

TOWARDS ENLARGED CROSS-TEXTUAL READING IN MULTI-FAITH CONTEXT ¹

Daniel K. Listijabudi, Ph.D

Abstract

This article wants to re-examine of Archie Lee's framework of cross-textual reading and offers a new pattern of doing what so-called communitarian cross-textual reading, afterward. Our critical assessment of the chosen method will address two items. The first is a reflection on the validity of the use of this method, including whether this hermeneutical method is proper, workable, and legitimate concerning the possibilities offered by the Asian context with its multiple religious sacred texts. The second is a reflection on the challenges that appear within this kind of biblical reading approach, challenges this method should face constructively, in the Asian context. In the end, this article will also try to offer an innovative reading model.

Keywords: cross-textual reading, hybridity, multi scriptural, interrelate, enrichments, communitarian

Asian Biblical Hermeneutics, A Concern and Reading Method.

Asian Biblical Hermeneutics is an effort to interpret the Bible in the dialogic and dynamic interaction between text and context and vice versa within the mixed socio-political, cultural, and religious realities of Asia. The phrase 'vice versa' is very important here. Doing Asian Biblical Hermeneutics is not just applying the word of the Bible that is treated as a timeless, universal, unchanging record of God to the context of readers,² but requires creative interaction between the text and context. D. Preman Niles suggests that "the most acute criticism of the commonly practiced mode of the interpretation of text and context in Asian Biblical Hermeneutics is whether 'theology is always a matter of relating text to context? Or is it not also a matter of relating context to text so that the context may speak to the text? Is Asia there to receive? Has it nothing to contribute?'"³

Regarding the context, we could agree with Aloysius Pieris' proposal that Asians (Indonesian included) have two major characteristics: overwhelming poverty and multifaceted religiosity. To be more detailed, Lee divides these characteristics into a kind of sub-correlated issue. He observes that regarding the Asian context "there are two major things: the socio-political reality of suffering and the religio-cultural characteristic of the plurality of religions and cultures."⁴ He then draws attention to some of the following details: "Though suffering is universal and not exclusively the plight of Asian people alone, the reality of suffering in Asia in terms of its extensiveness, its magnitude and its far-reaching consequences on the bodies

¹ This article is an adaptation to the last chapter of my dissertation in Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2016, entitled as *The Mystical Quest as a Path to Peacebuilding: A Cross-textual Reading of the Stories of "Dewa Ruci" and "Jacob at the Jabbok" as a Contribution to Asian Multi-faith Hermeneutics*.

² Archie Lee, "Biblical Interpretation in Asian Perspectives," *Asian Journal of Theology*, 7:1/ (1993), 35.

³ Daniel Preman Niles, "The World of God and the People of Asia." In *Understanding the Word, Essays in Honour of Bernhard W. Anderson*. In: James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger (eds.), (Sheffield: JSOT), (1985), 283.

⁴ Archie Lee, "Cross-textual hermeneutics and identity in multi-scriptural Asia," In *Christian Theology in Asia*, Sebastian C.H. Kim (ed), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 183.

and minds of people should not be overlooked or brushed aside lightly. Besides natural mishaps and hardships, there are economic exploitation, military violence, and political oppression, coupled with the national machinery and the transnational corporations that deliberately violate human rights and transgress human dignity”⁵

The social realities mentioned by Lee are prominent in Asian contexts that also need to be addressed by biblical studies and theology, as it is necessary to make a contextual effort on a more relevant basis. Asian Biblical Hermeneutics should address either (1) the issue of socio-politics, or (2) the plurality of culture and religions within Asia’s tensions and struggles. The context of the plurality of religions and hybridity in the socio-cultural life of Asians convinces me that the significance of doing an Asian Biblical Hermeneutics is at stake. Therefore, in this section I want to discuss what Asian Biblical Hermeneutics is; what kind of reasons underlie this concern; and how the Asian theologians try to elaborate their works to strengthen the significance of doing an Asian contextual interpretation, taking into account both Asia’s socio-politic context as well as the various religions and their religious text in a situation of hybridity.

There are some important publications written by Asian theologians/ hermeneuticians on these Asian contextual hermeneutics which brings into interaction the Bible and Asian cultural-religious traditions. According to Kwok’s analyses⁶, there are currently three approaches being used by Asian scholars. The first approach is comparing similar motifs through cross-textual studies to draw out hermeneutical implications which can be found in the work of Archie Lee, who has written several essays comparing the creation myths in Genesis with the creation stories in China and also, although in my opinion still a half to go, in the work of George Soares-Prabhu who compares Jesus’ Great Commission (Matt. 28: 16-20) and a mission command which is given by the Buddha to his followers in the text *Mahavagga*). The second approach is what we may call ‘seeing through’, in which scholars “look at the Bible through the perspective of other religious traditions” (Kwok 1995: 62). This approach, which wants to look at the Bible through the perspective of people of other faiths, one can see and hope how to find new ideas and discoveries in our biblical interpretation. Meanwhile, the third approach is to “discern biblical and theological insights in people’s stories, myths, and legends, as we can see in, is that of the work of Choan Seng Song, Yuko Yuasa, and Levi V. Oracion, who elaborate the Asian myths, stories, fables and legends to do theology and to interpret biblical stories.

What is Archie Lee’s Cross-textual Reading?

