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A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY OF AN INSTITUTION THROUGH
THE EYES OF AN ALUMNUS-STAFF:
A CASE STUDY OF ASIA PACIFIC THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

By Wonsuk Ma

Introduction

History-writing is a multifaceted discipline, and several important factors determine how a reality is constructed through selection, interpretation and presentation. Christian history also attracts a strong tendency towards the providence of God, which is completely unknown to secular history-writing. The Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS) in the Philippines celebrates its fifty years of existence and development as a Christian education institution, and reflections from various perspectives would be helpful in defining its future as well as understanding its past.

The perspective I am going to employ in constructing the journey of theological formation as an institution is through its impact to my own theological formation as a student, and then its subsequent formation process in which I played a role as a faculty/staff member. For this reason, my life at the seminary becomes an integral part of the reflection. Inevitably my personal story is closely interwoven in the fabric of the much larger corporate history (or tapestry) of APTS. Granted, this reflection can be quite different from other versions of the school's history. Of course, this approach comes not without its own problems. One of them could be the confusion between the subject and the object. My story (object) is to serve the story of the community (subject) and this will require constant reminders that I am writing an APTS story (history).

At this point, it is important to argue my own credentials in this historical exercise. The first is the long time span of my association with APTS: 1979–83 as a student, and 1983–2006 as a faculty member and also administrator of varying responsibilities. Although six years of

the latter period were spent outside of the seminary community for my own study, my personal involvement, albeit on a limited measure, continued. My total of twenty-seven years is more than half of the fifty years the seminary is celebrating. The second is, as already mentioned, the various roles that I played at the seminary: from a student (as a “client”) to a senior management leader (as an “operator”). The third is my Pentecostal identity and that of the seminary, which became the focal point of my time with APTS. Nonetheless, it is true that this reflection has a strong subjective nature, often not substantiated by hard data or written records.

The period of my association with APTS may be divided into three periods: the student period (1979–83), the faculty period (1983–92), and the administrative period (1992–2006). There were two periods when I was in the United States for study (1985–87 and 1992–96).

A Student (1979–83)

When I arrived in the Philippines one sizzling August afternoon, the school, then called Far East Advanced School of Theology (FEAST), was just fifteen years old, offering the four year courses of a bachelor’s degree.

Institution

The purpose of FEAST was to train faculty members for Bible schools throughout the Asia-Pacific region, by offering at least a degree program one step higher than the average level of theological education in Asia. Over the years, this race continued in the life of the institution: two master’s programs added in the early 1980s, and soon the master of divinity degree in the same period. I first came to complete the last year of an undergraduate degree, then went on to the master of theological studies program, which quickly morphed into the newly launched M.Div. program. When I graduated in 1983, five of us showcased the international character of the school: two were from the Philippines, one was Korean, one Malaysian, and one Indonesian. Today, all five serve as leaders on the national and international levels, and the school has fulfilled its mandate to raise Christian leaders.

Although there was no way for me as a student to know much about the management status of the school, this launching of three master’s programs in a short span of time seemed to apply significant

pressure on academic staffing. When I first began, one American missionary had a doctor of ministry degree from a Philippine school. Only one or two members of the faculty had a master's degree as I recall. They were augmented certainly by visiting lecturers and short-term resident faculty members. One may argue that the institution should have built its resources before launching a new program. However, often one is compelled to upgrade institutional capacities with a pressing immediate need in sight. The addition of the graduate programs in the short period must have encouraged or even forced the institutional leadership to take steps to build adequate resources to support them.

Contexts

The theological character of the institution at this period, well reflected in the "client's" view was influenced by a few institutional features. The first is the heavy North American influence. The faculty and management of the school were staffed mostly by U.S. Assemblies of God (AG) missionaries. Two Asian staff members were included, nonetheless: the registrar (a Filipina Christian education major) and the dean of students (a Japanese-American sociologist). When it comes to theology, there was a good dose of the American version of Pentecostal theology. The second is the lack of Asian resources on Pentecostalism. Basic historical data had not been collected, let alone published. In a sense, the graduate programs provided an important space for research on national Pentecostal movements. The third feature is the denominational nature of the seminary. Most of us were able to read the most articulate theological statements, albeit of U.S. Assemblies of God products, for the first time. At the same time, there was little opportunity to learn a broader landscape of Pentecostalism, that is, other Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions as well as the global feature of the movement.

