

THE CALL TO CONSECRATION: Renewing Discipleship in the Church in Modern Asia

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This paper builds upon the commonly acknowledged hypothesis that a negative correlation exists between modernity and commitment to the consecrated life. This means that the progression of the modern life in developing nations corresponds with the decline of religious vocations in varying proportions. Assuming this notion to be largely true, it is crucial that we understand the inner workings of the modern life that give rise to this reality.

At this point of time, religious life in Asia is thriving, and there seems to be little need for the kind of alarm and despair experienced in the Church in the West.¹ But Jose Maria Vigil, CMF, issues a warning on this consolation. He notes how consecrated life in Latin America, which used to flourish, had been so gravely stricken by the affliction of modern life until it began to witness “a new movement” from the year 2000: “most of the religious communities, men and women, observed signs of a new tendency with regard to vocations, namely, a decline in numbers”.² He perceives that “a new era has begun, an era that will transform Latin America into the image of secularised Europe. This transformation will ultimately lead religious life in Latin America along the same course as that of Europe”.

What then of modernising Asia? It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to explore the effects of the modern life on the religious senses of the Asian peoples. Modernity has, undoubtedly, upheld certain tenets and values which have regulated Asian society in certain ways, thereby having tampered with the religious senses of the people. This by no means implies a decline in the religiosity of the populace inasmuch as it alludes to a redefinition of the role of religion in regulating the life and values of the modern Asian person. It is this redefinition of religion and its role that provokes an allegedly negative correlation between the modern life and proactive vocational response.

I. A Deliberate Choice?

In his *Tradition, Change and Modernity*, S.N. Eisenstadt explains that modernity’s emergence in Asia, unlike its indigenous emergence in the West, began with external impositions enforced upon the Asian traditional civilisations by colonial forces.³ These impositions are said to have taken place in several ways. Firstly, a direct intervention was initiated in the traditional social structures of these societies such that a change was almost non-negotiable. Secondly, economic and political benchmarks were established by Western forces as measurements of comparative global status, this inevitably also implicating upon Asian societies. Thirdly, the “forces of modernity” had effected an insistence within the Asian civilisations for a greater participation by the citizens of the Asian socio-political order. In this sense, one may contend that modernity forced its way onto the shores of the Asian civilisations and was not cultivated from within the heart of the Asian worldview and paradigm, hence maturing into variant expressions unique to Asia.

Despite modernity being externally imposed upon Asia, there was also a subsequent point at which its embrace of modernity was deliberate, although perhaps reluctant. Asian interaction with

modernity became a necessity when, with the initiation of political independence from colonialists and the rise of nationalism, political leaders and social reformers of newly established Asian nations sought to urgently release their societies from a form of social inertia which bound their peoples to a state of stagnancy and backwardness. This need was identified in significant part based upon the state of dynamism of the world economy, which was then perceived to be Western dominated; hence the perceived dire need to release the Asian people to be free to struggle for the their nations' economic survival in the world arena.

The reality of economic motivations under-girding Asia's interaction with modernity cannot be dismissed, especially in view of the globalisation of the economic world. For most Asian nations, it is nothing more than a matter of thriving to survive, lest they be drowned in the sea of economic namelessness. Anthony Giddens, in *The Globalizing of Modernity*, identifies the "world capitalist economy" as one of the major dimensions characterising modernity.⁴ Giddens elucidates the fact that the significant political powers of the world are those that are chiefly characterised by a capitalist economy. He highlights that some business enterprises of consequential sizes are even accorded the privilege of influencing the political policies of authorities within their local geographical locality and beyond. This, in large part, is what has happened to Asia. In her helpless inability to function apart from the world economic system, Asia has had to interact with major business corporations and potential investors who would in turn possess influential capabilities upon her policies. This has a significant role in determining the direction and extent of Asia's embrace of modernity and how much she can withstand such economic pressure.

In this sense, a dialectic process exists between Asia and global economic forces to determine how she may be accepted and sustained in the world economic system without having to overly compromise on that which she holds to be acceptable and right for her society. The vitality of this exercise cannot be ignored, for the profound implications of international political and economic changes will affect the spontaneous reactions and even the long-term cultural behaviour of Asia. This seems to be the fundamental basis for Takehiko Kamo's argument for the necessity of Asia's search of its role in the twenty-first century in the face of globalism, regionalism and nationalism.⁵ Prasert Chittiwatanapong moves a step closer to the issue by drawing parallels between the "modernisation challenge" and the "globalisation challenge" by suggesting that both share a common characteristic, in that the responses offered by Asia to these two challenges possess the potential to determine the future of the region.⁶

