

**THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH
IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT**

by

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Introduction: Om Shanti!

In this representative gathering of the Asian Churches we should listen to the voice of Asia, be attuned to the Spirit of Asia and commune with it in the resounding symphony of the *Asian Communion*. In this spirit we should listen as Churches to the Spirit at work in Asia to see, to decipher and to respond in the very same Spirit of Jesus who incarnated himself and became flesh of Asia's flesh.

Asia is a land of communion. Asia vibrates with this communion in her living communities of people, with religious and cultural forces cementing their communion. Asia is a land of the Spirit, hence of peace: *Santi* (wholeness).

Om Dyaun Santi,	Let there be peace of the sky
Antharikshan Santi, Prithvi Santi	Peace of mid-regions, of the earth
Apah Santi, oushadhayah Santi	Peace of water, plants
Vishve devah Santi	Peace of all the powers of the world
Vishve nara Santi	Peace of all the men of the world
Brahma Santi, Sarvan Santi	Peace of God and all
Santireva Santi, Sama Santiredhi	May this peace be with me and with you
Om Santi, Santi, Santi.	Om peace, peace, peace! ¹

This position paper has been prepared for the Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held at Lux Mundi Seminary, in Sampran, Thailand, near Bangkok, 20th-27th October, 1982. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "The Church — a Community of Faith in Asia."

This *Santi Mantra*, recited at the beginning and at the end of a sacred action, sums up the holistic view of Asian religions.

Peace — and the *Santi Mantra* — must be at the beginning and end of everything. Nothing is achieved by external discord or internal unrest, and nothing is accomplished in the world or human life unless it is grounded in peace. For this man needs the collaboration of all the Gods: to establish peace in heaven, in the atmosphere and on earth. This is the meaning of the threefold wish: Santih, santih, santih!²

Part I

The Texture of Asian Scene/Asian Contexts The Asian Community Experience of Religious Belonging and Life—Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Traditional Religion

Asian Communities are characterized by:

Religion — deep-rooted and alive

Culture — ancient and active

Poverty — massive and dehumanizing.

Whatever be the order of these characteristics, they are simultaneously the components of the Asian reality, wherever we turn to, whichever Asian community is the object of our reflection.

Asia, the most populated continent with almost two-thirds of the world population, the cradle of humanity and of world religions, of communion and communities, is a reality we need to contemplate at this historic moment. The religions and religious communities of Asia are there for us to commune with at this juncture and *kairos* of history. Asia has in her embrace practically the whole of the religious world, excepting Christianity which makes up only over two percent of the Asian population. Asia has approximately over 513 million Hindus, 423 million Muslims, 248 million Buddhists, 206 million Confucianists, 31 million Taoists and 62 million Shintoists. All these religions from the dawn of human history have experienced communion, enabled people to experience it and created communities. These have so much hold on the hearts of men and women of Asia that the personal, communal and social life of the people is deeply rooted in these socioreligious and cultural-spiritual traditions of communion.

A. Disintegrating Factors — Crisis of the Asian Communion

Sociocultural Factors at Work. These few random remarks are made from an Indian point of view. But these are, I believe, applicable in varying degrees to the whole of Asia in general. The most glaring factor that sharpens the crisis of the communion of Indian society is the massive dehumanizing poverty of the vast masses of the people. Of the 690 million inhabitants of India some 297 millions live on or just above the poverty line. About 300 million are below the poverty line, that is to say, without the minimum requirement for survival. About 80 million have sufficient means for a comfortable life. 13 million are rich, living in the luxury of modern consumer society, having the means of production and reins of power in their hands. 70% of the Indian population are undernourished, 60% of the children in India (between the ages of three and five years) suffer from retarded growth.

The cause, all agree at least theoretically, is the unjust structures of the Indian society. Historically the structure of oppression arose as a result of colonialism.³ The community of rural India was based on the equilibrium of agriculture and artisan industry, which operated through the village *panchayat*, caste and joint family institutions. It was to an extent a self-sufficient economy — a community that had and used its resources for its own well-being. The inflow of foreign and later of indigenous industrial goods into the village progressively undermined the village community structure based upon village artisan industry. The self-sufficient economy of the village was converted into the capitalist market economy.

In the social field the dynamics at work in the communities through joint family, the caste and the village *panchayat* were replaced by British administration, which in the long run affected the shape and texture of the village community. It brought about a transformation in every aspect of village life, social, economic, political and cultural, and the emergence of two classes: the exploiting group (the landlords) and the exploited masses. The former had the support of the colonial powers. Structurally the root cause of the unjust and disintegrating factors of the Indian community is the unjust economic system of production, consumption and distribution. The tiny minority of the rich and affluent manipulates and controls to its selfish ends the entire system of economic, political and cultural relationships — dominating, subjugating and using the vast majority of the masses of the people. In the pursuit of power this system sets one group against the other: urban rich against the rural rich, merchants against capitalists, owners against workers, high castes

against low castes. The gap between the rich and the poor is on the increase, causing a continuous and unabated flow of resources from the masses to the minority elite. Thus violence is institutionalized and fragmentation of the Indian society continues on class and caste lines.

Value System. The capitalist economic system has values that are diametrically opposed to the cultural and religious values of the Indian ethos. Values which were cherished traditionally brought about communion among groups of persons, and because they were seen as sanctioned and demanded by the religious system, they were more of an integrating factor than any other force. But it is precisely this that has become the casualty of the onslaught of the capitalist system of society. These values of the latter stand counter to the values of integral humanism, social responsibility, harmony and cooperation, participation and asceticism, the hallmarks of Indian ethos and community.

The capitalist forces find the traditional feudal society and its system of caste convenient and highly useful for their ends. They reinforce the caste system and use religious structures to legitimize exploitation. Thus the feudal—capitalist alliance breaks the community of the people in India and Asia as a whole.