Cross-textual reading is a contextual reading method coined by Archie Lee, a Professor of Biblical Studies and Asian Hermeneutics, Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, that tries to understand the biblical text in connection with the cultural-religious text of Asians and seeks to achieve inter-penetration and integration of the two texts.⁷ The word “cross” has meanings such as “interaction”, “meeting” in mind, along the lines of crossing a river from one shore to the other.”⁸ Lee prefers to call it ‘cross-textual’ rather than ‘inter-textual’ interpretation. One reason is that “in the Jewish rabbinical

⁵ Lee” Cross-textual”, 183.

⁶ Kwok Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 62-63

⁷ Lee, “Cross-textual”, 35-39.

⁸ Archie Lee, “Cross-Textual Interpretation and Its Implications for Biblical Studies,” In *Teaching the Bible, The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 251.

tradition of hermeneutics, ‘inter-textual’ refers to the relationship between texts within the Bible.”⁹ This method of cross-textual reading is situated in the realm of multi-faith hermeneutics, which elaborates on the comparison, encounter, interrelation, and making symbiosis between the two different texts: one from the Bible and one from the Asian religious text.

In this method, differences and commonalities of text A and B are discerned and interconnected. Besides putting two texts side by side, this method also enlightens one text by using the point of view of the other. Through this mutual “encounter-interaction”, new meanings can be discovered. Furthermore, Lee continues that “cross-textual interpretation does not stop with one crossing, for it envisions the possibility of many crossings, nor does it start from only one text and end up with another. The aim of such multiple crossings is not comparative studies as such but rather transformation and enrichment: the transformation of one’s whole life, a process of self-discovery. The result, in the end, is an “enriched-transformed existence.”¹⁰

Referring to the basic idea behind the method, Lee reminds us that to personally integrate the encounter with and challenge of the otherness represented by Christianity, “Asian biblical scholars must take equally serious both our Asian cultural and religious heritage (Text A) and the Bible (Text B), instead of subjugating one “text” to the other or making one of these “texts” the absolute norm (scheme A). Both text A and text B must be held in reactive dialogue and interaction. One text has to be open to the claims and challenges of the other text for transformation to take place in a meaningful way.”¹¹

It should become obvious that this method is not just a comparison, but rather one which brings two texts into an encounter as well as interrelation dialogically and dialectically. Some differences and commonalities will be addressed and then an attempt at interpenetrating and integrating the texts within the nuances of ideas available and supported by the two texts will be taken into consideration, since “the differences can be used to amplify certain dimensions of the biblical text or to bring to the surface divergences in the religious worldviews shaping the text.”¹² The enrichments undergone by each text are apparent and prove themselves since, quoting Zhang Longxi, Lee mentions that the task of cross-textual hermeneutics is “to transcend the limitation of a narrowly defined perspective and to expand our horizon by assimilating as much as possible what appears to be alien and belonging to the Other.”¹³

Intertwined with that task, here we should point out the very aim of the cross-textual reading which is to facilitate “the Christian community to open itself up to multi-textuality and the plurality of faiths.”¹⁴ In this task, Lee continues, “the Bible has to constantly engage and negotiate with other scriptures to shape a Christian identity in a multi-scriptural context, which is, as it should be, ambiguously hybrid in a post-modern and post-colonial global setting; but still, it is empowering and life-sustaining.”¹⁵

Reasons for the Adequacy of this Method

⁹ Archie Lee, “Cross-Textual Interpretation and Its Implication for Biblical Studies,” In *Teologi Operatif: Berteologi dalam Konteks Kehidupan yang Pluralistik di Indonesia*, Asnath Natar (ed), (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia dan PTCA, 2003), 10.

¹⁰ Lee, “Cross-Textual,” 251.

¹¹ Lee, “Cross-Textual,” 249.

¹² Kwok, *Discovering*, , 65.

¹³ Lee, “Cross-Textual,” 250.

¹⁴ Lee, “Cross-textual hermeneutics”, 200.

¹⁵ Lee, “Cross-textual hermeneutics,” 200.

The reason for using this method is based on the cognizance that if we want to do a contextual biblical interpretation we should be aware that “what we see depends on where we stand. One social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts.”¹⁶ Asia, with its multiracial and multicultural resources, is a unique part of the world and can offer many possibilities for adequate contextual hermeneutics in a multi-scriptural society.¹⁷ By pointing out this invitation, we should also be aware that, more than just dealing with the matter of methodology, there is something more basic. One strong reason for this method’s adequacy is the fact of Asian socio-cultural-religious hybridity.¹⁸ Quoting Wai-Ching Wong (2006), Lee deliberately underlines that “hybridity is the key to the Asian theological agenda of the twenty-first century and the construction of the identity of the Christian community in Asian. It helps theology and biblical interpretation to go beyond the binary opposite of east and west, which sees Asian identity in the category of difference constructed and designated by the west.”¹⁹

As Lee constantly utters, Asian Christians “live in two worlds: the world of the Bible and Christian faith, and the world of Asian scriptures, cultures, and religions. Both identities and both worlds should be upheld in a creative, dynamic, interrelated, interactive, and integrated way, so that integrity is safeguarded.”²⁰ In this hybrid socio-cultural-religious context Lee affirms that the aim of cross-textual interpretation “is not simply to engage in the luxury of doing comparative studies, but rather to bring about an integrated self. Unless genuine crossings take place between these two texts within the self of Asian Christians, the self will remain disintegrated – a self torn between two worlds.”²¹

Another reason is that the issue on how to interact with the otherness (within the cultural-religious traditions) should always be freshly maintained and developed time and again. The difference is something ontological, determined by culture and belief. This is and should be a blessing rather than a curse. It is precisely within this spirit that this research contains its deepest concern since together with Lee I believe that “the plurality of scriptures in Asia has immense implications for biblical hermeneutics and biblical pedagogy.”²²

The Validity of the Use of Cross-textual Reading.

