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BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS - BIRA VI

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: FUNDAMENTALISM AND  
VIOLENCE, PROCLAMATION AND OUR COMMON HOME

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# I. THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN ASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF *NOSTRA AETATE*

- Mr. Javaid William

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference FABC office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) and the staff of this prestigious theological institution for inviting me to speak on the topic of "Fundamentalism & Religious Violence in Asia in the context of *Nostra Aetate*".

## **The Rise of Fundamentalism**

The concept of fundamentalism is no longer confined to the context of extreme behavior whether it be political or militant as was in the 1970s, but has rather gone much further in so that this leaves a fine line with religious violence. Generally, fundamentalism reveals a clash between the ideas of 'modern society and modern morality' (Crabtree 2012). In a broader spectrum, fundamentalism highlights oppression, violence which has resulted from Judaism and Christianity in the past and more prone in the present Islamic fundamentalism. Until very recently, the emergence of Buddhist extremist is sprouting including the increasing religious violence and oppression at the hands of Hindu extremists.

An individual becomes a 'fundamentalist' in the eyes of the other when he or she is said to uphold their belief in the very literal and strict interpretation of their scriptures. This begins to cross the line when the belief of the other is disrespected, disregarded, offering a complete shut out to a different faith with imposition regarding one's own faith supreme rejecting the other completely. An inflexible relationship is developed ignoring different cultures and their relationships necessary to bind society for prosperity, peace, growth and development.

There were many anti-colonial movements based on Islamic revivalism in the first half of the twentieth century. In so far as these Islamists played on the insecurities of social groups that were disappearing as society was transformed by capitalism and imperialism, they cannot be considered progressive. But in so far as this Islamism were also often an appeal to the radical currents produced by society's transformation, neither can it be characterized in any straightforward way as reactionary.

The combined and uneven development of capitalism in the context of imperialism has set the basic framework for political Islam's development over the last 100 years. It has developed in Third World societies traumatized by the impact of capitalist development.

Political Islam, while apparently offering a solution to contradictions for predominantly Muslim Third World societies, does not find its support equally in all sections of those societies. It has tended to get its mass support mainly from the petty bourgeoisie: landowners, small manufacturers and shopkeepers who are under constantly increasing pressure from emerging local capitalists and finance capital, peasants who are being forced into urban areas and unemployment by capitalist farming—all those who fear, or are, losing out as the capitalist modernization of their society proceeds.

Here it is important to understand that this is one of the reasons fundamentalism is becoming hard to tackle due to its deep rooted problems related to peace, security in countries, the economic situation with an increasingly burdened lower and middle class as well as the severe effects of climate change and food insecurity in the region. South Asia is experiencing tremendously the effects of religious violence and fundamentalism making the region a flash point on the world map. Recent clashes and unrest in India paints a picture of communal violence in the country exhibiting extreme intolerance and a concerted effort to promote 'communal polarization'. Countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh hold high counts of both reported and unreported cases of oppression.

As a case study of Pakistan, one witnesses constant attacks on religious minorities and discriminatory laws which do not allow minorities to practice their rights.

Below are some remembered conflicts and clashes from around the world:

Myanmar /Burma 1948 Buddhists vs. Christians  
Israel/Palestinian 1968 Jews vs. Arabs (Muslims-Christians)  
Northern Ireland 1969 Catholic vs. Protestants  
Philippines (Mindanao) 1970 Muslims vs. Christians (Catholics)  
Bangladesh 1973 Buddhists vs. Christians  
Lebanon 1975 Shiites supported by Syria (Amal) vs. Shiites supported by Iran (Hezbollah)

Ethiopia (Oromo) 1976 Muslims vs. Central government  
 India (Punjab) 1982 Sikhs vs. Central government  
 Sudan 1983 Muslims vs. Native religions  
 Mali-Tuareg Nomads 1990 Muslims vs. Central government  
 Azerbaijan 1990 Muslims vs. Christian Armenians  
 India (Kashmir) 1990 Muslims vs. Central government (Hindu)  
 Indonesia (Aceh) 1990 Muslims vs. Central government (Muslim)  
 Iraq 1991 Sunnites vs. Shiites  
 Yugoslavia (Croatia) 1991 Serbian orthodox Christians vs. Roman Catholic Christians  
 Yugoslavia (Bosnia) 1991 Orthodox Christians vs. Catholics vs. Muslims  
 Afghanistan 1992 Fundamentalist Muslims vs. Moderate Muslims  
 Tajikistan 1992 Muslims vs. Orthodox Christians  
 Egypt 1977 Muslims vs. Central government (Muslim) Muslims vs. Coptic Christians  
 Tunisia 1978 Muslims vs. Central government (Muslim)  
 Algeria 1988 Muslims vs. Central government  
 Uzbekistan 1989 Sunite Uzbeks vs. Shiite Meschetes  
 India (Uttar- Pradesh) 1992 Hindus vs. Muslims  
 Sri Lanka 1983 Hindus vs. Muslims

### **Christian Villages Attacked and Burned in Pakistan**

Year	Village	City/Distt.	Province
1955	Matty Pind	Kasur	Punjab
1997	Shanti Nagar	Khanewal	Punjab
2001	Bahawalpur	Bahawalpur	Punjab
2005	Sangla Hill	Nankana Saab	Punjab
2009	Gojra	Faisalabad	Punjab
2009	Baminiwal	Kasur	Punjab
2009	Korian	Kasur	Punjab
2009	Jathikay	Sialkot	Punjab
2012	LDA Quarters	Lahore	Punjab
2012	Essa Nagari	Karachi	Sindh
2013	Joseph Colony	Lahore	Punjab
2013	Francis Colony	Gujranwala	Punjab

In the perspective of Pakistan, especially in far-flung areas, the young people (with limited education) are getting increasingly radicalized in their thoughts or behavior or may be in their actions. In our context, the radicalization implies the mindset and orientations of the people and groups advocating and supporting drastic changes in the society and the political system based on their interruption of religious scripture and traditions. These individuals and groups are uncompromising in their interpretation of religious writings and traditions and thus intolerant towards other versions of the same text and traditions or version of the state and the society. The economic situation of the area began to decline with a significant rise in poverty after the 2010 floods in the country, and lack of education facilities provided by the government, engaging with militant groups seemed like the brighter prospect to the young people there. In the context of India greater alienation of the religious groups and cultural groups in some states is causing a rush towards religious violence and lack of mutual respect among these groups making it harder for them to live together by the day. Afghanistan and its war torn fabric and lack of opportunities is disintegrating society there leaving behind breeding ground for fanning extremist and fundamentalist ideas. The problems these countries are facing are leading to greater expulsion of minorities as a result of the intolerance in their countries where for example, Christians of Pakistan are seeking asylum elsewhere and escaping the violence without a proper direction.

### **Fundamentalism - Shifting Societies in the Perspective of Migrants**

Islamic fundamentalism is not only on the rise in Asia, but is also painting a horrific picture of intolerance in the Middle East, and slowly entering the western region with incidents of prejudice and hatred. The concept of fundamentalism in the modern world is also gaining diverse manifestations, components, and different contextual historical and societal conditions. These conditions are forcing communities, societies and believers to flee severe forms of discrimination, violence and intolerance in their regions.

Leaving once home is the hardest decision people have to make in their lifetime and are only forced to do so in the light of what circumstances ask of them. The migrant issue is a burning topic world over being not only hard to deal with for those migrating but

also those who are being compelled to host fellow human beings. At the core of the migrant issue lies religious violence and civil war that made them do so in the first place. There are more displaced people and refugees now than at any other time in recorded history, 60 million in all, and they are on the march in numbers not seen since World War II. They are coming not just from Syria, but from an array of countries and regions, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, even Haiti, as well as any of a dozen or so nations in sub-Saharan and North Africa. They are unofficial ambassadors of failed states, unending wars, and intractable conflicts. The most striking thing about the current migration crisis, however, is how much bigger it could still get.

Islamic militants in these countries have taken on the worst forms of religious violence with a self-proclaimed 'emerging caliphate' through the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant being the cause of ethnic cleansing at a 'historical scale'. The threat is even more alarming when we question, if this threat cannot be countered and the brutal writ sustains, and if territorial gains of the militants continue to rise. A quarter of Afghans told a Gallup Poll that they want to leave, and more than 100,000 are expected to try to flee to Europe this year. There are between six million and eight million people displaced in Syria, along with more than four million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Egypt's five million or more Copts, the Middle East's last remaining major Christian sect, are deeply worried about their future in an unstable and hostile country. Ancient minority groups like the Yazidis of Iraq are already homeless, as are many small communities of Assyrian, Nestorian and Chaldean Christians from northern Iraq. While Yemenis have yet to abandon their homeland in substantial numbers, their plight is worsening daily amid wartime shortages of food and medicine and persistent bombardment by Saudi warplanes. Yemen is not much farther away from Europe than Eritrea, now the biggest source of African refugees, just across the Red Sea, and at some 25 million it is as populous as Afghanistan. Nor it is only the Middle East and North Africa that European leaders need to consider. The Gallup Poll, based on data compiled from more than 450,000 interviews in 151 nations from 2009 to 2011, found that in Nigeria, which already has double the population of Germany, 40 percent of people would emigrate to the West if they could. And the lesson of 2015 – for them and much of the world – is that they can.

Social scientists predict that scores of mass movements could continue to rise in the years to come if ruthless modern forms of fundamentalism cannot be beaten and these include using water as a weapon of war, resorting to beheadings, rape, torture and attacks. It is also important to note that psychological warfare is also being used in this latest form of fundamentalism highly using young people as a tool for more absorption and acceptance of the concept of Islamic fundamentalism such as the Shura Council of the Islamic Youth in Libya. It is also ironic that a large number of recruited youth are migrants to western countries where they have experienced a loss of their identity, disconnectedness, not being welcome or accepted at home, also not being deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of their parents. Though religious education does also induce the transition to radical views, the youth however that is seen to be integrated more with host communities shifting societies becoming more vulnerable to radicalization and religious fundamentalism seeking to be part of the 'sub-culture of jihadists'. This serves as fertile ground for youth to be engaged in radicalism recruitments. Racism experienced by minority communities, alongside failed integration, feeds the conflict between the extremes in society.