B. Asian Community Experience of Religious Belonging and Life

Family Village. In Asia the experience of community is to a great extent centered around the family and village together. Every stage in life and important phases of life from birth to death are marked by participation of the family and village in the event. Not only the immediate family but also the whole neighborhood and the entire village are there with the person and family for the journey of life punctuated by peak moments of birth, initiation, marriage, joys and sorrows. The communion that exists in the Asian family circle is something unusual in the rest of the world. The system of the joint family that existed in India and in other places and continues to survive in several places is a witness to the sense and extent of community and sharing that is possible and alive in our society. Though the system of the joint family is gradually disappearing, it is a fact that even now family relationships continue to exercise a great influence.

Although religious ceremonies in the home celebrate the important stages of life of every family member, the temple or shrine is an important sign of a wider religious belonging. This belonging is hardly

organized. People favor a particular temple or shrine because of a particular and chosen deity (*ishtha devata*), because a deity responds to a particular need in their life.

The bases of a still wider social and religious belonging are the feasts, festivals and pilgrimages. Most of the festivals are of agricultural or seasonal origin and express the external rhythm of nature, e.g., sowing and harvesting. Myths, symbols and community rituals bind the people at a deeper level and give them an experience of deep communion. These rituals continue to be performed in the most modern and sophisticated offices and factories with advanced technical knowledge. Expressions of joy and festivity are seen in the busiest streets and squares. The abode of a holy person or saint or his visit also attracts large crowds of people who gather to get his or her *darshan* and who hold his teaching or silence in great esteem. The saint often gathers disciples who get a more thorough formation in his teaching.

Finally the Scriptures which embody such a variety of deeply religious experiences and practices already in vogue centuries before the birth of Christ bind all the people together in a hardly organized but no less real communion.

Conclusion. The belonging of the Indian people (Hindus) is based upon "shared living" or participation in life rather than upon teaching. However, this shared living goes ultimately back to a shared understanding and experience of the manifestations of God in the course of time. Through the shared living this understanding and experience passed on from generation to generation. This shared living includes observance of and participation in *pujas*, meditation, festivals, pilgrimages, etc.

There is a common world vision and an experience of being in pilgrimage and search which binds the Asian people together in their religious belonging. This is the most underlying factor of community experience in Asia. Hence we shall now deal with it at length.

C. Constitutive Elements of Religious Life⁴

1. Indian Experience of Communion Based on Wholeness

Life and history are considered in India as a journey (*yatra*) towards the ultimate goal (*moksha*). In order to reach the goal one should choose the path (*marga*) and walk on it, pass through its various stages (*asramas*), and one should adopt the means (*sadhana*) conducive to it and practise it regularly.

Most people lead a meaningless and purposeless life, without any effort to know the meaning of what happens at present and the purpose of life or direction for our future. One could just be drifting, subject to various forces or carried by routine and thus be caught up as a slave in a cycle (*samsara*). Serious religious life begins when one poses these questions and looks for satisfactory answers. One becomes a religious when one has discovered the ultimate goal of life and gears his life to reach it. "Now as the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road for Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51).

The goal to be reached is the most important reality; so it becomes the absolute and ultimate. As the ultimate it should be always kept in view. It should be pursued relentlessly in a single-minded concern with one-pointedness and concentration.

From Vedic times the highest and supreme goal has been *moksha* (liberation). One yearns for liberation from the endless cycle of life: birth and rebirth (*samsara*). Then life is a continuous and determined movement towards religious freedom.⁵

2. Advaita, Purnam, Santi — Non-Duality or Oneness, Wholeness or Fulness, Depth or Silence

The starting point and what is essentially basic to Indian view of reality (world, religions, spiritual experience) is unity and not multiplicity, harmony and not disharmony, commonness and not difference, silence and not sound, reality and not expression. It is in this perspective that the essence of ecclesiality or community will have to be seen in terms of totality and oneness.

Multiplicity is experienced and expressed as change, as a state of fragmentation and lack of integration in the world, the community and oneself. It is a state in which man

- becomes the victim of brokenness
- lives at the exterior and superficial level of being
- acts from and reacts to ephemeral and changing reality, and
- is dissipated and dispersed, scattered and distracted, worn out and torn out, from different directions.

One must therefore re-create oneself from the real center of one's being.

This core of self is the ground of being.

The ground of one's being is: the ground of God
the ground of others and community
the ground of the entire universe.

Hence it is the basis of communion with God and others, and of harmony with nature.

3. A Hindu Worldview and Experience: Integral and Holistic

a) **Vedic Worldview:** a structurally ordered totality: *Rta — Dharma—Karma—Atman*: (Cosmic harmony, social order, personal wholeness and integrity).

Rta is the cosmic harmony or rhythm in the universe, realized by the eternal law. The Vedic world was a perfectly-organized one. It functions according to the laws of cause and effect. It is a whole related in all its parts and totally integrated.

This harmony in the universe is the model and pattern for social order (*dharma*) and personal life of integrity (*atman*).

This cosmic harmony should be reflected in the life of society by justice and should be shared by man through awareness of self, of others and of God. Corresponding to this cosmic harmony there should be a social solidarity (*lokasamgraha*) among the inhabitants of the world. In other words, the world order calls for a social order. The latter is an eternal moral order based on the cosmic archetype or ideal. While the world order is regulated by *rta*, the social order is maintained by *dharma*. It is the duty and responsibility of man to see to it that this cosmic totality remains integral and that this world order functions smoothly. So he has a cosmic function.

Man identifies himself with the cosmic order (*rta*), enters into it, maintains it and contributes to it by the practice of *dharma* (justice) and performance of *karma* (prescribed duty). This *dharma* should give meaning and purpose to man's life and regulate all aspects and forms of his activity: individual and social, moral and metaphysical, rational and mystical, mundane and spiritual. It affects all groups of persons (families, castes, regions) (*kuladharmā, varnadharmā, deshadharmā*), all stages of life (*asrama dharmā*), all periods of history (*yugadharmā*), and the whole of humanity (*manava dharmā*). This *dharma* provides for the fulfilment of one's family, social and professional duties and

performance of cultic practices (*karma*). Correspondingly man has also a social function, a duty to fulfil towards the world/society and its inhabitants: the ideal of *likasamgraha*. This he fulfils, among others, by his fivefold daily sacrifices (*yajna*).