But Asia is also all too aware that her modernisation is not undertaken without inevitable consequences upon the life of her peoples. For this reason, Asian social thinkers have begun to better comprehend that the dynamics of modernity and modernisation cannot merely be steered by such a desire to bring about an economic vitality, for such an enterprise lacking in a critical spirit would inadvertently lead to myopic solutions for short-term economic development with little or no considerations for its social implications, thereby defeating that which they deem to be the whole fundamental purpose of modernisation in the first place. The challenge that Asia faces today is one of reversing this condition of imposed modernisation so as to establish a modernity that honours the existential integrity of Asia. In this light, a host of discussions has emerged in recent decades on the vitality of traditional Asian values and religions in its interaction with modernity.⁷

II. Has God Become Redundant?

A chief concern of the religious community in Asia is, of course, that the onslaught of modernity brings about a form of secularism which affects the potency of religion in Asian life. Secularism has taken on a variety of meanings in both the philosophical and social-scientific arenas.⁸ It has generally been understood as a state of being centred on worldly affairs instead of being religion-centred.⁹ Visible expressions of secularism would be typified through a preoccupation with “scientific knowledge and human self-regulation”, through which God is rendered redundant.¹⁰

The foremost train of thought of the secularisation theory (which arose in the 1950s and the 1960s) was that the onset of modernity inevitably led to the decline and eventual demise of religion in society and among individuals. A prominent proponent of this *disappearance thesis* was Peter L. Berger, who then suggested that modernity was characterised by the onset of “religious interpretations” being discarded from the worldview of individuals.¹¹ In relation to this thesis, he defined secularisation as the “process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”.¹² In accordance with this line of thought, religion is destined to dissolve at the onset of the scientific era; it is held to be, simply, “institutionalised ignorance and superstition”.¹³

Berger, of course, was assessing the marginalisation of religion in the face of secularism in the Western context. In the Asian context, to surmise that secularism eventually causes the diminishment of religion would betray an ignorance of a very fundamental Asian characteristic, that Asia is inherently religious. There never was a time when Asia was not religious, and there perhaps never will be. Against this reality, Robert N. Bellah perceptively discusses modernity in Asia by acknowledging that the spiritual heritage derived from Asian religions – such as Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam – constitutes a vital part of traditional Asian values.¹⁴ Bellah’s point yields an implication of great relevance in our consideration of secularism’s impact upon Asia.

A less intense interpretation of secularism, perhaps one which finds greater resonance with the Asian context, is to be found in the *differentiation thesis*, which holds that whilst the religious dimension is increasingly marginalised from the social arena, it sustains a level of significance in the individual’s private life. This theory is advanced by Bryan Wilson who denies the cessation of religiosity and expounds the possibility of religion being rendered insignificant only insofar as the social arena is concerned.¹⁵

Wilson’s theory finds agreeable plausibility when one considers the recent wake of global religious resurgence. Even Berger, some three decades later since his contribution to the secularisation thesis in the 1970s, admits that the wrongness of the secularisation thesis has been made apparent through the intensifying religiosity of the global society.¹⁶ Within the Southeast Asian region, Fred R. von Mehden observes that modernisation has not obliterated the importance of the supernatural to adherents to Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism.¹⁷ Whilst Berger acknowledges the reality of modernisation having propelled some secularising effects, he asserts that the effects of counter-secularisation outweigh the effects of secularisation.

As such, the ostensible corrosive effect of modernity upon religion has been a long-debated subject.¹⁸ In agreement with Berger, David Lyon contends that a more prudent inquiry into the social dimensions of society is necessary to derive a reasonable conclusion pertaining to the status of religion in society in the face of secularisation. Lyon does well to acknowledge that although the case for secularisation may have been exaggerated, “contemporary social change involved religious changes”.¹⁹ In the case of Christianity, the assimilation of the societal ethos into the life of the Church often renders

the Church “indistinguishable” from the society. As he observes, “growing numbers of people staying away from Church is one indicator of secularisation. But so is the invasion of a rational calculating mentality into Church life, and that is far harder to gauge”.²⁰

Furthermore, Bryan Wilson submits in apparent concurrence that the predominant preoccupation of the secularisation thesis has been narrowly confined to the numerical decline of Church attendance, which is not necessarily indicative of religious commitment.²¹ In fact, commitment to a particular local Church community does not and should not automatically imply a commitment to a belief in God.²² Thus, Lyon is right to have suggested that whilst “secularisation is both a challenge and a threat to the survival of authentic Christianity”,²³ this absolutely should not lead to a conclusion for the cessation of Christianity or religion in society.

