

Harvey Perkins (1919-2012)

Introduction

Who was Harvey Perkins and why was he important?

The Australian Christian minister Harvey Perkins was an important ecumenical leader in Australia and Asia in the immediate post-World War Two and post-colonial period in Asia. In Australia, he helped to create the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), which was an important symbol of ecumenism. It was later significant in providing development assistance to Aboriginal people in Australia and in the newly independent countries of South East Asia. While the secretary of the ACC in the Sixties and Seventies, he helped to found the East Asian Christian Conference (EACC). This was instrumental in providing Indigenous ecumenical leadership for the churches in Asia as well as offering a mechanism through which international aid could be linked to programs aiming to foster economic and social development. Perkins was influential in the EACC, later called the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), in helping to develop a contextual theology as a framework for Christian participation in economic development consistent with a grounded methodology for fostering growth and development in poorer communities. His resource book 'Roots for Vision' illustrated his considerable capacity to integrate biblical and theological insight with the practice of community organisation and development.¹ Perkins was a very important Australian Christian leader, who in a crucial period, laid the foundations for a reformed Christian and indigenous ecumenical movement in post-colonial Asia.

Early Years

Harvey and his twin sister, Jean, were born into the family of Leslie and Doris Perkins in Hobart Tasmania where Perkins served as a minister of the Methodist Church. His later years of schooling were at Wesley College in Melbourne where he was 'dux' of the school in his final year. In 1937 he entered the Queen's Methodist residential college and enrolled at Melbourne University, eventually graduating with a Master of Laws in 1940 and a Bachelor of Commerce in 1941. There was much debate at Queens in the pre-war period with some students taking a pacifist position, however, after graduation Perkins enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy (1942) and served as a lieutenant in the Pacific. His son David Perkins later reported that "to his children he explained his real justification as being the real threat of invasion, but it was the war that altered the direction of his life."² Perkins emphasized that poverty and inequality were underlying causes of war through his life and continued to focus on peacemaking and war.³ During this period from 1938 to 1948, the WCC was in formation and it was the threat of war that delayed the inaugural Assembly until 1948.

¹ Harvey L. Perkins, *Roots for Visions: Reflection on the Gospels and the Churches: Task in Re-Peopling the De-Peopled* (Singapore: World Council of Churches-Commission for the Churches' Participation in Development, 1985).

² David Perkins, "A beacon for the most needy," Sydney Morning Herald, February 7, 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/a-beacon-for-the-most-needy-20130206-2dyk1.html>

³ Perkins, A beacon for the most needy.

Perkins' earlier studies in law and commerce suggested a successful career in business and commerce. However, following the war, Perkins chose a very different path in returning to Queen's College to study theology (1947), intending to be ordained as a Methodist Minister. The college in this period, under the leadership of Master Raynor Johnson, chose to include a number of returned soldiers, a number of refugees including several of the 'Duneera boys' and some refugees of Jewish families from Europe as students. Queen's would become 'the most diverse and international College at the University of Melbourne.'⁴ Queens College also included among both staff and students a very high proportion of people associated with the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM), which at the time was the largest student association at Melbourne University. While the large SCM membership reflected the stronger position of Protestant Churches, it also showed the SCM's open membership and its commitment to important international causes often in cooperation with other clubs and societies, such as in opposition to the 'White Australia Policy' and support for refugees. Another academic and former president of the ASCM at Melbourne University was the Professor of Politics W McMahon Ball (1952) who wrote an influential book on 'The Rise of Nationalism and Communism in East Asia' and was also important in inspiring students with a more sophisticated understanding of changes occurring in Australia's immediate region.⁵ There was much there to educate and inspire the young Harvey Perkins.⁶

To understand Perkins' development, it is important to recognize that the ASCM and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) were together part of the international ecumenical movement. Before the war and immediately after the war, Perkins was educated in the ASCM on the importance of thinking internationally. The American John R Mott, the founder of the WSCF and the first convenor of the ASCM, was convinced of the strategic importance of the Asian Pacific region. As early as the 1920's Australian people involved in the SCM were going to conferences in Asia just as Mott was sending Asian Indigenous Church leaders to Australia.⁷ The ASCM experience was preparing Perkins for a larger understanding of the movement he realized, and following Queen's he went to Cambridge to further his theological studies in 1949. It was when he was travelling to Cambridge that he met his future wife Jill McCrory. They were married in 1953. (David Perkins SMH, Feb 7, 2013)

⁴ Inglis, Ken et al (2018), *Duneera lives: A Visual History*, Monash University Publishing, 2018.

Ken Inglis, Seumas Spark and Jay Winter, *Dunera Lives: A Visual History* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2018).

⁵ MacMahon Ball, *Nationalism and Communism in East Asia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1953).

