

Topic: **Living the Creed in Asia for the Flourishing of Life in a World so *Loved* by God: A Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis**

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Introduction

The theological and Christian ethical approach in this paper is lived theology and everyday Christian ethics. Lived theology is the process of theologizing (understanding and experiencing God) shaped by people's experience in everyday life. According to Knut Tveitereid, "Lived theology is an attempt to make everyday life theologically meaningful-or to flip the phrase-to make theology meaningful in everyday life."¹ Lived experience, on the other hand would mean everyday lives that live entangled and shaped by one's geographical location (borderlands, uplands, peripheries of nation states, etc), spiritualities, kinship, religion and the deployment of these entanglements to affirm life.² The turn to quotidian is helpful because as Luke Bretherton noted, "the ordinary and everyday world is the site at which forms of domination, the precarity and oppression they produce are most acutely displayed."³ In other words, it helps one grasp a realistic, intimate and specific view of the context. Everyday Christian ethics here will mean reconfiguring life as intentional ethical agents. Michael Banner defines everyday Christian ethics as: "[A]n ethics which Christianly imagines the fundamental moments of the human life course and in dialogue with alternative imaginations of human beings (combines moral theology and social anthropology)"⁴ This approach is helpful because of the way in which our lives are situated. Where are our Asian lives situated? When I am talking of Asia and Asians, I am imagining people who live crushed between rocks and boulders but from the cracks and crevices sprouting forth life.

Through the political, military and technological power of its foremost societies, European or Western culture imposed its paradigmatic image and its principal cognitive elements as the norm of orientation on all cultural development, particularly the intellectual and the artistic.⁵

... the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, or to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty

¹ Knut Tveitereid (2022). "Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* eds., Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (John Wiley & Sons).

² The turn to lived theology and everyday ethics is informed by womanists ethicists, *mujirista* theologians and indigenous women theologians "who turned their attention ... to the texture of the ordinary...Stephanie Mota Thurston, "Engaging the Everyday in Womanist Ethics and Mujiresta Theology in *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practices of Ordinary Life*, 28.

³ Luke Bretherton (2019). "The Task of Christian Ethics: Theology, Ethnography, and the Conundrums of the Cultural Turn," in *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practice of Ordinary Life* eds, Michael Lamb and Brian Williams (Georgetown University Press), 176: Similar positions have been taken by feminist ethnographers Lila Abu-Lughod, Sabha Mehmood and others.

⁴ Michael Banner, (2014). *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722069.002.0003>, accessed 20 Aug. 2024, page 6.

⁵ Quijano Anibal (2007). "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3, page 170.

is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.⁶

Our lives are suspended between these two stones. Some have compared with “zones of social abandonment,”⁷ “state of exception,”⁸ and as places where “judicial order can be suspended”⁹ People that occupy these places are those whose lives have been marked as expendable and whose death is not grievable because as Judith Butler states, their lives have not been apprehended as living at the first place.¹⁰ Their lives are uniquely held because they must seek protection from the very institution that renders them stateless.¹¹ Butler explains this irony very well:

To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nationstate for protection from violence is to precisely exchange one potential violence for another.¹²

This is an extra ordinary place to be, and it is from this place we are talking of a vision and an idea of flourishing moved by the Creed that we profess. As we re-asses the Nicaean Creed it is therefore important for us to see how people as targets of the sovereign power (state) and imperialism, as persons made of bone and flesh that hungers for truth and righteousness assess the Nicaean Creed? Or how do the Kuki-Zo communities produced as illegal bodies by the state and whose ancestral lands were nationalized overnight understand the Creed? What is someone suffering with terminal illness and grieving making sense of the Creed. Keeping these everyday realities in mind the overarching question that is sought to be addressed here is: In what ways does the reading of the Creed enable people to make sense of their personal and ecumenical world? By employing IPA method, these questions are addressed. M.D. Chapman in his article, “Why do we still recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist” observed that there is a vacuum that lay between the theological commentaries that theologians produce on the Creed and what really goes on when the Nicaean Creed is recited in liturgy. He writes: [W]hat theologians are doing when they expound the creed is very different from what goes on when the Nicene Creed is recited in liturgy.”¹³ In this article, I undertake the slippery task of ascertaining how ordinary people interpret and make sense of God, incarnation, passion and the resurrection with a view to flourish life in a world so *loved* by God.

⁶ Achille Mbembe. (2003). “Necropolitics” trans. By Libby Meintjes *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11-12.

⁷ Joan Beihl (2003). *Vita: Line in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (University of California Press).

