

Shoki Coe

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An Ecumenical Life in Context

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Preface

It is my distinct honour and joy to pen this Preface to *Shoki Coe: An Ecumenical Life in Context*, which is part of a series being planned by WCC Publications exploring the lives of ecumenical leaders. The original title as published in Taiwanese and Japanese, which translated as “Prophetic Taiwanese Pioneer,” expresses in three words the context for Shoki’s life and work as he was prophetic, a pioneer and Taiwanese throughout.

Shoki Coe was first and foremost Taiwanese. In spite of the difficult and tumultuous period into which he was born and in which he gained his theological formation, his love and passion for the land and people of Taiwan remained steadfast. Although he spent much of his formative years abroad, first in Japan and then in England, he eventually returned to Taiwan and served for 18 years as the principal of Tainan Theological College. He returned to face a changing and challenging context in which the church was called to give prophetic voice and priestly ministry. The various revolutionary changes that were enveloping Taiwan, as well as other countries in Asia and elsewhere in the world, informed his theological analysis of the situation and contributed to the development of “contextualization” as a new method of Christian engagement with the world and particularly of theology and theological education. In spite of his “good works” within Taiwan, he experienced the pain of betrayal and distrust because of his participation in the Self-Determination Movement of Taiwan and because he spoke out on behalf of many who were not being heard. Although such a stance eventually led to a virtual exile, separating him from the land and people he loved so much, he did not let this period of suffering detract from his pride in identity nor his self-awareness as a Taiwanese.

It may be safe to say that this exiled existence further honed his prophetic voice. It was during this period of estrangement from the land and people of Taiwan that Shoki Coe joined the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the International Missionary Council, which was created in Achimota 1958, integrated into WCC in 1961 and later in 1977 became the Programme on Theological Education (PTE). In this capacity he was able further to develop and elaborate the analytical tools of “contextualization” at a global level. His contribution to the universal church was much more than simply presenting

a “term” for defining what must be done for Christianity to be relevant to the world in which it was called to bear witness. He presented the church with both a conceptual and procedural tool for formulating a method of authentic witness that held in creative tension the scriptures (text) and the dynamic changes in the society (context) in which it was read, interpreted and applied. Coe’s contribution not only revolutionized the ecumenical movement’s approach to mission and mission theology, his approach revolutionized the understanding of theological education which is valid for many streams of contextual theologies, for regional associations of theological education in Asia and the WCC from that time until today. It would make inroads into the evangelical and even the Roman Catholic perspectives on mission. This is surely evidence of the prophetic nature of Shoki Coe’s theology.

In so many ways Shoki Coe represented the pioneering spirit of the ecumenical movement. His work in relation to the missiological concept of “contextualization” not only extended the horizons of mission theology but opened up a new avenue for exploring the interrelatedness of the Christian message and the world in which the church is called to witness. His understanding of *kairos*, the entrance of Jesus Christ into time (*chronos*), as the ultimate example of contextualization provides a fundamental theological foundation which intimately connects the church with the context in which it lives.

The transformative power of Christ’s incarnation as the “contextualization” of God’s message to the world was also a source of identity for the church as it took up its responsibility of being the prophetic voice affecting social transformation. In putting forward his theology of contextualization this pioneer ecumenist argued staunchly for the catholicity of the gospel. He adamantly believed that contextualization was the authentic way for achieving a vital catholicity. For Coe, contextualization was not simply about painting the gospel message of Christ (text) in different colors to fit in with the environment (context). Rather, it was holding these two in tension in a critical assessment of the context enacted in light of the *missio Dei*. His creative and forward-looking approach provided insight into how the church’s authentic acts of mission could embody the missiological work of God in today’s world. This vision revealed a new horizon in which individuals could be both true to the transformative power of the gospel and free to transform society without being above, beyond or estranged from it. It also set the stage for the development of an Asian theology by successive theologians, such as C.S. Song, Kosuke Koyama and Alosyus Pieris.

The life and work of Shoki Coe exemplifies for us what it means to be hon-

est and faithful—to the gospel of Christ, to one’s one ethnic and social reality, and also to the spirit of ecumenism and its quest of mission in unity and unity in mission. I am confident that this volume will enrich, empower and energize us to “take home the good news” in ever creative and contextual ways, being mutually accountable for our texts in our contexts.