As the custodian of the Catholic faith, the Holy Father Pope Francis used strong words of condemnation of the actions of brutality against Christians at the hands of ISIS revisiting the Holy Father Saint Pope John Paul II who had warned world governments and religious leaders of times to rediscover paths of peace which was not found and the lack of which is why we suffer these consequences today. What was needed more than invasions led by western countries was building the foundations of dialogue and peace where peace, security and people's solidarity are the pre-conditions for poverty reduction and sustainable development. The Catholic Church in this regard, through the *Nostra Aetate* put forward a declaration on the relationship of the Church to the Non-Christian Religions at the Second Vatican Council, the grounding principle of which is that

**'Humanity forms but one community'**

The document *Nostra Aetate* recognizes how people look at their religion for answers to life, problems, humanity, what is right and wrong, the meanings of suffering, how happiness can be sought and

what rewards follow death as well as the very complex fabric of our existence and how it all comes together. The document not only encompasses respect and recognition for all religions but also acknowledges some common heritage among religions, deploring persecutions and hatred. Though this is very much noteworthy, efforts for Interreligious dialogue must gain more momentum if communities must live together peacefully and not be forced to disintegrate giving rise to conflict and communities henceforth having to be displaced.

According to the Church's understanding, "society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. When the common good of the society of men and women is guaranteed, social justice takes its course since the person is the ultimate end of the society"<sup>1</sup>. The common good includes religious freedom which is a basic right of human being. On the part of religious leaders of the Church and Islam, efforts are made for co-existence of both religions but in reality Christians face uninterrupted cycle of persecution, structural and institutional discrimination, demonization and bigotry around the globe. According to the Pope Francis and the statistics of Aid to the Church in Need there are more martyrs today than there were in the first centuries. Religious persecution raises its ugly head because a particular faith considers itself superior to all other faiths which results religious intolerance and co-existence replaces suspicion, bigotry and hatred. There can be no true peace without religious freedom.

The Vatican Council II declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Without religious freedom a society cannot live in harmony. This freedom means that "all human beings should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against one's convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others. The right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself"<sup>2</sup>. Contrary

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1928, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, n.2.



to that we find that religious extremism has stripped people away from their basic rights of freedom to religion, conviction and thought in the Middle East in general and Pakistan in particular.

### **Climate Change and Food Security**

Voluminous of the migrants are fleeing persecution, poverty, ethnic and religious strife and war, but these afflictions are often symptoms of more profound changes.

Middle East and Africa, borders drawn by Ottoman dynasts and European colonialists are breaking down as the autocratic Arab states that enforced a grim peace for generations continue to implode. As traditional lines of authority break down, radical groups like the Islamic State and Boko Haram, in Nigeria, seek to fill the vacuum while minority sects and ethnic groups suffer unspeakable treatment at their hands.

Climate change, too, is roiling societies across the Middle East and Africa. Syria was in the grip of a prolonged drought when war broke out, and large areas of sub-Saharan Africa are becoming uninhabitable. With rising sea levels, a single typhoon in the Bay of Bengal could drive millions of Bangladeshis from their homes in low-lying coastal areas and render that land uninhabitable, too.

Europe has spawned mass movements of refugees in the not-too-distant past – 700,000 from the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1993, 1.1 million from Eastern Europe as the Iron Curtain was torn down in 1989 – but what is new now is not just the scale of the arrivals, in such large numbers over such a short period of time. It is also the sheer number and variety of problem places they are leaving behind.

A serious agreement on climate change is also an insurance policy against future mass migration. We know well that the Syrian disaster had some of its roots in the mega-droughts of the last decade. Many more environmental refugees are sure to follow a business-as-usual trajectory of global warming. The climate negotiations in Paris are therefore a key piece of the puzzle.

### **Peace & Conflict**

Migrants may come from very different cultures, social and economic jealousies appear and are often accompanied by a perception among the locals that the migrants will eventually wipe them out. Therefore, not only do migrants change the number and

age-composition of the population, they may also alter the social, economic and political composition of the population. A society may not be necessarily prepared to face a fast change in population composition. In particular, one can argue that change in ethnic composition is more likely to become an important issue with the rising flow of migration, especially during the current era of globalization when people from various cultural backgrounds move around the world. Ethnicity and religion become very crucial factors in determining cultural markers among people. Ideological tension will appear in the more subtle politics of identity. Sen (2006) argues that rising identity may have two opposing sides, one positive and the other negative. On the positive side, rising identity may be an asset for a society by increasing the sense of belonging in a community. On the negative side, rising identity may be detrimental to the society because a strong identity might mean that other people are excluded. A well-integrated community, with strong internal solidarity, might suddenly show its ugly side when migrants (strangers) enter the community. The adversity of exclusion might occur at the same time as the gifts of inclusion. Violence resulting from identity conflicts has occurred all around the world. Al Qaeda is a recent example of a group that has heavily cultivated and exploited a militant Islamic identity, with Westerners as its specific target.

Considering the major structural changes introduced in the legal as well as social system over the last three decades. The society in Pakistan has reached to a point where the fundamental of all religious values i.e. Peace seems to have been forgotten and society is geared towards further divisions and classes and sects. In order to forestall this trend and to salvage the peaceful coexistence and the country itself, it is need of the hour to develop a strong strategy for interfaith harmony by respecting others views and identities and to reform the overall state structure acceptable to all faiths.

After spelling out what interfaith is and how we can use religion for peace. It is equally important to have a glance over the recent shift in Pakistani society which has gone intensely violent with religious sentiments especially after 9/11 tragic event. The extremism was otherwise simmering, but it was contained within the sectarian bounds of Sunnis and Shites and radical Muslims vs minority Christians. But during the last decade radicalisation has seen upsurge socially and politically amongst some quarters of public.

Some religious factions strongly believe that US forces in Afghanistan needs to return and attacks on them are legitimate and are considered Jihad. Whereas other factions do not go that far and limit themselves to sectarian and interfaith hatred. This genesis of hatred caused by ideological misunderstanding, vested interests, political power infects the mindset of youth and pave way for violence within and outside Pakistan especially in Afghanistan, Kashmir etc. Similarly, the counter reaction from the other side also aggravates the situation. Thus, it disturbs the local as well international peace. If we see the pre-requisites for terrorism are widely scattered in the developing Pakistani society. The already prevalent conflicts like poverty, unemployment, ethnicity, politicization of religion and sectarianism can make the situation worse. As Walter Laqueur stated, "Third world terrorism was, almost without exception, inspired by nationalism or political religion".

### **Fundamentalism in the context of *Nostra Aetate***

In world full of hunger, marked with armed conflicts resulting refugee crisis, volatile food prices and social unrest these statistics call for environmental, social, moral and economic justice. Many people around us are denied right to basic food notwithstanding the fact the world has enough food for everyone. Vatican II said that all human beings have right to access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life such as food, clothing, housing, the right to education, work, to one's good name, to respect, to proper knowledge, the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard one's privacy and rightful freedom even in matters of religion.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that in this list food takes the first place. The council further encourages organizations of the international community to provide for food, hygiene, education, employment and so on.<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI said that the elimination of world hunger is a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of our planet. We need to have a 'network of economic institutions capable for guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs and address issues which create food crisis. Pope Benedict XVI further urged that the problem of food insecurity

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<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 84

be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries. This can be done by investing in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, organization of markets and in the development and dissemination of agricultural technology that can make the best use of the human, natural and socio-economic resources that are more readily available at the local level, while guaranteeing their sustainability over the long term as well.<sup>5</sup> While addressing the Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO) on the occasion of the World Summit on Food Security in 2009 Pope Benedict XVI said that the development and dissemination of agricultural technology must be employed to produce more food and make sure of their sustainability. Achieving durable results there must be a collective effort based on the principle of subsidiarity and concept of cooperation while making sure that local communities are also involved in decision making process that they may not feel injustice done to them.<sup>6</sup> He urged the people to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

Formed from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7) and created in the image and likeness of God, human being is connected with nature. This aspect of our creation calls us to love our fellow humans through peaceful and harmonious co-existence based on justice with nature which was likewise created by God. For this reason we are part of the environment and we live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect.<sup>8</sup> Vatican II stated that the social order and its development must constantly yield to the good of the person since the order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons.<sup>9</sup> It does not mean that human beings are infallible master of all what exists on earth. Human beings and is at their disposal has

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<sup>5</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 27

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to FAO on the occasion of the World Summit on Food Security, 16 November 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 27

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, n.81

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n.81

had disastrous results. In more recent times, this overly unilateral and anthropocentric vision has at time been used to justify environmental depredation.<sup>10</sup> How will future generation view us? Would they take pride in our existence before them or condemn our policies and actions, which brought disaster to them. If we are continuously engaged in armed and ideological conflicts then we cannot act collectively to save our environment.

Fraternal living in harmony with nature is essential to preserve and protect our today and make a better tomorrow.

*Nostra Aetate* though reflecting the spirit of dialogue of the Catholic Church needs to be acted and build on now and adapted during the current times as issues of fundamentalism and religious violence have become far reaching with modern techniques and approach. As the Church, the message and essence of the *Nostra Aetate* and the other Vatican documents need to be implemented as per the need of the hour, with a modern and substantial approach for reaching out with the message of peaceful coexistence and living together for a just society initiating a dialogue of life.

“Peace, security and people’s solidarity are the preconditions for poverty reduction and sustainable development”

This harmonious co-existence, the reign of justice and peace and integrity of creation is possible only when people begin to love God and neighbor in words and deeds, when their actions are governed not for domination but service, not for glory but obedience, not for wealth but equality, not for power but service in love, not for self-love but charity, not for division but harmony, not in pride but humility and not in self-indulgence but restraint. In international, national and religious conflicts, Pope Francis says “walls are never solutions but bridges are.’ Let us be people who build bridges for peaceful co-existence of all people on this planet.