⁶ It is important not to underestimate the importance of Queen's College in understanding Harvey Perkin's development as an important leader in church and society. Perkins was an undergraduate student at Queens before the war and as a graduate following his war time experience in the Pacific. Clearly well regarded by his fellow students he was elected as President of the Sports and Social Club in 1946 as he pursued graduate studies in theology. If the issues of peace and war had been the live discussion at Queen's in the thirties, it was the future of the Pacific region, especially South East Asia, that was the principle subject of discussion in the immediate post war period. McMahon Ball set the context with his book 'Nationalism and Communism in South East Asia, and while at Queen's, students such as Herb Feith and James Webb were developing a program emphasizing the importance of graduates becoming involved in mission and service. This climate must have had a powerful influence on Harvey Perkins.

⁷ Frank Engel, *Living in a World Community; An East Asian Experience of the World Student Christian Federation, 1931-1961* (Hong Kong: WSCF Asian Pacific region, 1994).

Perkins was awarded a scholarship to study at Wesley House, which was at the time was rather conservative Methodist University College. Perkins was already something of an expert on the Old Testament and strong enough in the Hebrew language to tutor theological students at Queen's. His main purpose at Wesley House was to write a thesis on Professor W Eichrodt, then a well-known Old Testament scholar, which did he not write in a way that enthused the examiners at Wesley House. Perhaps Perkins was too radical for Wesley House, and too enthusiastic about using the Old Testament exegesis to illustrate the way in which its stories and narratives could be used to illuminate modern societies and their politics.

Most importantly as Robert Gribben (later a scholar at Wesley House) told me, during this period Perkins took up every opportunity to spend time in Geneva where he was inspired by M M Thomas' agenda. This aimed to strengthen Indigenous regional leadership in South East Asia with the support of the ecumenical leadership in Geneva.⁸ Perkins was also a problem for Wesley House because of his increasing involvement not only in the Student Christian Movement of Great Britain, but also even more worryingly in the World Student Christian Federation because of its radical agenda (WSCF). It must have been a very exciting time to visit Geneva, as Perkins took every opportunity to do, not only because the WSCF was based there also it was the base for the World Council of Churches formed at a Conference in Amsterdam in 1948. Most of its leadership had been drawn from the Student Christian movement including Mott, J H Oldham, DT Niles and MM Thomas. Here was an opportunity to meet many of the emerging leaders of the World Council of Churches, who were then leading the World Christian Federation.⁹ With his focus on Geneva, the fact that he travelled there in every vacation may have angered Wesley House, but the experience was crucial in making possible his future career not just in the Australian Council of Churches but even more importantly in Asia.

Perkins was primarily driven by exposure in Europe to incarnational theology that emphasised the church as 'the body of Christ' and thus the need to see the future of the Church as dependent on unity and a commitment to a prophetic witness in the world. He saw in Geneva efforts to re-think the nature and mission of the Church in theological terms, which became his ongoing inspiration.¹⁰ As Perkins claimed "*I have tried to live my life theologically, grappling theologically with situations in which I find myself. I think the WSCF conference on Christians in the world struggle held in France in 1950 first gave me an awareness of the political context of theology which has been vital to my theological life ever since.*"¹¹

Perkins returned to Australia in 1949 and was appointed to the Mitcham Methodist circuit in Victoria where he sought to create a more ecumenical approach to ministry from 1953-1956. He was an enthusiastic participant in the Methodist Church's Mission to the Nation (1954-5) where he organized a strong local campaign and preached the message of the

⁸ Robert Gribben, *Interview with the author*, 2018.

⁹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, vii.

¹⁰ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*.

¹¹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxi.

Church. The theme of the mission was that of “Australia finding God” and Alan Walker, an influential Sydney Methodist clergyman and founder of Lifeline, emphasized in this mission the need for Australia to overcome the racism inherent in the White Australia policy and to see its location in the Asian region as an opportunity rather than a threat.¹²

Perkins appointment as the Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches in 1957 followed logically from his earlier involvement with both the ASCM and especially his involvement with the WSCF and the WCC in Geneva. Of course, in Australia, the ASCM had been especially important in making students more aware of the rise of nationalism in Asia and the emergence of an Asia with greater independence from colonial rule.¹³ Howe argued in her history of the ASCM that the “two main achievements of the ASCM in post-war years can be identified as fostering the emerging ecumenical movement and building Australian awareness of the Asian Pacific region.”¹⁴ This was in part an outcome of having the progressive international links through the WSCF including contacts in the Asian Pacific region such as the important Chinese Christian leader T K Zoo before the second world war and WSCF leader and later WCC Secretary following the war.

