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FRIENDS IN INDIA AND ASIA

RON STANSELL

Economists and geo-political strategists have called the 21st Century the “century of Asia.” The burgeoning economic muscle of China and India is the core reason for this largely secular statement, but when combined with the cultural and religious changes taking place in the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist world, the “century of Asia” becomes a phrase important to Christian believers also. How does the small group called Friends relate to Asia and what future do Friends have in a continent where 60% of the world population is crowded onto 20% of the world’s land mass (excluding Antarctica and Australia), where the largest blocks of non-Christians exist, and where Christians have the least influence of any continent?

In a sense, my words will be inadequate since I am not Asian, nor is Asia an area of great expertise for me. I write, however, to represent an appreciation for Asia based on experiences I have had among Asian Friends. While I wholly acknowledge my evangelical and western perspective, I have a conviction that one can be evangelical and still have a genuinely non-western perspective. While my western perspective is clearly not universal, a transcultural evangelical Christian faith based on biblical revelation is emerging in Asia with which I feel comfortable and of which I am highly supportive. It is that perspective I attempt to describe and articulate. Worship styles, leadership styles, and theological emphases are not like the West, but I sense a significant commonality of concerns and spirit that reflect the true meaning of the Body of Christ. Evangelical Friends, who form the vast majority of Asian Friends, find themselves a part of this Christian mosaic and are placed in such a way as to make significant contributions in the decades to come.

I also acknowledge my indebtedness to Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: University Press, 2002) who in turn has drawn upon the British researcher Andrew Wall and the African scholar Lamin Sanneh. These three academics have greatly heightened awareness in the West and North that the Global South constitutes the majority of Christians and largely holds the future of world Christianity in its hands. Jenkins reminds western Christians that Christianity not only began in Asia but that a majority of followers

were Asians and Africans for its first 1000 years of history. For Christianity to be labeled a non-Western religion—an Asian religion—is proper. Granted, Christianity of the Global South is predominantly evangelical, Pentecostal, supernatural and biblical in belief, placing it somewhat at odds with European and North American Christianity where Christianity may be suffering malaise and indifference. Malaise and indifference cannot be said of Asian Christianity.

The Global South will make its influence felt in the next century. Andrew Walls calls western Christians to admire, support and patiently encourage Christians of the Global South as they take further steps in the contextualization of Christianity in their own milieu. The same must be said of non-western Friends in Asia.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FRIENDS IN ASIA

Evangelical Friends pursued traditional missions in China and India beginning in 1885, first in Luho, China, not far from modern Nanjing and later in Bundelkhand, India in 1892, both from Evangelical Friends Church—Eastern Region. The first appeal from China was for medical workers. The Bundelkhand story is rich in accounts of compassion for the starving, orphaned and widowed. British Friends ministered in another area of north India and for a time in China. A Friends presence has been maintained in the Middle East through the Friends Schools of Ramallah, Palestine (FUM) since 1869. Small enclaves of unprogrammed Friends exist in Japan, Korea and elsewhere, especially among academics and scattered expatriates in southeast Asia. The majority, however, are evangelical and programmed Friends.

One career evangelical Friends worker in India received high accolades from the regional rajah and the British colonial government. The works in India, however, remained miniscule in numbers of Friends adherents for decades, heavily dependent upon foreign funds and leadership. Valiant efforts were later made in Bundelkhand to develop local initiative and leadership. Without such efforts, the work would have suffocated entirely under the oppressive persecution of high caste Hinduism. The strategy of American Friends working in Bundelkhand gradually became an “All-India” approach in which Friends supplied strategic leadership to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, to Union Biblical Seminary, to All-India Christian education, and to Youth For Christ evangelism. Unusually gifted Friends like Everett Cattell, Anna Nixon, Robert Hess, and David Robinson

worked inter-denominationally and proved Friends could influence the larger Christian world, something that might easily be a part of the future of Friends in Asia.

Meanwhile, in China Friends labored in medicine, education and church planting. Healthy growth resulted in a restricted area around Nanjing, all of which was suppressed by the rise of Chinese Communism and the expulsion of all foreign personnel. A significant number of Friends Christians and their descendants persisted, however, and later identified with state-registered and unregistered congregations in the area. While a distinct Friends identity has been lost on the mainland, a strong yearly meeting arose on Taiwan. Asian and non-Asian visitors make occasional contacts on the mainland and reinforce a Friends Christ-centered message. The future of Friends in mainland China will most likely be in relationship with established and emerging movements that have no Western denominational identity. However, as with Friends in India, Friends with ties in China may be well placed to be trusted as people of integrity and people concerned for harmonious peaceful relationships with fellow believers in Christ. One American yearly meeting, for example, has successfully place a good number of English teachers in central China over the last 15 years who have given quiet witness and participated in local Christian fellowships as they have completed their professional function as university and high school instructors. Other Friends professionals, both North American and Asian, work independently around China, some with a long-range presence. A number of conversions to Christ have been recorded and tracked. As far as mainland China is concerned, this is likely the paradigm Friends will follow in the future. These Friends will expend themselves as leaven for the larger Body of Christ in China.