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<sup>10</sup> Devadass, C. (Ed.) *Towards Responsible Stewardship of Creation. An Asian Christian Approach*, p.38

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## **II. PROCLAIM “CHRIST AS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE” WHILE RESPECTING AT THE SAME TIME ALL THAT IS TRUE AND HOLY IN THE RELIGIONS**

*- Fr. Andrew Gimenez Recepcion*

### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1 Wide Picture*

In scanning the horizon of our present history, one could be tempted to doubt whether the vision of *Nostra Aetate* has any prophetic significance in our time given the growing clash of civilizations caused by religions. There seems to be a looming cloud of destruction caused by some conflicts due to religious differences and intolerance. The daily news do not give us much opportunity to

hope that there could be a better world of harmony and peace. It is enough to remember the recent conflicts in Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, Israel and other countries where religion is a source of division and violence.

The wider picture depicted by the media gives the impression that religions are agents of division instead of unity; that religions remain to be the major obstacle to peace among peoples and communities; that religions exacerbate the already existing animosity among religions coming from rigid ideological interpretations of doctrine and practice often expressed through fundamentalism and extremism that do not actually give justice to the truth of faith in the actual and daily experience of men and women of diverse faiths particularly in the context of Asia.

Allow me to paint a different picture of the present experience among religions by highlighting some snapshots that capture a different way of looking at the faithing experience of the members of other religions through the optic of mutual respect and appreciation of the others' tradition and life.

## *1.2 Local Snapshots*

### *1.2.1 A Muslim Youth from Marawi, Philippines*

A Muslim youth from Marawi in Mindanao in the Philippines decided to stay for a few months together with a group of Catholic youth from all over the world in a house where the only law is constant and reciprocal charity. It was not easy for the Catholic youth to live together with someone who was different especially in overcoming biases towards Muslims coming from Mindanao. The experience of living together guided by the law of love made a difference in overcoming their personal and religious differences. The Catholics tried not to eat pork and they made it a point that the food that they ate was *halal*. Also, when the Catholics would go to mass, they would encourage the Muslim youth to become a good Muslim by preparing her prayer mat and also a basin of water for her ablution. It was heartwarming to see how barriers were overcome because there was the constant desire of each one to live together in the spirit of the Golden Rule.

### *1.2.2 A Buddhist Monk from Thailand*

A Buddhist monk from the North of Thailand had the opportunity to visit the International center of the Focolare in the Italian city of



Florence. The monk stayed with a community of men who belong to different institutes of consecrated life. It was winter. The only language spoken was Italian. There seemed to be many communication barriers that needed to be overcome. Instead of communicating with words, the religious men who were with the monk communicated through concrete acts of charity by giving him more blankets, by adjusting the thermostat to make his room warmer, by preparing food that would be suitable for him, and by giving personal space for his meditation. At the end of his stay, the monk through a translator shared his experience in which he expressed his gratitude to the community for their making him feel at home. On another occasion, he shared how he understood the cross of Jesus Christ. He confessed that he felt very uncomfortable at the sight of the suffering of Jesus crucified on the cross. His experience with Christians, however, made him understand that it is only selfless love that can make a God give his life by dying on the cross.

#### *1.2.3 Rissho-Kosei-Kai from Japan*

A group of mothers who belong to the popular Buddhist movement in Japan *Rissho-Kosei-Kai* has visited a community of Catholics for an experience of dialogue of life. Many of the Buddhist mothers could only speak Japanese. The few days they spent with the Catholic community went beyond the eloquence of language because the only way to communicate was through concrete acts of kindness and gestures of friendship and appreciation of one's religious tradition and practices. The experiences shared after a few days of dialogue expressed that both Buddhists and Catholics felt strongly the spirit of belonging to one Asian family.

#### *1.2.4. A Muslim Family from Damascus, Syria*

In Damascus, some Muslim families that were greatly affected by the growing conflict and violence in Syria decided to leave the country for good because of the worsening situation of peace. One of the families lost their two sons when a bomb hit their house. It had been a painful situation for the Muslim parents who lost their two sons. This situation became an occasion for some Christian families to reach out to them and help them cope with their loss and they even offered them a room in their houses. Muslim parents shared how they experienced a new sense of hope through the concrete acts of charity offered by the Christians. When the family finally left

Damascus to seek asylum in another country, they felt profoundly that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters in spite of differences in religion while being in the midst of hatred and violence.

These snapshots of local experiences give us the possibility to find ways on how to realize the hope that has been enshrined in *Nostra Aetate* beginning with our local communities. The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* is even more prophetic in its vision with regard to the relationship of the Church to Non-Christian religions when it continues to affirm that “men (sic) are drawn together, in the community of all peoples, by their origin in God and their final goal in God”<sup>11</sup>; and “in our times, when every day men (sic) are being drawn closer together and the ties between various peoples are being multiplied,” local experiences of people in a dialogue of life do illustrate that the declaration has been a reality not in the big scale but in the daily encounters of people.

It is against this positive backdrop that we can appreciate the permanent validity as well as the new challenges of the Church's relation with people of non-Christian religions. In fact, we read in the declaration that

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts of doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fulness [sic] of their religious life (NA 2).

The openness to non-Christian religions presents to us a difficulty let alone a challenge on how to proclaim that Jesus is the way, the truth and life while not rejecting nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. Let us go back to the text and background of John 14:6 to be able to interpret from the Scriptural horizon the meaning and ways of proclaiming Jesus as Way, Truth and Life especially in our relation with other religions. I shall limit myself to exploring themes without going into a detailed exegesis of the text.

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<sup>11</sup> Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 1.

## 2. John 14:6: Background and Insights

### 2.1 Background of John 14:6

Jesus as the Way, Truth, and Life cannot be understood apart from the second part of the Gospel of John (Jn 13:1-17:26) which is the Book of Glory. The scriptural text is in the first section of the Last Supper account of John's Gospel. The specific verse is part of Jesus' Last Discourse to his disciples (Jn 14:1-17:26). It must be noted that John 14:6 cannot be separated from the other themes of the *washing of the disciples' feet* (Jn 13:1-17), *the betrayal* (Jn 13:18-30), and the *Last Discourse to his disciples* (Jn 14:1-17:26). The interpretation of the first part of the Last Discourse (Jn 14:1-31) where we find John 14:6 is expressed by Raymond Brown in this way:

After the introduction at the end of chapter thirteen, Jesus stresses the theme of departure, at the same time confronting his disciples with the promise of a return at which he will gather them to himself... Thomas speaking for the others, shows no more real understanding of where Jesus is going than did the "Jews." Not only does Thomas does not know that Jesus is going to the Father, but he does not even know the way there. Jesus explains that he is the way to the Father because he is the incarnate truth about the Father and gives life from above to human beings.<sup>12</sup>

The answer of Jesus to Thomas, who expressed his misunderstanding with regard to Jesus' initial statement on his imminent departure in John 14: 1-4, shows that Thomas and the other disciples have yet to fully enter into the very life and mission of Jesus which could happen only through the help of the Paraclete, that is, the advocate whose condition for receiving him, that is, "for the gift of the Spirit is our keeping the commandments, which is, after all, the test of our love for Jesus."<sup>13</sup> In fact, in reference to the Paraclete's coming Jesus says: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). Therefore, the key to understanding who Jesus is, is the disciples' experience of the new commandment of love that also finds its continuity with the *leitmotif* of the last supper where the *Washing of the Feet* (Jn 13:1-7) highlights the role of

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospels and Epistles of John, A Concise Commentary* (Minnesota, USA: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 76.

a servant, the lowest kind of servant who humbles himself to serve out of love, the *betrayal* (Jn 13:18-30) which focuses more on the clarity of Jesus' identity and fidelity to his destiny rather than on the failure of Judas<sup>14</sup>, and the *Last Discourse* (Jn 13:31-17:26), which begins Jesus' rise to glory.<sup>15</sup> Jesus announces not only his departure that brings sorrow to his disciples but also his farewell gift to his disciples, *his mandatum* (mandate), "a new commandment of love for one another--a keepsake of Jesus' presence, the last glow of the light of the world."<sup>16</sup> What ties these three sections together is the new commandment. Thus, when Jesus affirms that he is the Way, Truth, and Life he was not teaching his disciples a new doctrine to be committed to memory but he was initiating them into a new life where love makes them see and understand who he really is. It is from this perspective that we can now explore and present key insights to our reflection on Jesus being the Way, Truth, and Life not only for Christians but also for the *other* who does not understand or who misunderstands Jesus.

## 2.2 Key Insights from John 14:6

### 2.2.1 Passage from Darkness to Light through the New Commandment

The way to Jesus involves a passage from the darkness of one's misunderstanding to the light of discovering the truth of who Jesus is; from the darkness of life's drudgery to the light of finding the fulfillment of humanity's longing for true life that can only come from Jesus as the Lord of life. What is crucial, however, is to live the new commandment of love for it is only in being a gift for the other that one discovers Jesus, that one understands Jesus, and that one begins to truly live. It is important to remember that the new commandment cannot be lived individually for by its very nature it requires another person, it can only be lived by a community. Commenting on discipleship, John Meier points out that "discipleship involves not just an individualistic relation of a single pupil to his teacher but the formation of a group around the teacher who has called the group into existence."<sup>17</sup> In other words, a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> John P Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), Vol. 3, 52.

disciple's primary task is "simply to be the community" so "that they might be with him" ( Mk 3:14),<sup>18</sup> with Jesus.

The passage from darkness to light is essential to knowing Jesus not simply with the mind but with the heart, that is, with one's life; and not only as an individual but also as a community. To know Jesus as the Way, Truth, and Life entails a life-changing personal encounter that transforms one's entire existence radically.

### 2.2.2 *Discipleship as a Process of Knowing Jesus in Person*

It is a common experience among the disciples that their call to discipleship was initiated by Jesus. From the different stories of the calling of Jesus' disciples we find a common pattern in which "the basic idea that Jesus' initiative in calling someone to be his disciple was an indispensable condition for counting that person as a disciple of Jesus and as a member of the group of disciples, Jesus' authoritative call was constitutive of discipleship."<sup>19</sup> A personal encounter with Jesus comes as a consequence of his call. It is in this sense that we can have a glimpse into the personal journey that every disciple had to undertake in the context of the community of disciples in order to know Jesus more personally thus moving from an acquaintance to friendship, from an outsider to an insider, from fascination to commitment, and from being alone to being with other disciples, from being a follower to becoming another presence of Jesus, the Risen Lord.