I found Lee’s framework of cross-textual reading (he used the term: cross-textual interpretation/hermeneutics²³) is important and interesting since he offered a theory and also a model for or a way of interpreting texts interactively. Nonetheless, regarding the practical

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethic of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107 (1988), 3-17.

¹⁷ Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions, Toward a Revised Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 58-59.

¹⁸ Lee, “Cross-Textual,” 5.

¹⁹ Lee, “Cross-textual hermeneutics,” 197).

²⁰ Archie Lee, “Cross-textual hermeneutics in Asia,” In *Asian Theology on the Way*, Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar (ed), (London: SPCK International Study Guide 50, 2012), 34.

²¹ Lee, “Cross-Textual Interpretation,” 249.

²² Lee, “Cross-Textual Interpretation,” 251.

²³ In the titles of his articles from 1993, 1998, 2008 until 2012 Lee used the term “cross-textual interpretation,” followed by “cross-textual hermeneutics.” Meanwhile in this article I choose the term: (cross-textual) reading, since I think it is necessary for us to distinguish between the terms ‘reading’ and ‘hermeneutics.’ The two words have different meaning. The term reading is meant for the practical method of analyzing the text, meanwhile hermeneutics is a term used in a broader sense: i.e. the theoretical framework and analysis of that reading. Regarding the difference, I would like to use the term ‘cross-textual reading’ when I intend to refer to the practice itself of analyzing or interpreting a text.

details concerning the use of his method, I found that when we want to take the perspective of the reading given by the cross-textual approach, several other biblical reading strategies are still needed, depending on the genre of both the Asian and biblical texts. The detailed elaboration contributed by this reading method may seem not too clear in Lee's theoretical framework. This may have been caused by the emphasis he placed on the general hermeneutical framework which is offering the "con/text" approach as a third option to the previous options of "text-alone" and "text-context approach."²⁴ In his framework, Lee has offered a significant paradigm. However, what we may find, again, is that his hermeneutical framework seems to require complementary technical tools. Several enlarged reading strategic considerations are demanded when we start practicing our cross-textual reading of the two selected texts.

Evaluation of the Method

It is important to mention that this kind of academic work, which seeks to find hermeneutical responses to the situation of hybrid Asians–Christians believers as well as cross-textual hermeneutical tools which interrelate both sacred texts within that intended context, does not want to hold as a point of departure that the texts have a different status. The texts are considered equal in the sense that both are considered part of a religious legacy. Therefore cross-textual hermeneutics does not present any danger to the corpus of Christian theology. The process of taking such religious evocative elements as symbols, stories, and metaphors²⁵ and bringing them into an honest and mutual dialogue does not merely lead us to be able to compare, evaluate, understand and appreciate others but can also enrich our Christian transformative values in the human community.

Through this challenging path, all discernment concerning the Bible as the Christian community's sacred book would gain its significance as the abundant source for actualizing the contextual Christ-events as rooted in the metaphorical meanings of the Word of God,²⁶ *hic et nunc*, here and now. Also, according to Heup Young Kim, "understanding the Gospel (read: the Bible in general) universally (the Word) presupposes first and foremost understanding it locally (the flesh)."²⁷

Vroom adds that all Christian believers have their legitimate socio-cultural lenses to read, reread, and also to be interpreted by the Bible.²⁸ It seems that this method can function as a constructive contribution to stretch out the singular meaning of the biblical text and thus help us to discover all kinds of sacred treasures', not seen before the cross-textual reading. Any biblical contextual interpretation whether in the scholarly academic domain or the pragmatic domain of the church as a 'hermeneutical community'²⁹ should include consideration of these inter- and intra-connected realities to develop its true significance.

²⁴ Lee, "Cross-textual hermeneutics in Asia," 33, 35.

²⁵ Hendrik Vroom, *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 88.

²⁶ Merwe, W. van der, "From theological metaphors to metaphorical theology," *Paradigm and Progress in Theology. Human Sciences Research Council* (1988), 291.

²⁷ Heup Young Kim, "The Word Made Flesh: The Crucified Guru, An Indian Perspective," In *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*, Mercy Oduyoye and Hendrik M Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 146.

²⁸ Hendrik M. Vroom, "Conclusion: Contextual Theology Revisited," In *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 229.

²⁹ Peter Bouteneff & Dagmar Heller, *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 136.

Regarding Lee's theoretical framework of the cross-textual method, I would like to offer six critical remarks. First, in elaborating this very method there are assumptions that the influence of the two worlds in their intermingled hybridity is relatively equal and finely blended. There are some degrees within the layers of these intermingled worldviews. The nuances could be varied from the "relatively influenced" to "in-between identity" and then ultimately to the fine composited hybrid entity. Therefore, assuming that cross-textual reading applies to every Asian, sounds too good to be true.