Martin E. Marty clarifies this well in his submission that perhaps the relevant issue for consideration is more about the “relocation” of religion than it is about the “disappearance of religion”.²⁴ Edward Norman also concurs by affirming that “we are living through a time not of religious decline but of transformation in the understanding of religion”.²⁵ This then, does not contradict Jacques Ellul’s assertion that religion is thriving in the modern world, although the senses have shifted in regard to that which constitutes the sacred.²⁶

However, in the wake of the reality of secularism, something must have obviously declined which cannot be ignored (even if it is not religion itself). Hence, further clarifying this concept is Mark Chaves’ contention that secularisation does not imply “declining religion” inasmuch as it implies “the declining scope of religious authority”.²⁷ Religion itself is not threatened as much as religious institutions are. With regards to Christianity, this must mean that the Church exists in a perpetual state of tension between being “relevant but undistinctive or distinctive but irrelevant”.²⁸ The first of these two alternative responses pertains to the reinvention of the faith to fit modern needs such that an inoffensive rendition of Christianity is presented. This process of reinvention is that of domestication, and in its extreme form, the theology of the Church mutates into one of unorthodoxy. This accommodative approach has been criticised by conservative theologians as having contributed to the decline of the Church, especially in the West. Edward Norman attributes this decline to the insistence of the liberal leaders of the Church in fixating their emphasis upon a “secular enthusiasm for humanity as core Christianity”.²⁹ The second of the two alternative reactions is the stance of conservative resistance or fundamentalism. Paradoxically, conservative Christianity still stubbornly persists despite its antithetical nature. Perhaps there is something about the climate of secularisation that resonates with Christian fundamentalism, for the approach helps believers to make sense of the present societal disillusionments that follow the secularisation phenomenon and offers hope in the midst of such disappointments. In any case, the onset of secularism has done much other than to have rendered irrelevant the religious dimension of human life. If anything, religion thrives at an even more intense magnitude, even if it may be so because of the psychological and emotional dependence of humankind upon the supposed supernatural in order to derive a sense of stability in a dynamic world.

Until now, in view of the historical and cultural context in which secularism advances, one speaks of secularism as a phenomenon with a largely Western framework. However, in turning to the context of Asia, it is in order that some form of differentiation is identified so as to understand the unique embodiment of Asian secularism. And yet, this identification is possible only through the employment of Western secularism as a starting point, for that which was inherited by Asia in the course of her history was, in essence, Western secularism. But the relative maturity of modernity in Asia now warrants the imperative for several crucial points of departure between Western secularism and Asian secularism being identified.

Firstly, Asia's secularism is not to be understood as a denial of the transcendent, but rather, the mutation of the meanings and significance attached to religions, their rites and their symbols. In speaking of Western secularism, it is observed that social thinkers have persisted in their debate on how religious or non-religious Western society truly is. These arguments are frequently accompanied by a host of social scientific data that fall within the favour of either one view. But as has been noted in this paper, one must hasten to acknowledge that there never was a time when Asia was not religious. Michael Vatikiotis, former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and a visiting research fellow at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 2006, unrepentantly observes that "the trend in Asia is anything but moderate or secular".³⁰ Ellul is right to assert that modern man is "just as religious as medieval man" in that the emptying of the sacred from certain dimensions of life does not naturally follow that no part of life has been retained as sacred.³¹ Secularism in Asia is not one of non-religiosity or a vehemence of anti-religion. Rather, it is the subconscious reassignment of significance to religion in accordance with the present order of modern society in Asia, whilst often still retaining traditional (even conservative) forms of embodiment.

Secondly, Asia has in the past existed in a state of cultural and religious pluralism, this being likely to remain a perpetual configuration in time to come. Pannenberg suggests that when Christianity establishes a sense of unity within itself as opposed to its medieval history of exclusive fragmentation, coupled with tolerance within the larger society, the path shall be open for the reinstatement of Christianity into the public square.³² Pannenberg's assessment seems to assume the dominance of one religious worldview. Although this may be so for the West (and even so, this assumption must now be seriously questioned), it is not so for the Asian context wherein multiple religious worldviews coexist.³³ Asia has never been critical of Christianity or post-Christian in the sense that the West has been. It is just non-Christian. But again, this does not mean that the shape of her secularism does not bear any resemblance to that of Western secularism. In Asia, the God of the Christians is not dead; he merely lives among other gods.

Having established some salient points at which Asian secularism takes its departure from Western secularism, one must in the same breath also affirm that the faces of the two secularisms bear stark resemblances to each other. One would not be going too far in affirming certain features that the two secularisms share in common, which also implies the applicability of much of Western critique on its own secularism to the Asian situation. Concretely, Asian secularism may be held to have comfortably embraced the following definition of the term (which happens to refer specifically to Western secularism):

Secularism is that which seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest possible point, as the immediate duty of life - which inculcates the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism or the Bible - which selects as its methods of procedure the promotion of human improvement by material means, and proposes these positive agreements as the common bond of union, to all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service.³⁴

III. God or Mammon, or Both?

The embrace of modernity and the resulting secularistic inclinations emerging in Asia, being more of an attitude than it is a process, may have unsurprisingly led to a successful enterprise of wealth-creation. However, this embrace was not initiated in a state of oblivion towards the accompanying