Whenever and wherever this social order is disturbed, *adharm*a prevails and society is in disharmony with *rta*. One should change it and restore the harmony by practice of *dharma* and the performance of his duties in a disinterested way (*niskama karma*). This is poverty or detachment and social solidarity (*lokasamgraha*); this is justice; this is sharing and communion with others. This is also the core and origin of *karma marga*. This is humanization and liberation of all peoples, all becoming brothers and sisters, ushering in a dharmic (just), human and fraternal society of sharing, and realizing communion and *moksha* hereafter and even already here and now.

Thus the Hindu worldview, which is expressed through a triptich: *rta, dharma and atman* (cosmic harmony or ecological balance of the universe, social order or a just society and personal wholeness and integrity), defines and emphasizes man's integrity and totality as covering individual (or personal), communitarian and cosmic dimensions. Man's salvation or self-realization cannot be realized in an isolated, individualistic or selfish manner but should be social and universal in perspective and concern.

Likewise one cannot have an awareness or fulness of it unless one realizes his integrity and wholeness at this triple level. To pray and to meditate, to listen to God and to respond in faith to His revelation, to receive God and to give himself to God, man should be whole and integral.

Advaitic Tradition: the Upanishadic Worldview: Paramatman/ Brahman-Atman/Jivatman

a) A Dialectic Pair: Experience of identity and union with the Absolute. The unity and totality of the Reality is also expressed by this pair: *Brahman* or *Paramatman*, as the ultimate ground of being, *Atman* or *Jivatman* as the subjective reality or consciousness. Both the all-pervading Spirit and the indwelling Spirit are meant to be experienced as one. The awareness of the one adds to the awareness of the other in a dialectical relationship. Salvation (*moksha*) is connected with the attainment of that state when one transcends all dualism and arrives at an awareness of the identity of both: *Tat tvam asi : aham Brahmasmi*.

b) Reality is also understood as expressed in three modes: *Atman*, *Jagat and Jiva*.

c) Paramatman or Brahman is also experienced and described as *sat—cit—ananda*: reality, awareness and bliss.

Non-Advaitic Tradition: In the *Bhakti/Theistic/Ishvaranubhava*, the absolute is fundamentally perceived as creator, sustainer, indweller.

4. Wholeness

To live fully is to be whole. This experience of wholeness is the ideal to be realized at all stages of human life and in all areas of life and at all levels. The Indian/Asian tradition of wholeness consists of and is realized at three levels:

Personal. First of all one must integrate and unify one's own self from within at the core of one's being, transcending all forms of dualism (body—soul duality) and the distinction of subject—object. To be an integral person in oneself is the first and basic requisite and component of wholeness. For this one should gather oneself and make a totality of oneself, an integrated whole. Negatively, one should get rid of the fragmentation and disintegration of self, lack of authenticity and integrity, a state of non-awareness (*avidya*) and individualism in isolation. Taking for granted one's brokenness, one should realize at every stage one's wholeness and personal integrity.

Communitarian. Once one realizes one's personal integrity, one must enter into deep-level communion and extend this wholeness to one's relationship with all people. Hence the second level of wholeness is our solidarity with others with its communitarian dimension and social concern. One should be and remain open to all people and sincerely seek and yearn for deep-level communion with them.

Cosmic. Cosmic harmony (*rta*) is the third level or dimension of wholeness (ecological balance). The age-old Indian/Asian concern for cosmic harmony is diametrically opposed to the various forms of exploitation and pollution of our environment which threaten human wholeness. In such a worldview *rta* (cosmic harmony) and *dharma* (social order) are indispensable factors for personal and communitarian wholeness.

This worldview enlarges the vision of life and includes within it the community of person/groups with the cosmos and inculcates the

awareness of the whole universe as one and interrelated whole. The entire worldview is based upon the conception of partnership of the universe and not domination of one by the other. All strive in mutual harmony and interaction for the supreme goal of *moksha*.

5. Experience

In all religions and cultures experience counts. In the Eastern approach and practice, experience holds primacy in the religious sphere. Indian/Asian sages have always been more interested in experience than in ideas and concepts. Abstract reasoning, speculative thinking and discursive meditation do not interest them much. These are not typically Asian. But mysticism had a great appeal for them. The wisdom taught by Indian sages (wise holy men) in the *Jnana Marga* (Path of Knowledge) and in other *margas* is not primarily philosophical knowledge — though philosophical enquiry has an important place — but experiential consciousness, i.e., a knowledge to be experienced and lived. Religion is above all a *marga* and a *sadhana* leading to the realization of salvation and liberation. Hence they developed techniques of concentration and contemplation and not so much systems of reasoning.

6. Mystery of Being/Presence: The All-Pervading and Immanent Spirit as the Ground of Radical Communion

In the Indian/Asian traditions communion is realized at the level of being. It is the experience of interiority that makes us transcend the level of doing and come to the state of being. Once one reaches the ground of one's own self and experiences the mystery of Being in oneself, one can experience by the same fact and at the same time this mystery of Being in others and in the Other (God).

It is at that level of communion in Being that one experiences the divine presence in all realities. Asian experience of religious belonging is based on this awareness of presence — this sense of the divine presence (misinterpreted by some as pantheism) in all realities. This is a specific characteristic of the Asian people. In Asian religions this sense of the presence is expressed also in the experience of the sense of life (*jeeva*). This sense is particularly strong among the Jains, who see life as flaming in the whole of creation and permeating everything. *Ahimsa* (non-violence), another characteristic attitude, also springs from this awareness of universal presence; all forms of life are considered sacred and inviolable.

7. Integral Humanism

The Indian challenge to community is integral humanism, the holistic (integral) approach. There are no dichotomies between the secular and the sacred, the spirit and the body. An organic structure uniting these realities at a deeper level is recognized. The four goals of life — *artha* (wealth), *kama* (pleasure), *dharma* (righteous social order) and *moksha* (liberation) — are to be sought in an integrated and balanced manner. The fourfold stages of life or the four ashramas — *brahmachari* (student of sacred science), *grahasthya* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller) and *sanyasa* (renouncer) — are not four different vocations, but they give a plan of life which fosters not only individual harmony and fulfilment but also social interaction and communion. This integral humanism is further enlarged by an attitude of all-round harmony and communion.