Second, the selected texts cannot be just any texts chosen at random from the Bible and Asian religious traditions. There is one basic requirement. The two selected texts should contain the same motifs regardless of their differences as they are stemming from different religious traditions but is read in the same (hybrid) socio-cultural context.³⁰

Third, using this method academically also assumes that the interpreter/hermeneutician knows the two "materials" equally well. This is an ideal situation, of course. However, finding this ideal condition for interpreting the two texts is not easy.

Fourth, intending to compare and then interrelate two texts, the intention to adapt to the insights offered by other biblical interpretation methods is still valid and even beneficial. Therefore, we should not think that the ideal of cross-textual reading or interpretation is laid only on the spontaneous direct crossing of the texts. In other words, we should not bring the two texts directly into interaction at the outset. What we need to do first is delve into each text as a literary work on its own. The reason for doing so is to find first the richness of meanings in each text by itself. This is important because afterward, we can compare this first level of discovery (insights in each text) with a second level (insights that emerge after we have cross-textualized the two texts).

For instance, if each corpus of the text is a story, we could use the tools of narrative criticism to address them. My intention here is to say that using other methods as complements or in an ancillary role (not as the dominant one) of this cross-textual reading is valid since it will be hard to find just one method that will be sufficient to do the job. The basic idea of a cross-textual approach that must be developed is given in the consistency of elaborating the possible crossings between the two texts; however, one must not ultimately reject other beneficial tools that can be used properly to understand each text.

Fifth, just as Lee suggests that we should analyze the commonalities and differences between the two texts, I think we need to develop more theoretical reflection on this since it seems important for the interpreter to firstly qualify for those available commonalities and differences. Regarding the commonalities, we should analyze whether there are several resonant ideas in the pattern, motives, and basic elements of the two stories. Meanwhile, regarding the differences that come to the fore in this reading method, it is important to firstly (for the time being) categorize the differences in several groups such as (a) appreciative differences, (b) enriching differences and (c) irreconcilable differences (scheme B). It is important to mention that qualifying the commonalities and differences will help us more effectively in gaining our aim to compare and interrelate the two texts.

What we may found after addressing several commonalities and differences in both stories, is that several points of intersection between the two selected texts appear to be able to create enrichments in each text, in which text A is no longer text A, and text B is no longer text B. There are insights from each text that can be embraced as advanced reflections of the other text. These enrichments as suggested by this reading strategy enabled us to underline the 'promise' of this method.

Sixth, instead of making a careless mixture in interrelating the two texts, developing cross-textual reading requires hermeneutical skill. In this case, knowing the philosophy

³⁰ Kwok, *Discovering*, 62.

behind the reading and knowing the proper steps required is compulsory. In this matter, the method tends to be used only by the elite and not by the lay community. That is why the best way to develop this kind of reading is within the ongoing dynamic interactions of the academic and laypeople that function both as the interpreter and reader of the two texts in an open, humble, and challenging (but non-oppressive) conversation.

Several Challenges Cross-Textual Reading Offers

Regarding the process and results, some people may criticize this cross-textual reading approach by pointing out tensions within the discussion of interreligious dialogue. Among others, there are at least two main challenges that need to be addressed, namely: syncretism and domination. What follows is a discussion of these challenges.

The first matter is (still) how to deal with syncretism. We should be aware that this classic issue arises in these kinds of dialogues whenever other cultural-religious traditions' values are assumed as equal to the Christian-Biblical insights. The basic idea of this alleged tension is that syncretism, on the one hand, could result in contaminating, blurring, betraying, or even erasing Christian-Biblical uniqueness as well as the "pure interpretation of the Biblical message."³¹ On the other hand, we should also be aware that, in many cases, so-called syncretism arises and develops harmlessly and positively in our intermingled worldviews. We should also notice that, in the matter of hybridity in socio-religious realities, if we do not admit and wrestle with syncretism critically as well as openly in its many dimensions and forms, it will be much more difficult to enter and work out dialogical encounters of religious traditions properly. In this case, we could be restrained, framed, and trapped by our own pre-understanding since we tend to evaluate and judge other religious traditions as subordinate to our own religious beliefs in one way or another.

Responding to this problem, as Christian Bible scholars and readers as well as the church, we should notice that there are at least two kinds of syncretism. The first type, we might say, is careless syncretism, which mixes the insights of religions recklessly, while the other type is what I refer to as careful-constructive syncretism, which takes into consideration the proportional discernment of "means of knowledge."³²

In my opinion, dialectical encounters with the other will not reduce religions into careless syncretism since these encounters also contain critical perspectives that allow the interlocutors to discern crucial elements of the experience, its implications, consistency, and witness³³ within the relations of the religions in the same category.³⁴ According to André

³¹ Anton Wessels, "Biblical Presuppositions For and Against Syncretism," In *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), 52.