“undesirable side effects” of such a conscious choice. These effects, D.K. Fieldhouse aptly suggests, were and are most felt in the realm of the cultures and lifestyles of the Asian peoples.³⁵

As has been noted herein, even despite the onset of secularism, God is far from redundant in Asia. Secularism in Asia has evidently not derailed the religious senses of the people. However, what it has done is detract the preoccupation of the people towards more tangible realities, whilst still retaining their religious adherence and loyalties. The peoples of Asia, generally speaking, seek both God and mammon, and their sense of the sacred constantly propels them to steer a path of synthesis between the two otherwise opposing forces. But the nature of material prosperity is such that it is almost always accompanied by a dilemma of being confronted by pressure for a never-ending descent. In the more developed Asian nations, it is said that the “rich bankers, lawyers and doctors” (being typifications of progressive upper class societies) are “engaged in a marathon race, their eager faces distorted by strain, their eyes focused not upon their goal but upon each other with a mixture of hate, envy and admiration. Panting and perspiring, they run and never arrive. They would all like to stop but dare not as long as the others are running.”³⁶ The reality must hit – hard – when one comes to realise that this apt description pertains to no other than the parishioners in attendance at our weekly Eucharistic Celebrations. Many of the people running constantly to keep abreast of societal demands and market-imposed aspirations are the very ones given to the Church for her pastoral care.

The capitalistic market-driven economy today often finds justification through the contention that the acquisition of profits is not wrong, since profits is an indication of one’s apt understanding of what consumers desire to spend their scarce resources on.³⁷ However, this seemingly objective argument conveniently ignores the reality of induced spending to avoid losses and maximise profits. After all, is this not what a large proportion of the marketing strategies is devoted to – the persuasion of consumers to gravitate their perceived needs towards what the market has to offer? What more when the provocation of such perceived needs is not always well regulated and does slide into the most unethical ways of cajoling an unsuspecting audience. If anything, much of the marketing industry capitalises on its knowledge of consumers’ acquisitive vulnerabilities. The principle of diminishing marginal utility holds that when scarce resources are employed for the acquisition of a certain economic good or service, the relative value of the said economic good or service would diminish in contrast to all the other alternatives that had to be foregone in the light of the selected acquisition.³⁸

The principle delineated above says much about the immeasurable magnitude of human materialistic desires. The fact that every acquisition is accompanied by a range of other alternatives – and there is no guarantee that these alternatives are bound by a certain rational constraint – points to the insatiability of the human materialistic desire. These desires are often perceived as needs. It seldom occurs to the consumer in a materialistic market that whilst the market projects an image of freedom on the part of the consumer, he is not actually free in an absolute sense. The exercises of purchasing power and the freedom to choose are but perceptive notions cultivated through media projections. No consumer is totally free to make economic decisions in the best interest of his wellbeing. This is because no consumer possesses (or is able to possess) perfect knowledge of the market, when it is thought that such knowledge sheds light on the choices he makes which are hoped to derive desirable effects. As such, unbeknownst to the consumer, he is constantly kept unaware of the life cycle and the imposed deadline for obsolescence of his acquisitions. And even if such information was revealed to him, one cannot safely assume that the consumer possesses the will to exercise the prerogative of rational economic choice.

Tibor Scitovsky presents a sustained argument in his hallmark piece of work, *The Joyless Economy*, demonstrating that – contrary to the mistaken assumption held by modern economics –

consumers are *not* rational and cannot be expected to consistently make choices and decisions in their best of interest.³⁹ The consumer may not be able to “arrive at a rational balance between what is desired at the moment and what must be faced in the future.”⁴⁰ Where capitalism is truly effective, it eventually becomes an undeniable reality that the acquisition of luxuries is developed as a cultural habit. John Schneider contends that capitalism does not merely cause the emergence of cultures that contain great wealth; *wealth* itself becomes the innate defining point of those cultures.⁴¹

Capitalism, whilst claiming the promotion of human freedom, has also slid into an impersonalisation of the human person. It has come to treat labour as a commodity. What was once a system that existed to serve the human wellbeing is now an economic mechanism that is served by human labour. Ronald Preston notes that this constitutes the point at which Marxism speaks at its most forceful tone, “with its talk of alienation of the human being and the inhumanity of the cash nexus”.⁴² This arises from the reality that capitalism, as a system, rewards profitable returns rather than moral virtue or human wisdom.⁴³ Inasmuch as one might hope that the mechanism proportionately rewards business practices which give rise to the wellbeing of humankind, this is not always the case – in fact, this is probably *most often* not the case! Hence, in the same measure that one may posit that capitalism is a liberating force for the modern life, it is also an alienating force. John Milbank aptly points out that for the person who provides labour for the sustenance of the production process, the offer of labour is more a contractual process than it is liturgical work offered to God.⁴⁴ Labour within the framework of capitalism is but a commodity.