Harvey Perkins General Secretary, Australian Council of Churches (1956-1966)

In 1956, Perkins was appointed to the position of General Secretary of the Australian Council the the World Council of Churches (later called Australian Council of Churches) and held the position until 1967. The Secretary immediately prior to Perkins, Congregational Minister Rev John Garrett, had a keen interest in the future of Christianity in Asia. Perkins built on his predecessor’s work, especially in building good relations with Christian churches in Asia. John Garrett had been a significant leader in the Australian Student Christian movement and had travelled to Indonesia in 1950 to convey the good will of the Australian ecumenical movement to the newly formed Indonesian Council of Churches. Lake has noted that this trip was the first undertaken by a leader of the Australian ecumenical movement to one of the new nations of Asia and marked the beginning of substantial interaction between the Australian Council of Churches and Asian Christians and Church councils.¹⁵ It emphasized the importance of Churches making a new beginning in post- colonial Asia.

This essay is especially focused on Perkins broader role in Asia but this is not to understate his importance in building the Australian Council of Churches into strong lead institution on top of an increasingly influential ecumenical movement. In Australia Perkins was important in promoting cooperation between churches with a strong emphasis on building a more informed Church. He strongly emphasized social justice themes including the importance of land rights in working with Aboriginal people and in opposing the White Australia Policy. Perhaps most importantly he was responsible for the inaugural Australian Council of

¹² Alan Walker, *Australia Finding God*, Methodist Church Report of Mission to the Nation, 1953.

¹³ Renate Howe, *A Century of Influence: the Australian Student Christian Movement 1896-1996* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009).

¹⁴ Howe, *A Century of Influence*, 308.

¹⁵ Meredith Lake, “Western Heritage, Asian Destiny: The Australian Council of Churches Activity in Asia, 1950-1965,” *Erasmus Journal*, updated 2004, <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/eras/eras-journal-lake-m-western-heritage-asian-destinythe-australian-council-of-churches-activity-in-asia-1950-1965/>.

Churches Conference held in Melbourne in 1960.¹⁶ He was a visionary in the sense that he recognized the importance of a broad and integrated understanding of mission in Asia.

Frank Engel, who at various times was both the Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches and Secretary of the Australian Student Christian Movement was an important participant observer of the ecumenical movement in post-war Australia and in his 'History of the Australian Council of Churches' gives Perkins the credit for creating a unified vision for the principle activities of the ecumenical movement in Australia. According to Engel:

*"In 1963 there were three well developed organizations giving expression to ecumenical relationships and activities—The Australian Council of Churches, The Australian Commission for Inter Church Aid and the Australian Division of the Resettlement Department of the World Council of Churches. They all sprang from Australian responses to the needs of people, and the fact that the World Council of Churches and they were all involved in regular contact with the WCC, and yet they operated separately. It was Harvey Perkins as General Secretary, who faced up to this oddity of growth and it was his vision that brought them together."*¹⁷

Engel also noted that these reforms in the ACC were not achieved without both courage and a sense of the importance of longer term objectives. Concern about structures and boundary issues were a distraction for Perkins. His concern was for causes and people rather than constitutions and procedures. Reflecting on this period in 1991 Perkins wrote '*I suppose in some sense I have used or helped to create conciliar structures to serve the ecumenical movement or my perspectives on it. My ultimate loyalty is to the movement rather than the structures.*'¹⁸

Summing up Perkins' contribution to the ACC, Engel wrote that "*Perkins' clarified the purpose and role of the ACC at its first general meeting in 1957 and enabled its expression in a revised constitution, created a national office, built links with the Indonesian Council of Churches, launched the church and life movement, developed Australian thinking and theology on inter-church aid, helped form the Australian Council for Inter-Church Aid and was active in the World Council of Churches on inter-church aid refugees and world Service.*"¹⁹

Harvey Perkins, The Parapat Conference in Indonesia, Formation of The East Asian Christian Conference

¹⁶ David M Taylor (ed), *We were brought together: Report of the National Conference of Australian Churches held at Melbourne University* (February 2-11, 1960).

¹⁷ Frank Engel, *Times of Change 1918-1978: Christians in Australia*, Volume 2 (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1993), 232.

¹⁸ Quoted in Engel, *Times of Change*, 232.

¹⁹ Engel, *Times of Change*, 319?

The Parapat Conference in March 1957 was at the end of a long process that preceded the Second World War. It was interpreted by MM Thomas in his autobiography, 'My Ecumenical Journey', as an important stage in the post-war struggle on the part of the Churches of Asia to establish their independence within the wider Christian Church and creating the capacity for the Indigenous Churches of Asia to take control of their own destiny.²⁰

For Perkins, with his significant experience in the SCM, it provided an opportunity for him to join hands with so many colleagues he had known in the WSCF and begin to address the profound challenges that would face the Christian churches in post-colonial Asia. M M Thomas particularly stresses the importance of earlier student discussions in Asia when he singled out the Candy Conference in Sri Lanka 1948/9, as 'the first student get together after the war' and very important in having students consider the big issues to be faced by Christians in post-colonial Asia.