The depth of knowing Jesus is both a divine grace and a free response of the disciple to Jesus' call. One can truly speak of an encounter not on a superficial level but on a divine-human sphere where Jesus enters the very life of the disciples' humanity and transforms him into becoming another Christ, that is, a presence of the Risen Lord in earthen vessels, that is, in frail yet redeemed humanity. Only after a personal encounter with Jesus that one can locate meaningfully life's fruitfulness from the horizon of relationship rooted in love and given out of love.

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco, USA: Ignatius Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>19</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3, 52.

### 2.2.3 *The Meaning of Life as Relationship of Love*

The meaning of life is not simply a chronological progression from birth to death, from the womb to the tomb. On the contrary, Jesus invites his disciples not just to exist but to live fully (cf. Jn 10:10). Therefore, life's fruitfulness is ultimately found in one's relationship patterned after the relationship of Jesus with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Raymond Brown commenting on the relationship between the Father and a Christian emphasizes that "the presence of all three divine figures can be known only through affective knowledge, a knowledge steeped in love. And one cannot love God and break his word at the same time."<sup>20</sup> Life is a journey of love that slowly progresses towards greater harmony.

The quality of life does not depend on the length of time but on the depth of love that is ready to give one's life for the other like Jesus did. Living life to the full is loving in Jesus, loving with Jesus and loving for Jesus.

The key insights that have just been discussed do provide us with a wider backdrop and optic for understanding more specifically the meaning of Jesus for us today being the Way, Truth, and Life.

### **3. Interpreting Jesus - Way, Truth and Life**

When Jesus speaks of himself being the Way, Truth and Life, we are confronted with the reality that the Way is Jesus, the Truth is Jesus, and Life is Jesus. In other words, we speak of only one Jesus who is simultaneously Way, Truth and Life. Thus, we need to affirm from the general biblical horizon in the Gospel of John that operative in this affirmation of Jesus is the Trinitarian relationship that runs through the first part of the Book of Glory. What we would like to underscore is that Jesus' statement expresses that the language of being the Way, Truth and Life captures in a dynamic way the mutual indwelling of the Trinity in the eternal reciprocity of loving relationship. Thus, it might well be necessary to recall that understanding Jesus-Way, Jesus-Truth, and Jesus-Life entails participating analogously in the Trinitarian life. Understanding is in reality being in relation with Jesus with the consequence that when our existence is in Jesus and we live for Him alone, we become not only like him but also another him.

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 77.

Let us consider some salient aspects of Jesus-Way, Truth and Life from the optic of being for the other in the reciprocity of love.

### 3.1 *Jesus is the Way*

Jesus allows us to see the way not as a geographical road that we need to pass through in order to reach a place but as a living reality, a life-space that speaks of inclusion and the all-embracing love of God in Jesus Christ. Piero Coda rightly comments that “If Jesus is the Way of salvation through which God reaches all of humanity, without excluding anyone, it is clear that in the paschal event (death and resurrection), Jesus has objectively reconciled all with God without excluding anyone.”<sup>21</sup> Coda further intuits that “because salvation is fully realized subjectively, it means to encounter, to recognize, and to follow Jesus, in other words to live Jesus,”<sup>22</sup> that is, to be Jesus ourselves.

Today more than before, with the traditional religious symbols being replaced by idols of Globalization, by the consumerist and this-worldly lifestyle of postmodernity with its mistrust of meta-narratives, and by the technologies of digital revolution with its shift from “bricks to clicks,” there is a need to know Jesus as the Way not through the pulpits of stone churches but through the lives of Christians whose way of life proclaims Jesus from the living testimonies of our communities of living stones. Unless one's personal story re-tells the story of Jesus in our time, more “thomases” will keep asking for the Way. In multi-religious contexts, every genuine Christian becomes the way to encounter Jesus. Indeed, those who are still searching for the way can find, touch, relate with, and believe that Jesus is alive today because He is in us and among us in the manner that we put into practice His new commandment.

### 3.2 *Jesus is the Truth*

Jesus is the Incarnate Truth that reveals to us in the Spirit, God as our Father. In Jesus, Truth is a person who casts away all shadows of unbelief and doubt about God. Jesus as truth in person becomes the witness par excellence of God-Love who desires that all humanity

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<sup>21</sup> Piero Coda, “La Presenza di Gesù Risorto Nella Chiesa” in *Egli e' Vivo* (Roma: Citta' Nuova Editrice, 2006), 92-93. Unofficial translation provided by the author.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Unofficial translation provided by the author.

become God's children. Truth can only be credible when the witness who possesses the truth gives the word without deceit and fear. Jesus as the Incarnate Truth is at the same time the Word made flesh, the Eternal Truth. Word and Witness are one in Jesus thus Jesus is the Truth because he is the Incarnate Word whose power creates new heavens and new earth, whose power dispels the darkness of selfishness and death, and whose power restores life forever.

Today more than before, with the competing voices of global powers doing away with the traditional standards of what is right and wrong by relativizing truth according to fads and trends, by reducing truth to personal taste and preferences of the ego, with Christian truth divested of its objective nature and banished to the private sphere of one's faith, there is a need to know Jesus-Truth not simply in the Church's doctrine and commandments but in the power of witness of Christians whose lives have become the spoken yet silent word in the midst of the world that has slowly become deaf to the truth of the Eternal Word. It is only when Christians have become living Word themselves in the "worlds of the world", for example the world of politics, media, education, entertainment that Jesus-Truth is encountered and believed. When all printed and recorded copies of the Bible are destroyed, by looking at the lives of Christians, the Bible can be written again. In this time when icons are used for digital applications in mobile technology, the best icon of Jesus-Truth is a Christian fully alive in God's Word.

### *3.3 Jesus is Life*

The affirmation that Jesus is life points out that human life and all of creation are interconnected. Jesus is life because he is love who gives himself as a gift to us. In other words, Christians know that apart from Jesus life ceases to be a gift and it simply becomes a task that is reduced to human endeavors and to the repetitive cycles of life that ultimately lead to death. Life cannot end with a few tears and flowers and some beautiful eulogies that are soon forgotten. Our role towards life is ministerial, that is, we are caretakers or administrators of life as a gift that is meant to be shared generously for all of humanity.

Today more than before, when life is equated with productivity, success and work; when life is disposable in a throwaway culture, there is a need to retrieve life in the language of gift and stewardship. This disposition or view of life does not see the other as



a competitor or threat but rather as a gift for the other, as a recognition of the other's value as a partner in life's journey for life is a journey, a long journey that we undertake with others.

From the above discussion, let us explore implications to dialogue in our times.

### **Implications to Relationship with Communities of Other Faiths In Our Times**

In a nutshell, we have discussed from a wider picture that it seems that religions have been an obstacle to dialogue and peace. We have seen, however, that the experiences of our communities of faith do give us hope that the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* is being realized in diverse situations and experiences. In understanding John 14:6 from a scriptural horizon, we rediscover in a new way *Nostra Aetate's* vision of a Church of dialogue. Proclaiming Jesus the Way, Truth, and Life entails locating its significance from the account of the Last Supper with the washing of the feet, betrayal and last farewell discourse as constitutive elements. It is interesting to note that it is the mandatum to live the new commandment as a community of disciples that serves as the key to understand why Jesus is Way, Truth and Life. Thus, through the community of disciples, Jesus can be personally encountered as the Way of love, as the truth of God's inclusive love, and as the Master of life who journeys with us in walking together towards the Kingdom of God.

The following implications may be suggested with regards to Proclaiming Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life while respecting what is true and holy in other religions.

Proclamation is not simply a pastoral strategy for dialogue with other religions. Proclamation is a way of life, that is, an evangelical lifestyle both personal and communal that gives witness to Jesus through the new commandment.

Proclamation entails three interconnected processes born out of Christian love.

#### **A. SILENCE**

We can proclaim Jesus in the fecundity of silence. In other words, silence is an existential disposition of mind, heart and soul which allows the other to feel welcomed and not judged; which makes the partner in dialogue at home because there is only the emptiness yet

fullness of love. It is only in our existential silence that Jesus as the Way, Truth and Life can be encountered, understood, and loved. Silence also allows us to listen deeply to the different voices of the other that come to us in all circumstances of life. Silence allows us to love the other without preference. Silence allows us to enter the world of the other and see it from his or her point of view. Silence gives us the grace to love the other in the manner that he or she wants to be loved.

## **B. PRESENCE**

It is only in our silence that we allow Jesus' presence to dwell in our lives and in our midst. We can proclaim Jesus through our loving presence. Presence does not mean simply our physical presence but Jesus' presence in us and among us in the Spirit of love. It is important to highlight in the context of our brothers and sisters of other religions, that they do not perceive our presence as a threat or as proselytism but as an edifying assurance of acceptance, respect, and compassion. What is crucial is that we allow ourselves to journey with them through thick and thin, through the celebrations of life and faith, and also to share their joys and pains. The bottom-line is relationship of mutual acceptance and respect animated by the new commandment of love.

Another important element is that Christ's presence becomes a culture that permeates the fabric of society, that enters the public space not as a set of doctrines to be taught and committed to memory but as a way of life that can be embraced by all religions. The list below can illustrate these cultures.

One can speak of a culture of generosity transforming a culture of greed and consumerism, of a culture of nearness or welcome transforming a culture of indifference, of a culture of interiority transforming a culture of superficiality, of a culture of harmony transforming a culture of conflict and violence, of a culture of solidarity transforming a culture of marginalization and exclusion, of a culture of introspection transforming a culture of information, and of a culture of community transforming a culture of communication.

Culture of Greed/ Throwaway Culture	Culture of Generosity/ Social Justice
Culture of Indifference	Culture of Nearness/ Welcome/harmony
Culture of Superficiality	Culture of Interiority
Culture of Conflict and Violence	Culture of Harmony/ eco-justice
Culture of Marginalization/ Exclusion	Culture of Solidarity/ Social Justice
Culture of Information	Culture of Introspection
Culture of Communication/ Media	Culture of Communion/ Community

### C. TELLING STORIES

For us Asians, preaching or proclamation is story-telling. The power of stories can transform the other from within but at the same time it allows the story to be retold in different ways by the story-teller. It is only when the story of Jesus becomes our story that we can share with others why Jesus is our Way, Truth and Life. The credibility of the story-teller does not come from a university degree and specialized studies but from the consistency of word and deed that could be verified from one's life as a Christian.