In the light of this economic-societal dilemma posed by the capitalistic market-driven economy, one cannot help but perceive that the authentic Christian calling and the materialistic acquisitive culture are supposed to stand at odds with each other. After all, capitalism has never sat well with traditional theological thought in that the most prevalent response of traditional Christian social theology towards capitalism was the abiding suspicion of the market capitalism.⁴⁵ Preston describes in detail the complicated tension arising between traditional Christian social theology and capitalism. This largely arises as a result of traditional theology’s understanding of the role of money-lending with interests being charged and its adverse consequences on social relations. He notes R.H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) as a delineation of the discomfort experienced by moral theology towards the idea of money-lending. However, Pope Leo XIII in 1891 is noted to have found redeemable elements in the modern capitalistic system despite the social ills which accompanied it.⁴⁶ In similar vein, theological scholarship seems to have expressed hope in capitalism as the only prevalent solution for wealth creation in the interest of the marginalised people’s wellbeing.⁴⁷ The problem is, as Schneider rightly delineates, capitalism has blossomed into something more than a mere economic mechanism. It is now a lifestyle, or in Berger’s terms, an “economic culture”.⁴⁸

This economic-related dilemma warrants detailed thought on the part of the Christian community. The Church should heed Preston’s argument for the vitality of a social theology. Preston posits that the construction of a proper social theology demands, first of all, that the economic dimension of society be taken seriously.⁴⁹ This includes an appropriate understanding of the fundamental human issues with which economics engages. This is not to say that an understanding of economics provides the crucial solutions to the human dilemma, but rather, that economics is a crucial reality. At the same time, the limitations of the role of economics and market mechanisms are also to be observed. Like any other institution and virtues, market mechanisms too are vulnerable to depraved manipulations. They have limits in their usefulness and are not to be embraced uncritically as the solution to the common need of humankind. The functioning of market mechanisms must be subject to the scruples of ethics and morality, and it is herein that the articulation of the Church finds its place.⁵⁰

Whilst capitalism may be seen purely as an economic-related mechanism, it is the task of the Church in Asia to examine the ideologies undergirding the practice of this mechanism in her continent.

IV. A Prophetic Call to Authentic Discipleship

The recent encyclical of the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, is a most heartening representation of the Church's interaction with such wider realities in which the Church itself exists.⁵¹ Such interaction is crucial although the immediate efforts of the Christian community may not always yield the effects hoped for, as Nicholass Wolterstorff notes:

The Church and its representatives continue to pour forth pronouncements on economic life. Some of these are critical of what transpires in the economy; some are legitimating. Some are aimed at motivating people to continue doing what they are already doing; some are aimed at motivating people to change what they are doing. Materialism is condemned, charity is urged, stewardship is praised, the dignity of work is celebrated, God is thanked for blessings received and petitioned for blessings hoped for. But all of this noise makes no difference. The economy as a whole proceeds exactly as if none of these preachments had ever been made; and individual believers *do* function and *must* function within the economy just like everyone else, each pursuing his or her interests. No longer can anyone give "a genuinely Christian character" to his or her economic life.⁵²

Indeed Wolterstorff rightly presents the intimation of a community consisting of variant voices within the Church. If his point of reference is particularly Western in nature, then it must be emphasised that it is rather accurate a reflection of Asian Christianity too. Most Asian Christians exist within an order that has an established system which, as Wolterstorff aptly notes, "perpetuates itself by rewarding disciplined pursuit of wages and profit and punishing other modes of behaviour".⁵³ Together with this, they also live in an economic climate of enforced spending, consumer manipulation, and hence, a continuous escalation of materialistic desires. Robert Coles explains,

"...they hear the church bells, the church bells, sure they do, but they read the [news]papers, and they listen to the radio, and they pass the stores and look at the displays – and don't forget this: so do the priests. The bells are there, but there's a lot of other noise in the air, voices with messages about buying and selling: spend and get – and work hard, so you can spend more, get more, and hey, that's the life".⁵⁴

At this point, the negative correspondence between economic progress and the spiritual aspirations of the Asian peoples becomes all but apparent. As people live in economically driven societies that encourage hard work, hard spending and continuous acquisition, their spiritual aspirations for lives devoted to holiness are also somewhat dulled. Thus, the interaction of the Christian community with the materialistic culture of the more developed Asian nations is more than a philosophical one, for to speak into the culture is also to stake one's material wellbeing in the process. Such a cost for interaction is perhaps the reason that it has become normative for Christians of the relatively developed nations to accord definitive priority to economic wellbeing, often even at the expense of social responsibility.⁵⁵

Joseph B. Tamney suggests that since capitalism has redefined the individual's idea as "a personally-designed life, non-conformity, high standards, a spirited not boring life, sensual pleasures,

and success in this world”, the decline of religion (including Christianity) is attributable to its own irrelevance in having “disdained the material world”.⁵⁶ Tamney seems to be echoing the notion that religion would be gradually ousted from economically progressive societies, and this allegation is yet far from conclusive.⁵⁷ Further to that, his analysis of the alleged failure of religion betrays a gross misunderstanding of that for which religion stands. Whilst it is true that some religions do perceive the material world with distaste, Christianity does well to delineate the difference between the “material world” and “materialism”. It is utterly untrue that religious leaders have failed to develop a “nuanced understanding of the various reasons affluent people are interested in things”.