Perkins would later write: *"My introduction to the EACC was the Parapat Conference 1957. I went there as a consultant from a country that was not asked to send a delegate. I left with a responsibility as a general secretary to that countries NCC to help take part in the new Asian ecumenical organization.... In one sense the period of the beginning of the EACC was itself a time of vision, marked by newly independent nations of Asia and their aspirations to build comprehensive national communities. The Churches of Asia sharing the ethos of that time, grasped the vision of the peoples of Asia having a single hope, bearing single destiny, and sought to make their distinctive contribution, deriving from and contributing to the Lordship of Christ."*²¹

The Conference was organized by Kywar Than, a lay ecumenical leader and Professor from Myanmar, who had been general secretary of the WSCF from 1950-1956. MM Thomas from Kerala in Southern India had been a member of the SCM, on the staff of the WSCF, and a strategic leader of the WCC. Thomas had created a research centre in India on religion and society and helped to create through a preliminary conference the strategic context of the of the Conference, especially the broader economic social and political challenges facing the region. Perkins would later write that D T Niles, the great ecumenical leader and Methodist pastor, was in many ways was the inspiration of the conference.²² They were all student leaders in the SCM and later the central figures in Asia seeking to renew the Churches influence in the Council of Nations. Perkins especially emphasized that at the regional level the churches in Asia needed each other to belong to a fellowship of churches.²³ The challenge was to make a start to create the common membership of the Asian Churches in the Body of Christ, the preamble spoke of discerning "the movement of God's Spirit in the events of our time. It was not pious rhetoric, you could feel it in your bones."²⁴

²⁰ M.M. Thomas, *My Ecumenical Journey* (Triandrum: Ecumenical Publishing Centre, 1990), 59.

²¹ Ninian Koshy (ed), *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia, Volume 1* (Hong Kong: World Student Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Region, 2004), 130.

²² Koshy, *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*.

²³ Koshy, *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, 12.

²⁴ Koshy, *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, 131.

There are other reasons why the Parapat meeting was important to Australia. The Conference invited Harvey Perkins and Alan Brass, the Co-Secretary of the EACC from New Zealand, to sit as equal members of the conference with other Asian delegates and as D T Niles claims this represented the acceptance of the idea that Australia was very much part of Asia, European in heritage but having its destiny Asia.²⁵

Secondly, the enthusiasm that Perkins brought back to Australia led to the successful first Australian Council of Churches Conference in Australia in 1960. Upon the return of the Australian delegates from Parapat, the ACC convened a provisional Division of Studies working group with the task of preparing a report on common Christian responsibility towards an area of rapid social change.²⁶ Perkins organized a National Council of Churches Conference in Australia in 1960 to have speakers from Asia well represented. The conference speakers included important leaders of the Church in Asia including M.M. Thomas, Bishop Leslie Newbigin (India,) Bishop E.C. Sobrepena (The Philippines), M Takenaka (Japan) and Miss Renuka Mukerji? (India). In his speech, Bishop Sobrepena noted that the formation of the East Asian Christian Conference and its commitment to the evangelisation of Asia required an ecumenical approach. As Taylor wrote that "It is our common conviction that the Church should be a full participant in the new life of Asia, if she is to be effective in witnessing to Jesus Christ."²⁷ The EACC had limited resources in its early years and seemed to rely heavily on volunteers in positions such as Harvey Perkins (ACC) and Alan Brass (NZCC) to get its programs under way.

Perkins attended the WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 and published an account of the Assembly. This Assembly was important, if for no other reason than it saw the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches come together as one body. There was consequently great emphasis in this conference on the mission of the Church.²⁸

Perkins Officially in Asia

Perkins began his ecumenical ministry at the ACC in 1956 and from 1957 onwards he was heavily involved in the EACC and later the ACC that possessed a growing interest in Asia. As a post-war student at Queen's College and Melbourne University, there was great interest in Asia as colonial shackles were being left behind and independent nations were being formed. With the independence struggle increasingly successful, new leaders and governments were under pressure in new nations to build modern economies. Australia and New Zealand had geared their economies to primary products before the Second World War, and following the war attempted to become independent industrial economies based on replacing imports, especially manufactured goods, with goods made domestically.

²⁵ Rienzie Perera, "Called to prophesy, reconcile and heal", *Theologies and Cultures*, VII, no.1 (June 2010): 37.

²⁶ Lake, *Western Heritage, Asian Destiny*.

²⁷ David Taylor (ed), *We Were Brought Together: Report of the National Conference of Australian Churches* (Sydney: Australian Council for the World Council of Churches, 1960), 149.