FRIENDS IN ASIA TODAY

With that background, let us take a look at Asian Friends today. Granted, there are small groups of unprogrammed and non-evangelical Friends in Korea, Japan, central India and scattered elsewhere within educated and humanitarian enclaves, but their numbers are few. Likewise their impact will not likely be significant among the great masses of the continent, although some social and political activists surprise us by their range of influence. The more substantial Friends groups are evangelical and programmed. Friends

in Taiwan, Philippines and Indonesia function as recognized yearly meetings with numbers ranging in the low thousands in each of those nations. Two yearly meeting structures in Nepal are less formally organized, also number in the low thousands, and represent rapid growth in the Hindu world generally considered resistant to Christian faith. Newer ministries in Kolkata (Bengal), Dharwad (Karnataka state) and Kerala state all in India show growth in the hundreds. The much older work of Bundelkhand Yearly Meeting is located near Chhatarpur, India and numbers in the hundreds. Other new Friends works are found in Sikkim state in the far northeast of India and in the neighboring countries of Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. New church planting movements are underway in Bhutan, Bangladesh and the West Bengal state of India. Altogether these represent significant beginnings in Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist-majority populations.

Without doing a detailed history, let it be stated there are four major players among evangelical Friends, all inter-related and collaborative in this new wave of ministry by Friends in Asia. First, Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region (EFC-ER) has maintained contacts in Asia for over a century. A number of the new works have been spin offs from early ministry in China and India and Eastern Region networks. The second player is Taiwan Yearly Meeting, founded by EFC-ER, has its own extensive but low profile outreach program in several different nations including Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar and elsewhere. Some are producing Friends church plants.

The third major player has been Evangelical Friends Mission (EFM), founded in the 1970s as a collaboration among four (now six) American yearly meetings. EFM has encouraged many of the newest works, some from ties with Eastern Region. The fourth major player is Evangelical Friends Church Southwest (EFCSW). They helped form a yearly meeting in Indonesia in the late 1980s. New ministry was begun by Southwest in Cambodia in the 1990s and now has a strategy that encompasses neighboring countries. While administratively independent, all four groups collaborate and consider their work as a regional movement. Almost all Asian Friends affiliated with them are members of Evangelical Friends Church International—Asia. They probably number around 20,000 people.

The more significant issue for the future of these four evangelical Friends players (Eastern Region, Taiwan Yearly Meeting, Southwest, and EFM) is that in several cases significant initiative for expansion is taking place locally, spontaneously and outside the direction of

American Friends. New works being opened by Evangelical Friends Mission now start with serious consultation and collaboration with established Asian Friends leaders. The future of Friends in Asia lies strongly with what happens in these non-Western movements, some spontaneous, some planned. Such new movements have the potential of embedding the Friends movement far more deeply into the heart and culture of Asia than ever before.

There is great hope. For example, there have been pan-Asia financial offerings for Myanmar; Taiwanese Friends businessmen and women travel in ministry to many locations in fresh evangelism, leadership training, and funding of projects. One Friends Hindu-background people group has pushed across international borders to plant new Friends churches in two nearby nations. This new kind of internationalism and networking is frequent and goes mostly undocumented. I believe this will become a great fifth “partner,” assuming a similar role to that of Taiwan Friends that could easily eclipse the efforts of American Friends in Asia.

In 1989, Evangelical Friends International (now identified as Evangelical Friends Church International) was incorporated in the United States with international participation. In the following six years, regional fellowships were established in Africa (1993), Asia (1993), Latin America (1994), and later in Europe (2007). EFCI—Asia meets every three years for fellowship, mutual accountability and planning for evangelism, leadership training, church renewal, and missions. Asian meetings have been held in Taipei, Taiwan; Jakarta, Indonesia; Manila, Philippines; Kathmandu, Nepal; Rajpur, India; and Battambang, Cambodia. In turn, they produced a sub-group of an All-India fellowship that meets annually. Leadership is exclusively Asian, although a few non-Asians attend the gatherings. I believe EFCI-Asia will be a part of the future of Friends in Asia to teach and encourage, to share experiences in contextualization and to nurture a Friends identity, fanning the flame of zeal for cross-cultural ministry.

THE FUTURE FACE OF FRIENDS IN ASIA

There are a number of features to this Asian face. I will highlight three that I feel will be important in coming decades: 1) their capacity to cross cultures and to break out of geo-political and ethnic boxes to obey Christ’s commission to proclaim peace with God and fellow humans;

2) their engagement with spiritual needs in culturally appropriate ways; and 3) their concerns to live out the love of Jesus Christ among the poor, oppressed and marginalized through ministries of compassion.

Cross-cultural obedience. One of the striking features of Friends of Asia in the last decade has been grass-roots evangelism from one cultural group to another. At the beginning of the 1990s, Evangelical Friends Mission made a commitment to reach several unreached people groups. Instead of three or four, the number has reached well over a dozen through unplanned and spontaneous growth. I can count four of these that actually crossed international frontiers. In countries like India and Nepal, the number of languages and ethnic identities is quite staggering. In a recent international conference, I counted something like 20 Asian languages and ethnic identities present in a gathering of Evangelical Friends Church International-Asia. Friends of Asia are well positioned to continue expansion in obedience to Christ's great commission to reach all people of the world.

