

Book Review

Norman Tanner, *Is the Church too Asian? Reflections on the Ecumenical Councils*, Chavara Institute of Indian and Interreligious Studies, Rome and Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2002, pp. 1-91.

Norman Tanner, who teaches in Oxford and London Universities is one of the authorities on the Ecumenical Councils in the English speaking world. His magisterial two volumes, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, and the handy *The Councils of the Church: A Short History* have contributed a great deal to make the Councils of the Church which seem such a distant reality for most people including teachers and students of theology, familiar to us. He has lectured world wide on the topic. Therefore, when he speaks about the Councils one listens to him with interest.

This small book of about 90 pages with the provocative title *Is the Church too Asian* is the Placid Lectures the author gave at the Chavara Institute of Indian and Interreligious Studies in Rome. As the author says in the introduction, his intention has been to honour Placid Podipara who was well known for his promotion of dialogue and understanding between East and West and for his initiatives in recovering the genuinely Indian features of Christianity. The author tries to do this by trying to recall the contributions of Asia and in a special way, India, to Christianity through the Ecumenical Councils. In order to do this, he makes a quick survey of all the Councils of the Church under the familiar headings: the Early Church, Middle Ages and Trent, and the Vatican Councils.

As can be expected, the author stresses the Councils of the first millennium and their eastern character in a special way. The places where these Councils were held, the participants at these Councils, the language used, the philosophy behind the credal statements, and the mentality behind the decrees of these Councils, etc. point, according to him, to their eastern character. The Councils of the Middle Ages which were Councils of the Western Church were held to deal mainly with disciplinary matters which were of interest to the Western Church of the

time. They hardly tried to go beyond any of the formulations of the early Councils. Whether this was because of an inferiority complex that the West felt both physically and culturally, as the author suggests, is to be debated. In any case, one can hardly speak of a direct contribution of the East in these Councils. When we come to the Vatican Councils we have better evidence of a more substantial contribution of Asia, but by then the East-West dichotomy had grown substantially and hence these contributions have been rather marginally considered in comparison to that of the West. Sure, there were some prelates who were quite independent and outspoken like Patriarch Maximos IV at Vatican II whom the author mentions frequently but these were few. However, some decrees of Vatican II do bear the stamp of the interventions by Asian bishops as has been pointed out in the book, but one can hardly speak of a real Asian influence.

One problem with the thesis of the book is the apparent confusion about East and West. The cultural and geographical divide between East and West today is quite sharp and hardly anyone would speak of Greek philosophy as Eastern. The merit of the book is precisely in challenging this view through a historical hermeneutics. It is surely a small but a firm step in correcting the incurable Eurocentrism of many Church historians who have basically denied any Asian influence on Christianity at all. Here is at least one who speaks of a need for liberation from “western colonial theology and spirituality.” The question posed at the beginning of the book is answered in the negative but the book has been a help in recovering the Asian roots of Christianity. The book is also a short and easy reading through the Councils, perhaps the shortest history of the Councils so far.

Isaac Padinjarekuttu

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