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GRASSROOTS ASIAN THEOLOGY: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up. By Simon Chan

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GRASSROOTS ASIAN THEOLOGY: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up. By Simon Chan. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. 216 Pages. Paper. \$22.00.

Simon Chan, of Trinity Theological College in Singapore, has written an intriguing book that both introduces and commends what his title refers to as “grassroots Asian theology.” He states his purpose as “to force a rethink on the way Asian theology is currently undertaken and in so doing to show the distinctive contributions of Asian grassroots Christianity to the wider church’s theological endeavors.”

There is a bit of bite in his words “force a rethink.” As he illustrates, there are some widely known and respected theologians from all parts of Asia. In describing many of them as “elitist,” Chan suggests that they may be renowned academic theologians, but seem driven by agendas and thought patterns emerging from Western/ecumenical agendas, doing theology *for* the Asian Christians rather than expressing theology *by* Asian Christians. Those “elitist” agendas tend to cluster around issues like cosmic Christ, liberation, inculturation, or dialogue. By contrast, theology that grows from the grassroots is reflective of the “primal” cultural worldview and experience of grassroots Asian Christians.

Chan structures his book around five major theological loci: God, Humanity and Sin, Christ and Salvation, Holy Spirit and Spirituality, and Church. He introduces each topic, illustrates how representative “elitist” or traditional theologians approach each theme, and describes how the various theological affirmations are refracted by the life and theology of

grassroots Christians from varying Asian contexts.

If there are several basic descriptors of grassroots Asian Christianity, they would be experiential, holistic, and relational. When Chan highlights how these cultural instincts affect the understanding of these major loci of the Christian faith, he is engaging and stimulating. The importance of close relationships—family for instance—takes the understanding of church out of the realm of political or hermeneutical issues (liberation, inculturation, or simple membership), and opens the church up to the joy of personal conversion and full life in Jesus Christ, in Asian context which often means life as a minority religion citizen out of sync with majority religions. Such instinctual familial sensitivity offers options to explore in the vexing question of ancestors. Another theme that spills out from the primal relational sense is the role of shame/honor in the pre-Christian and Christian life, often overshadowed in Western Christianity by its dominant forensic emphasis on guilt/righteousness. One final insight shows how the instinctual sense that life is lived in the presence of and at the mercy of the world of spirits leads to both a soteriology emphasizing *Christus victor*, and a strong and immediate reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide the Christian life. Could it be, the thought occurred to this reviewer, that the reason the Holy Spirit has such a secondary place in the life and piety of Western Christianity is because our instinctual understanding of the world is generally devoid of spirits?

If this grassroots, primal form of Christianity sounds like a form of Pentecostalism, it clearly is, not, however, because of conscious theological decision

but because this approach grows from the life experience of folks in the “grassroots.” As Philip Jenkins reminds us, this is the fastest growing form of Christianity across all cultures in all parts of the world. One of Chan’s delights, at the same time, is suggesting where some of those primal yearnings seem echoed in long-standing traditions of both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox communities: saints and ancestors, familial role of sacraments, exorcism.

As intriguing and thought-provoking as Chan’s suggestions are, and as inviting as his style of writing is, some substantive questions do occur. When I first saw the title, I had reservations simply about the word “Asian,” which covers major cultures widely different from each other, and is arguably an abstraction. Thankfully, Chan avoids a common denominator approach, and dips down for representative voices, without claiming to be exhaustive. What he does claim as trans-cultural—and he cites similarity of African cultures—is the primal grassroots worldview, which seems to this reviewer to fade a bit into a blur, with reduced cultural specificity. Likewise, while pointing helpfully to blind spots in both Western/ecumenical Christian theology and “elitist” Asian theologians, Chan does at times soft-pedal what would seem areas where the line between “grassroots, primal” and generic “folk religion” seems rather thin and porous. Does this suggest a built-in weakness in his presentation of grassroots Asian Christianity which may explain some of the caution that much of the global Christian family instinctively senses?

We certainly stand in Chan’s debt both for his reasoned critiques of Asian theologies, and for forcing a rethink about

grassroots Asian Christianity so it can assume a place in that global Christian family, and both enrich and be enriched by it. Hopefully, too, this book can serve as a catalyst for reflective theologians from other under-recognized cultures, so that Christians of every sort can grow together as the Spirit leads us into all truth.

Henry Rowold