8. Life as a Pilgrimage with Others to the Other

In India people as individuals and groups and individuals are expected to pursue a fourfold goal in life (*purushartha*). Three are proximate goals: *dharma* (justice), *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (enjoyment). And the fourth is the ultimate goal: *moksha* (release). Life and history are considered in India as a journey (*yatra*) towards the ultimate goal (*moksha*).

The experience of the mystery of being, the awareness of God's universal presence, viewing the totality, giving priority to experience and arriving at it by intuition and introversion — all these require a long process which is expressed by the word *yatra* (pilgrimage).

The word "pilgrim church" is used often in opposition to the eschatological one which is supposed to be perfect. In Hinduism "*yatra*" is used not only to point out the goal of our movement but also to show the life dimension of our life in threefold communion and harmony.

9. Ashram

All that we have said above is in some sense summed up and institutionalized in what is called "ashram." It is the embodiment of all the ideals of Indian spirituality in terms of lifestyle. It is a state or place of intense and sustained spiritual quest for the Absolute by a group of persons around and under the guidance of a guru, recognized by others

as a God-realized person and a person of deep spiritual experience. It is a place where people can, above all, experience God and live in an ever-deepening awareness of His presence. This is fostered by renunciation and detachment in an atmosphere of silence, peace and joy. In an ashram primacy is given to the relentless quest by following a *marga* and practising *sadhanas*, specifically Indian spiritual exercises. The lifestyle here is necessarily simple, in conformity with Indian tradition and context — a genuine expression of the contemplative dimension of life. It is dedicated to prayer and/or service. It is open to all and welcomes men and women of all persuasions, status and races who come in search of peace and enlightenment. The ashramites are therefore authentically poor and qualify for the description: powerless and voiceless. Yet they have a spiritual and moral power; their lifestyle is more eloquent than their voice.

Thus ashrams are meant to embody any or all of the following concerns:

a) Multireligious and Interreligious Dimension

To build a truly ecumenical, multireligious community of men and women who in an ongoing dialogue and collaboration inspire one another to become ever more alive to the complex reality of the Indian society and respond to its needs and aspirations through humble service with dedication and love. Thus as a community of God-seeking people, in common pilgrimage engaged in deepening their own awareness and that of others, integrating the best traditions of ashram and following a simple lifestyle.

b) Authentic Spirituality

To promote the search for an authentic Indian spirituality, facilitating God-experience and self-realization through prayer, meditation and spiritual guidance.

c) Academic Pursuit

To be engaged in research, teaching and publication, to facilitate the contact, get-together and sharing of scholars and students, and contribute to the building up of an academic community in a truly interpersonal, interdepartmental and interdisciplinary approach, in collaboration with all academic bodies.

d) Dialogue

To promote the human, religious and spiritual values that are found in all religions and philosophies, and to work towards emotional integration, communal harmony and indepth living and sharing through interreligious and interideological dialogue.

e) Community Education

To work for greater social justice, and to enable people to reach full humanization and integral liberation through non-formal education (conscientization), especially at the grassroot level.

f) All-Round Renewal of Society and Church

To train and form leaders who will stimulate and enable people's leadership in society and Church; to facilitate the growth and spread of small communities in which there is real equality and brotherhood and, for Christians, the emergence of basic Christian communities; thus to work for a new image of Christian life and participation in nation-building and for the authentic identity of Christians in India that they may be fully Indian and fully Christian; and to achieve it through formation and all-round inculturation.

Thus salvation/liberation/communion with God and men is an experience of wholeness and fulness, convergence and concentration, openness and universality, depth and silence, being and consciousness, harmony, peace and bliss.

Part II

Comparison and Contrast

1. Religion: System or Way of Life

Hinduism is not so much a particular religion as a way of life, living at its base many religious traditions, beliefs and practices which converge at the core level. It is a determinant factor in the life of the Indian people. It has had and continues to have an influence on the worldview and insights of several other religions of the East. It is flexible and capable of adaptation, assimilation, integration and consequent growth.

2. Orthopraxis and not Orthodoxy: Doctrine and Dogma

There is doctrine in Hinduism and other Oriental religions but doctrine is secondary. In the Hindu mentality it is not orthodoxy or dogmas that they are worried about. The concern is an orthopraxis — on spiritual, moral and social attitudes.

The Hindus do not waste their time in sterile reasoning and mere intellectual quest of religious truth. This does not mean that they are indifferent to truth. There is an inbuilt spirit of tolerance and accommodation.

There has been formal teaching and preaching in India. The great mystic and philosopher Sankaracharya travelled all over India teaching and preaching. His writings do contain doctrinal explorations. Doctrinal disagreements have even given rise to different and opposing schools of thought. This can be applied to Buddhism, Jainism and Islam as well.

There is a general dislike for dogmas. Christianity appears as a religion of dogmas and Christians are labelled “dogmatists.” Dogmas are frowned upon not for what they affirm but for what they do not say — for the narrowness that they are likely to engender. When one defines something, there is bound to be restriction, limitation. The Indian approach to reality as mystery looks at definitions with abhorrence and fear. Comprehensiveness, universality, tolerance and vision necessarily imply openness for the mystery, for every aspect of reality/Reality. The Hindus are not against truths, nor indifferent to them, but they understand dogmas as a too-partial and narrow-minded expression of one particular aspect of reality, leaving out all the rest.

It is important to refer once again to the community dimension of the Hindu community. It is not doctrines and dogmas that makes up the basis of communion. It is not even the religious practices and obligatory rituals. Pluralism in belief and practice is opposed to dogmatism. Hinduism stresses orthopraxis. One's belonging is there till one disowns it. However, one can notice a tradition that is long, coherent and continuous, which is by nature able to grow — not by absorption (conversion) but by integration of everything that is in tune with the original vision. Thus the Indian worldview and consequent practical approach to life are able to integrate all the various shades of truth/reality. The only exception is when one opts out. The basis of belonging is so wide and large and deep that all can find space within its embrace. Hence it is not called a religion but a *marga* — a way. A

departure from the *marga* is irrelevant since it is not primarily a set of canons with definite limits to understanding and belief. Continuity is guaranteed through living and a living tradition of interpretations. The life of the people has a built-in and instinctive frame of reference to which all problems are referred and ultimate significance sought.