⁸ Giorgio Agamben () *State of Exception*,

⁹ Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>, page, 24.

¹⁰ Judith Butler (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Greivable* (London: Verso), 25.

¹¹ Shiluila Jamir. (2021). *Embracing God's Beloved Community: Rethinking Mission in Asia during COVID-9 and Beyond* (Asiacms, Malaysia), 6.

¹² Judith Butler (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Greivable* (London: Verso), 26.

¹³ Chapman, M. D. (2005). Why do we still recite the nicene creed at the eucharist. *Anglican Theological Review*, 87(2), 207–223. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-842886821/why-do-we-still-recite-the-nicene-creed-at-the-eucharist> page, 213.

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Framework/Method

George Poulet's work *Phenomenology of Reading* claims that when one reads a book, the barrier that exist between the reader and the text evaporates and the book no longer remains an object but a subject, a rational subject. And when one reads, the consciousness of the author, in our case the Creed intrudes into the consciousness of the reader. The Creed is a life, therefore speakable and translatable. Poulet writes: "I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human beings I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, with unheard-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels."¹⁴ Because of the invasion of the person by the thoughts of another, "my consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another."¹⁵ Poulet's work helps understand the way Creed overtakes our mind and emotions and out body when we read it. The Creed invades our consciousness, and we begin to move along with the Creed absorb its tenets into our mind and in our attitude and the way we sense the world. However, as Poulet notes this taking over of the consciousness through reading of literature does not totally replaces the consciousness of the reader rather there is a co-enrichment: "I give it not only existence, but awareness of existence. And so I thought not to hesitate to recognize that so long as it is animated by this vital inbreathing inspired by the act of reading, a work of literature becomes (at the expense of the reader whose own life it suspends) a sort of human being, that it is a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its object."¹⁶ How does the change in consciousness forms actions? According to Philosopher J.L Austin when we say, I (we) believe we are doing something, which is a performative utterance. He writes: if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something. We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I perform that action. When I say, "I name this ship the 'Queen Elizabeth' I do not describe the christening ceremony, I actually perform the christening; and when I say, 'I do' I am not reporting on a marriage, I am indulging in it."¹⁷ The opinion of J.L Austin helps to manoeuvre that the Creed is not a mere recitation in the vacuum but is associated to performances -of living it out or of performing the Creed.

The work uses Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis to capture the lived experience of the readers in their encounter/engagement/recitation/singing with/of the Creed. IPA is a qualitative research method that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA

¹⁴ Poulet, G. (1969). *Phenomenology of Reading*. *New Literary History*, 1(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468372>, page. 54.

¹⁵ Poulet, G. (1969). *Phenomenology of Reading*. *New Literary History*, 1(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468372>, page. 56.

¹⁶ Poulet, G. (1969). *Phenomenology of Reading*. *New Literary History*, 1(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468372>, page. 59.

¹⁷ J.L Austin, *Philosophical Papers* edited by J. O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 222.

researchers are interested in exploring what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance for the people.¹⁸

Studies based in IPA focus on examining how individuals make meanings of their life experiences. A detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes is typically paired with researcher's own interpretation, which is an expression of double hermeneutic in practice. IPA draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.¹⁹

Reading of the Creed is not a major event but the way it impacts the person and engage the mind and body of the person merits a study using IPA to explore their lived experiences while reading the creed. The case studies are only representative or a model that needs further in-depth and more rigorous study.²⁰

Case Studies

Three women between the ages of 35-55 were selected for the interviews. Semi structured questions were provided which was followed by several conversations. The reason for choosing only women is motivated by feminist epistemology that implies production of knowledge from a feminist standpoint with a feminist sensibility that pays attention to affect, embodiment, lived experiences, everyday lives etc.²¹

Case Study I

Ms. A, 35 years of age is a scholar in a theological college in India and hails from the state of Manipur. She narrated: "It was after I joined a theological college for my studies that I started reading the creed. When I first read it, I felt very emotional, and experienced a sense of awe." When asked how important the Creed was for her faith she said, "I cannot dismiss the importance it has for my faith and even for my life despite the exclusive language that is there. When I first read it, I was not even aware of the father language and the hierarchical concept that is there. It was only later, when I became critical, I realized it and I changed my tone while reading the Creed. But for me, coming from a small village where communities are closely knitted, and relies on community labour for helping each other denominational difference played a very negative role in my village. I used to see Catholics with much biasness and as different from us. Our interaction with each other was very limited. I always wondered why we hated them so much when we are from the same family, village and shared the same blood.