Concerning the theological formation process, there were two important contextual elements to be mentioned. The first is the socioreligious context of the Philippines. At the height of the People's Power Revolution against the Marcos dictatorship, the Charismatic renewal broke out among Catholics. Charismatic prayer groups and fellowships mushroomed in restaurants, hotel ballrooms, homes of middle- and high-class residents, and even individuals' garages. The

role of several Assemblies of God preachers is well established.¹ Among these influential Pentecostal figures was George Batson, a U.S. Assemblies of God missionary serving on the FEAST faculty. He spoke in many Charismatic Bible studies and mentored emerging leaders. Some of these leaders joined the seminary as students: Buch Conde (of Bread of Life), Gus Lising (then of Word for the World) and Manny Garcia (an influential businessman who had a significant ministry in Muntinlupa Penitentiary). The second element is the diversity found in the student body. Even though most of us came from the Assemblies of God tradition, we soon became aware of how each sociocultural context had shaped a local version of Pentecostal theology and spirituality. Coming from a monolingualistic and cultural background, this exposure challenged me greatly. Also, other Pentecostal traditions found in the student body alerted me of complexity found in any human experience, including the Pentecostal one.

Theological Identity

During this period, I became more aware of my Pentecostal identity. Even though it was heavily North American material, my courses and readings immensely helped me to establish my Pentecostal theology with confidence. The American presence, we felt, was not a problem: it was the lack of Asian contribution to theological formation that was the core of the challenge. Nonetheless, the restlessness on the lack of Asian component was quite evident among the first M.Div. class of five (two Filipinos, one each Indonesian, Korean, and Malaysian). The nine o'clock evening tea was where lively discussions took place, sometimes with young American instructors joining in. One concern was that the American way of life was taken as a norm. A pointed question was raised: What would future Asian Pentecostalism and the school look like in ten years? It was not to blame our American missionaries but to bemoan the lack of any serious awareness of, and investment in, the future among Asian Pentecostal churches. The conclusion: one of us should remain at FEAST. I did not know that it would be me!

As expected, often speaking in tongues became the hottest subject to discuss, primarily because this was the point of attack from other churches. At one point, however, I began to wonder if this was

¹ Dynnice Rosanny D. Engcoy, "A Reflection of a Missionary to the Philippines: Gary A. Denbow Interview," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 8:2 (2005), 311-30.

more an American or modern Western agenda. I questioned the use of the word *evidence*. It sounded like a modernist language demanding for evidence (as in natural science or medicine). I also noticed that in many Asian languages (such as Korean, Japanese, and Chinese), there is no definite article (“the”); thus, there is no way to translate into these national languages “*the* initial and physical evidence.” The definitive article here suggests “the only,” and in some Asian languages, consequently, speaking in tongues can become one of several evidences. Books such as *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* further challenged us to think twice about what we believe.

The rise of the Charismatic movement was an important context for theological formation. In retrospect, how I wish we were all open to learn from these new experiences. One fruitful question would have been: how does the Spirit’s work operate in the existing Catholic theology and spirituality? Years later, Koichi Kitano, a Japanese-American missionary faculty member, completed his sociological research on this subject. We were too eager and busy to “baptize” the Charismatic believers into the Pentecostal fold rather than facilitating them to be faithful to their church and to the work of the Spirit. Today, there are significant Catholic Charismatic groups, but the magnitude and impact would have been much greater had the early Charismatic prayer groups all remained in the Catholic fold. The school had an important opportunity to influence the shaping of the Philippine Charismatic movement, but the institution was not sufficiently theologically mature to expand its vision beyond the denominational or classical Pentecostal confines.

The constant lack of qualified instructors was not at all negative. There are important names in Pentecostal scholarship among the visiting instructors. Gordon Fee, though controversial with his American denomination (that is, the Assemblies of God), taught us to think critically. His yearly visit to FEAST was indeed a feast. He delightfully demonstrated that a Pentecostal scholar does not have to quench or tone down the Pentecostal fire. He often wept during his lectures. Del Tarr was another. He certainly brought the global dimension to our thinking as an Africanist. He taught us to do theology that is of service to the kingdom.