As R. Panikkar puts it: What then does it mean to be a Hindu? Has Hinduism no ecclesial consciousness? Do Hindus have no group consciousness, no collective identity? To be a Hindu does not mean much more than not to reject the *karma*, the heritage of being geographically or historically born of an Indian stock. To be a Hindu does not amount to much more than this acceptance of an everlasting *dharma*. In point of fact, nobody is ever a Hindu in the abstract; one is always a Hindu of a particular brand, of a concrete group, caste, sect, ashram — and with a personal co-efficient which allows, justifies and even in a way demands a personal interpretation. This latter fact prevents any kind of feeling of guilt or disloyalty if one happens to have a personal view which does not tally with that of one's surroundings, for instance. There is hardly any place for heterodoxy here; even the conception of heresy makes little or no sense.⁶

3. Spirit — Organization

The challenge of Hinduism and other Asian religions is that they subsist and survive, i.e., continue to grow beyond the vicissitudes of history, in spite of the fact that they do not have the rigid organization as that of the Church. The Church should learn this from the Asian religions. The courage to incarnate itself in the heart of Asia would require from the Church to undergo the experience of being a movement for the liberation of humanity without having recourse to all the sociological structures which she adopted in a particular culture. There is need to die and sprout again.

The top-heavy organization that the Church is and is known to be is the result of a process in a particular culture. Her incarnation in Asia has yet to take place. But the real difficulty is that only one experience of a given epoch remains as the point of reference, model and norm of Christianity today. What is most urgently needed of the Church is the courage to incarnate.

We have a tendency to consider particular organizational structures essential for the Church. They are not the Church or are they

always conducive to what the Church is called to be. Sociological analysis makes it abundantly clear that in many respects our organization resembles very much secular ones (especially multinational corporations). In these socioculturally conditioned expressions of the Church the reality of the Spirit constantly threatens to become a casualty.

What the Church could learn from Hinduism is that *ecclesial consciousness does not need to be a closed-group consciousness, and that self-identity does not need to be affirmed against the background of different-identity*. The Church might as well try to develop a catholic, universal consciousness in today's real global context. Church-consciousness could then become equated with a concrete consciousness of being man. Is not the 'Son of Man' the self-chosen title of Christ? The Church could learn that the price of her catholicity implies the *kenosis*, the emptying herself of every particular form which she tends to identify with her nature. There are many mansions in the Father's Kingdom. Being Church, then would not be equal to being man, but it would signify a very concrete consciousness of belonging to the family of Man. This consciousness can be split up into as many tongues as at Pentecost, each being different from and even unintelligible to the other except for the fact of a common consciousness that all express the *megaleia*, the 'great deeds of God.'

What is fundamental in the Church, or in other words the central ecclesiological character, is *its sacramental structure*, the Body of Christ in Pauline terms. The *Sacramentum mundi* is certainly material, visible, historical, but this is not the external aspect of an inner core, a living soul which manifests itself in as many forms as the universal saving will of God may deem it convenient to echo expressions of the New Testament.

It is the sacramental structure, the cosmos-theandric reality which makes the Church so basically visible that her visible boundaries cannot be encompassed by the naked eye.

This structure is visible and invisible, human and divine, concrete and universal (not particular and general). However, it does not ultimately depend on psychological or organizational devices. The Church could, paradoxically, learn from Hinduism that the gospel injunction to live without fear, without anxiety, without a 'police' mentality — as being responsible for 'law and order' — is not a utopian dream.

To stretch the paradox further, what the Church could learn from Hinduism is confidence in the Spirit, which can be translated as confidence in the people, in the unifying myth that still holds believers together. The theological virtues are also cosmological.⁷

The Western idea of community as a closed or organized group arises out of its consistency with its own fundamental philosophical principles — the principle of contradiction and principle of individuality. The Asian tradition (as also the biblical tradition) is that we are one. It is in the corporateness of the collectivity that the individual is seen.

The Church in Asia embodies or appears to embody in her theology the organization and practice, the values and principles, of Roman Law. One of the main characteristics of it is the uniform government, from the top, from above, from one center with codes and decrees applicable to all communities over the whole world. This center follows a deductive method of reasoning from *a priori* principles and does not live from the experiences of God's people interpreted in the light of the normative experience of the Bible.

The theology of the Asian Churches which influences the official policies and programs of their ecclesial life and practice is still a Western one. This harmonizes very well with the "order model" of society which they are anxious to uphold. The main concern of this theology has been and continues to be orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis. However, the locus where the Church is supposed to fulfil its mission is not the world or a society in general, but a concrete society in a particular country, at a particular level and in a particular period of history with its specific cultural heritage and religious traditions. If the Church in Asia were truly incarnated, she would not consider and interpret the crisis in society and in the Church as a breakdown in law and order, a crisis of faith and obedience and above all as a crisis of authority. Rather, in the light of social analysis and guided by the Word of God, she should face it as a challenge and opportunity for a reorientation of the Church and her structures, her total lifestyle and functioning in Asia.

4. Institutionalization

The Christian Churches — communal — and their service and witness are highly institutionalized and clericalized. This institutionalization of the Church in India has been essentially and predominantly Western — a transplanted institutional Church. Besides projecting a Western image, these Churches appear triumphalistic, self-sufficient and

self-complacent, with a superiority complex. Because of this institutional presence the peoples of Asia cannot easily recognize what the Churches pretend to be, the sacrament of God's presence. The minority character of the Church in Asia adds to their anxiety to be on the defensive and to seek security through massive institutional presence.

The communication of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India to the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization of 1974 in Rome says:

The Church in India should point away from herself, her temporal glory, her institutions, her leaders and point to the glorious and transforming presence of the Lord in herself and in the whole world. As servant, therefore, the Church must strive to correct the impression that exists among certain sections of the Indian people that she is associated with and promotes the interests of the privileged section of society. This spirit of service should prevail within the Church itself in the attitudes and actions of bishops, priests and religious and all those in authority, particularly in their style of life and administration.⁸

5. Authority: Constituted or Recognized?

The pyramidal concept of the Church that shaped the theology and praxis of the Church has its impact even today. The more biblical concept of the Church as community and communion — enunciated by Vatican II — is easily forgotten.