However, even leaders who do not endorse materialistic preoccupations still desire to help people express their “personal sense of self” despite their reluctance to affirm the spirit of materialism (this being attributed to a realisation that an authentic personhood is to be found in something deeper than a mere frenzy over the material world). Whilst these “deeper things”, to some, may be superficially passed off as being irrelevant, it nevertheless constitutes the core of the religious psyche that looks beyond the superficiality of material cravings. Whilst it does not disown the material world, authentic Christianity perceives an obligation to help its adherents to distinguish between necessary needs and covetousness. Tamney’s scathing analysis therefore seems to have neglected to affirm, and too quickly dismisses, the challenge confronting the Asian Church as she seeks to embody the faith in the context of a modernity which engineers the worldview of the people by inclining them towards material affluence.

But in the light of this modern challenge, the Church in Asia is reminded to be committed to living history differently. In a wider culture that frantically finds its identity and security in material achievements and sensual pleasure, the Church – herself being an eschatological phenomenon – has to be the embodiment of an eschatological hope which renders all such preoccupations void. In a modern era that exalts the preoccupation with temporality, she must be jolted and constantly summoned to return to her calling to be the Church in the world that prays “Thy Kingdom come”. For this, a recovery of the sacramental nature of the Church must be attained.

Perhaps the most obvious call for the Church to identify with her own calling as the *mysterion* of the kingdom of God in the world is found in *Lumen Gentium*:

...the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race... To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom. By His obedience He brought about redemption. The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world.⁵⁸

The idea of the Church as a sacrament is by no means novel. Church Fathers such as St Leo the Great (c.400-461) included both Christ and the Church in their lists of sacraments. J.M.R. Tillard, in explicating the understanding of the Church as a Eucharistic body united to Christ, explores Augustine’s association of the Eucharist with Church. He begins by extensively quoting Augustine’s Sermon 227 in which Augustine stipulates that the bread and the cup are the body of Christ which he offers to the recipient. In this sermon, Augustine goes on to say that for the recipient who receives these well, “you are yourselves what you receive”.⁵⁹ Tillard also examines Augustine’s Sermon 272, in which the latter describes that the very members of the body of Christ are the ones placed on the Lord’s table, that “what you receive is the mystery that means you”.⁶⁰ Further to that, he goes on to quote Augustine’s baptismal sermons, in which the latter is found to have mentioned in the presence of his listeners, “You are on the table and you are in

the chalice, you along with us are this. We are this together”.⁶¹ In his scrutiny of Augustine’s correlation of the Eucharist to the Church, Tillard describes that the Eucharist is not one of a Christ dissociated from the Church, but rather, of a unity between the head and the body. Augustine himself writes in his *The City of God*, “...the Church teaches that it itself is offered in the offering it makes to God”.⁶²

In so claiming, the Church is explicated by the Church Fathers as a community of people in communion with the Triune God and with one another, and a community of people in the world that constitutes the visible presence of the invisible Christ. Of course, history observes that the Middle Ages somewhat clouded this understanding by way of a new concern over the individual sacraments of the Church and the effects of sacramental *rituals* upon the individual recipients through the persons who administered them. However, the re-emergence of the ancient understanding took place at the dawning of vital ecclesial considerations at the Second Vatican Council, thereby highlighting the role of the Church as not merely *doing* sacraments, but more so, *being* a sacrament. In resonance, Patricia Smith notes that “the Church of Christ is a sacrament, an explicit sign of what God hopes and intends for all people”.⁶³ Henri de Lubac likewise affirms the following:

If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder’s continuation.⁶⁴

Admittedly, the idea of Church as sacrament is not posed without difficulties. Avery Dulles identifies the complications arising from the stipulation of the Church as being a sacrament. In his *Models of the Church*, he comments on the sophistication of this concept rendering it a difficult one to propagate.⁶⁵ Subsequently, in *A Church to Believe In*, he states the following:

The term “sacrament” suggests either an impersonal reality, such as baptismal water, or a ritual action, such as anointing. It is hard to think of a social body as a sacrament. Further, the image suggests a conspicuousness which the Church as a whole does not possess, since most Catholics and Christians do not go about in uniform. And finally, there is some ambiguity about what the Church as sacrament or sign represents. Is the Church, as we commonly experience it, a convincing sign of the unity, love, and peace, for which we hope in the final kingdom? The Church in its pilgrim state is still far from adequately representing the heavenly Jerusalem, even in a provisional manner.⁶⁶

Dulles’ observation has to be gravely considered, to which a response is in order. Contrary to Dulles’ critique presenting a dilemma to the concept of the Church as sacrament itself, it should be seen to be posing a critical dilemma to the people who call themselves “Church”. It is for the members of the Church to reflect on their constant failure to embody the Church’s calling, to be what she was meant to be: the sacrament of Christ in the world.