³² Vroom makes important remarks concerning the way to develop a possible dialogue with other worldviews and discuss "whether adherents of different religious traditions are able to give an account of their beliefs to one another, learn from one another and pose critical questions." He reminds us to first examine the nature and internal connections of four criteria (experience, implication, consistency, and witness) which function as means of knowledge. Vroom's further explorations show that "consistency (two assertions side by side without contradiction) and coherence (two assertions evidently connected)," are important in doing such evaluation to the others although these four criteria "cannot be made fully because the divine, transcendent reality is beyond the cognitive powers of human beings." Therefore, "a right balance between the various means of knowledge and of a fair application of the criteria" should be maintained in order for us to develop a reasonable and responsible attitude toward religions. See in Hendrik Vroom, *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 67-71.

³³ Vroom, *A Spectrum*, 66.

³⁴ Kwasi Wiredu offers a critical remark when anthropologists develop such of misleading comparisons between African traditional thought and Western scientific thought. According to him, "African traditional thought should in the first place only be compared with Western folk thought. For this purpose, of course, Western

Droogers who quotes Pannenberg, the presence of syncretism within Christianity might be evaluated in a positive light in that “it is the way in which the universal Christian message incarnates within other cultures. Christian faith may be enriched in contact with other cultures by the influence and the challenging questions which come from them.”³⁵

We come to the second challenge of cross-textual reading, which, is the alertness to prideful domination of one party at the expense of the other and which can lead to neglecting the reality of socio-cultural-religious hybridity. Wherever and whenever these hybrid realities are ignored, denied, or even rejected, Christian insights and witnesses tend to be trapped and chained in their egocentricity and chauvinism. We should be critically aware that by including the other religious traditions (within the Asian cultural hybridity) in critical and open dialogue, Asian contextual biblical interpretation could empower its transformative and emancipative values in the real life of the wider society.

The basic reason for this hermeneutic attitude is that the unique and helpful insights of Christianity will be sharpened and elaborated within the encounter with the other religious traditions which we welcome in humbleness. Through this attitude of humility (as the opposite of prideful domination) we might share references and categories of basic insights into worldviews as we have the opportunity to come to respectful conversations regarding our common humanity.³⁶ This humble and critical hermeneutic attitude should be continuously maintained and trained in academic as well as in practical biblical reading

Involving Communities

Having examined the use, validity, and contributions of the cross-textual reading method we may now focus on common readers of the Bible and in the end, propose a relatively new model for developing contextual biblical reading within ecclesial and multi-religious communities.

There are at least two kinds of transformative communitarian hermeneutics we need to develop: within the community of Christian readers, and in the interaction between the Christians and the other religious tradition adherents.

a. Within the Community of Christian Readers

The development of what might be called communitarian hermeneutics (in the Christian communities) owes much to the work of Gerald West and Musa Dube (1996) who have tried to open the way for creating this kind of reading process. For them, the parties involved in communitarian reading (in the African context) consist of both socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers.

Dube explains that by the ‘ordinary readers’ she means the “Two-Thirds World” readers who consist of “those who read from different cultural perspectives, those whose reading techniques are unrecognizable to the Western-trained reader, and those who stand outside the

anthropologists will first have to learn in detail about the folk thought of their own peoples. African folk thought may be compared with Western philosophy only in the same spirit in which Western folk thought be compared also with Western philosophy.” See in Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980), 48.

³⁵ André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” In *Dialogue and Syncretism, An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), 13.

³⁶ Vroom, *A Spectrum*, 59.

hall of mirrors for whatever reasons, but whose standards are still defined and seen through the structures that subordinate and marginalize differences.”³⁷ To examine what happens and what should happen³⁸ when two groups read the Bible together is what the project of “Reading With” (in 1996) or “Reading Other-Wise” (in 2007) is about (see scheme 1). The goal of this kind of approach which wants “to read with ordinary readers” (see scheme 1) is to investigate “the interconnections of our immediate and global power relations and how they inform or should inform our biblical practice.”³⁹

According to them, this approach may challenge “scholars to become even more socially engaged, more ethically committed by situating themselves within their immediate and global contexts.”⁴⁰ In this concern, we find the significance of the “interface” between critical and ordinary readings of the Bible.

The two groups mentioned in Dube and West’s project are socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers. Whereas the socially engaged exegete (in the Dube and West project) is mainly just one person involved in communal reading, the group is really a group. In this case, therefore, it seems that there are not exactly two groups that read. The real ‘reading with’ experience where one group reads the Bible and is linked with another inter-culturally, may be found in the project of intercultural reading of the Bible as developed by Hans de Wit *et.al* as presented in the book *Through the Eyes of Another* (published in 2004). This intercultural reading seeks to analyze what will happen “if ordinary Bible readers from radically different situations and contexts read the same Bible story and enter into a conversation with each other about this reading.”⁴¹

In his pivotal article, De Wit proposes three phases when one group of ordinary readers reads and exchanges its reading with a partner to whom the group is coupled. In the first phase, which could consist of several meetings, one group reads the selected text. A report is made in every meeting. The reports consist of both the interpretation of the text and information about the group i.e their socio-cultural contexts, personal information, and their church background.

After the reading report is interchanged with the partner group, the second phase starts. In this phase, each group reads the text once again through the eyes of the partner group. Here the group searches and discusses several items — such as the similarities, the differences, the role of the culture which is operative in the partner’s reading, the new discoveries found by the group from the partner’s reading — and reflects on the changes of perspective which happen in the group.