Proclamation as retelling of Jesus-story through our stories of encounter with Jesus experienced as the Way, Truth and Life can be re-told in the families, in the marketplace, in workplaces, in schools, in the bus, in political institutions, and in social media.

#### **Conclusion**

What we need is an authentic conversion as a community of disciples that gives witness to Jesus as the Way, Truth, and Life through constant and mutual charity. The Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue indicated by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue succinctly expresses the relation between

dialogue and proclamation when it exhorts us with these words resonating John Paul II's *Pastores Gregis*: "In encounters with people of other religions and indeed all human beings, Christians must always "make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved."

If the declaration *Nostra Aetate* would be permanently lost with no copy available in the world, through our stories of dialogue, indeed, by our testimony of life it could be written again.

### III. LAUDATO SI' AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN ASIA

- Fr. Clarence Devadass

*Synopsis:*

*Interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the mission of the Church, especially in Asia. Being a minority in most countries of Asia, proclamation and dialogue have to strike a perfect balance in order for the Church to be a catalyst for the kingdom. The Encyclical Laudato Si' provides another platform for the Church to enter in dialogue with the religions and traditions that continue to grow in Asia. Many of the religions and traditions of Asia have a deep connectedness with nature and it is seen as 'sacred' and a precious gift to humanity. In understanding these religions and traditions, the Church can work together in promoting a spirituality of harmony and peace amongst all peoples of Asia. To this end we must all strive for the betterment of the only 'home' that we have.*

This year, as we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, it is a wonderful moment in the Church to celebrate the common origin of humanity and also its final destiny. This is clear at the very outset of this Declaration where it begins by describing the unity of the origin of all people, and the fact that they all return to God; hence their final goal is also one. In more ways than one, this document starts with the perpetual questions which have been on the minds of men since the beginning, and how the various religious traditions have tried to answer them: "All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which

God created to people the entire earth (cf. Acts 17:26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God.”

In spite of being the shortest of the documents of the Second Vatican Council and having started off with the intention of clarifying the Church’s relationship with the Jews (the first draft, entitled “*Decretum de Iudaeis*” [Decree on the Jews], was completed in November 1961), this document has since had a great impact on the life of the Church with regard to building relationships with other religions and traditions that we have become so accustomed to especially to the Church in Asia. At a time when the Church was going through a process of renewing herself, this document could be considered radical and ahead of its time in many ways. Being only at its infancy stage, this document was to provide the basis for further discussions and engagement in the area of interreligious dialogue. The Saint Pope John Paul II described the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* that emanated from the Second Vatican Council as “an expression of Faith” and “an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as a word of Divine Wisdom” and Walter Cardinal Kasper had described the impact of *Nostra Aetate* as “an astonishing transformation”.

With the publication of *Laudato Si’* on 24 May this year, the Catholic Church has become awakened to the issue of the environment more than ever in its history. Much has been said and written on the positive impact of this encyclical on the world that I do not wish to add any more. The very purpose of our discussion here is to explore the opportunities for dialogue that this encyclical provides. From the outset, Pope Francis states the goal of the document: “In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” (#3)... “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environment challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (#14).

### **Dialogue - A Means to Build Bridges**

Building bridges between people from social, religious and cultural backgrounds becomes increasingly important as our society becomes more diverse and socially stratified. One way we can foster

learning and understanding across differences is to understand each other's narrative for this can only promote greater respect and thus towards harmony. To identify common grounds is one of the many ways of promoting dialogue.

'Dialogue' is a theme that is much reflected in *Laudato Si'*. The dialogical nature of ecological concerns provides not only challenge to theological reflection but also that which creates a locus for integration. Apart of the dialogue with environmental policies, politics and economy that is mentioned in Chapter 5, religion and science must complement one another to a better understanding of faith and reason (#200). Dialogue for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity (#201). Dialogue requires patience, self-discipline and generosity: "Dialogue among the various sciences is likewise needed, since each can tend to become enclosed in its own language, while specialization leads to a certain isolation and the 'absolutisation' of its own field of knowledge" (# 201).

From an Asian perspective, dialogue in itself provides its own challenges. Be it political, economical, religious or cultural, there is so much of diversity in Asia that the thought of dialogue itself can be quite daunting. Though many people profess to be believers of a particular religious tradition, interreligious dialogue can be a means for engagement in such a way that it provides a common platform for the protection of the environment: "An open and respectful dialogue is also needed between the various ecological movements, among which ideological conflicts are not infrequently encountered. The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which demands patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that "realities are greater than ideas" (#201).

The methodology that I choose to employ in this paper to look at the major religions of Asia and discover some of the common themes that we share which could be the 'launching pad' for interreligious dialogue. Not only were most of the major religions of the world born in Asia, but also the variety of cultural traditions provides us a foundation to engage in dialogue especially in ecological issues. In

this paper, we will take a look at the teachings of the major religions in Asia on ecology. The purpose of this section is to show that ecological issues are shared concerns among many peoples of Asia, and that many of the major religions and spiritualities in Asia share a common heritage – an opportunity for dialogue. I would like also to acknowledge the assistance provided by my colleagues at the FABCs Office for Theological Concerns who have researched the various religions and traditions of Asia. The following is not an exhaustive study on the environment as envisaged by the religions and traditions in Asia but it provides a platform and overview for the purpose of encouraging interreligious dialogue for the purpose of caring for our common home.

### **Religions and Traditions in Asia**

As we all know, Asia is the world's largest and most populous continent (60%), with millions of different peoples following a wide variety of different religions and traditions. The continent of Asia has been the birthplace of many of the world's major religions and today, Asia continues to reflect the religious diversity of the planet. One must also remember that the continent of Asia is home to some of the most ancient and formative civilizations in history. In this light then, ecology has a narrative in many of the religions, cultures and traditions.

#### ***a) Christianity***

One of the first propositions of the Bible is that God is the creator of the whole universe. The entire world is God's creation, and its continuing life and preservation are thoroughly dependent upon God. Likewise, man who is part of God's creation is also dependent upon Him for his life and survival. In this regard, the Bible does not recognise or make a distinction between such categories as "world of nature" and "humanity". The whole sweep of the existing realities is "creation". The creation category unites both humanity and the world of nature with God as the centre of this unity. Without the divine element, the creation category does not come into existence. Creator God, humankind, and the world of nature are thus united and brought into organic wholeness through the act of creation. The doctrine of Creation teaches that the whole of creation is a sacred

gift. God creates, sustains, and preserves all life, both animate and inanimate. And in this regard, humanity is no different from the rest of God's creations. The creation saga is a poetic expression, which proclaims the divine intention and love behind the act of creation.

The Genesis story begins by affirming the goodness of God by affirming the goodness of everything He has created. God is good in Himself and good in everything He desires and does for His creatures – humankind and the world. God's goodness is attested in the on-going creation. The creation story also tells us how humankind and the world may individually and collectively participate and share in this divine goodness. The continual goodness was experienced in maintaining a harmonious and creative interdependent relationship within the cosmic community, a symbiotic and systemic relationship. Psalm 104, more than anything else, speaks about this interdependent order and the symbiotic relationship.

Secondly, the Bible also confirms that the purpose of creation is to proclaim God's glory. The divine life is actively manifested in and through the created world. Therefore it would not be right to deal with the world of nature merely in materialistic terms. Nature has its own intrinsic value, teleology, and destiny, and humanity is called to recognise this fact and respond to it with respect and reverence.

Thirdly, Biblical writers were keen to give a theological explanation for the presence of evil in the whole created order. They identified evil as a breakdown in the on-going creative relationship that existed between God and humankind, thus introducing death and decay. The ecological crisis we experience is a direct outcome of this failure and a sure sign of this breakdown.

And finally, Biblical writers go on to propose a way out of this cosmic disintegration and deterioration. They affirm that restoration of the broken down system is possible. The human predicament and all contemporary crises are not beyond divine redemption. And the deteriorating trend within the cosmic community is reversible. And this possibility is offered through an active faith in Jesus Christ, the very God who authored the whole of creation and came into the world in human form to restore the working model once again. The



emerging new cosmic order is made up of transformed humanity within a renewed universe of a new heaven and earth -- a world free from strife, tension, pollution, sickness, poverty, deterioration, and ultimately free of death itself. Humanity is called upon to actively participate and share in restoring this disintegrating cosmic order, thus ushering in the Kingdom of God. And it is up to the present generation either to accept or reject this offer of Biblical promise of cosmic salvation and restoration in Christ.

### ***b) Hinduism***

Hindus are known for their search of the absolute. Hindu philosophers have reached lofty metaphysical heights which merit appreciation. In Philosophy, the living schools of Hinduism generally speak of some form of unity, but not necessarily identity, of the soul with the Supreme Reality, which in different traditions is named in various ways: *Brahman*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, etc. On the one hand in the *Kevaladvaita Vedanta* School (to use its technical name, since there are various forms of *Advaita*) there is only One Reality and everything else is illusion. They of course follow the path of knowledge (*jnana*). But they also ascribe a role to the path of devotion (*bhakti*): by itself, devotion does not lead to liberation (*moksha*). It is not necessary to practice *bhakti*, but it can help to purify the soul so that the soul can practice the path of *jnana*.

It is the exponents or followers of this School who say that the path of knowledge is for the advanced, and other practices like *bhakti*, etc. are for the common people. It permits pluralism on the practical level or the level of ignorance, but on the absolute level there is only One Reality.

In this way, they reconcile in a limited and partial way, the path of knowledge with that of devotion, and monism (on the absolute level) and pluralism (on the practical level). However, this is only one of the many of philosophical schools in Hinduism. Though this school is not the main school yet it seems to enjoy prestige among intellectuals. In reality, there are several other schools that claim that the path of devotion is the best path to salvation and they say that the path of knowledge leads only to a lower form of liberation. In fact, the neutral Brahman, who is the Supreme and Only Being for

*Kevaladvaita Vedanta*, is put on a lower level, just as *Kevaladvaita Vedanta* puts *Vishnu* or *Shiva*, etc. on a lower (and even unreal) level. The vast majority of Hindus actually believe in and practice *bhakti* as the path to salvation. Hence there are differing schools with greatly differing understandings of God, humans, other beings and the metaphysical and other (e.g., spiritual) relationships between these (God, humans and other beings).