In the context of the present discussion, the recovery of the understanding of sacrament as being that which the Church *is* as opposed to merely what the Church *does* crucially presents the need for a shift from an action- and result-oriented Church to a being-oriented Church. Simply put, there is no space in ecclesiology for a Church that thrives on an easy Gospel. The cogent argument placed before her is that of her need to recover the antithetical nature of discipleship to a modern Asian society that thrives on the domestication of God and materialistic inclinations (thereby rendering aspirations for sacred vocations irrelevant at best and ridiculous and worst). The community of Christ, which is itself

the sacrament of Christ in the world, is called to embody a different way of living and to embrace a radically different set of values in the way it regulates its common life so that it may reflect the very Christ it follows.

Stanley Hauerwas argues that in the present paradigm of modern Church life, the call of the Church to discipleship has become paralysed.⁶⁷ The existence of the modern, and therefore, a consumeristic worldview in the Church itself renders impossible the requirement that the person who desires to be a member of the Christian community should embrace a vulnerability to certain imposed spiritual disciplines. Hauerwas describes this transformation of paradigm as one that has shifted from that of a “called Church” to that of the “voluntary Church”, where the attitude of friendliness and the positive climate are the order of the community. He emphasises the need to recover the calling of the Church for discipleship through spiritual disciplines, for there are occasions when human crisis calls for discipline rather than care. A Church that hesitates to speak prophetically and sacrificially to the modern world is bound for a consequential loss of her sense of calling as a people with a mission in the world. The vocational crisis in many segments of the Church in Asia is but a summons to the restoration of authentic discipleship, and if left unheeded, a painful foretaste of the shape of things to come.

Such times do not render redundant the Church’s continuous call for holy men and women committed to the consecrated life. If those living the consecrated life are sacramentals meant to inspire the community of believers to embody the Evangelical Counsels of Christ Jesus and to return to the holy life, then the Church’s call needs to be further intensified and tirelessly proclaimed. Now, more than ever, such men and women wholly devoted to the search for holiness need to be present among the Asian peoples as a sign that the Kingdom of God continues to abide and inspire amidst Asia’s struggle with the modern life.

ENDNOTES

¹ From 1978 to 2004, the number of Religious Brothers in Asia was reported to have increased by 38.72% from 6,508 to 9,205. The number of Professed Women Religious likewise increased by 64.49% from 91,585 to 150,736. Further to that, the the number of priests increased by 74% from 27,700 to 48,000 priests. *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* of 2004, reported in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 14 July 2004, p. 5.

² Jose Maria Vigil, CMF, "A Call to Religious Life Worldwide" in *Religious Life Review*, Vol. 44, #232, May/June 2005.

³ S.N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York: John Wiley, 1973).

⁴ Anthony Giddens, "The Globalizing of Modernity" in David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.92-8.

⁵ Takehiko Kamo, "Globalism, Regionalism and Nationalism: Asia in Search of Its Role in the Twenty-first Century" in Yoshinobu Yamamoto (ed.), *Globalism, Regionalism and Nationalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp.12-31.

⁶ Prasert Chittiwatanapong, "Challenges of and Responses to Globalization: The Case of South-east Asia" in Yoshinobu Yamamoto (ed.), *Globalism, Regionalism and Nationalism*, pp.70-92.

⁷ For some of these discussions, refer to Hans-Dieter Evers (ed.), *Modernization in South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), Ho Wing Meng, *Asian Values and Modernisation: A Critical Interpretation* (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1976), Robert Neelly Bellah (ed), *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier-Macmill, 1965), and Saral K. Chatterji, (ed.), *The Asian Meaning of Modernization* (Lucknow: East Asia Christian Conference, 1972).

⁸ It derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means "century", "world-age", or "temporality".

⁹ This definition is adapted from that of Fred Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar)" in *The Review of Politics*, Volume 61: Fall (University of Notre Dame, 1999), p.715.

¹⁰ Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism", p.715.

¹¹ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1969), p.108. Other apparent proponents of this theory include Bernard Eugene Meland in Bernard Eugene Meland, *The Secularization of Modern Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Phillip E. Hammond in Philip Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), pp.1-8; Daniel Bell in Daniel Bell, "The Return of the Sacred? The Argument on the Future of Religion" in *British Journal of Sociology* 28 (4): pp.420-3; and Fredric Jameson in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), p.67.