In Indian religions, authority — especially from above — is not the bond of unity and order. Authority is something that emerges from below and is discovered due to one's spiritual energy to contribute to the new pilgrimage of man towards his ultimate goal. Hence one who has "authority" is the God-experienced man who leads others to such an experience and not the one who is appointed from above. This is best embodied in the guru who is the opposite of a bureaucratic administrator. He emerges through the recognition by the people who see in him a God-man. He shows that authority is the spiritual power to make the community an authentic communion. He leads his followers to genuine service for the growth of persons and the building up of the community as a whole. Such an exercise of authority in the Church will make her authentic to our traditions and credible in the eyes of our people.

To be a guru is, therefore, a real challenge, a challenge which was pre-eminently met by Jesus Christ, our *Paramguru* (supreme guru), our

Sad-guru (authentic guru) and the *Jagat-guru* (the *guru* for the whole world). We cannot really claim to be his followers as long as we accept, (as most of the clergy and religious consciously or unconsciously do!) and even uphold the highly competitive society of affluence and consumerism, as long as we continue to belong to and to serve mainly the top 20% of Indian society. True disciples of the greatest guru should have a radically different set of values and lifestyle. They have to identify themselves with the people and participate in the temporal order and live the consequences and implications of the incarnational economy.

This means that we are where important events take place, where history is being made, where the many millions live their life. But while doing so, Christians are called to stand out as witnesses to another order of things; our lifestyle and our service should reveal a deep God-experience, authentic interiority, which is perhaps the most characteristic word of Indian spirituality and certainly the characteristic of a guru and hence of true disciples.

6. Language of Communication: Words or Silence?

A guru communicates with his disciples not only through words and gestures, but also and sometimes even better through silence. *Mauna* or *maunam* may well synthesize the whole Indian spirituality. That is why a spiritual person is called a *munih*, one who has reached total silence, experiences God in silence and shares it with others through silence. Many real Indian gurus are not great theologians or acharyas, nor are they orators with eloquence. They are practically “voiceless.” Still they are “gurus” for millions of people. Many go and look at a guru for a minute and they experience that a real communication has taken place between the *sishya* and the guru. For a guru can communicate with his whole being through a look and sometimes without even raising his head. This is not something that took place only in the Vedic times but is also taking place today in our cities and villages. In modern India where we have social means of communication (television, radio, cinema, etc.) we still hold aloft the ideal and effective communication through silence. A guru communicates through silence.

But why silence? Silence is totality. In Indian languages the proverb goes: the pot that is full does not make noise; it is the half-filled pot that makes noise. The guru is one who has come to fullness and who really knows. The one who is in fullness and experiences it need not show it because he knows it and has it. Likewise deep calls to deep, or depth can be reached without words; or when one reaches the depth, words become

useless. God is ineffable and unutterable. Therefore words have a value only to some extent, but beyond it they become meaningless (nonsense). Because God is unutterable and beyond words, he cannot be fully communicated through words. Further, any affirmation limits and restricts, and thereby it becomes partial and distorted.

Finally, experience cannot be expressed. We often speak of sharing an experience with one another but in fact what we share is not real experience. There are three things in an experience:

- a) Experience itself (pure experience)
- b) Memory of the experience, and
- c) Interpretation of the experience.

a) One cannot know experience itself, nor can one communicate it, for experience is ineffable and incommunicable, e.g., one cannot really describe deep love, communion, loneliness, abandonment, rejection, deep sorrow, etc.

b) There is then the remembrance (memory) of the experience. Some are capable of remembering some aspects of their experience. We find in the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians a sharing of his visions and ecstasies. But he himself is not sure of what he is recalling as it is beyond human language.

c) Finally, what we really share is the interpretation of experience. Nothing is understood unless it is translated or interpreted. This is equally true of our experience. We do not understand our own experience until and unless we have translated it for ourselves and others. We have to reflect upon it to interpret it. It is not experience that makes one wise, but the reflection upon it, the understanding and interpretation of it and its influence on one's later life. So when we share, it is the interpretation of experience that we share. That is why we said above that experience itself cannot be expressed and much less by words. It is best expressed and communicated by silence. In such a state of silence is found fulness, and fulness is depth. Depth and fulness are equal to silence.

7. The Religious People

a) Who are they? The true religious of Asia are those who recognize their life as a relentless pilgrimage (*yatra*), and embody in themselves the radicality of the Gospel and the Spirit of communion of Asia in the

religious, cultural and spiritual traditions of our people. Hence the resonance of the pilgrim song: “*Asato ma sad gamaya*” — ‘From the unreal lead me to the real.’

b) In the religious life of Asia there is no evasion of the world or history or life at present here and now. It is not a question of escapism from one’s duties in society and to fellowmen. There is a balance between involvement in this life and searching for salvation in the next. But through all and in all, one must pursue one’s ultimate goal.

c) One should not get bogged down by or engrossed in anything of this world. There is no question of looking back, having once put the hand to the plow. It is a relentless quest. So there is a definite priority for the future and eschatology. The indispensable condition is non-attachment or renunciation. Against this background our religious life has no meaning both for Christians (2%) and non-Christians (98%). We are not religious in the sense in which Hindus understand. We are not regarded as religious by Christians either. If so, for whom do we exist? What is our witness value?

d) God is the one Reality, without a second. Hence the object of our focus and concentration is this one Reality. All the rest is *maya* and illusion, darkness and non-existence and hence our renunciation of everything.

e) Hence the one activity that matters is the relentless quest for the Absolute, God-experience and contemplation, in the ever-sharpening and deepening awareness of this reality. This movement towards the goal beyond (*moksha*) is coupled with an interior movement towards the core/center in search of wholeness and depth. Only when one becomes an integral person can he move towards it, the exterior goal.