¹⁸ Jonathan A Smith, Paul Glowers and Michael Larkin, (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage).

¹⁹ Igor Pietkiewicz and Jonathan A Smith, (2012) "A Practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology," NP.

²⁰ Due to paucity of IPA is not discussed in detail. Like all methodologies, and methods, IPA has its own set of problems and criticisms. For a brief summary see Francis Ethelbert Kwabena Benyah, "Prayer Camps and Mental Health: A Study of the Religious, Human Rights, and Media Dimensions of the Healing of Persons with Mental Illness in Ghana," (Abo: Abo Akademi University, 2023), pages 29-30.

²¹ Dana-Ain Davis & Christa Craven, (2016). *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking Through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 9-12; Also see Pranee Liamputtong, (2007) *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (New Delhi: Sage Publication), 9-14.

When I started reading the Creed carefully, I realized the inclusiveness that is there- that God created all, that Jesus came not only for me, that this God I profess is also a God for them who I always saw as a problem to our community. [...] I read the Creed occasionally only, but every time I read it, it gives me happiness and allows me to experience the same feeling that I had when I first read it.

Case Study II

M, 55 years of age from Lamka, Manipur is a renowned indigenous woman leader, heads an NGO which is also actively engaged in helping people impacted by the recent crises in Manipur. She was a human rights defender for many years and was responsible for mobilizing women leadership in the grassroots. She is also one of the pioneers of setting up Women in Governance- an association of women headed NGOs in the Northeast of India. When asked what she thought of the Creed and how it impacted her and her life worlds she narrated: "In my Church the reading of the Creed happens in a very formalized way. We stand and read. The pastors lead the congregation, and we follow. For me the Creed is like a pledge, a bond of commitment and allegiance, a term of reference, an MOU with God. Reciting the Creed makes me feel closer to God and gives me spiritual satisfaction which ultimately leads to physical satisfaction and contentment. [...] She also mentioned that the description of God as "Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen," makes her feel small, as only a tiny part of the whole which in turn creates a sense of humility in her. She also said: "As a Christian I cannot forget the creed, always, in blessing and in grief, I am reminded of who God is and what he is to me. This gives me strength and hope and even when things are very dark there is some hope left."

She also explained that the relationship between the Creed and the poor people are like the relationship between customary law and women. Women in the urban areas do not feel the customary law to be binding on them because they live in a different set up where life is easier, but for women in the villages the customary law is encroaching on a day-to-day basis because they live in a situation where life is realized in the confines of the customary law. Similarly, the rich people might not feel and know the intensity and the weightage of the creed and the impact it has on lives because they have everything, and they feel they don't need God. For us and for people who live here in the camps, God is the only thing we have. So, the Creed is very meaningful. That's why people who have hard life especially those that live hand to mouth, it is much more important for them to draw to God and creed is the benchmark. [...] She also added that the creed is also read informally by women when they gather for prayer meetings. She said: "We either read it individually, read it out together or meditate over it. It helps us prepare both spiritually and politically. The affirmation in the Creed that says God, the Maker and Almighty is both a spiritual and a political source for us."

Case Study III

X, 37 years of age was going through grief after the loss of one of her loved ones when I approached her for the interview. She said that since Creed is the core faith foundation for Christians, affirming that gives her a sense of being close to God. When I enquired what makes her feel so. Unlike case study II who saw fixated with the idea of God as maker and almighty,

for Case study III the Goodnews of the resurrection and the eternal life that is promised were important. This possibility makes her feel close to God. [...] She feels that in today's context we need to reaffirm the creed and think deeply on what it says. [...] However, she also cautioned about the exclusive language in the Creed. She said: "The exclusive language is a little bit uncomfortable, but creed not only provokes me to think profoundly about the core Christian values and foundations, but also makes me feel deeply about what I truly believe in. What is the truth in a world of so much untruth and deception."

