

Foreword

In this book Paul S. Chung undertakes constructive theology of comparative religions in terms of a social scientific study of religion, which is concerned with the axial enquiry into world religion. He provides a foundation for a methodology of comparative religion and social scientific enquiry in challenging capitalist civilization. In examining Christian interaction with other religions, a theology of comparative religion is constructed in a creative and fresh manner. This interdisciplinary approach shows the extent to which religious ideas or discourse would be explicated in constructing social reality for a life-creating culture. Religion may become a source of solidarity and emancipation to cut through the limitations and crisis of today's civilization beset by the pathology of late capitalism.

Humanity threatens itself with self-immolation. The climate catastrophe is the tip of the iceberg of the consequences of a civilization model which turns out to be suicidal. At the core of this civilization is an economic system which is systemically driven to compulsory growth. Why? Because it is the definition of capital that it must grow – as opposed to money which can also be used as a pure instrument for exchange, credit etc. Capital, by contrast, is bound to create a profit beyond the costs of the investment. Otherwise the owner would be thrown out of the competitive market. As capital must grow, so too does consumption of the goods produced by capital. That means in an industrial economy more natural resources must be extracted and pollution must grow, including carbon dioxide. As long as the capitalist-economic and mental civilization continues to produce unlimited growth on a limited planet, species will die, the heating up of the climate will reach levels destroying the conditions for life for humanity – not to mention the insane arms race including nuclear ‘modernization’, stimulated by capital for profit's sake.

How can humanity perhaps overcome capitalism and the imperial lifestyle and the thinking patterns that go along with it? The majority of the world's population adheres to one religion or another. Religion has power over people, particularly by speaking to the most intimate part of their inner convictions and basic orientations. So, for the deep conversion of people, which is urgently necessary as climate change is already reaching its tipping point, religion could be a crucial factor for helping people to change their thinking, in order to create countervailing power to also change the economic and political institutions and policies towards a socially and ecologically sustainable economic system and way of life.

The good news is that recent research has shown that the major world religions and philosophies – Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Chinese classical philosophies (Taoism and Confucianism), Greek philosophies and tragedies, Christianity and Islam – took shape after the eighth century BCE, driven by the dynamics of accumulating money and property. With the introduction of money into daily life at that time the community-based economies gradually were replaced by markets. The insecurity of the market led to the conclusion that only as much money as possible could guarantee the necessities of life – the objective cause for stimulating greed. It was not yet capitalism, but the highest form of this logic was collecting treasure and amassing land. This split the societies into rich landowners and peasants losing their land and becoming debt slaves.

The religions during this period, called the Axial Age, reacted in critical ways: Judaism with critical prophets speaking of the need for justice, and laws against charging interest, for debt relief etc.; the Buddha taught people to overcome the poisons of greed, aggressiveness and illusion; Greek philosophers called on the polis to prohibit the charging of interest and the creation of monopolies, developing an ethic of justice and common good; Jesus, at the first climax of the money-driven economy in the Roman Empire, called people to the basic choice between the God of justice and the idol Mammon; Muhammad started Islam as a social movement against the rich traders in Mecca. So, the original sources of these world religions contain critical and constructive power against the origins of the economic and political system which now, at its climax, is driving humanity into suicide.

This heritage is actually realized in all faith communities today. Against the majority of believers, assimilating to the dominant imperialist capitalism, minorities are at work to challenge their faith communities to wake up and follow their original faith documents for the sake of the survival of humanity. In the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam – these minorities are called liberation theologians; in Buddhism they are the International Network of Socially Engaged Buddhists.

Paul Chung's book is a great support for these liberation movements in the different religious communities. Building on the advanced studies of the Axial Age religions, he develops clearly differentiated arguments for academic theology to join the emancipatory forces of the various religions. As the danger for humanity is global, only all religions working together have a chance to influence politics to shift the rules for the economy. His approach of critical constructive theology in the context of comparative religions offers not only a methodology but also concrete examples of mutually enriching inter-religious understanding as a basis for the necessary cooperation. He shows convincingly that it is not abstract inter-religious dialogue we need, but a self-critical interaction that redresses oppressive systems of class, caste, gender, etc. – very congenial with the basic approach of the Axial Age religions.

May many students of theology use the tools presented in this book to join the forces in society working for preserving the conditions of life for future generations on this beautiful God-given planet.

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