f) Poverty and sharing in Hindu understanding and religious pursuit have always been primarily and essentially a positive concept. It is a totality, all-inclusive and comprehensive. The moment it is made particular it is no more poverty.

g) It is connected with the ultimate reality (release and God-realization). Hence it has a radical connotation.

h) It is a dialectical reality, such as detachment and attachment; total renunciation and full possession of everything, transcendence and immanence; nothing and everything, emptiness and plenitude; *sunya*

and *purnam*. The consequence is the indispensable aspect or the necessity of non-attachment or renunciation. Penance (*tapas*) and fasting (*vrata*) have no value in themselves, nor are they negative in character. There should not be any calculation either, how much or how little: spiritual things and persons are either given or not, they are indivisible. These are indispensable conditions for God-seeking and inevitable consequences of God-finding.

i) A life of poverty is a lifelong endeavor, and hence it is not provisional or for a limited period of time, to be practised only till the first or final commitment.

j) Material poverty is indispensable for and is an expression of the spirit of poverty. The practice of religious poverty will be baseless without it. It implies sharing with others, voluntarily giving away to those who need.

k) It is synonymous with God-experience or self-realization (*sat—cit—ananda*), as poverty is equal to the attainment of the supreme good and ultimate goal.

l) It is identical with social justice (*dharma*) and cosmic harmony (*rta*). In other words, poverty is meaningless without the cosmic dimension, communitarian concern and spiritual experience.

m) God-experience (*brahmavidya*), liberation (*moksha*) and struggle for justice and re-establishment of *dharma* are not mutually exclusive but strictly dialectical. Likewise self-realization is not possible without the “realization” of others. The *santi* of India is not escapist but the aloofness experience of wholeness at personal, communitarian and cosmic levels. The *ananda* is not an individualistic one — no man is an island — but a fountain that springs from the *santi* or wholeness and develops into a flood and becomes an ocean for all (*ananda sagar*).

n) Hence the radical exigency of poverty and religious life: the challenge it poses to the religious to be truly and really poor and to opt to be one with the “powerless” and the “voiceless.”

o) Against this background, disgruntled and demanding religious are a contradiction in terms and in reality. To look for and to enjoy maximum security, to crave for ease and comfort and to demand and to continue a life of luxury are incompatible with genuine God-seeking or relentless spiritual quest. Hence with religious life.

To be poor is to be both God-experienced (*Jivan Mukta*) and committed to the struggle of justice (*dharma*).

Part III

Spiritual, Sociological and Pastoral Demands of These Experiences on the Church in Asia

A. The Challenge and Response in General

Alienated from our roots and traditions through a Christian upbringing in a pre-Vatican, apologetic and Western atmosphere (although this should not be exaggerated as regards the smaller towns and particularly the rural areas), Christians had a very negative approach to and understanding of Asian religions and religious experiences. Thus the challenge from the Asian tradition with the integral humanism resulting from its holistic approach to reality was overlooked. Yet it has given inspiration to many revival movements within Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc., and greatly influenced the ethos of the Asian peoples. It has enabled them to overcome the dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, the mind and the body, the spiritual and the material which have time and again frustrated men and women of all times on their pilgrimage to life in all its fulness and disturbed their history and harmonious development.

This integral humanism and the holistic approach should be worked out in the three following dimensions:

1) Cosmic-Ecological

The tradition and challenge of the cosmic order are that man is not the master or the slave but the partner of this order. While the West has often behaved as its dictator and caused destructive imbalance, the East may have been too long its slave and shown itself as helpless before its forces.

2) Communitarian (Secular)

The ideal of and the faith in integral humanism and the holistic approach to reality should form the basis of and inspiration for a "political" strategy towards the creation of an economic order at the level of the world, nation, state, and each place overcoming economic exploitation, racial discrimination, male domination and religious intolerance and fanaticism.

The various *margas* of the Asian religious traditions are expressions and means of developing man's creative potentialities to promote authentic human freedom in responsibility, and thereby to work for the fulness of life for all, i.e., the whole human community.

The holistic approach is manifested in the integrated and balanced way in which the four goals of life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* are pursued. The four *asramas* outline a plan of life that guarantees not only the full development and personal fulfilment of the individual, but also guides him as regards his responsibilities towards the building up of the whole human community.

In this context the servant role of the Church (*ad extra*) and the model (sacramental) function of the Church as a true community of brothers and sisters (*ad intra*) with collegial leadership (integration of authority and charism) can be worked out.

3) Anthropological

The centrality and the preciousness of every human person in the Asian traditions and the equality of man and woman are shown in the concern for the elderly and the children. It constantly manifests that the human person has much more than utilitarian and economic value. Is Asia able to call a halt to a technocracy dominated by multinationals, dictating an increasing consumerism? It is high time that we paid attention to the Asian/Indian techniques and disciplines: forms of meditation, prayer methods, cosmic symbolism, celebration of life, concept of time, which enable persons to become more whole and human.

For this Asia must strongly resist the neocolonial pressures from the West, based upon and greatly influenced by its dichotomic, secularist worldview and strongly supported by its economic-political supremacy. This holds good for the formulation, expression and proclamation of the faith, the mode of celebrating the Christian mysteries, the structures of governing and the models of community-building and living. Within Asia there should be ample room for the Church to experiment a new being, acting on the basis of her cultural and religious traditions and the demands of the socioeconomic situations.

B. The Spiritual Challenge

Making the most of the openness of Vatican II, the spiritual treasures of India/Asia must be given prominence both in relation to the *norma*

normans of the Word of God in the Bible and to the patristic and magisterial traditions. The latter have evolved mainly within one particular cultural context; the only memorable exception is perhaps the Eastern Orthodox tradition. This requires that Christians boldly take risk to share the belonging and life of persons of other faiths and ideologies. This calls for a positive catechesis towards a responsible risk-taking. The integration of Asia's unique cultural and religious richness may be the answer to the world's spiritual crisis and emptiness. Finally, one could recall here what we have said about religious life as a relentless quest for the Absolute, all-round sharing and total renunciation, in view of possessing everything in God, through poverty.