Interpretation and Implications

I. The Creed as a Living Text having Pedagogic Possibilities

From the case studies, it is very clear that the Creed intrudes into the consciousness of the readers and there is an experience of change within the person as she reads the Creed. It creates an awareness of her surrounding, including the brokenness that marks one's society, one's life and inspires them to transcend and forms and shapes their life in ways that reflect the core values expressed in the Creed. Case study I responded that she feels emotional and experience a sense of awe and it gives her happiness every time she reads it. For case study II reciting the Creed makes her feel closer to God and gives her spiritual satisfaction which leads to physical satisfaction and contentment. For case study III, the Creed gave her hope. The encounter between the Creed and the reader results in an experience of God. Therefore we, can say that the NC is a living text that is life giving and pedagogic. The Creed is accordingly, a profession of faith which patterns our lifestyle. Therefore the Creed we confess is embodied and results in actions or deed. This experience debunks the criticism that the Creed is otherworldly, is high theology and have no connection with people and their ordinary lives. For case I the inclusiveness and unifying message in the Creed made her think that the God she professes is the same God Roman Catholics profess. For case II the Creed makes her feel small, only a tiny part of the whole earth, therefore, instils in her a sense of humility. For case III the Creed is a statement of hope, and a renewal for the present as well as the future. The Creed provides her with the image of a world that is possible, and the passion of Jesus Christ evokes in her a sense of compassion and an understanding of suffering. Their experiences and interpretation of the Creed enlightens us about the vast pedagogic possibilities that the NC has for the flourishing of our lives and the whole of the world.

II. Lived Realities and the Creed

The Creed speaks of a 'Parent God, a God who suffers, a Spirit who guides us, and a Motherly Church.' However, from the case studies it is observed that each of them focussed on the character and nature of God that is closest to their lived experience without losing track of the nature of the Triune God. For case III as someone going through grief when the interview was conducted, her focus was on the good news of resurrection and the eternal life that is promised. For Case I it was the division in her village that made her focus on the unity and the unifying character of the Creed. The image of God as creator, who created all is an image that speaks to case II. This does not mean they overlook other aspects of the nature of God, but they pay

attention according to the needs and the circumstances they find themselves in. Both I and II pointed out the exclusive and hierarchical language in the Creed but for II God the Father, Almighty was consoling and empowering as well. There are cultural and political reasons that explains why she thinks so. The image of God that she has is of a God that creates, provides, cares and someone who will defend them. For someone coming from a context where life is about negotiating violence and is a victim of violence idea of a God Almighty helps them cope. This image is far from the criticism that has been mounted by feminist theologians and other postcolonial readers on conception of God as Almighty.²² Case II also explained the Creed as a pledge, an MOU, and a term of refence. The question here is not whether the words and language that she is using is right or wrong (this needs another paper) but what is interesting is the way words and metaphors are drawn from one's experience of the world. As John Sanders has demonstrated in his work, it is about human beings using images that they are familiar with. He says: "We have no other choice than to use the mental tools available to us to think about God. Our human conceptual structures are all we have to understand anything, including God."²³ My stress here is on the ability of the people to connect, experience and interpret the Creed through the themes, languages and concepts that is readily available in their lives-Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud calls this as strategically using home-grown tools (of course they talk of this in the context of livelihood).

III. Contextualized Reading of the Creed

Christians in Asia are a minority despite the euphoria surrounding Christianity in Global South and have no political clout. And the rise of right-wing politics has put us in a state of precarity. However, despite these thorny realities, we also know how to flourish within that limited space. We live as neighbours with people of other faiths side by side, we exchange meals and celebrate different festivals together and take care not to speak ill of others' faith. At the same time, we have also adapted and fashioned Christianity in ways that helps us create our agency. The Kuki Zo communities in Lamka, Manipur, India wearing sack clothes and praying along the national highway as a means of citing their plight both to God and to the state (perpetrators of violence) and marking their agency in the face of death is an example of how we strategically use our faith. Such negotiations and performances of Christian identity informs us how much we have evolved as Asian Christians.²⁴ However, the concern of One God that we profess in the Creed in a multi-religious context persist. Case II has expressed that the Creed that we read is a pledge to our God. Her response solves much of the headache that we have. Every country has a pledge, we read that in schools, on special days like the Independence Day. When we read the pledge, we don't bother what other countries are reading. With full attention, we read that. Similarly

²² Piet Naude, « Can our Creeds Speak a Gendered Truth? A Feminist Reading of the Nicene Creed and the Belhar Confession,» *Scriptura* 86 (2004), pp. 201-209. The author discusses about the views feminist have about the use of masculine language however she argues that despite the presence of exclusive language, the overriding message of the NC is unity.

²³ John Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture shape the way we think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Fortress Press), page, 3.