The vast majority of Hindus emphasise love of, and devotion to, God, which is known as – *bhakti*. And they express distaste for non-dual unity and identity with the Absolute. This practice of devotion is extended to and embraces inanimate objects such as plants, stones, water, fire, rivers and trees. Animals such as snakes, monkeys and cows become objects of worship and adoration.

The following hymn from the *Atharva-veda*, XII, 1, is one of the most ancient testimonies to the Hindu attitude to the cosmos. The hymn brings out the beauty, splendour, order and harmony of nature and environment in the context of faith and spirituality. There is a personal and dialogical relationship with the earth that has to be upheld. However, there does seem to be a tendency towards sacralisation of the earth and elements therein for their eventual inclusion into the Hindu pantheon. Since the entire earth hymn is too long, a few select verses are cited here below:

1. Truth, greatness, universal order (*rita*), strength, consecration, creative fervour (*tapas*), spiritual exaltation (*brahma*), the sacrifice, supports the earth. May this earth, the mistress of that which was and shall be, prepare for us a broad domain!

2. The earth that has heights, and slopes, and great plains, that supports the plants of manifold virtue, free from the pressure that comes from the midst of men, she shall spread out for us, and fit herself for us!

3. The earth upon which the sea, and the rivers and the waters, upon which food and the tribes of men have arisen, upon which this breathing, moving life exists, shall afford us precedence in drinking!

4. The earth whose are the four regions of space, upon which food and the tribes of men have arisen, which supports the manifold

breathing, moving *thinās* (things), shall afford us cattle.

5. The earth upon which of old the first men unfolded themselves, upon which the gods overcame the *Asuras*, shall procure for us (all) kinds of cattle, horses, and fowls, good fortune and glory!

6. The earth that supports all, furnishes wealth, the foundation, the golden-breasted resting-place of all living creatures, she that supports *Agni Vaisvânara* (the fire), and mates with *Indra*, the bull, shall furnish us with property!

7. The broad -earth, which the sleepless gods ever attentively guard, shall milk for us precious honey, and, besprinkle us with glory!

8. That earth which formerly was water upon the ocean (of space), which the wise (seers) found out by their skillful devices; whose heart is in the highest heaven, immortal, surrounded by truth, shall bestow upon us brilliancy and strength, (and place us) in supreme sovereignty!

9. That earth upon which the attendant waters jointly flow by day and night unceasingly, shall pour out milk for us in rich streams, and, moreover, besprinkle us with glory!

The following verse of *Tukaram* witnesses to the devotees' association with nature and his great appreciation of all the elements of nature, even in the context of his desire to unite with God: *Trees, plants and animals are all our relatives (kith and kin) | The birds also sweetly chant | | By this bliss we relish abode in solitude | No defects and vices do we contract | | ch | | The sky is the canopy, the earth is the throne | The spirit therein engages and plays.*" (*Indu Prakash* 2481).

In short, the Hindu view of the eco-system and celestial galaxies are all connected and are considered one rhythmic cycle.

### ***c) Islam***

The roots of Islamic view on the environment are to be found in the Quran and the guidance (*sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic worldview is based on the belief in the existence of an all-powerful creator, Allah. From the Quran, it is said that Allah created *the universe and every single atom and molecule it contains and the laws of creation include the elements of order, balance and proportion: "He created*

*everything and determined it most exactly" (25:2) and "It is He who appointed the sun to give radiance and the moon to give light, assigning it in phases... Allah did not create these things except with truth. We make the signs clear for the people who know" (10:5) [Fazlun M Khalid, Islam and the Environment (Volume 5, Social and Economic dimensions of global environmental change, pp. 332 – 339) in the Encyclopaedia of Global Environmental Change, Peter Timmerman (Ed)].*

It is said that there are over 6,000 verses in the Quran, of which more than 500 deal with natural phenomena. Allah repeatedly calls on His people to reflect on His signs, which include all aspects of nature such as trees, mountains, seas, animals, birds, stars, the sun and the moon – and our own hearts. The Quran refers to creation or the natural world as the signs (*ayat*) of Allah, the Creator, and this is also the name given to the verses contained in the Quran.

Islamic jurisprudence contains regulations concerning the conservation and allocation of scarce water resources; for the conservation of land with special zones of graded use; for the establishment of rangelands, wetlands, and green belts and for wildlife protection and conservation.

In short, the Quran says that Allah (God) is the Creator of the world. Human beings are on the world as trustees or 'vice-regents' - they are told to look after the world for Allah and for the future. In the Quran, Muslims are instructed to look after the environment and not to damage it:

Devote thyself single-mindedly to the Faith, and thus follow the nature designed by Allah, the nature according to which He has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah (Surah 30:30)

Islam calls on its believers to look after the earth because it is all Allah's creation and it is part of a human's duty to Allah:

Allah is He who raised up the heavens without any pillars that you can see. Then He settled Himself on the Throne, and constrained the sun and the moon to serve you; each planet pursues its course during an appointed term. He regulates it all and expounds the Signs, that you may have firm belief in the

meeting with your Lord. He it is who spread out the earth and made therein firmly fixed mountains and rivers, and of fruits of every kind He has made pairs. He causes the night to cover the day.

The *Hadith* also teaches that *the Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been created a place of worship, pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is love on his part.*

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasised the Quranic decree of treating the earth as a trust, and humankind its guardians. Likening our planet to a sacred place of prayer, “All of the earth has been made to me as a mosque,” Muhammad promoted respect and responsibility towards the environment amongst his companions. He encouraged water conservation, instructing them not to be wasteful even if they were next to a flowing river, and stipulated the importance of keeping public places tidy.

Nature and environment have always played an important part in Islam. Its believers understand that God has not created all this for nothing. In fact, Muslims have been commanded to find the wonderful signs of God around them so that they will only increase in them their awe of Allah.

In conclusion, Islam teaches that Allah has given man a responsibility and that man will be accountable to God for his actions and the trust placed in him. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “Everyone of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges. The ruler who has authority over people is a guardian and is responsible for them” (Sahih Bukhari 3.46.730). Islam has urged humanity to be kind to nature and not to abuse the trust that has been placed on the shoulders of man. In fact, to be kind to animals is an integral part of Islam for Muslims. There are two primary sources defining Islam i.e. the Quran and the Hadith (the example, sayings, and actions of Prophet Muhammad) and both emphasise the accountability and responsibility of man toward the rest of creation.

#### *d) Buddhism*

Buddhism tries to point to the roots of the problem and to show a possible way towards a more responsible use of nature. Buddha has actually incorporated some forms of environmental attributes in his preaching and views humanity as an integral part of nature. We should immediately notice that in a Buddhist context the question of the beginning of the world is not addressed. For this reason it is more proper to use the term “ecological consciousness” referring to the context of our study.

Buddhism considers the destruction of natural resources as unethical and it encourages sustenance of human existence through the balance of the eco-system. The relationship between man and nature should be based on a wide range of interests: present and future, human and non-human. It should be purposeful, farsighted and everlasting. Unfortunately humans concentrate primarily on satisfying their present “wants” (a now-oriented society) instead of their own present and future needs and the needs of future generations, as well as that of other forms of life on earth.

Buddhist ethics show that the ecological adaptation is a process of advantageous variation and progressive modification by which human beings are adjusted to the condition of the environment in which to live a harmonious life. Buddha suggests that human beings are supremely capable of going deep into the causes of their suffering. They understand what is good for them and adjust themselves without passing the responsibility for their suffering on to some invincible forces. They make an effort to walk on the noble eight-fold path (1. *right view*, 2. *right intention*, 3. *right speech*, 4. *right action*, 5. *right livelihood*, 6. *right effort*, 7. *right mindfulness* and 8. *right concentration*) to lead a good ethical life. Buddha regarded every environmentally harmful action as questionable and ethically wrong. Our intention depends on our mental makeup. If it is polluted with lust, hatred and delusion, it will translate itself into the external environment as a complex of physical life and material development based on exploitation of nature without moral restraint. Delusion associated with greed results in environmental problems, because satisfying one’s appetite can lead to natural

resources being mercilessly exploited, resulting in the suffering of people.

Buddhism always believes in the middle way. The middle way, in today's terms, means harmony. Any extreme measure may produce opposite results. In the light of the Buddhist doctrine of the middle way, economic recovery measures should not go to any extremes. The middle way economic recovery measures have to be the ones that will aid environmental protection, and drive economic growth towards being in harmony with nature.

Life is not an isolated process starting with birth and ending in death. Each single lifespan is part of a series of lives having no discoverable beginning in time and continuing on as long as the desire for existence stands intact. Rebirth can take place in various realms of human beings and animals; on the higher level we meet heavenly worlds of greater happiness, beauty and power and on the lower level we find infernal worlds of extreme sufferings. Karma is the cause of rebirth. *Karma* determines the sphere into which rebirth takes place, with wholesome actions bringing rebirth in higher forms, and unwholesome actions bringing rebirth in lower forms.

It is clear that in Buddhist teaching, all forms of living beings are interrelated, particularly because they can be considered the individualisation of the same being in different forms. Therefore, care and love for other beings and creatures is basic and important in Buddhist ethics and morality.

The human world and nature are joined together in a reciprocal causal relationship: change in any one of the two necessarily brings about change in the other too. The human world and its environment stand or fall with the type of moral force at work. If immorality grips society, humankind and nature decline. If morality exists, the quality of human life and nature also improve. Buddha says that change is universal; neither man nor any other being, animate or inanimate, can be exonerated from it. Everything is framed in a constant process of change.

In short, Buddhism presents its teaching on care for the environment as follows:

1. Buddhism states that *Karma* is the major factor responsible for what we are and what we will be. Man has an element of free will or personal endeavour; by practicing it one can change his own nature as well as his environment.