Afterward, the group sends a response to its partner. Then comes the third phase, which is responding to the responses of the partner group, looking back over the entire process, and deciding whether they wish to have further contact.⁴² The central goal of this

³⁷ Gerald West & Musa Dube (eds.), “*Reading With*”: *An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible*, *Semeia* 73, *Society of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1996), 12.

³⁸ After West and Dube examined both the Western biblical scholastic tradition as well as the non-Western ones, they stated that on the one hand we should acknowledge that the standart of critical biblical readings of the West seems very strong. However, on the other hand, we must also admit that “the cry against biblical textual violence, its suppression of diversity – be it gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual and cultural orientations- and its alignment with global structures of dominance must finally be addressed by those concerned with reading for differences, for liberation, and for both immediate and global social justice.” See in West & Dube, “*Reading With*,” 15.

³⁹ West & Dube, “*Reading With*,” 13.

⁴⁰ West & Dube, “*Reading With*,” 15.

⁴¹ Hans de Wit, “Through the eyes of another: Objectives and backgrounds.” In *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker (eds.) (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 41.

⁴² De Wit, “Through the eyes,” 5.

project is to create a transformative and liberating process⁴³ intended “to design a method for Bible reading that enables one to see differences: which readings are truly life-giving, and which ones lead to exclusion and sorrow.”⁴⁴

In his effort of developing a reciprocal interpretation process of biblical reading which could lead to transformative reading, John Prior has suggested several important phases.⁴⁵ Similar to De Wit’s design (see scheme 2), Prior offers three phases in his concern for developing a transformative process through cross-cultural reading between two groups (each may consist of both academics as well as ordinary participants; see my scheme 2) who read the same biblical text: (1) the naive first reading, (2) mutual listening and questioning, and (3) extending horizons.

Laying out the best conditions for the first phase of “in-group conversation” Prior emphasizes the significance of maintaining an atmosphere of trust and openness among the members as well as appreciating an authentic “naive” readings by individuals and groups to develop a readiness to permit “the other” to question each reading and freely acknowledge that “no one cultural interpretation is final” because “we can and need to learn from people embedded in other cultural contexts.”⁴⁶

In the second phase in which each group exchanges its reading with its partner, the participants are facilitated to acknowledge the impact of ethnocentrism that might blind them to their home culture and then be willing to alter the cultural lenses they usually employ to see through. Here, the participants are fostered to re-read the texts in the light of the other’s report, to take up aspects of the text they had not highlighted before, and to place themselves in the other’s position and then to re-read their own report anew.⁴⁷

The important idea for this second phase is that, on the one hand, the participants are led to experience transformative inter-cultural readings as well as to build a meaningful inter-cultural relationship.⁴⁸ Prior points out that the participants may then enter the next phase in which this inter-cultural reading can “bring to the surface in each group the core themes and values that are central to each group’s life and reading of the Bible.”⁴⁹ As a result, the participants may be facilitated to clarify their “understanding of God and the role of religion which plays in their lives.”⁵⁰

Through these phases, Prior is certain of that we will be enabled to “discover a shared identity, history and purpose within and beyond our cultural plurality,” if we maintain the “central kerygma, with its concomitant core values expressed in diverse cultural contexts” in honest and open inter-cultural conversation which wants to “listening carefully to the whole symphony of voices.”⁵¹

⁴³ This reading provides the core moment of ecumenical learning by following these steps: “People (1) get to know each other’s context, (2) similarities are discovered, (3) prejudices are adjusted, (4) from longing to unity, and (5) the situation of asymmetry is critically involved in the discussion. (6) One tries to discover a structure and origin in the differences, (7) puts them into perspective and searches for what can bind them. (8) One looks critically at one’s own context. (9) Mechanisms of exclusion from the partner group are criticized. See in De Wit, “Through the eyes,” 33.

⁴⁴ De Wit, “Through the eyes,” 49.

⁴⁵ John Mansford Prior, “The Ethics of Transformative Reading: The Text, the Other, and Oneself,” In *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading*, Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk (eds.), *Semeia Studies 81* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 75-98.

⁴⁶ Prior, “The Ethics,” 78.

⁴⁷ Prior, “The Ethics,” 83.

⁴⁸ Prior, “The Ethics,” 81.

⁴⁹ Prior, “The Ethics,” 91.

⁵⁰ Prior, “The Ethics,” 92.

⁵¹ Prior, “The Ethics,” 93.

Finally, Prior affirms that the readers of this reading will experience the transformation⁵² as they recognize “that we need each other, the academic and the ‘ordinary’ reader, when we experience how inter-cultural conversations shock and liberate, disturb and challenge, prod and sensitive, refute and confirm, question and transform, interfere and create a new. The more we enter and find ourselves at home in both cultures-our own and that of our partner- the more our understanding and commitment are open to transformation.”⁵³

Another effort of “reading with”, which has been done in the circle of WCC in 2001, is the project of reading the Bible in the interactions among different confessional, regional and cultural Christian contexts to “examine the ways in which their different hermeneutical approaches have effectively caused or perpetuated their division.”⁵⁴ This World Council of Churches project is entitled “Interpreting Together.” The book observes the relationship between biblical hermeneutics and ecumenism and argues that the church is a hermeneutical community which, according to Anton Houtepen, must relate “the ecclesiological issues of unity and reconciliation, mission and dialogue.”⁵⁵

Up to this section, we may conclude the differences among these three models of reading within the circle of Christian readers which consist of (1) “Reading With-Interface” of West and Dube, (2) “Interpreting Together” of the WCC, and (3) “Intercultural-Empirical Hermeneutics” of Hans de Wit. In the context of West’s model, the first party is scholarly readers who are trained in the academic community, and the second consists of ordinary readers who are trained to read the Bible in their first (family) or secondary (church and school) communities.⁵⁶ The audiences of readers for the WCC project are the Christians from many denominations, while Intercultural-Empirical Hermeneutics is directed at ordinary Christian readers in different cultures and contexts who read the same biblical text(s) together.

b. In the Interaction between Christians and Readers from Other Religious Traditions.