C. Sociological Demands

We have to acknowledge frankly our double source of division. First of all, with the imported divisions of dioceses and parishes, the local Churches hardly manifest being Christian communities on the pattern of the early Christian communities. Secondly, we have also to overcome what traditionally divides our people: caste and community, wealth and status. This demands a radical Christian living with Christian poverty and sharing among ourselves. We are called upon to co-operate positively with those among whom we recognize the Spirit's working — those of other faiths and ideologies — towards the building of the Kingdom. In the present unjust situation, personal and structural, we have to support all those who work for radical change both in society and in the Church. More concretely it implies the following:

1) Cosmic/Ecological

We need to stand up for and promote respect for nature and all life. This implies a clear stand against the arms race, especially the uncontrollable chemical and atomic arms, against the percentage of expenditure spent on defence over against the percentage spent for health, education and the fostering of small agricultural and industrial projects and co-operatives, encouragement of rural-based and labor-intensive projects. It invites us to preserve natural/cosmic symbols, together with symbols of technological progress and to foster their usage.

2) Communitarian/Ecclesiological

Pioneering efforts must be made and encouraged in different forms of community living characterized by radical Christian discipleship. Research and experimentation have to be done in new forms of ashram-

living rather than importing the basic Christian community models from elsewhere and believing in the “trickle-down” theory. Within the Christian community we must seek a balance between commitment to justice, human rights and liberation, and indepth growth in spirituality and interiority. Such a community should be characterized by equality, sharing, personal responsibility — with both family and religious commitments pluriform tasks inside and outside the community, ongoing formation — both formal and informal — and experimentation in collegial decision-making. In place where people from different states, tribes, languages and castes live together, such a community should be an example of integration of people. In a religiously pluralistic society the popular festivals of other religions should be particularly respected and celebrated.

3) Anthropological

We should really question whether the (Western) nuclear family is the basic social unit, an *ecclesiola*, or whether the basic unit is the small Christian community which respects familial bonds and yet transcends them.

D. Pastoral Demands

Great stress should be laid on the principle that the Church exists to serve humanity and the world:

— to take the sacramental/liturgical life from its “*welt-fremd*” pedestal and relate it to and let it emerge from the people’s servant role of the Kingdom to be realized in the world. This demands a far more creative and responsible formation of religious leaders (priests, religious and lay animators) and a more careful selection;

— to reorient the “popular” devotions of both Christianity and other religions in the light of the primacy of Gospel values;

— to fight against material and spiritual individualism through radical sharing of goods and responsibilities;

— to have a minimum of a universal canon law so that there may be only general and organizational rules for the universal Church and enough freedom for the local Churches at national, regional and local levels to have their own requirements of organization and administration.

— to draw boldly the consequences for religious belonging and life from largely non-Christian societies and find ways and means to remedy the inherent difficulties of, e.g., marriages with persons of other faiths;

— to diminish as far as possible institutional possessions, the undertaking of our own projects and the running of our own institutions, especially in fields where the state and other agencies are also involved.

— to prepare our Christians through a strong community life to witness to evangelical values in projects and institutions run by others.

— to upset the unjust order in order to bring about justice for all; to disturb the superficial peace and to expose the false unity in order to promote true peace and unity in the various communities and in the whole cosmos.

Conclusion

In short, the Asian Churches have to be ready for the cost of discipleship: to become genuine *sishtyas* (disciples) of the *sadguru* (the authentic guru), authentically Christian and authentically Asian (Indian, Malaysian, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, etc.). Concretely they have to stand up for the poor for whose liberation the *Jagat Guru* (the guru of the whole world) spent his life. The voluntary spiritual poverty has to be integrated with the forced material poverty of the masses. It is such a poverty in sharing and renunciation that can build up a fraternal world and be a milieu of God-realization, of which the Church can be a sign and instrument. If so, one day all peoples of Asia and all nations of the world and the entire universe will bow down before the Lord of all blessing and peace, the end and goal of our perennial quest.

om namah shambhavaya cha	we bow to you,
mayobhavaya cha	who are all joy and the source of all happiness.
Namah shankaraya cha	the Dispenser of blessings
mayaskaraya cha	the Fulfiller of our righteous desires
namah shivaya cha	and blissful and
shivataraya cha ⁹	giver of all peace.

In view of this ultimate goal and universal bliss we can conclude this paper wishing happiness and health for all people. It is a very ancient greeting which we use in India either at the beginning or at the end of a discourse or prayer session.

om sarve bhavantu sukhinah	May all be happy,
sarve santu niramayah	may all be healthy,
sarve bhadrani pashyantu	may all experience good things,
ma kashchiddukhhabhaghavet.	never bad things.

In short, community means sharing. One need not be afraid of sharing lest it should be diminished or one should have less. Asian tradition believes otherwise: sharing of fulness maintains fulness and causes fulness everywhere.

om purnam adah purnam idam	Fulness there, fulness here
purnat purnam udacyate	from fulness fulness proceeds
purnasya purnam adaya,	once fulness has proceeded from fulness
purnam evavashishyate	fulness remains,
om shanti, shanti, shanti. ¹⁰	peace, peace, peace.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) Yajur Veda, XXXVI, 17
- 2) R. Panikkar. *Vedic Experience*. London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977, pp. 304-5.
- 3) *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, ed. by D. S. Amalorpavadass, NBCLC, Bangalore, India, 1981, pp. 44-48.
- 4) *Indian Christian Spirituality*. ed. by D. S. Amalorpavadass, NBCLC, Bangalore, India, 1982, pp. 221-236, Cfr. 151-160.
Poverty of the Religious and the Religious as Poor, ed. by D. S. Amalorpavadass, NBCLC, Bangalore, India, 1982, pp. 11-25.
- 5) D.S. Amalorpavadass. *Religious Life in Future and Future of Religious Life*. NBCLC Bangalore, India, 1979.
- 6) R. Panikkar, "The Hindu Ecclesial Consciousness," in *Jeevadhara*, no. 21 (May-June, 1974), pp. 201-202.
- 7) *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.
- 8) Report of the General Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Calcutta, January, 1974, CBCI Centre, New Delhi, 1974, p. 134, no. 36.
- 9) Namaskara Mantra
- 10) Shukla Yajurveda Ishopanishad.