²⁸ Harvey Perkins, *No Night There* (New Delhi: A Report of the World Council of Churches, 1962)

Similarly, the newly independent Asian nations faced the challenge of matching political independence with more economic independence. This challenge was more formidable because the inherited structures of their economies were often shaped by the colonial era. Churches in Asia faced difficulties because in missionary times churches in Asia were seen to be heavily influenced by their historic ties with Western missionaries and institutions that were more Western than Asian.²⁹ Institutions such as the International Missionary Council, the World Council of Churches, The World Student Christian Federations and the YMCA and YWCA were all seen as Western Institutions and thus not truly Asian in their ethos and interests. In the first decade following the war these institutions were also reluctant to devolve power to local and regional leadership. Perkins from the beginning understood the need for local and regional autonomy and this became very clear in the work that he did through the EACC and later the ACC.

Perkins while at the Australian Council Churches like his counterpart Alan Brass in the New Zealand Council of Churches was increasingly involved with the EACC, although for the first decade, Perkins followed Parapat behind the scenes rather than holding administrative responsibility. During the following twelve years he held a number of appointments that directly relate to his work in Asia: EACC Secretary for Inter-church Aid, Refugees and World Service (1968-71) Secretary for the WCC Commission on Churches participation in Development (1973-75) and with the CCA Secretary for Development (1976-80).³⁰

Clearly there is a story associated with each of these appointments. As Secretary for Inter-church Aid, Perkins was essentially responsible for maintaining a food relief delivery program and health services during the highly politicised Vietnam war without taking sides. Asian Christian Service (ACS) was the only international agency working in Vietnam in 1965. Perkins clearly had strong feelings about the US war in Vietnam, however, as he observed, *"There is an issue of maintaining reasonable level of political neutrality since ACS had access to only one side of the conflict other than sending medical supplies to the North."*³¹

At the Asian Ecumenical Conference on socio-economic development in Tokyo in 1970 Perkins reflected on the tensions he faced in directing this program including the issue of maintaining reasonable political neutrality; difficulty in distinguishing service positions from politics; church identity in a total war situation; refugees and displaced people had to be helped irrespective of creed and allegiance and tensions as people could not separate themselves from views of their own country.³²

This initial experience as a staff member of the EACC was an important learning experience in which Perkins learned something of the constraints that would be faced in his two later appointments with the World Council of Churches based in Geneva and with the Christian Conference of Asia. In Geneva, he was Secretary for the WCC Commission on Churches

²⁹ Harvey Perkins, *Guidelines for Development* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 1980), 4-7.

³⁰ Engel, *Living in a World Community*.

³¹ Koshy, *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, 174.

³² Koshy, *A history of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, 174

participation in Development (1973-75) and later with the CCA Secretary for Development (1976-80). In Geneva, he had the opportunity to learn more about the development theory in regions such as the Asia, Africa and Latin America. Development theory in Latin America had been influenced by people such as Paolo Freire and Frances Fanon and particularly Latin American liberation theologians. While he describes his theological approach as contextual theology, he is ready to create a model for teaching community organizations and development that draws from these rich sources. Despite these diverse sources, it is obvious in 'Roots for Vision' that Perkin had developed an integrated theory of change, which is applied in helping to prepare people to participate in developmental projects across Asia.³³

Perkins writes that *"Which way can services move? This was the crucial question which we tried to answer during my period on the Development and Service Desk of the CCA."*³⁴ *In seeking these answers, I became aware of three stages, the emphasis of moving from one to another. Beginning with an emphasis on community motivation (1976-7) the work then moved on to community organisation (1978-79) and finally to community transformation (1979-80). That movement is inherent in the nature of development."*³⁵ Perkins rather than thinking in terms of delivering services thought in terms of development. In this approach he anticipated Amartya Sen's work summed up in his *Development as Freedom* to build capabilities that would enable change movements to flourish in post-colonial Asia.³⁶

Contextual Theology

What did Perkins do in his extended period of involvement in Asia from 1957-1980? What was he trying to do? What were his achievements? Perkins wrote about what he was trying to do in theological terms as well as in terms of his theory of development. He did not think of his theology and his understanding of development as being about separate worlds, rather he saw them as being inter-dependant. In 'Roots for Vision' Perkins sets out to demonstrate their interrelatedness in both theory and practice.³⁷ As Perkins writes *"We ask how Christian hope for a better human society is served by our action, and where it points us beyond our present action; how love is released in the processes of our action and in structures we implement. The dream, the vision, the promise of a better human society, a society with a human face, belongs to the essence of the Christian gospel, which is the political message of the Kingdom of a God who is concerned with humanity and who wants people to be concerned with humanity...Political process for a more human society in the socio-political context of human hope."*³⁸

'Psalm 23' is often seen as a source of Christian comfort and hope but Perkins wants to de-spiritualize the psalm so that it is seen fundamentally about poverty and release from oppression. Perkins writes that *'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not lack, lead to green pastures and still waters'* might be read as meeting the need and providing the flock with

³³ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*.

