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Christianity in Asia

Background

Christianity in Asia is an on-going programme of the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies (CARTS). There is great diversity and richness within Christian traditions in Asia, but Asian Christianity and its theologies have not always been explored sympathetically and introduced to wider scholarship. There is therefore ample scope for research on Christianity in Asia and networking between scholars of Asian and Western countries. Such interaction is vital for the furtherance of the understanding of Asian Christianity as well as highlighting its importance to Christian theology. By being in Cambridge, which is recognised for its academic excellence, the Programme is a catalyst to facilitate this interaction through publications, seminars and consultations, providing courses and research environments.

In 1997 the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies of the Faculty of Divinity set up the *Christianity in Asia* Programme. Its funding came from the Council for World Mission (CWM), a worldwide partnership of some 30 Reformed and United Churches which emerged from the work of the former London Missionary Society (founded in 1795). *Christianity in Asia* is intended to contribute to the crossing of boundaries between countries, cultures, and theological traditions. It seeks to explore the nature of contemporary Christian mission in a global context and involves a sense of the appropriate balance between the ecumenical and the local. Led by Prof. Archie Lee and assisted by Dr Damayanthi Niles, the Programme explored Asian biblical hermeneutics, and later diversified under Dr Nam-Soon Kang, a specialist in Asian feminist theology. The Programme is also in the process of publishing a one-volume textbook on Asian Christian theologies.

Over the years, *Christianity in Asia* has created close links with Asian centres of Christian studies and theology through the following activities: conducting research; contributing teaching to courses in the Faculty; holding seminars, lectures and consultations; inviting leading Asian Christian scholars and theologians to Cambridge; sponsoring members of the Cambridge Faculty to visit Asia for lectures, seminars and conferences; and encouraging more Asian graduate students to study in Cambridge. The Programme is also the European base for the Network of Theological Enquiry (NOTE), which links several theological centres, mainly in Asia and Europe, but including some in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, North America and the Pacific.

Aims and Objectives

In the next phase, the main purpose of *Christianity in Asia* will be to examine Christian theologies arising out of Asian churches and facilitate their interaction with other theologies, especially in the West. By employing both historical and theological methodology, it is intended to explore the contributions of Asian Christian theologies to worldwide Christianity so that Asian perspectives on Christian theology can enrich the wider Christian churches. By being a platform in Cambridge for Asian theologians and Western theologians, the Programme will seek to provide a place for mutual interaction between these scholars and students. Its network with other similar programmes or centres in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific will also be strengthened. The research questions to be addressed are such as: What are the distinctives of Asian theologies in their historical development? What are the commonalities of and differences between Asian theologies? How does Asian Christianity relate to socio-political and religious issues in a given context? And what are the contributions of Asian theologies to contemporary theological discussions within world Christianity?

In order to meet the above questions, *Christianity in Asia* will aim:

1. To examine distinctive characteristics of the historical and theological development of Christianity in Asia.
2. To introduce Christian experiences and theological insights from Asian Christianity to the wider Christian churches.
3. To provide a network whereby concerned students and scholars interact through seminars, consultations and through exchange programmes.
4. To publish a series of books and a journal on Christianity in Asia
5. To provide teaching and research facilities for students and scholars on the subject.

Activities

Christianity in Asia will have four main activities by which to achieve the above aims and objectives: conducting seminars and consultations; producing publications; networking; and teaching and research.

1) Conducting seminars and consultations

The Programme will set a different theme relating to contemporary Christianity in Asia for each year and, accordingly, the seminars will be conducted twice a term (from Lent Term 2003: a total of six seminars per academic year) and the invited speakers, both Asian and non-Asian, will be expected to produce a paper for publication. The themes could include: fundamentalism; ecology; socio-political justice; poverty; feminist theology; living religions and spiritualities; globalisation; etc.

Christianity in Asia will also aim to have a conference in 2006. The aim of the conference will be to provide a forum for both Asian and non-Asian theologians to interact and to produce textbooks, which will give a general overview of Asian theologies.

2) Publications

The Programme aims to publish each year's seminar papers in Britain and Asia, adding in each case four to six more papers by theologians from in Asia (a total of 10-12 articles). In addition, the outcome of the consultation will be published as a three-volume textbook of Asian theologies (South Asia; South East Asia; and East Asia).

Furthermore, toward the end of the third year, the Programme aims to launch a bi-annual academic journal of Christianity in Asia. A Cambridge-based academic journal on *Christianity in Asia* will draw great interest from Christian churches in Asia as well as in the West and will encourage on-going development of scholarship on the subject. The journal could also include English translation of significant articles, which were originally written in vernacular languages.

3) Networking: exchange programmes

Christianity in Asia aims to facilitate students and scholars from Asia to do research and to teach in Cambridge by coordinating research programmes, undergraduate and MPhil courses and seminars. The Programme will also arrange for Faculty of Divinity members to visit Asian universities and seminaries to teach and to interact with scholars there. The Programme also aims to host informal gatherings for Asian Christians and those who are interested in studies in Asian Christianity in Cambridge.

4) Teaching and research

Christianity in Asia facilitates scholars from Asian countries to come to Cambridge to lead seminars, give public lectures and contribute to the teaching of the Faculty. Recently the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Divinity has approved the launch of a new MPhil in World Christianity. Several Faculty members are involved in teaching and supervising of MPhil students as well as PhD research students in this field.

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