Engagement with spiritual needs in cultural context. For example, caste and gender discrimination, sex trafficking, and goddess worship plague India and Nepal. Financially draining idolatry disappears. Friends in Bundelkhand and elsewhere found themselves dining across caste lines as a testimony of reconciliation among new believers. Elsewhere, bride price customs are altered and new parents make a point of cherishing female babies equally with male babies. Christ-centered Friends ministry in Nepal teaches Jesus overcomes fear of spirits that lead to goddess worship. New Christians find freedom from demonic possession and torment. Jesus is the only hope, a precious commodity in the spiritual and social development of any people. Another ministry in north India has created Christian community in the foothills of the Himalayas by periodic communal living by discipleship leaders. Biblical truths are studied intensively and practical strategies are hammered out to deal with polygamy, idolatry and persecution from Hindu fundamentalists. Community life in itself brings healing.

In another country where Buddhism is the dominant faith, leaders trek and ride long miles to plant small house churches that exist mostly below the radar of national politicians. These small groups display a worship strongly colored by local culture, use their national language(s), and display joy through culturally appropriate music and preaching. People are attracted by such worship and enthusiasm and often give testimony of being freed from demonic oppression or

possession. Prayer for the sick is frequent and healings are regularly reported. Forgiveness of sin and an evangelical heart-changing experience of God's love are considered basic as family groups become Friends. The ministry in this same Buddhist country provides micro-business loans: goats and pigs become flocks and herds, and training conferences provide instruction. These Asian Friends leaders perceive conversion evangelism and church planting is the cornerstone of ministry integrated with social concerns.

Another Asian Friends group does poultry- and goat-raising projects and a sewing-machine project, all related to local churches. In this Asian country, where persecution is considerably less, pastoral training is far more public and actually has recruited several leaders for evangelical Friends service in other nations. Still another EFM ministry that works anonymously in Islamic areas of Asia has collaborated with other evangelicals in programs of evangelism and the development of evangelistic tools. It has led to the establishment of small, immigrant Asian Friends meetings in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. In turn these Muslim Background believers are reaching out to friends and family in Asia and elsewhere. This indirect and expatriate network will undoubtedly be a part of the future of Friends in Asia. Other Friends workers live in the Middle East and have labored in media development, Internet broadcasting to the Arab world, and education. Friends are readily accepted into these settings when they go ready to cooperate with other evangelicals and emphasize Christian commonalities. Also, media workers and educators from the West have found open doors to develop teaching materials on peace and reconciliation from a biblical and Friends perspective. Friends in Asia are being called to live faithfully to historic concerns and are finding appropriate and new ways to communicate those concerns.

Compassion ministries. Friends in one Muslim-majority nation of Asia have found ways to appeal to the very poor, persisting despite persecution. New believers have faced land confiscation due to oppressive indebtedness. Others have been refused rights to the water of the village well because of their confession of Christ. Workers in this same nation reported adult literacy programs, help for widows, flood relief, tuition fees paid for poor students, technical education, small business help and medical aid, all on a small scale but representing a heart of obedience. While some measure of foreign funds are directed

toward these compassion ministries, the heart and spirit come from within, as well as a significant portion of the funds themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Asian Friends will be busy in coming decades with biblical and theological reflections on reconciliation with God, holiness, the nature of the church, egalitarian leadership and the meaning and practice of worship, to name a few concerns directly related to conversion evangelism and church planting. Asian Friends are tiny minorities in great seas of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or, in the case of the Philippines, Roman Catholicism. The cultural challenges of the world religions are many and require inspired wisdom to broadcast joyfully the biblical message as Christ intended, and not simply as represented by western theologians. Furthermore, persecution will not end quickly. A theology of suffering will become more, not less, prominent. Full-blown educational programs have been slow and tend to be small and informal aimed at the grass roots. I hope to see a continued emphasis on inter-denominational collaboration and service alongside other believers. Yet the planting of new Friends meetings for worship will continue, touching common people and forming followers in the image of Christ.

Indian theologian Saphyr Athyal believes Asian Christians are rediscovering the Bible as an authentic Asian document. He says they understand sociopolitical concerns are integral to Christian living. He writes, “the root causes of poverty and suffering are demonic socio-political structures. The causes are essentially spiritual causes.”¹ Likewise, Indian Christian apologist Vishal Mangalwadi, whose ancestors were Friends Christians in Bundelkhand and whose daughter became an evangelical Friends worker, has spoken strongly to the need for Christian sociopolitical involvement and witness. (See *Truth and Transformation*, 2009; or *The Legacy of William Carey: Model for the Transformation of a Culture*, 1999 by Vishal Mangalwadi.) These concerns will likely be strong among Asian Friends as well.

ENDNOTE

1. Saphir Athyal, *Church in Asia Today: Challenges and Opportunities* (Singapore: The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, 1996), p. 14.