In the multi-religious context as in Asia (in my specific context: Indonesia), the audiences of what is called communitarian hermeneutics may consist of both Christians and adherents of other religious traditions with whom we share the resonant socio-cultural-religious hybridity. Both the Bible and other sacred texts might be read together, openly compared, and interrelated. In doing so, the spirit of discovery should be stronger than the spirit of competition. To make such a “fair” and fruitful interaction, the premises of this cross-textual reading (*i.e.* method, motive, and constructive hermeneutical attitude) should be respected and followed.

The common ground for this hybrid audience is that they share the same socio-politico-cultural-religious concerns, such as the problem of human rights, the question about

⁵² In addition to existing models for transformative communitarian reading (*i.e.* in the design of De Wit and Prior), we may learn from the ‘readers-listeners’ in Solentiname who are inspired by the Holy Spirit and read the Bible from the perspective of liberation (see scheme 3) in the context of the social struggle of the poor and oppressed people in Nicaragua. This kind of reading can start in the Christian community, but can also be extended to the ordinary readers of other religious traditions. However, this kind of reading should not end in the act of reading itself. It should bear fruit for the community through actions, mediations, and conversations, and more importantly in the lives of the readers. See in Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname. Vol 1-4* (New York: Orbis Books, 1976), x, 27.

⁵³ Prior, “The Ethics,” 94, 95.

⁵⁴ Bouteneff & Heller, *Interpreting*, vii.

⁵⁵ Anton Houtepen, *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 5.

⁵⁶ Gerald West, “Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading With Their Local Communities: An Introduction” In *Reading Other-Wise*, Gerald West (ed), *SBL* (Leiden: Brill), 2.

theodicy in disaster contexts, commitment to peace in the realm of conflict, etc. In this situation, it is easier for academic communities (from whatever religious background, and as the tertiary community⁵⁷ to appear as the hermeneutical pioneer due to their proficiency, experience, distance, and more critical approach to (both) texts.

Herewith we may affirm Pieris's general principle as he has, for more than two decades, developed the work of "cross-reading of scriptures" as follows: "only a scrupulous regard for the *other's understanding of his or her religious texts* as well as a strict adherence to the *distinctive paradigm* within which each religion defines its identity and creates its own idiom can guarantee the moral rectitude and the intellectual honesty required in inter-religious dialogue."⁵⁸ This "cross-reading of scriptures," can be done via (a) an inclusive approach of interpretative accommodation in the studies of scriptures;⁵⁹ (b) a liturgical appropriation of texts when people develop "a concerted search for scriptural inspiration from one another's religions" in their liturgies;⁶⁰ (c) a symbiotic⁶¹ encounter of texts, which according to Pieris is "the procedure most conducive to reciprocal spiritual nourishment among the members of multi-religious communities."⁶² In my opinion, it would be meaningful for Asians to sit together and discuss how far the insights of different religious texts could help them in discerning the commonalities, differences, and resonances of their respective sacred texts.

In doing so, it is important to remember Kwok's pivotal message that "the most difficult task for multi-faith hermeneutics is how to reinterpret the Bible after seeing it through the lens of other faith traditions. It requires intellectual humility and radical openness to divine disclosure in other faiths and cultures [...] At the same time, it must be recognized that the insights and wisdom found in the Bible are but one religious resource of humankind, and they must be shared, tested, and corrected in the wider community of the human family."⁶³ Accordingly, doing this kind of contextual Bible reading contains a kind of a difficult task, a task that consists of remaining open to the invitation to read our Scriptures in a contextual, reciprocal manner.

Contextual Challenge: Proposing a Communitarian Cross-textual Reading

As we return and deepen the discourse of Asian Contextual Hermeneutics, we may find that much value is located in the dialectical growth that occurs between the understanding of the readers and the meaning of the texts. Here it is important to recall Lee's statement: "On the one hand, the reading process is shaped and governed by readers' social location and the power dynamics within which they are situated. Readers are in fact neither passive nor

⁵⁷ West, "Reading Other-wise," 2.

⁵⁸ Aloysius Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: A Search for the Right Method." In *Scripture, Community and Mission, Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles*, Philip L. Wickeri (ed), (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2003), 234.

⁵⁹As shown in the reflection of Christian-Buddhist dialogue by Bhikku Buddadhasa Indapanño who demonstrates that Buddhists can "accommodate the basic teachings of Christianity within their own religious framework so as to legitimize such doctrines as teachings *acceptable* to Buddhists, inviting the Christians to acknowledge that there can also be a *Buddhist way of reading the Christian Scriptures* apart from the orthodox Christian exegesis." See in Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading," 241.