Faculty (1983–1992)

This was a complex period in my life with the seminary. A quick look at three segments of the period may be helpful. The first is the beginning of my faculty life at FEAST until the commencement of my Ph.D. study at Fuller (1983–85). The decision to join the faculty as a Korean missionary (with no commissioning and supporting body) was recounted elsewhere.² At least one corporate prayer was answered: one of the first five M.Div. graduates would remain at the seminary. Then came my two-year study leave in California under the faculty development program of the school. A series of events and circumstances leading to this reflect a significant development in institutional awareness. The third is a five-year period following my first study leave. This time, the school was in a different place (Baguio) and soon adopted a new name.

William Menzies

My offer of my service to the school as a Korean missionary faculty (to-be) must have created a stir as I was just qualified to teach undergraduate courses. Also my denomination, the Korean Assemblies of God, had no missions department or missions program. When the leadership of the school finally accepted my offer, it also opened a new avenue for more Asian missionaries to eventually join the school.

The coming of William Menzies, a noted Pentecostal scholar, to serve as interim president of FEAST for two years was important in the development of the institution. With several younger rookie teachers on campus, lively discussions took place on many different subjects. Three young faculty members, Robert Menzies, Gary Long, and I, occupied a hastily renovated office strip and we called it “Ivory Tower.” Among the topics of discussion was the publication of Asian Pentecostal reflections. With eager and talented students willing to do editorial work, the first academic journal of the school was born in 1985: *Horizon: A Communication Paper of the Far East Advanced School of Theology*. The talented editor was Albert Kang, an M.Div. student from Singapore. Although it never saw beyond the first issue, I

² Wonsuk and Julie C. Ma, “The Making of Korean Pentecostal Missionaries: Our Personal Journey”, in Arto Hämmäläinen and Grant McCung (eds.), *Together in One Mission: Pentecostal Cooperation in World. Evangelization* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 2012), 159–76.

published my first study in this historic publication.³ The second achievement of Menzies was the faculty development program. He argued rightly that securing a qualified resident faculty was critical to support the existing graduate programs. At the end, all three Ivory Tower residents left the school in 1985 for Ph.D. studies: Bob to Aberdeen, Gary to the University of Chicago, and myself to Fuller. Menzies returned to the school later (in the new city) to lead the school for the second time. The same interest in scholarship advancement was characteristic of that time. Talks on a publishing program, a proper journal, and academic lectureship were lively, and all of them have become a reality in due time.

Baguio Instead of Ortigas Center

The school once developed the idea of an urban campus in the newly developed Ortigas Center area of metro Manila. This could have made the school deeply ingrained in the urban life of the country. Attractive programs could be developed to attract a good number of professional, mid-career day students, in addition to the residential and international student body. But this plan was quickly abandoned due to the high cost of maintenance. Instead, a move was made to Baguio. This has seriously altered the character of the school. It has now become pronouncedly a residential school with a small town on campus. The sociocultural context also challenged the international community to find nearby locations for worship and ministry. International and local travels were challenging due to the long hours for road trips, often interrupted by landslides during the typhoon season. Domestic flights were unpredictable. However, the school found its way to strengthen existing churches in the city and to establish new ministries to cater to the international community at the school and in the city. Several brave students began to explore ministry opportunities in the surrounding tribal villages, in spite of the presence of the People's Army, the armed wing of the illegal Communist Party of the Philippines. We returned to this new city and arguably to a different school.

³ Wonsuk Ma, "Brief Guidelines to Motivating Cell Leaders," *Horizon: A Communication Paper of the Far East Advanced School of Theology* 1 (March 1985), 3–4.

Theological Formation

As an institution, the new setting forced the institution to consider what was needed to be a true international school. The change in the student demography proves this change in the institutional nature. While trying to settle in a new environment and still unstable social situation, the school began to interact with other seminaries in the town and the country. The successful accreditations by the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and Asia Theological Association (ATA) opened new doors for inter-seminary networks and interactions. The steady upgrade of national schools also pressured the seminary to explore postgraduate programs and to produce resources for training.