³⁴ Perkins, *Guidelines for Development*.

³⁵ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*.

³⁶ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁷ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*.

³⁸ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxii-xxiii.

security and abundance. Releasing from a situation of want he restores life. From a situation of injustice, he leads into paths of righteousness as in 'Verse 3'. Releasing from a situation, even foreshadowed death, He restores strengths. In the place of release and restoration a great reversal takes place—In place of shame and the disgrace of want, a seat of honour is provided at the table of the Lord, within the enemy's sight. This is a common picture of social transformation in the bible.' This is very much the biblical realism of Harvey Perkins the old testament scholar recognizing the universal message that emerges from an informed exegesis.

A major theme to his approach in 'Roots for Vision' to working in Asia is that of rereading the Bible as stories of liberation. Perkins sees two strong recurring themes in Asian religious thought of 'transcendentalism' and 'over spiritualisation' leading to barriers to getting across the Christian message. He argues that there is a need for the "*whole process of reinterpretation of the Bible as being necessary to overcome individualisation. When this is done the beatitudes' no longer speak of a disturbing piety, but express the way the hope, the vision of the people of God, contending with oppression, hungering, thirsting after justice, identifying with the poor and seeking the wellbeing of people, thus 'Repentance is socialised and therefore radicalised.'*"³⁹ Perkins further claims that '*I am searching for a biblical liberationist faith and that faith is leading me to a communal vision that faith and vision involves Christian obedience that I commend as the response of all Christians.'*"⁴⁰ Perkins also argues that '*The kingdom is not otherworldly, but to be realized 'on earth' in history. It is the reality of God at work in the world, pursuing his work and purpose. The actions for justice, the struggles for human liberation, point to it. Of course, they may also betray it; the wheat and the tares grow together. But every action in justice can still be a mustard tree, Mark 4.31 small in beginnings, but ultimately liberation that provides shade for many. The kingdom is something to look forward to, like a candle in a deep surrounding darkness...It gives hope in the depths of struggle for liberation when the dominating powers prevail and oppress.*"⁴¹ Perkins illustrates here the grounding of his theology both in the bible and in the contemporary world especially in post-colonial Asia struggling to break free from the oppressive economic and social structures which are the legacy of colonialism.

Biblical Realism: Contextual Theology

In Chapter 5 of 'Roots for Vision', Perkins illustrates how he used biblical language to inspire people to the concreteness of the biblical message and to how oppression is the root cause of poverty. Perkins emphasises that "you cannot have the oppressed without an oppressor."⁴²

In some respects, contextual theology echoes biblical theology of an earlier era. As far as Perkins is concerned this would not ignore the significant influence of liberation theology (Rubem Alves, Miguez Bonino, Julio de Santa Ana) and Perkins recognizes the importance of liberation theology when it comes to Asia, Africa and Latin America. As Perkins argues "*Christians turn to theology in their struggle with oppression- the enslavement of their*

³⁹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxv.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxxii.

⁴¹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxxiii.

⁴² Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xxiii.

*peoples, racial oppression colonial exploitation, the alliance of new elites in newly politically independent countries with dominating structures of neo colonialism, the loss of human dignity and the destruction of cultural identity'... People searching for theological liberation find it in the Bible, discovering for themselves. It is the theology of involved people living with the gut consequences of oppression but also with the bible we put in their hands"*⁴³

Perkins argues that 'Contextual Theology' is a reaction against traditional theology that so rarely questions existing social structures and tends to be elitist and authoritarian. It emphasises the universal truth against 'Contextual Theology's' focus on the inductive and partial, the people and their situation. 'Contextual Theology' must be seen in contrast with an ethos that sets itself at a distance from political processes. 'Contextual Theology' is essentially a political theology, its leadership is among the oppressed, a theology on the liberation of the oppressed.⁴⁴

Perkins' theology is a radical theology based an interpretation of the Bible that sees in the biblical word a source of realistic commentary on the fundamental issues that people face in everyday life. It recognizes that responding to peoples' issues needs to emphasize the realities of human conflict and to call out the oppressors who deny the possibility of human freedom.

