notably reflecting the extremely low birth rates in Europe and Japan, the report said.

The United States, which has 267 million inhabitants, continues to be the industrialised country with the highest population growth. The annual population increase is 2.4 million, out of which a third are immigrants.

"The future size of world population will be determined by the large number of developing countries with high and moderately-high birth rates," said demographer Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau.

"Birth rates in developing countries, apart from China, remain at twice the level needed to stabilise world population size at some point in the future."

Among the main concerns for the near future, according to the report, is that the decline in India's birth rate seems to have stopped. With a population of 969 million, the subcontinent is second in population terms only to China, with its 1.23 billion people.

"India's population by mid-century may rise to 1.2 billion and then slowly decline, or it may be almost two billion and still growing," said Mr Haub.

"This is a perfect example of how statistically uncertain the future is." — AFP.