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit
WCC General Secretary

Introduction

Like the man himself, the name Shoki Coe is a blend of global cultural influences, with its Japanese pronunciation (Ko) and English spelling for the Taiwanese surname Ng. Born in 1914, he lived exactly half of his 74 years away from his home in Taiwan. By the time he turned 51, when he left Taiwan for what turned out essentially to be the last time, he had already been abroad 14 years: four years studying in Japan and ten years in England, where he had gone to study and then been stranded at the outbreak of World War II. From 1965 until his death in England in 1988, his career was dedicated to the theological education and ministerial training of younger churches through the Theological Education Fund (TEF) and beyond.

Those who called him Teacher or heard him speak marvelled at his ethnically grounded perspective, intellect and behaviour as an authentic Taiwanese “everyman.” His state of mind and outlook on life were described by Nobel Laureate and Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, as “a man without country” and by the Dean of Southeast Asian Graduate School of Theology, Kosuke Koyama, as “a homeless guru.” People who came to understand him were impressed by his deeply rooted Taiwanese identity, yet he was a well-seasoned international and interdenominational leader, a thorough ecumenist. Such a person is truly a “Thinker Contextual” characterized by a “life lived contextually.” In words he first coined in the “third-world” setting, his theology is now widely known as “contextual theology.”

His 14-year tenure with the World Council of Churches (WCC) began in 1965 until his retirement in 1979. However, his involvement with the ecumenical movement started in 1939 when he attended the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam as a Japanese delegate. Shoki was invited to Geneva in 1951 to participate in planning the WCC’s second assembly in Evanston in 1954, which he attended as an official delegate of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan; he was then 40 years old. As a theologian from the Third World, he was invited to participate in the 1958 creation of the Theological Education Fund as part of the International Missionary Council. As the director of the Theological Education Fund, he advocated, assisted and guided the seminaries and ministerial training projects of the younger churches in the third world. In this role he was involved firsthand in defending and protesting

[AQ: These phrases aren't in the current tributes, but one presumes they were said at some point]

[AQ: “Contextual Thinker,” perhaps? Was this originally a French phrase or something like that?]

the imprisonment and deportation of seminary professors by the dictatorial regime in South Korea. Even if he could not participate in the struggle for human rights and freedom of religion in his homeland, he could apply his considerable energy and influence to struggles in other countries. In the basement of the WCC library, I was astonished to read handwritten volumes of notes taken by then–Associate Director Desmond Tutu for reports to the director Shoki Coe of the seminaries he visited. The TEF staff team thus touched many trainers and trainees of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

As I look back on the germination of Shoki Coe’s biography, I cannot help but point to a divine call and providence. As his student, I was not one of those chosen by Shoki to succeed in the task of engaging in theology and educating the future church workers at Tainan Theological College. Was I angry? Certainly. So I decided to run away from Shoki and his Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT). Like the prophet Jonah, I went my own way in 1962. After a few years of study, I chose to stay in the United States and accepted the opportunity to serve a Japanese American church in the United Methodist denomination. I thought I had escaped the gravitational pull of Shoki and the Presbyterians. But through our common concern for the future of Taiwan and commitment to the Christian mission and ministry, God led us to seek each other and work together.

It was during a critical time of Shoki’s leadership in the world movement for Taiwanese self-determination that he discovered God had prepared an “indispensable friend” for Taiwan and its Presbyterian Church within the United States and in the United Methodist Church. In 1976, Rev. Dr Tracy Jones, General Secretary of the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, drafted a resolution for the board to adopt. His resolution consisted of two main points: (1) the US should normalize its diplomatic relationship with the People’s Republic of China; and (2) as diplomatic negotiations take place, the United Methodist Church should support Taiwan as *an integral part of China*. The latter phrase was poison to the Taiwanese self-determination struggle. As a full voting member of the Board, I was led by the Holy Spirit to amend the second part, which was then approved by the Board. The amended resolution read that “the United Methodist people support the idea of ‘self-determination’ and respect human rights for the Taiwanese people.”

Since 1945, at the end of World War II, Taiwan was ruled by the Nationalist Chinese Party, or Kuomintang (KMT) regime. The colonialists from China, headed by Chiang Kai-shek exploited the island and its people. As the exploitation deepened, the leaders of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan—many of them Shoki’s students—stood up for the people of Taiwan. Not surpris-

ingly, as a result the entire church was subjected to severe persecution. From 1972 to 1980, the leaders of the church issued three declarations as the regime watched for their chance to arrest the Presbyterian leaders. Finally, in December of 1979 many PCT leaders were arrested. With the April 18, 1980 arrest of Rev. Dr Chun-Ming Kao, general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, the church fell under surveillance, if not outright captivity, by the KMT. I took part in the strategy session summoned by Shoki in Geneva; we tried to reach out to all possible church leaders to appeal to their national leaders to work towards the release of imprisoned PCT leaders and ask Chiang Ching-Kuo—Chiang Kai-Shek's son and successor—to stop persecuting the church. Aside from our business matters, Shoki and I shared a hotel room, ate and walked together on Geneva streets for three days. They were memorable days of friendship, bonded by staunch commitment to a common cause.