2. According to the Buddhist idea of dependent origination, everything in the ecosystem is interdependent and interconnected to some other; for this reason everything has its own intrinsic value. However, in the scientific world, nature is conceived as a material thing which has a merely extrinsic value and can be used in order to fulfil the desire of the people. From this point of view we can say that the relation between human beings and nature may be spelled out in a threefold way: human beings are superior; nature is superior; and both human beings and nature are interdependent and interrelated. Only this last way can be considered the correct one. Therefore a new paradigm of development should promote economic activities and a lifestyle based on the concept of '*man with nature*' and not '*man against nature*'.

3. Buddhism aims at eliminating human suffering and bringing peace and prosperity to all mankind. It is a religion that in its core has a deep sense of responsibility in protecting the environment. Environmental protection has to begin in the mind. Buddha clearly ruled out the two extreme positions of self-indulgence and self-mortification and adopted the middle path. Buddhist concedes that re-orientation of our inner life is a sine qua non to preserving nature. Everything is interconnected and interdependent in the ecosystem. However, due to our ignorance, often we are not able to understand this interdependence. We think that our happiness depends upon our maximum consumption. Hence in order to diminish the problems, we will have to moderate our consumption. The only way to minimise our consumption is to restrain our desires, walking on a middle path, which rejects the waste of resources in displays of wealth designed to gain ephemeral status. Instead we should focus on friendship, good relationships, and meditation. *Metta* (Mercy) can be extended to the protection of other species, and indeed to the whole ecosystem. This is a great contribution that Buddhists can offer to the world.



4. In Buddhism there is a close relationship between science and spirituality. When science is only based upon the concept of self-interest, it will become the cause of destruction. But when it is built upon spirituality, it will be connected with the welfare of all human beings. Buddha gave the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and all living things. A holistic approach towards a solution must consider that everything is interdependent and interconnected to each other in the ecosystem. Everything has, therefore, its own intrinsic value. Therefore when speaking of the conservation of the ecosystem we should not only be concerned about the preservation of flora and fauna in its totality, but also about their regeneration. Through his eight-fold path, Buddha was not only aware about preservation but he also emphasised on regeneration.

#### *e) Confucianism and Taoism*

Confucianism traces its origin back to 6th Century B.C. with Confucius. He stressed a way of life which looked into the past for a guide to behaviour in the present. Virtues, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity are basic ethical principles of Confucianism. Confucius' teachings encouraged human beings to live in ordered social relationships, and to have "religious" reverence for all life. A place for every human being, and every human being in his or her place is the only way to achieve harmony. These ethical principles are found in the *Book of Analects* (Lun Yu): "Fix your mind on truth; hold firm to virtue; rely upon love-kindness; and find your recreation in the arts." Confucianism teaches that human beings are not intended to overindulge. Preservation is a virtue: "With coarse food to eat, water to drink, and bent arm for a pillow, happiness may still be found." A human being's relationship with his or her surroundings and the environment, then, is moderation.

Although not a religion, religious sanctions are alluded to in Confucianism in reference to Heaven: "Does Heaven ever speak? The four seasons come and go, and all creatures thrive and grow. Does Heaven ever speak?" and "He who does not recognise the existence of a Divine Law cannot be a superior man [sage]."

Confucian humanism then understands human beings, not only from a human point of view, but also from a cosmic point of view. The full significance of a human being is found in the relationship to Heaven and Earth, realising the Heavenly endowed potential in the human. The sage is the person who fully realises his or her Heavenly endowed potential.

The Confucian sage is the person who truly practices “reciprocity” – “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you” – not only in human and social contexts but also in the context of nature and the universe. In this respect, Confucian humanism is based on a reciprocal relationship with Heaven and Earth, nature and the universe. Reciprocity can be achieved when we become receptive. In this sense, a Confucian sage is a receptive person who is able to discern the signs of Heaven and Earth. The sage is the person who has developed the wisdom and art of seeing and listening in order to feel and be able to respond to Heaven and Earth.

The Taoists inherited from the Confucian tradition the idea of the “three spheres” of heaven, earth, and the human, which are intimately inter-fused with each other. The Taoist conception of creation is metaphysical: it is “Tao”, eternal and nameless. Yet, at the same time, it is “all-pervasive, eternal, life-sustaining, and nourishing.” Tao stands for the ultimate reality of nature. In Taoism there is a natural relationship between humans and nature. Humankind is viewed as a “member” of creation and is, therefore, without exception internally linked to the Tao as well as to everything else. A human being receives no special place from Tao; thus, ‘*homocentrism*’ is an alien thing in the Taoist axiological ordering of beings. As well, human beings are considered to be endowed with intellect, and thus quite capable of living in harmony with nature. In Taoist thinking this means that there is no unbridgeable chasm between the two. They are interconnected. The extent of Taoist harmony between human being and nature reaches down to the smallest of creatures, even insects and crawling things, herbs and trees may not be injured.

Uncontrolled attitudes to nature can only result in disharmony and hurtful results. Anyone who tries to do things in violation of this interconnectedness is doomed to failure. In order to prevent such transgressions, the Taoist books refer to two classes of officials whose duties were concerned with preservation and conservation. One is Shan-yu, inspector of mountains, and the other, Lin-heng, inspector of forests. These officials, through their protective duties, enforced conservation practices by admonishing, for example, what trees could be cut, by whom and when, and warned against the consequences of deforestation.

The regulation of nature also finds its philosophical roots in an appreciation of nature and in feelings of painful sentiment which arise out of the senseless destruction of nature. An ancient compendium of songs, the *Shi Ching*, contains such lines about trees torn up by “cruel brigands” and “no one knew of their crime”, and of trees being so lovely that they were not even looked to for firewood.

Chinese ancient religions or philosophies, then, present an image of human beings in harmony with, and sympathetic to, nature. Whatever harm humankind does to nature inevitably creates human being’s own self-destruction because of the interconnectedness between the two life systems.

#### *f) Shintoism*

It is difficult to give a definition to Shinto for it does not have a founder. It seems to be originally a common feeling of the Japanese people. Shinto is a culture rather than a religion. Shinto had been formed little by little based on ancient feelings and folk beliefs. Being influenced by the rule of the Emperors, the aristocrats and Samurai, some practices and attitudes like expressing deep and sincere gratitude towards the work of gods by praying, has produced ceremonies and content for the Shinto faith.

Although Shinto doesn’t really have its own specific doctrines and scripture, it is believed that there are gods in all things in the universe and people have worshipped these gods in their excellence and celebrated several festivals in their honour. Humans and gods

are strongly connected. Moreover, gods lead people in this world and therefore people must live under their guidance.

Humans receive the life from gods and are regarded as sacred as well. That is why people must respect their individuality, each other and must cooperate with one another. As a basic way of life according to Shinto, one must stay clean, happy and honest in as much as possible. People must have *Makoto*, i.e., people must see gods in their life and being connected with gods, live with sincerity and humbleness.

Shinto establishes a harmonious integrity that come from the Emperor's empire and directed to the local deities. This concept of the unity of various powers gave way to open the minds of the people in accepting the different thoughts and cultures that came from other countries. And so this has been a Japanese way of thinking with regards to coexistence with others as well.

From a Shinto perspective of the world, the word "nature" is identified with anything that exists in the universe. For Shinto "nature" means "the essence of existence" or "anything that exists in its pure state, hence untouched and uninfluenced". In other words, nature is not an abstract existence but a concrete one.

In the ancient books of Shinto for example, "Universe" is defined as "the infinite space and time continuing from the past to the future." Sometimes it refers to the ground world. There is also another expression, "heaven and earth" that means a concrete space composed of ground and heavenly worlds. Therefore in Shinto, the concrete world is the major premise.

In the classic book of Shinto, the universe consists of three vertical layers: *Takama no hara* (plain of high heaven – the kami's world), *Ashihara no Nakatsukuni* (middle land – the present world) and *Yomi no kuni* (Hades – the world after death). These three vertical layers are not considered separated but are connected through *Amano mihashira* which is believed to be the centre of the world.

They also categorised time in three layers: the former life (*zense*), this life (*gense*) and the future life (*raise*). These on the other hand are

considered separated, although it is believed that spirits can communicate and move.

Having these concepts intact, in Shintoism, it can be concluded that from the very beginning, the gods were just hiding somewhere and decided to appear as gods at the right time and at the very exact moment as they did. In Shinto however, the existence of the world was spiritual and not created by God. Its essence appeared as many different Gods. To follow on that, *Izanagini no mikoto* (deity born of the seven divine generations) and *Izanami no mikoto* (goddess of creation and death) got married and gave birth to the Japanese Islands and its people (as mentioned earlier). Gods appointed *Amaterasu omikami* (sun goddess) at the centre and let her rule the country.

Therefore, Shinto believed that Japan is the only existing world at that time. Shinto always does not consider the world in a general sense (the whole existence of world), but in a particular sense (Japan). Shinto tries to believe in concrete existence, to recognise the existence concretely and individually.

In Shinto it is believed that gods, humans and every creature are all connected and inseparable and if ever this connection is cut, it will result in chaos. Therefore, for the Shinto, it is very important that all creatures should learn to live harmoniously with each other and in accordance and as a reflection of Gods in order to obtain a peaceful and prosperous life.

In reference to ecology, the ancient people of Japan lived in harmony with nature. This is because they thought that all things come from nature. Because nature sustained life, they respected nature. Moreover they knew well which parts of nature they could or could not touch. The parts of nature that people could not touch are the top of the mountain, riverside, seaside and hillside, which are protected by the Shinto shrines and temples located there. As a result, these temples and shrines took measures to prevent nature from destruction.

### *g) Indigenous Eco-Spirituality*

Apart from the major religious traditions of Asia, it is to be noted that there are approximately 300 million indigenous peoples living in more than 70 countries in the world; with half of them living in Asia. More than 150 million Asians define themselves as indigenous, and among these 2,165 groups we find thriving Christian communities in both Southeast and Northeast Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, China, Korea and Japan).

Despite the political, economic and cultural discrimination suffered by indigenous peoples all over Asia, these groups have so much to give and to teach (post) modern societies. They have been acknowledged for their environmental consciousness and ecologically sound way of life, especially at this time when we in Asia experience half of the natural calamities and disasters in the world. Their natural healing practices, communal way of living, as well as their deep spirituality have inspired and challenged people living in globalised societies that have promoted individualism and greed, as well as unhealthy lifestyles.