²⁴ Also see Mocherla's work, in which he discusses about the way Dalits in South India have strategically used their Christian identity. Mocherla, Ashok. (2020). Dalit Christians in South India: Caste, Ideology and Lived Religion. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003045106>

for Christians the reading of the Creed is an expression of our belongingness to that God that we profess. Therefore, our focus ought to be about affirming our faith in the Triune God. A similar idea has been shared by Chapman who concluded that reading of the Creed should encourage “God fearing people to live in humble adoration of the one who loves them, but without growing overly anxious about what precisely the other people who are singing God’s song “believe” or even whether they believe at all.”²⁵

The other concern that needs our attention today in Asia is the question of seeking truth amid so many untruths as shared by case study III. She said: “creed not only provokes me to think profoundly about the core Christian values and foundations, but also makes me feel deeply about what I truly believe in. What is the truth in a world of so much untruth and deception.” This question is relevant especially in the face of the contemporary empire. The matrix of the “coloniality of power”²⁶ continue to persist. The state that we assume should defend its people has become the arms and legs of the empire and the perpetuator of violence. In the face of this, what can the Nicaea teach us? Winston Persaud, whose parents were taken as indentured labourers to British Guyana wrote:

To believe in “one God,” which is confessed in the very opening of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, means that Christians are to reject any allegiance to political realities alongside of God or in place of God... In the world of empire, the Christian confession in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, “We believe in one God ... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. ... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life ... is a radical, life-giving alternative to the variegated idolatries of creating life and meaning through violence and destruction; through seeking and grasping power over others to reduce them to less than God intended...”²⁷

When we are confessing the One God, we are not only rejecting all other gods that denies life, but we are also redefining what we mean when we say One God. Our anxiety should not be too much about excluding other gods but whether we are able to make choices in ways that enhance life.

IV. Living the Creed in Asia

Another important theme that emerged from the case study is about our affirmation of the Creed resulting in action. All three case studies speak of doing and living according to the divine pedagogy they learned from their encounter with the Creed. This implies focusing on demonstrative living: living the Creed in Asia in our everyday lives. However, for the church to live the Creed in Asia or to witness and realize the full potentiality of the spirit of ecumenism mentioned in the Creed, we need to step back and think of ecumenism in the Asian villages and provinces. Case study I has pointed out how denominational difference have endangered decades of community life and kinship. While not forgetting inter-religious context, we need to pay attention not only to the denominational differences that Christians in Asia experience but

²⁵ Mark D. Chapman, “Why do we still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist?” 222.

²⁶ Quijano, 171

²⁷ Winston D. Persaud. (2013) “The Evangelical Necessity of Creedal Confession in the World of Empire,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* Vol 52, Nove 4, Wiley Periodical and Dialogue December, 2013. 363.

analyse how these differences impact communities and neighbourhoods who lived as families. This needs attention because unlike in the West where people live on their own, we live very close to each other, sharing a village or a locality and many of the decisions must be made collectively. This context calls for serious reflection that results in ecumenical responses that is situated in the lived realities of the Asian Christian communities. It is not about rehearsing how WCC or the Western churches see ecumenism but how we as Asians see it. The commemoration of Nicaea can be an opportunity for us to reframe our priorities in order to speak the potentialities of the Nicæan Creed in the language of Asia.

5. Flourishing in the world so *loved* by God

In *Embracing God's Beloved Community*,²⁸ the author wrote: To that boy in Southeast Asian Massif Restitching his single use disposable mask so that he might live and other might live too." This boy was living with his grandmother in Nagaland in a bamboo thatched house, one morning, as I passed through their house, I saw him sitting on a wooden bed and stitching (repairing) a disposable face mask. Through this profound act he was ensuring that he and his grandmother should flourish. The image of flourishing that the case studies render to us is one that is yoked to their determination to claim life in the face of death. This reflects that when we talk of flourishing inspired and patterned by the Creed, we are talking about dealing with life with all its myriad complexities in dignity, keeping the good of all in mind.

It is within these complexities, of life being suspended between the empire and the sovereign, the practices of difference based on various categorization including church affiliations we have to fashion our ideal of flourishing and interpret the dynamism of ecumenism and unity with the NC as the benchmark. However, in Asia because of the kind of societies that we are made up of, our idea or vision of flourishing is not some grand narrative but a vision that is intimately tied to everyday life where small gestures and simple tools like a thread and a needle or a sackcloth can become powerful instruments of flourishing. While the Creed shapes our lives in ways that leads to the flourishing of all, we also need to put into use our home-grown tools-moral principles derived out of our cultures, spiritualities and even our geographies to develop ways of living that the NC beholds.

Conclusion

If one can think of doing theology through various ways and can interpret Christ through Asian eyes, then we know there is a possibility of reading the Creed through the lived realities of the people. We are also called to step back and re-examine the interdenominational realities and pay attention to it in our ecumenical engagement?

²⁸ Shiluinla Jamir, *Embracing God's Beloved Community*, NP.