⁶⁰ Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading," 242.

⁶¹ What Pieris means by "symbiosis" is "a living encounter of the texts within the encounter of religions, resulting in a further articulation of implicit meanings which these texts would not reveal unless they are mutually exposed to each other's illuminating disclosures." See in Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading," 244.

⁶² Pieris, "Cross-Scripture Reading," 244.

⁶³ Kwok, *Discovering*, 93.

autonomous. When taking an active role in reading the biblical text, they not only bring a perspective to the interpretation of that text, they also critique the text from the perspective of their own cultural or social text. On the other hand, their life will have to be examined, critiqued, and claimed by the text too. Interpretations, however, must also be tested by interpreters in dialogue.⁶⁴

This means that there should be more inter- or cross-scriptural/sacred texts encounters done within and by the communities in Asia. Herein, the text from the Asian traditional-cultural-religious context and the Bible may be read and reread together by both the traditional-cultural-religious group and the Christians (see in scheme 4). In this cross-scriptural/sacred texts dialogue, the reading partners can offer their readings of both texts to one another to find new insights that may deepen and enrich their understandings of their own text as well as of the other text without ignoring the significance of each text for the community to which it “belongs.”

In developing the contextual cross-scriptural/ sacred text readings between two religious groups, we may adapt the code systems offered in the reciprocal readings previously mentioned (i.e. in the designs of De Wit and Prior) while at the same time developing the interrelationships of the texts by looking at similarities, differences, and enrichments, as proposed by Lee. I am certain of that to improve this dialectical growth in contextual Bible reading, we should maintain this kind of interaction (of the texts and readers) so that we can create ways to guide readers to innovative discoveries in their sacred texts and strengthen the praxis of transformation of the heart and of the socio-cultural hybrid realities the readers reside in.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bouteneff, Peter., and Dagmar Heller. *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001).

Cardenal, Ernesto. *The Gospel in Solentiname. Vol 1-4*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1976)

De Wit, Hans. “Through the eyes of another: Objectives and backgrounds.” In *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker (eds.), (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 3-53.

Droogers, André. “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem.” In *Dialogue and Syncretism, An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), 7-25.

Dube, Musa and Gerald West. “An Introduction: How We Have Come to ‘Read With.’” In *Reading With: An Exploration of Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible*.” *Semeia* 73, Musa Dube and Gerald West (eds.), (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. Scholar Press, 1996), 7-17.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. “The Ethic of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship.” *JBL* 107 (1988), 3-17.

⁶⁴ Lee, “Cross-textual hermeneutics,” 36.

- Houtepen, Anton. *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001).
- Kim, Heup Young. 2003. "The Word Made Flesh: The Crucified Guru, An Indian Perspective." In *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*. Mercy Oduyoye & Hendrik M Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 129-148.
- Kwok, Pui Lan. *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).
- Lee, Archie. "Biblical Interpretation in Asian Perspectives." *Asian Journal of Theology (AJT)* 7:1/93 (1993), 35-39.
- "Cross-Textual Interpretation and Its Implications for Biblical Studies." In *Teaching the Bible, The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*. Fernando Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds), (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 247-254.
 - "Cross-Textual Interpretation and Its Implication for Biblical Studies." In *Teologi Operatif: Berteologi dalam Konteks Kehidupan yang Pluralistik di Indonesia*. Asnath Natar (ed.), (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia dan PTCA, 2003), 5-13.
 - "Cross-textual hermeneutics and identity in multi-scriptural Asia." In *Christian Theology in Asia*. Sebastian C.H. Kim (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) Pp. 179-200.
 - "Cross-textual hermeneutics in Asia." In *Asian Theology on the Way*. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar (ed.), (London: SPCK International Study Guide 50, 2012), 31- 38.
- Merwe, W. van der. "From theological metaphors to metaphorical theology." *Paradigm and Progress in Theology. Human Sciences Research Council* (1988), 281-294.
- Niles, D Preman. 1985. "The World of God and the People of Asia." In *Understanding the Word, Essays in Honour of Bernhard W. Anderson*. In: James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger (eds.), (Sheffield: JSOT), 281-313.
- Pieris, Aloysius. "Cross-Scripture Reading in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: A Search for the Right Method." In *Scripture, Community and Mission, Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles*. Second Printing, Philip L. Wickeri (ed.), (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2003), 234-255.
- Prior, John Mansford. "The Ethics of Transformative Reading: The Text, the Other, and Oneself." In *Bible and Transformation. The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading. Semeia Studies 81*. Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk (eds.), (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 75-98.
- Samartha, Stanley, *One Christ-Many Religions, Toward a Revised Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).
- Vroom, Hendrik, M. "Conclusion: Contextual Theology Revisited." In *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*. Mercy Amba Oduyoye & Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 225-234.

- *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

Wessels, Anton. "Biblical Presuppositions For and Against Syncretism." In *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Jerald D. Gort & Hendrik M. Vroom (eds.), (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), 52-65.

West, Gerald. "Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading With Their Local Communities: An Introduction." In *Reading Other Wise, SBL*. Gerard O. West (ed.), (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1-5.

West, Gerald and Dube, Musa (eds.). "*Reading With*": *An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible, Semeia 73*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, Scholar Press, 1996).

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Philosophy and an African Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980).