¹² Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), p.107.

¹³ Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism", p.715.

¹⁴ Bellah (ed), *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, pp.x-xi.

¹⁵ Bryan Wilson, "Secularization: The Inherited Model" in Philip Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), p.14, and Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp.149-151.

¹⁶ Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat", *The National Interest* (winter 1996/97): p.4; and Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview" in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp.1-18. Prior to that, Callum G. Brown had already submitted that the secularisation

theory in its original form was deficient in its acknowledgement of the social reality in “the world’s first two industrial-urban nations – Britain and the USA”. The only reason for the sustained survival of this hypothesis was the inadequate quality and quantity of relevant empirical researches. Callum G. Brown, “A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change” in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp.31, 40, 55.

¹⁷ Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p.179.

¹⁸ The two theories herein advanced are not exhaustive. Less common theories, such as the *de-intensification theory* demonstrated by Steve Bruce and the *coexistence theory* illustrated by David Martin, have been advanced. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail secularisation theories from a purely sociological dimension.

¹⁹ David Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), p.27.

²⁰ Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow*, p.115.

²¹ Bryan R. Wilson, “Reflections on a Many Sided Controversy” in Bruce, *Religion and Modernization*, pp.195-6.

²² Hugh Montefiore, *Reclaiming the High Ground: A Christian Response to Secularism* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), p.1.

²³ Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow*, p.114.

²⁴ Martin E. Marty, *The Modern Schism: Three Paths to the Secular* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.11.

²⁵ Edward Norman, *Secularisation* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), pp.viii, ix.

²⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C.Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²⁷ Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority”, *Social Forces* 72, no.3 (March 1994): pp.749-50.

²⁸ Lyon, *The Steeple’s Shadow*, p.119.

²⁹ Norman, *Secularisation*, p.ix.

³⁰ Michael Vatikiotis, “Heavens, Asia’s Going Christian”, *Asia Times Online* [on-line]; available from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HC02Ae03.html; Internet; accessed 15 September 2006.

³¹ Ellul, *The New Demons*, p.65.

³² Wolfhard Pannenberg, “How to Think About Secularism” in *First Things* 64, June/July 1996, pp.27-32.

³³ It most often seems that the Western reading of post-modernity refers to a kind of pluralism in terms of worldview, religion and spirituality. If that is the case, one may contend that Asia does not have a post-modernity, for pluralism has been a reality in her state of existence since time immemorial. The term post-modernity is largely relevant for a social context in which one particular worldview dominated the society prior to the onset of post-modernity itself. Since this has never been the case for Asia, the appropriateness of this term in its usage for the Asian context should be seriously re-examined.

³⁴ C.A. Dubray, “Secularism”, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume XIII [on-line]; available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13676a.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 February 2005.

³⁵ D.K. Fieldhouse, “The West and the Third World” in Anthony McGrew and David Held (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), p.364.

³⁶ Reginald H. Fuller and Brian K. Rice, *Christianity and the Affluent Society* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p.71.

³⁷ Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, p.43.

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- 38 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, p.20.
- 39 Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 40 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, p.23.
- 41 John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p.25.
- 42 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, p.44.
- 43 Craig M. Gay, *With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p.233.
- 44 John Milbank, "Socialism of the Gift, Socialism by Grace" in *New Black Friars*, vol. 77, no.9 (1996), p.545.
- 45 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, pp.35-46.
- 46 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Vatican City: 1891, 1991).
- 47 Craig M. Gay, *With Liberty and Justice for Whom?*, pp.22-63.
- 48 Peter L. Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions about Prosperity* (Equality and Liberty, New York: Basic Books, 1986), p.24.
- 49 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, pp.4-19.
- 50 Novak and Preston, *Christian Capitalism or Christian Socialism?*, pp.15-6.
- 51 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: 2009).
- 52 Nicholass Wolterstorff, "Has the Cloak Become a Cage? Charity, Justice, and Economic Activity" in Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behaviour* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p.148.
- 53 Wolterstorff, "Has the Cloak Become a Cage?", p.161.
- 54 Robert Coles, *The Secular Mind* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.102.
- 55 Lee Soo Ann, "The Church and Her Social Responsibility" in *The Christian Church in 21st Century Singapore*, Isaac Lim (ed.) (Singapore: The National Council of Churches, 2000), p.32.
- 56 Joseph B. Tamney, *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul: Western Modernization and Asian Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p.48.
- 57 Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism*, p.5.
- 58 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, points 1 & 3.
- 59 J.M.R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), pp.39, 40.
- 60 Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, p.42.
- 61 Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, p.43.
- 62 St Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.6.
- 63 Patricia Smith, *Teaching Sacraments* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), p.113.
- 64 Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sr Elizabeth Englund, OCD (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1988), p.76.
- 65 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976) pp.69-70.
- 66 Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p.5.
- 67 Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp.93-111.