IS THE CHURCH TOO ASIAN?
REFLECTIONS ON THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS
By Norman Tanner, S.J.
Rome, Italy: Chavara Institute of Indian and Inter-religious Studies
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Reviewed by Joseph J. Smith

This slender volume traces the Asian contribution to the twenty-one councils of the Church and thereby questions, at least for this dimension of the Church’s history, the assumption of Western dominance over the Church.

The first chapter surveys the seven ecumenical councils of the first millennium from Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787). In these councils the Asian—or at least the Eastern—contribution was dominant. This may be seen from the perspectives of places, participants and theological input. Four of the seven councils were held in Asia, the other three in Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern empire. “Another striking point is that the overwhelming majority of participants … came from the East and most were Asians” (15). The teachings and creeds of these seven councils possess a pronounced Eastern face: 1) The language of all of them was Greek, the language of the Eastern empire, including its Asian parts; 2) The theological content was predominantly the contribution of the Eastern and Asian Churches; 3) The decrees of these early councils reveal an Eastern mentality “in spaciousness and flexibility of language and in the quest for accommodation and unanimity” (85).

The second chapter surveys the Middle Ages and Trent. After the schism between the churches of the East and West in the eleventh century and “the Islamic conquests of much of the Byzantine world, the centre of Christianity moved to West Europe” (85). The ten major councils, held in Rome, France, Germany and Switzerland, and whose participants were almost all Europeans, are more fittingly described as “general councils of the West” (Paul VI) rather than as fully ecumenical councils. Aware of their lesser status, medi-
eval councils hesitated "to move beyond their Asian past in doctrinal matters ... issued relatively few decrees of a doctrinal nature, said little that was new; their focus was on church order" (39). The author concludes: "The giant of Asia continued to project its powerful presence over the medieval West" (47).

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent "represented a return to the predominantly doctrinal councils of the early church" (51). But in its first doctrinal decree, the council affirmed its continuity with its eastern and Asian roots by proclaiming that the Nicene Creed was "the basic principle on which all who profess the faith of Christ necessarily agree" (51). While Trent assimilated many of the better insights of the Reformation, in various ways it enabled the Church to escape from the "excessively Eurocentric theology and spirituality" of the Protestant Reformation (86) and "helped to return the Church to its truly catholic and Asian roots" (54).

The third chapter treats the two most recent general councils, the first and second Vatican councils. By the time of these councils, Christianity had become "the largest and most widespread world religion" (86). Asia again began to exercise a more direct influence.

The Second Vatican Council witnessed a significant increase in the number of representatives from Asia—especially indigenous Asians. And their contributions increased significantly as the council progressed. The author illustrates the contribution of Asia by examples of views expressed by Asian representatives in the debate of the third session of the council on five decrees: "The Church in the Modern World, Missions, The Life and Ministry of Priests, Priestly Formation, Marriage" (70). The author concludes that "Asia made an important and distinctive contribution" (83) and "the council contributed to rebalancing the Church away from Europe, towards Asia and the other continents" (86).

For the future, author Tanner urges Christians in Asia to focus above all on the recovery of their Asian roots. This reviewer recommends the book highly. It should be in the library of every school of theology.