Some of the fundamental beliefs and main practices of indigenous peoples all over Asia regarding the natural world could be summed as follows:

1. *Belief in Interconnectedness*: Indigenous peoples look at life in a holistic and integrated way. The spiritual and the material permeate each other. Nature, culture and cosmos are interconnected and work together.
2. *Belief in the sacredness of all things*: Everything is an epiphany of the Divine and there is Divine presence in everything. This is the reason for their deep respect and care for creation and the natural world.
3. *Belief in spirits*: The indigenous peoples believe in spirits, both good and bad, who reside in material and natural things. They – especially their shamans – relate with the spirits (through their rituals and prayers) and negotiate for community needs and desires.

In a special way, their relationship with the land summarises what they believe in. They believe that the Land is sacred and that the Land is life itself. The land is the source, the setting and their community of life. The land feeds them: “Land was created by *Magbabaya* (Supreme Being). The earth is the breast of *Magbabaya* that feeds us. That alone is our source of life.” The land is also the setting for their daily life and grounds their community of life. In this land where they live, they are in touch with their God, with the earth, with their ancestors, with the spirits of the land. The land symbolises this network of relationships, this interconnectedness of life. It is also this land and all the interconnections within it that have given birth to their culture – their way of believing, their rites and rituals, their customs and practices, their arts and music, their laws and ways of living. The land is “the wellspring of life, the cradle of consciousness, the soil from which history grows, the arena for social and cultural practice, the basis for their political system; in short it is the foundation of ...identity.”

Because the land is a gift from God, it belongs to all. This sense of common ownership or stewardship of the land also strengthens the strong community values that are foundational to indigenous peoples. Such sense of ownership of and responsibility to the land does not only cover this generation but the next generation as well. “The land was entrusted to us by our ancestors. We need to protect and care for it for future generations.”

Because of their relationship with the land and the natural world, they have a high ecological aptitude, and an excellent knowledge of the environment. Because nature came from God, they have a deep reverence for it. Because of their gratitude to God and to nature that keeps them alive, they feel responsible in caring for it. Such relationship with the land and with nature has nourished their spirituality which has been described as eco-spirituality.

### **Some Propositions**

The publication of *Laudato Si'* has not only awakened the Church towards the need to care for our common home but has also brought the Church's position on ecology to the eyes of the world. The escalating problems that the world is confronted with in issues of

environment is indeed crucial that not only the Church needs to address but it has also to evoke a response from the whole of humanity for we know that humanity is not separate from the environment in which we live – rather humanity and the natural environment are united inextricably. For this reason then the ethical nature of our crisis must be addressed, both through dialogue, and by working towards recovering our fundamental spiritual dimension. It is interesting to note that the word ‘dialogue’ appears twenty five time in this encyclical. Therefore we are not off the mark to propose *Laudato Si’* and interreligious dialogue as a path forward.

#### ***A. A Common Human Experience***

The encyclical *Laudato Si’* is addressed to all peoples of the world and not just the Christians or Catholics. The starting point of this encyclical is the fact that we all share a common experience in this world that we share. Starting purely from religion and science perhaps has no appeal to many people. However, drawing attention to the common realities of human life that which transcends space, time, and belief provides the locus for engaging in dialogue. *Nostra Aetate* begins with an inquiry into the common origin and destiny of all human persons. Similarly, the care for the common home cuts across all barriers and hindrances.

In the recent decades, there has been an explosion of academic interest in the anthropological, philosophical, psychological, and biological basis of religious experience. Just as we rely on these sciences to help us understand our religious and spiritual experiences, the human experience forms the basis of all other experiences.

*Laudato Si’* begins with what is happening around us and it provides the majority of readers an opportunity to connect with the issues at hand. Among the many issues that are highlighted in this encyclical, almost every person can relate with at least one of the issues at hand. In this light then, it shows us that the ecological issues confronting humanity at this point in history are not purely religious in nature but human.



This common home of ours is need of healing and assistance. The poor and the marginalised more than others need our help and intervention. It is here that interreligious dialogue can play an integral role for the upliftment of the 'downtrodden'.

### ***B. Rediscovering the Place of Man in the World***

The self-understanding of the human person occupies an important place in most of the religions. What is man's origin, his purpose and destiny defines the crucial relationship between man and God. However, over the centuries, the self-understanding of man has progressed to an extent that today man has become the center of the universe and that everything else revolves around him. In this pursuit for power, wealth, and authority, man has lost the sense on God and even to a point of replacing God with other "gods". The rich and the affluent have come to understand that they are the masters of their own destiny. Egoism and self-centeredness have escalated to a point that one cannot feel the need for the other in society: "Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; this in turn is the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society" (LS #116).

In every religion, the purpose of man's life on earth is a question which many have pondered about for thousands of years but yet the answer to which has often become elusive. We do not ask this question anymore because we seem to have given up on the possibility that an answer can ever be found or perhaps we have learned to manage our own destiny. We have also relied on science to give us the answer but with its one-sided way of looking at things it does not look promising that an answer can ever be found in this way. In this context then, interreligious dialogue can play a role of restoring a correct vision of man and working towards restoring the place of God, man and the environment in a dialogical relationship.

It is to be pointed out that the foundation for Catholic Social Teaching is the proper understanding and value of the human

person. Saint Pope John Paul II, points out rightly that the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching “is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as ‘man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.’ God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity” (*Centesimus Annus* #11). The respect for the human person and the inalienable rights that man possesses is a shared heritage... yet another window for engaging in dialogue.

There is also the need for humanity to define its destiny with God being included. In the current world where we are seduced easily by consumerism and materialism, the spiritual values of simplicity, trust and modesty is quite easily set aside. The ‘pressures’ to keep up with the world leads also to greed: “When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality” (LS #205). Interreligious dialogue can be a ‘tool’ to help people rediscover the spiritual values and roots.

### ***C. An Opportunity to Engage in Dialogue***

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (LS #25). Given the gravity of the problem that humanity is faced with, it is an opportune moment to engage with one another for we can indeed learn from one another and work with one another. There are many levels of dialogue that we can enter into especially in relation to *Laudato Si’*.

There is the *dialogue of life* which promoted good relations with peoples of all faith and seeking encourage one another in the sharing of joys and troubles; we could also find opportunities to enter into the *dialogue of works* where society can work together for the purpose of the well-being of all, especially the poor and the marginalised. The *dialogue of theological exchanges* provides the opportunity to understand in depth the respective religious heritages; many of the religious traditions celebrate the beauty of creation and therefore

this could be the platform to celebrate the *dialogue of spiritualities* where adherents of the different religions brings to the table the riches of their life.

Our own FABC tradition encourages the triple dialogue: religions, cultures and the poor. The *dialogue with religions* can only enrich our own God experience: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men (NA #2). Asia is blessed with a variety of cultures and it can only enrich the way we express our beliefs. The *dialogue with cultures* makes it possible for us to celebrate our diversity which is not seen as a threat but rather a diversity that enriches the whole of humanity. Finally the dialogue with the poor provides us the opportunity of encounter God in the needy who are most often neglected and taken advantage off. Dialoguing with the poor can provide the impetus to not only encounter God but to be the prophetic voice that ‘raises the lowly from their misery’. In short, interreligious dialogue mobilizes all those who are on their way towards God or towards the Absolute.

#### ***D. Making a Difference for the Common Good***

The principle of the common good has been an integral part to the Catholic Social Teaching. In this encyclical the words ‘common good’ appears thirty times, signifying the common destiny of working towards the preservation of the environment: “Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development” (LS #157). The common good is not only for the purpose of providing a better quality of life but it is also crucial to the development of the human person who is inextricably connected with the environment.

The contemporary ethicist, John Rawls, defined the common good as “certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage”. Pope John XXIII defined the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as

individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Pacem in Terris* #55). This good is *common* because only together as a community, and not simply as isolated individuals, is it possible to enjoy, achieve, and spread this good. All people are obligated to work towards making the common good a greater and greater reality. The environment is concern for the environment is indeed a common good.

*Laudato Si'* provides not only an opportunity to engage in interreligious dialogue but the possibility to network with many other organisations that are committed to this cause of the environment: While making little steps in our own compounds does make a difference, the opportunity to be a catalyst for change in a more profound way lies open before us: “While the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference” (LS #179). The common good is essential for human flourishing.

### *E. Dialoguing for a New Narrative*

In the past, interreligious dialogue may have been just limited to trying to understand each other’s faith and traditions for a harmonious living. Perhaps the ideals of respect and peace may have been to goal for dialogue by discarding elements of fear, mistrust, and threat. It cannot be denied that such goals are far more a pressing need today than before. However, we also need a new narrative for dialogue and that has to be “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (LS #14). All peoples are in the process of trying to cultivate a ‘new world’. We need a new narrative if if world is to sustain: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (LS #160).

If *Nostra Aetate* opened the doors to engaging in dialogue by acknowledging the goodness the other religions of the world, *Laudato Si'* now connects us as citizens of a common home that is in need of intervention. This connectedness is not just limited because we citizens of the world but because there is a spiritual reality that

all of us are in search of. Fear must not prevent us from finding this new narrative.

In many of the encounters between Jesus and the people whom he came in contact with during His ministry, Jesus not only is able to re-write the narrative of the lives but He proposes a new narrative when engaging with them - one which unsettled the teachers of the Law of his time (e.g., the encounter with Zaccaheus, the Samaritan woman, etc). *Laudato Si'* provides us with the new narrative as Pope Francis calls for an 'integral ecology'. A new way of doing ecology for for the involvement of every person at every level.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reminds us all that "at the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude... In the meantime, we come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us" (LS #243, 244). There is no doubt that this encyclical has made an impact to such an extent within the Church and also significantly outside the Catholic Church. Environmentalists and scientists have endorsed the document. Likewise, non-Catholic religious leaders are eager to discuss the encyclical, which has now become a topic of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The window of opportunity stands before us at this time. We need to work together and citizens of the world to make this common home a place to cherish us and for the generations to come.

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