Perkins and his theory of development

Perkins in his role as Secretary of Development and Service with the Christian Conference of Asia organised many workshops in Asia including Myanmar, Philippines and Indonesia. This was to think through and activate the CCA's commitment to encourage development and provide services to Asian countries in the name of the Christian Church. As Perkins declares "*We believe as Christians, there are three main elements in the development process, people need to be released from bondage, people need to be restored from being mere objects to their role as subjects on society. Society itself needs to be transformed.*"⁴⁵ Focusing on similar themes, Perkins argues that "*Development then is the process whereby the people, the poor and the oppressed being the prime bearers of humanization, liberate themselves from all forms of enslavement and create a condition where there is no oppressor and oppressed. This frees persons, communities and nations to realize their full potential as every individual has access to wealth, power, respect, knowledge and wellbeing. This liberating process involves fundamental changes in the social order we live in.*"⁴⁶

These in-principle statements are set against the realities that were recognized and experienced in contemporary Asia still under foreign control, having its resources exploited, in debt under neo-colonialism, facing authoritarian structures of power and continuing to be subjected to cultural domination.

⁴³ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 289.

⁴⁴ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 292.

⁴⁵ Perkins, *Guidelines for Development*, 1.

⁴⁶ Perkins, *Guidelines for Development*, 1.

Perkins in taking up his role in the mid 1970s sought to guide the existing and new programs around the challenges in motivating and organizing communities with the ultimate aim of working towards the necessary social transformation.⁴⁷ His method of working with the region was through a series of workshops designed to think through a process addressing the issues of social development in Asian region. The workshops appeared to have behind them always a biblical and theological dimension. Perkins writes that *“the three-fold process of releasing, restoring and transforming which we found to be basic in the Bible”, and which we worked in an understanding of our program dynamic. Increasing focus on social and structural analysis directed our attention to the biblical language of ‘yokes’ as depicting oppression through national and international power structures. That enabled us to discover in the Bible a lively awareness of dominant community, operating in political, economic, social and religious institutions which stood at the centre of prophecy and the ministry of Jesus.”*⁴⁸

While inspired by the bible and Christian Theology as the director in 1976 of the ACC development and Service program in the Asian region, Perkins contemplates the processes of change that will be necessary to motivate and organize people. Perkins aimed to do so in ways that would ultimately realize a social transformation of societies, who while free of colonial occupation, still suffered from poverty and powerlessness in a region devastated by World War Two. Perkins is clear that substantial change will only follow if people are motivated to demand and work for change before finally being ready to pursue a course of social transformation. He clearly gave very careful thought as to how people might be motivated. He contrasted on the one hand what he called ‘the harmony’ approach which he contrasted with ‘struggle’. While the ‘harmony’ model of community motivation seeks to prepare people for change, help them to cope with it, and make available to them the benefits of change, change is always being introduced by others, the ‘struggle’ model seeks to enable people to be participators in and initiators of processes of change.”⁴⁹

His overarching objective was to ‘let the people grow’. A more consensual approach recognizes the depth of cultural factors, such as relating to attitudes to male and female roles or the caste system. In Indonesia local communities may be incorporated into ‘nation building’, and encouraged to participate in the slow progress of Indonesian economy/society. On the other hand, Perkins emphasises the importance of people struggling to assert their right to pursue social development. He asks *“Have I expressed the differences too far? I am not saying that only the political struggle for justice is valid. Recognized that in the wholeness of Isaiah we are called not only to break the fetters of injustice but also to bestow care on the needy. But I find it essential to ‘human development’ that the fetters of injustice are broken. I do not want to see the poor and oppressed used and manipulated as tools to serve any particular revolution or ideology of right or left. They must know that the struggle for justice is theirs, and acquire powers for their struggle.”*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xi.

⁴⁸ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, xi.

⁴⁹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 48.

⁵⁰ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 57.

Just as in Biblical times, Asia as a rural society was strongly rooted in local communities, thus the relevance of community development and community organisation in Asia. Perkins was interested in mobilising both rural and urban industrial communities. Early influences of urban industrial missions in Singapore, Manila and Seoul, which in turn were influenced by Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) program that Alinsky had originally organized in Chicago. Perkins recognises that while “change is inevitable it is only through organisation that the issue of power can be confronted. A vital part of the struggle for power is the aspirations and response of the poor and their will to act. Although the poor need allies in their struggle with the powerful, those allies will only be able to claim the attention of the powerful when they have clear credibility with the poor.”⁵¹ In line with this philosophy the CCA decided that its ministering strategies needed to move away from pastoral ministry to *“lifting up people’s participation in decision making, and towards action focused in different groups of people instead of undifferentiated service in the communities.”*⁵²

People may fall victim to money lenders or landlords and suffer neglect from government agencies because of lack of literacy or skills and may through organisation win small victories but *“Whether actions succeed or not the people can claim a new dignity by being able to participate in decisions which effect their basic interests, learn through reflecting on their experiences, and sometimes become participants in the wider national struggles for justice.”*⁵³ Perkins emphasises that in primary communities a consensus approach around shared goal may work, but in more complex communities it is important to build an alternative power base to confront established power structures. This may be focused on local concrete issues around which people may organise, although in Asia the authoritarian nature of national government may spark change movements of resistance that will take on a national character. Perkins recognized that while the focus on power is important, it is also necessary for there to be an emphasis on cultural awareness. The people must feel dignity in themselves, a sense of value in their culture and tradition and a pride in what they do and how they do it. The importance of appropriate technology is relevant to this point. This is a fundamental issue for Perkins, who claims that *“The people and their human development require a transformation of the society by whose power structures they are crushed, but the process of transformation must preserve and elevate that human development as the goal of transformation.”*⁵⁴ Perkins comments here on the tension between empowerment and the need at the end of the day to focus on human development.