After Shoki's death in 1988, his *Recollections and Reflections*¹ was published. I was deeply moved and realized that I could trace the outlines of his life. When I was stationed in Japan from 1991 to 1999, I realized I was in a position to collect data, to verify and back up his stories from partly faded memories. But my real search began in earnest only from the time I retired from my active duties in 1999. Making use of my free (retired) time and with my slow pace, I started to trace Shoki's shadow in Taiwan, Japan, England, Switzerland and the United States. Everywhere I searched, I found surprise rewards of photographs and documents; and in several cases, I arrived barely in time to obtain valuable pictures before the contributors passed away.

I am not a gifted writer, but I believe that the stories of a prominent ecumenist will attract readers. So I felt bold in getting the Taiwanese version completed and published in 2004. Within about a year the Taiwanese edition sold out. Then I recruited a well-known Japanese church leader, Rev. Dr Hiroshi Ohmiya, to help translate and edit in Japanese, and the Japanese edition was published in 2007. For this edition, Rev. Dr Ching-Fen Hsiao, a prominent Taiwanese theologian, took on the task of translating the book into English. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan has accepted the book as its property and is ready to publish the English edition under its auspices. I am indebted to Ching-Fen for his efforts in translating, for which he took three months leave from his pastorate to complete. I am grateful to the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan for lifting the financial burden of this project from my shoulders and for negotiating the partnership with WCC for publication of this book.

I sincerely pray that people of the world will be inspired to join the movement of peace and mutual respect and to realize the inherent *imago Dei* (image of God) in the human race, as Shoki used to preach and pray with his students.

Translator's Notes

The original writing assumes readers have some knowledge of the background and the historical and social setting of the main character of the book. For English readers who may not be familiar with the background, I have placed additional footnotes to clarify the usage of some words or nomenclature. All these footnotes are clearly indicated as “Translator’s note”; other footnotes are the author’s.

With the consent of the author, all the Taiwanese names, persons and places—except Shoki Coe—are put in romanized Taiwanese. But occasionally, additional or optional pronunciations in Chinese Mandarin are given. For the references to old documentation used by the author, I have kept the names in Chinese Mandarin transliteration.

The name “Formosa” was commonly used in the Western world to refer to what today is called “Taiwan.” Both names are used in this translation, as determined by the occasion. For instance, the Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of England called its mission in Taiwan “Formosa Mission,” and the official English name of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan was at one time the “Presbyterian Church of Formosa.” In the original text there was no distinction between Formosa and Taiwan.

Some international and local church agencies or organizations have changed their names in the course of their history. Although the original text uses the same nomenclature, the translator has tried to name them to match the historical setting.

Ching-fen Hsiao

Tributes

[AQ: Does this information belong somewhere else? It seems misplaced]

[AQ: Please check.]

Shoki Coe and the Theological Education Fund

I came to 13 London Road, Bromley, Kent in England in 1972, when I was appointed associate director for the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). BD, MTH, at Kings College London. I had returned home to South Africa to teach in a theological seminary in accordance with the TEF scholarship grant. The last thing I ever expected was an invitation to join the staff as successor to the quietly efficient Dr Walter Cason, who had been associate director of the TEF with area responsibility for sub-Saharan Africa. I knew very little about this organization except that it was doing innovative and exciting work, particularly in the area of staff development, theological teachers' associations and the encouragement of indigenous theological thinking and writing.

We were not certain that the South African government would allow me to take up the post. The WCC was like a red rag to the South African apartheid government because of the grants its Programme to Combat Racism had made to the ANC and PAC, banned organizations which the South African government deemed to be terrorist organizations. As it happened I was granted the rare privilege, for a black South African at the time, of a passport, and so began a very important phase in my life.