Two things dominated my academic life. The first was my ongoing Ph.D. research on the Spirit of God in the book of Isaiah. Considering that, like many Evangelical cousins, Pentecostal scholarship has paid most of its attention to the New Testament, or the Lucan literature to be more precise, I wanted to explore a territory that was promising but also not much charted. As a typical Pentecostal, I was looking for scriptural references to the empowering work of the Spirit. To my surprise, the book contains far more nuanced notions of spiritual empowerment, such as the Spirit-empowered suffering Servant (e.g., Isa. 42:1–3). Also prominent in my research was the Spirit's role in creation, maintenance of creation, and restoration. The first publication in a peer-reviewed journal was on the same subject.⁴ A holistic view of pneumatology began to surface through the research, taking the life-giving work of the Spirit seriously.

The second is the new surroundings of the seminary community. Led by a student, we began to minister to several tribal communities around the school. We soon learned that the Pentecostal message had a special appeal to the Kankana-ey tribe through the courageous work of an American missionary widow. Immigrants from deep mountain villages to the Baguio area formed communities and established congregations. Although surrounded by traditional animistic religious cultures, the interaction between Pentecostal Christianity and local cultures was fascinating. This also rekindled my interest in local Pentecostal theologies, relevant to the host culture. The legacy of Elva Vanderbout, the pioneer missionary, also illustrated that Pentecostal missions has been holistic in nature. For example, belief in

⁴ Wonsuk Ma, "The Spirit of God in Isaiah 1–39," *Asia Journal of Theology* 3 (1989).

physical healing and the supernatural intervention of God prove that Pentecostals care for more than the eternal life of souls.

Dean (1996–2006)

When we returned to the school now renamed Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS), I was made academic dean. I had come a long way from the uncertain Korean volunteer. With the full support of President John Carter, I was the architect of the academic character of the seminary. Some key components had been in place to advance the academic agenda of the school: the APTS Press and the annual Pentecostal lectureship. The Press proved to be an important outlet of created knowledge, providing valuable material for research and teaching throughout Asia. To this, the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* was added in 1998, while an independent periodical was also in operation on campus from 1999, the *Journal of Asian Mission*. This soon became the journal of the Asia Graduate School of Theology-Philippines, the evangelical consortium of which APTS is a member. I served as the founding editor of both journals. The annual Pentecostal lectureship brings both renowned scholars and new topics for deep exploration. The lecture week every January has become an annual pilgrimage to APTS for a growing number of graduates and guests throughout Asia. To this, an Occasional Pentecostal Lecture Series was added. This irregular lecture series has brought Pentecostal scholars from wide geographical and ecclesial backgrounds, from Oneness to Catholic Charismatic, and from South Africa to South Korea.

Academic Infrastructures

As already noted, a serious investment was made to build an academic infrastructure. The seminary became increasingly known among the seminary community in the country for its fine facility, superb library collection, focused curricular, well-qualified international faculty, rigorous publications, and its vast international community of both the student body and the faculty.

The launching of postgraduate programs was significant. It is true to the mission of the seminary to provide qualified teachers for national schools which by now began to offer graduate programs. Both the master of theology (M.Th.) and doctor of ministry (D.Min.) had a Pentecostal/Charismatic Studies major. Later, the seminary reached an agreement to host a Ph.D. program of the University of Wales, Bangor.

This served as important third-party recognition of the international standard of the seminary programs.

The emergence of the Asian Pentecostal Society, although existing independent of the seminary, enhanced the academic aspirations of the school. Formed in 1998 in Seoul as a pro-conference program of the Pentecostal World Conference, this network of Asian Pentecostal scholarship put APTS at the centre of the Society. The wisdom of Vinson Synan and William Menzies, two founding leaders of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, was offered for the future of the Society. The Society began its annual meeting then, and APTS was the first venue. Studies presented in these meetings were steadily fed to the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, and to a lesser degree to the *Journal of Asian Mission*. The creation of the Society and the launching of the seminary journal in the same year suggest that the two are interdependent in their flourishing.