Tools and Goals for Social Transformation (p. 93)

Perkins questions the view in bodies like ACC that decision-making belongs to experts, that progress is good and that what is good for elites ultimately is good for the people. As Perkins argues that *“The socio cultural transformational task is therefore in the first place is to destroy the myths which internalize attitudes of acceptance of those without decision*

⁵¹ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 59.

⁵² Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 59.

⁵³ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 59.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 69.

making power. By education, the mass media, social relations, the some-times religion, the people are told who they are, what is their place in society, what is expected of them, what they can do."⁵⁵ By implication Perkins' work hopes to free people from such myths so that they are able to struggle for the right to make choices, and to pursue them until a community of justice is realized.

Perkins is persuasive in arguing for social transformation as the result of highly motivated people working to organize communities and working to change the political culture. However, the evidence is scarce when seeking to assess the impact of the processes put in place by the CCA. A conference at Kalyani near Calcutta (1982) does look critically at community based programs to try to assess progress. One of the conclusions of this consultation was that "*Humanization is a process as well as a social goal.*" It is important for the humanizing experience to be real among people in the process of struggling for community transformation, and when it is, it is like a foretaste or early participation in the society we seek. The consultation included many stories illustrating the transformative power of community based programs.⁵⁶

On the other hand, some projects ended up benefitting the rich because of a failure to analyse the power factors in the community. Sometimes they became dominated by the functional purpose losing the representative transformation, sometimes they support or supplement government plans and projects, instead of organizing people for power to bargain with government. Sometimes they instil competitive profit-seeking which obstructs the building of any new community society. People must be full participants, planning and implementing according to their needs, so they are always aware that the struggle is theirs.

Of course, assumptions underlying evaluation are most important:

- How does the project release people, build sharing community and enhance the solidarity of the people?
- Does the project give power to the people to share their own future as a community, and uncover potentialities and strengths with cultural realities?
- Does the project enhance their understanding of their situation and the power factors operating within it, and their will to do something to change it?

Perkins' analysis of the importance of collective power with his insight into the importance of 'capability building' indicated that Perkins was not only a profound biblical scholar, but he understood the importance of social development as a sociological concept. This meant that he could integrate his biblical wisdom with quite deep insight into working with people often desperately poor to achieve social transformation.

Assessment of Perkins

⁵⁵ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*, 93.

⁵⁶ Perkins, *Roots for Vision*

The Student Christian Movement deeply influenced Harvey Perkins before the Second World War and even more in Cambridge following the war through his growing involvement with the World Student Christian Federation. His theology was always a biblical theology largely grounded in the stories of the Old Testament that illustrated themes of justice and equality, as he claims that *“there cannot be the oppressed without there being an oppressor.”*⁵⁷ Perkins was a strong leader although in no sense an authoritarian. He was deeply committed to Christian unity although not unity for its own sake. He understood that the power of the biblical witness was best illustrated by practice in continuing aid through the Vietnam War. He could weld together his religious philosophy with a positive human development philosophy and approach. He brought the prism which he and colleagues in the WCC had developed for analyzing power structures and relationships in development. He developed a Biblical-theological-ideological framework in which to assess and formulate policies and establish priorities – a sort of prism through which to analyse situations: *What is happening to the people for whom this program is being run? Who holds the power? Who makes the decisions? Who holds the purse strings? Who decides the priorities?* Perkins is very clear that for Christians transferring power to the dispossessed must always be the highest priority.

Conclusion

John Brown, post war missionary in Korea and the strategic leader of the Board of Missions of the Uniting Church of Australia knew Perkins well. ‘Harvey was a person of great intellect, but also of great humility. He encouraged and challenged all of us, his colleagues, affirming our strengths and making suggestions as to how to resolve issues which we were handling without ever taking over. He taught us new skills of analysis as a basis for planning’. For Harvey it was the twin approach that was important.” I deliberately sought to relate biblical theology and social action for justice and to nurture action theologically’...*“doing theology contextually is a process of action and reflection fashioned out of historical involvement.”*⁵⁸

It is often forgotten the enormous contribution many Australians have made to the international Ecumenical movement and to the challenge of human development in often deeply distressed communities. There has been no more important example than that of the Reverend Harvey Perkins.

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