We formed a team of four associate directors plus the director, Shoki Coe. We each had different area responsibilities. So, for instance, Aharon Sapsezian, a Brazilian Armenian, had area responsibility for the Middle East and Latin America. James Berquist (the only Caucasian) from the United States looked after India. Shoki and Ivy Chou divided the rest of Asia between them. We were operating under a Third Mandate from the WCC and were especially given the task of promoting contextualization in so-called third-world theological institutions and churches. This meant that we were supposed to encourage and support efforts in the different regions at making Christianity, and therefore theological education, more native, more indigenous, more at home in those contexts and not the alien product that it so often seemed to be.

We were as diverse as you could ever hope to be racially, nationally and ecumenically. Shoki was Presbyterian, Ivy Methodist, Jim Lutheran and I was

Anglican. I think Aharon was Methodist. English was the first language of only one of us, but it was the language of our organization. We were diverse in our life experiences as well. Ivy had been born on mainland China but grew up in Singapore; Jim was a US citizen who had taught in India for quite a while; Aharon came with all the memory of the Armenian genocide and the radicalness of Latin American liberation theology. Shoki was a refugee, an exile from his native Formosa, now Taiwan, and I came from the injustices and restrictions of apartheid South Africa. And we all were representing in addition the diverse needs and complex problems of poverty, corruption, exploitation and misgovernment in our various areas of responsibility.

We each had to convince our colleagues in our regular staff meetings of the vital importance of our particular projects be it a scholarship for staff development in a college or university in our area, or library development, and so on. Our meetings were raucous and bruising in a way because each sought to carry the day and our colleagues were rigorous in their examination of each project. Shoki was quite wonderful in his ability to remain calm and serene amidst the cacophony, and we always ended still friends despite the sharp criticisms we had given and received. I doubt that anyone else could have kept us as a team despite our different temperaments and interests. He believed fervently in our theological enterprise and had the skills to herd this particular collection of cats.

I was always impressed by his capacity to hold us together, and yet he suffered deeply being an exile from his beloved motherland. He used to say, "My homeland was the fourth world ignored by almost all." But he never indulged in self-pity. It just made him more sensitive to the plight of others.

I am so privileged to have had him as my boss and friend. He made a difference in my life and in that of the many he touched. I learned a great deal about leadership and about the power of gentleness in an abrasive, competitive world. I am a better person for having been touched by Shoki and I give thanks to God for him. He must have heard his Lord and Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond M. Tutu

Above the door to the library of Tainan Theological Seminary, a photo with the face of Shoki Coe greets every student who enters. For many years he was the principal of this seminary. Later, when he became one of the directors of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, he regularly visited theological seminaries in Southeast Asia. I remember numerous wonderful occasions of free and relaxed theological discussion, often ending in serious reflective moments. He was genuinely happy to be with us “younger theologians” as he visited Singapore, Djakarta, Hong Kong or Manila. He was quite naturally, with grace and charm, dialogical. For him, to be educational was dialogical. Our dialogue inspired the mood of prayer together, affirming the ecumenical presence of Christ in Southeast Asia and beyond. We “younger theologians” were privileged to enjoy those many hours to be spiritually and theologically near “Shoki,” as we called him. He was the *guru* to many of our generation, certainly to me.

He authored the word “contextualization.” Contextualization, he told me, is another name for the church’s constant need of reforming itself—*ecclesia semper reformanda*. This thought is foundational for the church, the beloved community. The church cannot “settle down” in some fixed religious ideology or even with theological theses. The Head of the Church had “no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). For the Church of the Crucified and Risen Lord, contextualization is a serious matter. The gospel creates moments of reformation, reconstruction and resurrection, not just once but constantly. In accordance with the spirit of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, Shoki insisted upon the expression “contextualizing theology,” not “contextual theology” or “contextualized theology.” It must be understood in the present progressive mood. Contextualization is inspired by the urgency of the *here and now* power of the gospel. It is, in the words of Toyohiko Kagawa, to imitate God who is “the awesome power that uplifts us.”

Contextualization is more than a cultural adjustment. It engages in a prophetic critique of the given context itself and the creation of a new context *here and now*. Such spiritual energy originates from the church’s engagement in the struggle for social justice as demonstrated, for instance, by the 1934 Barmen Declaration against Hitler’s idolatrous use of power or by the Dalits’ open protest against the 2002 Anti-Conversion Legislation in Tamil Nadu. “Act justly one with another” says Jeremiah (7:5-7). “Yes, you are the keeper of your brothers/sisters!” (Gen. 4:9).

“You shall not kill,” says the Biblical commandment. This uncompromising commandment must be publicly contextualized. It must be mobilized and articulated. In the words of Article Nine [Renunciation of War] of the Postwar