The Pentecostal journal became the most visible face of the seminary. I often examine Ph.D. dissertations especially on Asian Pentecostalism. Inevitably, the journal is cited with high frequency. It regularly publishes historical material of Asian nations, which was never known previously among the academic circles. A lively dialogue between Pentecostals and Evangelicals is another feature. Theological subjects such as speaking in tongues are revisited from various social and ecclesial contexts.

Academic conferences became a regular feature of the seminary with the two lecture series in place. The postgraduate programs brought various seminars and workshops. Also formally organized conferences were held.

The presence of a strong international faculty well supported all these academic programs. The school had seven members of the faculty with Ph.D. degrees, with eight nations represented, evenly divided between Asia and the rest of the world. These faculty members were augmented by regularly visiting instructors. However, the maintenance of such a faculty required constant pastoral care and an advanced planning of faculty development. This required a strong and supportive senior management team.

Theological Reflection

The institution deepened its Pentecostal identity in every discipline of study: theology, missions studies, and Christian education. It is Pentecostal studies all over, and this identity-formation highlighted the theological uniqueness of the seminary. This was useful, for example, when ten evangelical seminaries in the country came together to form a postgraduate consortium.

In addition to a serious academic output in terms of graduates and researches, two new dimensions are observed in this period. The first is the flowering of Asian Pentecostal studies. The steady focus on the subject resulted in a growing recognition by the academic world and church circles. Some illustrations may be helpful. When the revised edition of the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* was organized, the publisher and the editors paid special attention to the international dimension of the movement. However, the editors struggled to identify Asian contributors on Asian entries. When I was contacted close to the deadline, four APTS faculty members were recruited to provide extremely valuable studies to the revised edition. When the book was published,⁵ I quickly went through the list of contributors. I was pleased to realize that APTS had the most contributors to the dictionary project. Similarly, when the University of Birmingham organized a conference on Asian Pentecostalism, at least six presenters were from the APTS family, including alumni. The conference collection was later published jointly by Regnum Books and APTS Press.⁶

The second dimension is the ecumenical implications of the seminary's reputation for Asian Pentecostal studies. When world church bodies were in search of voices of Asian Pentecostalism, they normally approached APTS. Again, several examples may be helpful. The Global Christian Forum has been an innovative and most inclusive ecumenical movement in our day. Its participants ranged from the Catholic Church to various Pentecostal families. When it planned its first regional gathering in Asia in 2004 (Hong Kong), the general secretary contacted the seminary. I worked with the organisers closely to identify about a dozen Asian Pentecostal delegates. There were four APTS members in this historic meeting. Then the Commission on

⁵ Stanley M. Burgess, et al., eds., *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁶ Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, eds., *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia* (2005).

World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches held its thirteenth mission conference in 2005 in Athens, and its conference theme was “Come, Holy Spirit and Heal and Reconcile.” For Asian Pentecostal delegates, the organizers approached APTS and the Asian Pentecostal Society. Four faculty members of the seminary attended the conference, and I presented a keynote address.⁷ In the same year, the Church of Scotland first organized the preparation conference for the centenary celebration of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. To represent the world Pentecostal churches in this twelve-member global gathering, Asian Pentecostal representatives were sought from APTS. In the centenary conference in Edinburgh in 2010, at least four APTS graduates joined the 250 delegates to this historic conference. Asian Pentecostal studies at APTS won international and ecumenical recognition.

Conclusion

I am currently leading a global postgraduate institution in the United Kingdom. As a member of the APTS family, both as an alumnus and former staff, I am genuinely grateful for my own journey of theological formation. Of course, everyone has a different path to tread, even if it is through the same institution. As much as an institution shapes one’s theological character, a participant can also contribute to the shaping of the institution’s theological identity. I offer my own story as an example, as my own expression of appreciation to the institution and its community. However, I earnestly pray that my story will remain as a dim star in the bright ray of suns and moons.

⁷ “‘When the Poor Are Fired Up’: The Role of Pneumatology in Pentecostal-Charismatic Mission,” in Jacques Matthey, ed., *Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, Greece, May 2005* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2008), pp. 159-167.